

Children's Dens

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Abstract

Previous studies have described different aspects of "dens," "enclosures" or "own places." In design and planning, such studies take their starting point from the physical environment and as such focus on dens as physical objects (e.g., with a "place," "a floor," or "walls"). In contrast, research in psychology and sociology takes its starting point from children's own way of experiencing and understanding dens and focuses on mental and social aspects (e.g., as a place for special games, or as a secret place of retreat). Few studies reflect on the interesting intersection between these two ways of describing "dens" and its relevance for understanding children's points of view in planning and design.

Based on research of children aged 9-13 in a Swedish small town, the aim of this paper is twofold. First, to describe dens as physical objects in a physical context in which children choose to make dens, in this sense an adult/professional perspective; second, to portray children's understanding and experiences of a den, thus a child's perspective. The paper also comments on how planners can use these different perspectives to make environments child-friendly.

Keywords: play; dens; landscape design; child sociology

Background

The Problem

Children, especially in urban areas, live and act in environments planned and monitored by adults. Adults, planners not excepted, describe and plan these environments through an adult and professional perspective using cognitive and physical classifications. However, children mostly describe the same environment in terms of activity and meaning. While interviewing children 9-13 years old, my attention was drawn to a recurring place that the children often described both in terms of being a physical object in a physical context and as a place with special meaning where special activities and games were performed. This aroused my interest in investigating these places further. I was interested in why these places were so important to children and, as a landscape architect and planner, I also wanted to develop an understanding of which outdoor environments include this kind of place.

In Sweden, where this study was conducted, the children call these places *kojor* (singular *koja*), comprising objects of varying types, structures and locations. Some were in bushes, under branches or in trees, some behind stones or transformer stations, and some under stairs. The sites showed different degrees of "construction," and the structures had different degrees of permanence. A few of the structures were built with planks and nails (although never with the help of adults), but most were small spaces, corners and hiding places that had been improved or modified in some way. What was common for these objects or places was that each was an outdoor physical place that the children identified as a *koja*, and that had been manipulated to some extent to mark a spatial boundary

between the child and the rest of the world. This could be as simple as two crossed sticks, or as complicated as an expanded system of rooms in a thicket; the common factor was that each was an important place for the child, a place filled with meaning and where the children involved themselves in special games and activities. Kojor comprise "forts," "tree houses," "bush houses," "houses" and "dens." In this paper I will use the term "dens," even though this translation might not be totally satisfactory.

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, it is to describe the den as a physical object in a physical context in which children choose to make dens, in this sense an adult/professional perspective. Second, it is to portray children's understanding and experiences of a den, thus a child's perspective. The paper also discusses how children's experiences and understandings of the den reflect on the den as a physical object and vice versa. In other words, how different activities and meanings affect the physical expressions and constructions of dens; and how different physical expressions and constructions of dens can influence certain activities and meanings. This discussion is the basis for suggestions for how planners can make a child-friendly environment.

To describe dens as a physical object in a physical setting, the following questions were asked: Where do children build dens? What materials do they use? How do they construct them? To portray children's understanding and experiences of dens, questions included: What do children think is important and fun with dens? What do they do there?

Different Approaches to the Problem

Research on the physical environment and its relation to social and psychological significance, experience, health, creativity, ability to learn and perception has advanced in recent years, primarily in the broad research field of environmental psychology. There are currently several research projects that touch upon these questions, even if there are great differences in approaches.

One way of approaching these questions is to take a starting point in the physical environment. Often this is done by categorizing or changing and manipulating objects and elements in the physical environment and thereafter studying people's experiences and reactions. This was done, for example, by Susa and Benedict (1994) when they studied children's play on different types of playground and tested children's creative abilities after a certain period of play. They noted that playgrounds that offer specific characteristics, which they call "encapsulations" or "enclosed areas," promote pretend play and they concluded that this has positive effects on children's ability to be creative. A similar approach was taken by Herrington and Studtmann (1998), who rearranged elements in a daycare garden and thereafter studied children's play behavior. They observed that the children's social hierarchy changed significantly when space-defining areas of vegetation were planted in a preschool yard. The previous social hierarchy, which was based on physical strength, changed and instead favored children with command of language and their creativity and inventiveness in imagining what the spaces might be used for. Recent research by Grahn et al. (1997) shows how children's motor abilities differ after playing in daycare gardens with different aesthetic characteristics. The common aspect of these studies is that they first and foremost focus on the physical environment and that conclusions are drawn regarding the social and psychological significance and experience.

Another way of approaching the problem is to take a starting point in children's own accounts of their experiences and understanding of their physical

environments. In this way the focus shifts from the physical environment to aspects such as experience and understanding. Examples are the studies by Lieberg (1992) and by Rasmusson (1998) who took a starting point in interviews, drawings and photographs from children. Their analysis identifies a strong connection of social and mental aspects to the physical environment.

Some researchers with an environmental psychology approach have been interested in what are called "children's special places" or "favorite places." Chawla (1990), Sobel (1990), Dovey (1990), Olwig (1990) and Korpela (1992) discuss these places partly with physical and spatial perspectives and partly with mental and psychological perspectives. Their results show that these places often have different degrees of "manipulation" or "construction," have great meaning for their creators and are named differently by different children. Hart (1979) labels these activities "landscape modifications." He observes that it requires close contact with children to identify these places, because they might be nearly invisible as physical objects for anyone other than the child, and because they may exist for only a short time. Both Hart (1979) and Sobel (1993) found that children have different names for these places. In England they are called dens, bases, houses, tree houses, tree forts or Wendy houses. In the West Indies they are called playhouses, houses, play shops, bush houses. In the USA they are most often called forts.

Several researchers make a point of the fluid boundaries between the physical, social and psychological aspects of our lives. Chawla (1992) observes, for example, that the physical qualities and characteristics that can be planned and designed contribute only a small part of the whole that provides a total experience of a place. Olwig (1989) shows that in children's texts, "nature" cannot be described only as a physical entity; rather, the converse is true, nature is unnatural and absent if it excludes social context. Titman (1994) offers an explanation of how the physical environment and social and mental/psychological aspects are interrelated and difficult to separate. Lieberg (1992) shows that teenagers see the physical environment not only as a place in which to spend time, but also as a space where one rehearses for adult life. It is clear that the significance of the physical/spatial aspects of our development is closely bound to the psychological/social; they always affect each other and are difficult to distinguish in daily life or in research.

In studies of different outdoor environments, researchers frequently find that children build dens. For example during 1970–80, Florgård (1981) studied in detail the wear and tear in the natural surroundings around a housing area in Järvafältet and observed that one type of "wear" was the construction of dens. Lindblad (1993) observed that fantasy and construction play occurred most often at the periphery of schoolyards, among trees and bushes, and Lindholm (1995) showed that children played more games and constructed dens in schoolyards containing groves and natural areas. Grahn et al. (1997) showed how the character of the outdoor environment, such as "wilderness" or "quiescent," encouraged or discouraged preschool children from finding places to construct dens.

Three main studies have contributed to knowledge about dens in the sense that is used in this study. These three studies (Hart 1979, Sobel 1993, Powell 2001) have different approaches. While Hart mostly contributes by describing the physical aspects of children's constructed places, Sobel and Powell explore the meaning of these places from a social and psychological perspective.

Hart (1979) found in his studies in the USA during the 1970s that one of children's favorite places was a place where they had "forts and houses." Hart found this surprising, since previous studies of children's outdoor environments had not noted this. He argues that one reason might be that previous studies did not use observation and that studies not using this approach may not discover children's play in less open, less visible, areas. Hart noted, "I was struck by the large amount of time children spend modifying the landscape in order to make places for themselves and for their play" (Hart 1979, 205). He showed that the "making of places" is an especially important aspect of the child's experience of place and an aspect that had not been adequately considered in previous studies. In his study the main interest was "forts and houses" as physical objects, as he described where they were built and what they were made of. He also argued for the great importance of these places for children's development of a sense of personal competence and personal order.

Sobel (1993) conducted his studies in England and the West Indies, identifying common activities pursued by children in these different cultures and landscapes. In both places, the children gave great significance to their own private places, i.e. the children's personally found or constructed places. Sobel's primary interest was to explore the mental and psychological aspects of why children showed such a great interest in constructing their own places, and he developed and relied on the theories of, among others, Pearce (1977), Jung (1961) and Cobb (1959).

Powell (2001) conducted his studies in a schoolyard in the USA. Although the children had many activities to choose among, most of them chose to build "forts," an activity that for many of them continued throughout their school years. In many cases the "forts" were passed down between grades. Powell found that the social hierarchy that developed during the "fort" play was so strong that it permeated the rest of the school day. His primary interest was to answer questions related to the social dynamics of "fort" culture. He observed that playing with "forts" provided training in social competence, for example when children had to come to an agreement on who should decide what (the democratic aspects), or how they should cooperate to make a "fort." Powell gives examples of where children established rules and systems for what they considered to be the most important rules of fort play. He reflected on the importance attributed to social competence in contemporary society, and how little attention we give to this skill in our school curricula.

Researchers must often choose to disregard some aspects to make it possible to manage and describe reality. The vantage point of the present study is in part a child's perspective (Kylin and Lieberg 2001), where children's own accounts provide the basis for identifying their experience and understanding, and in part a professional perspective, where the physical reality can be described from skills in planning. In this study the children's accounts are the primary source for assessing their understanding and experiences of dens. They also show which physical/spatial aspects of the adult landscape architects should concentrate on to make areas available for children's play and development.

Methods, Materials and Analysis

Location and Previous Studies

This paper is a part of a Ph.D. study that started with a pilot study conducted in 1999, aimed at examining what children themselves experience as important in their everyday outdoor environment and how these experiences are supported by municipal plans. Results from the pilot study and an exhaustive description of the area are found in Kylin and Lieberg (2001). One of the offshoots of the pilot study

was the importance that children give to "dens." This paper is based on further material collected in the spring of 2000.

The location of the pilot study and the continued case-study are housing areas built during the 1970s and 1980s in the small town of Eslöv with 14,000 inhabitants in southern Sweden. The participating children attend a primary school with 331 pupils attending 14 classes from grades one to six. The school is located 2 km northwest of the center of Eslöv and is situated in the middle of the above-mentioned housing areas. This case-study included renewed participation with children who had previously participated in the pilot study and a new group of children. In spring 2000, the older children were in grade six (ages 12-13) and the younger children in grade three (ages 9-10). All of the participating children come from middle income families.

Figure 1. Map of Eslöv

Data Collection and Material

During May, I interviewed the children while walking with them through the area between the school and their homes. From grade six there were five groups of two children each: three groups of girls and two groups of boys. From grade three there were four groups of two children each: two groups of girls, one group of boys and one mixed group. All of the children volunteered. The interviews were open-ended (Kampman 1998, Andersson 1998) and took between one and two hours. They were recorded on a portable cassette recorder and transcribed immediately.

In June the classes were asked to write an essay on one of two topics: "my den" or "my favorite outdoor place." A total of 38 children wrote essays, of whom 29 chose to write about "my den."

During the summer I also made a number of walking inspections on my own in Eslöv, Lund and Dals-Långed. During these walks I made observations of dens and the areas where they were built. I documented the areas and dens with photographs and sketches, and in Eslöv I marked the dens on a map.

The material collected included

- nine recorded and transcribed interviews conducted during walks around the area: each interview was conducted with two children, for a total of 18 children. Of these, six interview groups, that is 12 children, showed me dens.
- 38 essays, of which 29 were about dens.
- a number of dens documented by photos and site plans where the locations of the dens are marked.

Of 56 participating children in the study (18 children in group interviews and 38 essays), 41 chose to show or write about dens (12 children in group interviews and 29 essays). A total of 62 dens were shown, described or observed. All of the children participating in the interviews wrote essays. Some of the children described or showed more than one den.

Methods and Motives

Hart (1979), who used several methods in his study, established that children mention more land-use places in what he called interviews with "place-expeditions" than in interviews at school, in which they mention more the "social" places (page 162). As one of my aims was to capture children's own understanding and experiences of dens, I used a similar method and let the children walk me around their everyday environments while interviewing them.

Complementing the interviews with essays balanced children's different abilities to formulate their thoughts through oral or written language. By combining both methods the children had several chances to give a more comprehensive description. It was also a way of collecting more data in a limited time, as interviewed place-expedition is time-consuming. The using of several methods to cover one subject is described by Starrin (1996) ("method triangulation") and has previously been used by Lieberg (1992) and Rasmusson (1998).

In the analysis of children's understanding and experiences of dens, I mainly relied on the material from the interviews and the essays. I read and re-read the transcriptions and looked for what recurred in what the children said or wrote. I looked for patterns- differences, contradictions or similarities- in the children's descriptions of their dens. As a starting point I used a phenomenographic approach described by Alexandersson (1994) and Larsson (1986), in trying to identify the perceptions and their variations.

As a former planner, I am accustomed to describing a physical reality in cognitive terms and physical classifications. Instead, describing a physical reality with a starting point from the concepts "understanding and experience" is, in a sense, a "child's perspective." This paper reproduces the children's own words and also shows my interpretation as a practitioner. Using a "child's perspective" means to perceive children as competent experts of their own environments and to be free from the preconceived opinions of what should be and could be important for the child. It also implies that children are subjects in a context, as opposed to their objectification in a clinical study.

The reason for doing my own observations was based on my aim to describe the den as a physical object and the physical factors in an outdoor environment that the child chooses for making dens. A professional and adult way of describing the den, and my own observations, with or without the children and in different locations, therefore gave the supplementary information needed for investigating and describing the den as a physical object.

In this part of the analysis I mainly relied on the material from my own observations, but also the children's comments on physical aspects, I designed a broad categorization of the types of dens, the vegetation and the characteristics of the places where children built dens. I looked for common features, structures and elements that could describe the dens and the places where they were built.

Findings

The Den – A Physical Object in a Physical Setting

There seem to be certain external factors that have a greater influence on where and how children construct dens. The most important factors are the character of the outdoor environment, the distance from home, and the availability of elements and materials to use in building dens. Below, each of these factors is analyzed and described more specifically.

Character of the Outdoor Environment

The research area included two similar neighborhoods, each surrounded by earth embankments that were built to function as noise barriers. Both embankments were covered with plants. On the first, one could see traces of activity everywhere in the vegetation, and there were many dens constructed in thickets, in trees and of "scrap." On the second, there was no trace of children's activities or a single den. The vegetation on the first embankment was designed to be natural, planted in several layers and included among other species Amelanchier,

Syringa, Betula, Crataegus, Fraxinus, Lonicera, Quercus, Symphoricarpos, Sorbus and Salix. The plantation gave the feeling of entering a forest and, once inside, one was hidden and there were many small glades. On the other embankment there were two layers of vegetation, a tree layer of Malus and a shrub layer of Prunus. Trees and shrubs were planted in regular rows without openings or variations and there was good visibility through the plantation.

Figure 2. The Noise Barrier

When wandering with the children, it became apparent that most of the gardens in the neighborhood were established about 20–30 years ago, and most had well-pruned shrubbery, flowerbeds along the house, lawns in the middle, trimmed hedges and fences at the edges. In these gardens the younger children constructed dens just outside the fence in nearby shrubbery, or in a corner where it did not affect the appearance of the rest of the garden, for example next to the compost. Only in one case was the garden “wild;” the lawn, shrubs, hedges and trees grew under less control than in other gardens. Here the children had two permanent dens.

My den is just outside the house. I share it with my friend Malin. It is in the thicket outside the fence. We cut inside the bushes with hedge clippers. It became a big open space. We also raked it. We have it because we think it is a nice place to be. What’s nice about dens is that you can go there when you don’t have anything to do....

-essay, girl, grade three

The older children showed me their dens on “Slingan,” a large green area that has the character of natural vegetation. The area contains a small brook, tree groves, thickets and fields with tall grass. Two of the dens were built in trees hidden in a larger grove, one was in the vegetation around a marl pit, and another was in a thicket along the brook. Most of these dens were hidden and out of view with the exception of a den in an oak tree, high up on a grass-covered hill. The den consisted of a floor and a rope ladder: a visible but impregnable fort.

-How did you come here to this place?

- Here? We walked.

- But why to this place?

- Because it is completely private.

- But there are loads of other trees closer, why this tree?

- You cannot see in here. Mamma doesn’t know where we are.

- interview, two boys, grade six

As these examples show, there are specific demands on the types of vegetation that attract den constructors: areas that resemble forests and the natural countryside, with several layers of different plant types, large untrimmed bushes, thickets or hedges with mixed species. Common for these types of vegetation is that they offer many hiding places, and there are trees and bushes whose placement creates both closed and open spaces within. Important factors for finding a place to build a den are that the environment offers a place hidden from view and that it has space defining qualities.

It is possible that children’s need to build dens is so great that it is even expressed in environments lacking places that are hidden from view or without space defining qualities. However, as most of the children in this study were reluctant to build a den if it was not secret and out of view, one can assume that

these qualities encourage children's construction of dens. Another obstacle described by some children is the adult demand that the surroundings should be tidy and not messy. This was clear in my conversation with a boy who had a den in his garden next to the trunk of a pine tree, near the compost. He told me:

We can be here...; we had a den in another place in the garden, but Mamma thought it was too messy, so we have to stay here near the compost.... There was much more scrap around but I've it cleaned up....
-interview, boy, grade three

Distance from Home

Distance from home was an important factor for both younger and older children. For the younger, it was important to be sufficiently close to home or another safe place, such as a friend's garden or a playground close to home. For the older children who still built dens, it was important to be sufficiently far from home that one was left in peace, and that the parents could not see everything they did. It has long been known that children's radius of activities outdoors is associated with their age and the character of the outdoor environment (Sandels and Wohlin 1961). Speck and Rogier (1997) observed that if there are no good play areas near the home, it does not mean that children go farther away to play. Instead they do not go out to play until they are old enough to play farther away. Hart (1979) found that children constructed dens between 90 and 300 meters from their homes and Sobel (1993) found that although dens might be described as isolated from the world of adults, they were often close to the home. He also found that the older the children, the farther from home they built their dens.

It is therefore no surprise that the present study showed that the younger children had dens near their homes (or another safe place), and that the older children constructed dens farther off. The children continued this activity for some years, and it followed the age-related action radius. There were more dens near safe places than in the larger green areas farther from the housing area. This might be because children are the most active den builders at the age of seven to nine (Hart 1979, Sobel 1993, Powell 2001) when they still prefer to be near a safe place. However, it could also be due to an absence of large green areas with the character of nature that could attract older children to construct dens. The older children would probably have constructed more dens if there had been more appealing environments for them.

Materials and Building Elements

There is a fluid boundary between different types of materials which children use to construct dens. Above all, the construction is dependent on what can be found on the spot. I observed a whole village of "rock dens" on a stony forest slope in Dals-Långed, while Bengtsson (1994) describes how as a child he built earth dens, when there was no other material to be found.

In the present study, the most common type of den was constructed by the younger children in and of shrubbery. In thickets it was easy to find a small "room" shielded from view, and these "rooms" were the most secret dens, which even offered some protection from weather and wind. In some cases the den that a child showed me was no more than this. Some children then continued to improve the den by breaking off small branches and working with the bushes to extend the space and create holes and passages in the thicket. The children may also collect different "treasures" that they sort and classify and arrange inside or outside the den. If they find other building materials, the den may be improved with boards, poles and "scrap." For example, I found dens built along thickets that were improved with branches and twigs, wood boxes and paper cartons.

I had several dens with my friend Josefin but one was the best of all. It was a bush with light green leaves, and it was about two meters wide and ten meters long, but we only used about five meters. There were two clearings and if you wanted to get in you went through a clearing and then through grass a half meter high, and then we were inside the den. You could not look inside because the bush was very dense. Then when you got inside there was a big room with stones to sit on. Then we broke off branches so that we had a hole to another room that was smaller than the first but looked almost the same, but it had a "window" in a wall. Then there was a hole to a smaller room and there was a door hole so that you could go out, but there were stinging nettles and you got stung. There was a log in the first room where you could put things...

-essay, girl, grade six

Figure 3. Bush Den Entrance

Figure 4. Bush Den Interior

The next most common type of den observed was made by older children in and of trees. The best climbing trees offer good branches as observation points over the neighboring areas. In some cases a den was no more than one or more good sitting branches for a couple of friends. Children might then improve the den by hanging up treasures and sticks, for example an umbrella as a roof or a string as a doorbell. To improve it further, the children might add some sort of floor and, if there was enough material, there might also be one or more walls.

My den was in a tree outside our place.... It was big and we played in it all the time. It was built in the tree. We started by putting in the bottom, and when that was finished we put in wooden poles to make sure that it didn't slip on the sides. When that was done, you put up the walls.

-essay, girl, grade six

Figure 5. Tree Den

Some dens were built of "scrap" or other forms of loose material that children could carry from nearby. During one survey, the parks department had just pruned a number of shrubs along one of the paths and left the trimmings. In a very short time children constructed a number of dens next to larger thickets. Dens built of loose materials such as plant trimmings, sticks and "scrap" most often were set against a bush, stone or tree trunk. The den would thus be "anchored" to the other element. The dens built of "scrap" were mostly well hidden in the forest-like areas on the embankment built as a noise barrier. Otherwise they probably would not have lasted long, since most of them would have been seen as "scrap piles."

Figure 6. Den of Loose Material (1)

Figure 7. Den of Loose Material (2)

Hart (1987) argues that young children's first dens are found places and as children develop, the dens also gradually develop to become more built constructions. My observations, however, indicate that children must find a starting place even for dens that are elaborately constructed. The placement of the dens in this area and their "anchoring" elements indicated that these places were found and that the surroundings signaled to the children that it was a good place for a den. Again, the lack of visibility and the space defining character were important aspects.

Most dens contained a variety of objects such as boxes and chairs, tree stumps, dart boards, umbrellas, pieces of board and rope bits, feathers, bunches of flowers, pens and paper, carpet pieces, stones, corrugated cardboard and cartons. These objects could function as furnishings and fittings, but also to define the space, such as an umbrella for the roof and a carpet as the floor. Items could also be used to lay traps in front of and around the dens. Some children showed me traps they had made of grass plaited into loops that would catch an intruder's foot; others showed me attempts to make pit traps, which were holes in the ground that someone could fall into. Sebastian's ingenious rope trap was built high up between branches so that an adult would be caught, but a child could go under.

- *Oh dear, a string, have you caught me? That was incredible. You can't see it.*
(Interviewer)

- *No, it is green and you went straight into it... It is a trap and anyone who is tall gets caught in it.* (Child)

-interview, boy, grade three

Figure 8. Making a Grass Trap

Dens are often closed and invisible to passers-by, but can be open to view when the children choose to define and use the immediate surroundings as a kind of forecourt. Thus the area around the entrance to the den is important. This is where children lay traps to protect the den from intruders. This is also where they have food preparation areas (such as pretend fireplaces), and this is where they might hold "rituals" to enter the den (for example, one must press on a special stick to enter).

Children's Understanding and Experience of Dens

The Den as a Social Place

It appears that the children perceive the den as a secret place and a place that one has together with someone. This means that although a den is secret, it most often is built and shared with one or more friends.

Elin, Philip, Marcus, Pierre and I have a den at Marcus'. It is a club den only for us (and others when we give them permission). You come up to the den with a ladder. When you first come up the steps you come to a balcony. Then you go two meters forward and one meter to the left and reach a door. The door is part of an old fence that we put hinges on. We laid a white carpet on the floor. Along the wall there are different colored cushions. The walls are sheets of masonite and an old ironing board...

-essay, boy, grade six

It was most common to have the den with one or two close friends, friends with whom one shared secrets. There were also dens shared by several friends, and in these cases they functioned as meeting places or "club" houses and it follows that there was an exclusion of other children. The children themselves decided who would be included or excluded; it was no business of adults. Unlike school or organized after-school activities, the children took the initiative and decided by themselves if there was going to be a den and with whom it would be made. In the cases that children mentioned an adult, it was a father who helped with the construction. But they never mentioned "having" a den with an adult; they "had" it together with other children.

The children often talked about the common games that they played when sharing a den. For example "shop," "war," or what could be associated with "house and home," as in "mothers and fathers." "We tidy and make it nice." "We snack and have picnics." Or what could be associated with the building and constructing process, such as "We paint and build."

When I was younger, the others on my street and I used to play in our dens. Sofie (neighbor) Marcus (brother), Janni (neighbor) and Linda (neighbor) had a den together only because they were the eldest. Daniel (neighbor) and I had one together. Our den was on the embankment behind Sofie's and Daniel's house. We used to play there very often. We also had our own tree. Janni and Linda were best friends so they had to have trees next to each other. We others had bigger trees, a little farther off. We only played there when it was light and the weather was nice. We used to play mother and father. We phoned each other after school, and then we went to Sofie's and Daniel's and then through their garden and then we were there.

-essay, girl, grade six

Drawing from these examples, the den can be described as a meeting place where one of the most important aspects is that the children themselves influence who is allowed to be there. It can also be described as a place for common games, both during the construction and later when playing in it. Describing the den as a social place where those who construct and play together create a sense of fellowship, or strengthen a previous relationship, and gain social competence.

Figure 9. Children Playing Together

The Den as a Secret Place

Most often the children talked and wrote about how important it was that the den was "secret," "hidden" and "out of view." The main reason for stopping using a den was that "it was not secret any more;" for example, that other children had seen it. All of the dens in thickets were shown to me by their owner, and they did not show me any dens on the ground belonging to other children, even if on some occasions they said that they knew where they were. Dens in trees were more visible, even if they were somewhat hidden behind leaves, and the older children showed me dens in trees that they had not built themselves. For some of the older children it was important that the den was secret from their parents.

My den is in a big shrubbery at a playground. The plants are very big. The surroundings are flat, and there are lots of trees, so you have to be very thin to get in. I have it there just because it's very hard for other children in the playground to find it, so it's a little secret in a way. What's fun with dens is that you can keep them secret for a long time before anyone else finds them.

-essay, boy, grade six

Dens were also described as hidden observation points from which one could collect information and spy on adults or other children without being seen, especially dens in trees from where the view over the neighborhood was good. One girl had a den in the branches of a *Pinus mugo*, and from the top she could look directly into the neighbors' gardens. She gave a detailed account of life, death, daily living and the social situation in her neighborhood block. This observation point, provided by her tree den, seemed to be an important place from where she could collect information on these matters.

- Yes and if I stand up you can't see me from there, so it's possible to hide. And then I usually spy on my neighbor.
 - Can you do that from here?
 - Yes, if I sit in my place there.
 - So you have a special place?
 - Yes, I can listen when they talk. But we will have new neighbors there... a man died, he had two years to retirement... and she thought it was too expensive to live there so she moved to a flat, but the house hasn't been sold yet, but they've been there to look, but they haven't sold their old house....
 - What is best about a den?
 - You can be yourself there, you are left alone, no one can disturb you, you can play without anyone hearing, and you can share secrets with friends.
- interview, girl, grade three.

The den was often perceived as a place where one could be alone, to sit and ponder or just "do one's own thing." It was also a hidden refuge from which one could get up to different kinds of mischief, since one (hopefully) could run back and seek refuge afterwards. It was also described as a good place to tell stories.

...We usually sit in the den in the evening and play cards. Play on our Game Boys and tell ghost stories (that's the most fun). We have a torch with a bright light. When we tell ghost stories we change the torch to a battery powered light bulb that gives very weak light.

-essay, boy, grade six

The children's perception of the den as a secret place can be compared with Lieberg (1992) who found that "hideouts" were places and settings where teenagers felt they could escape from the control of adults and peers and feel free, uncontrolled and independent. From a spatial perspective, it is interesting that these "hideouts" were mostly found and created in green areas and factors such as the outdoor design and the vegetation played a role when they chose just these places.

To be able to decide for oneself and draw the boundaries of one's physical space is an important part of a child's progress toward independence. Wolfe (1978) describes observations that show that privacy achieved through control of physical space is necessary for healthy mental development. Wolfe and several others note, however, that young children have no or very little possibility to choose privacy, since adults control children's time and space.

Figure 10. Den Friends

The Den as a Process

When children describe how they make their dens, they usually talk about the elements and materials they use, as described earlier. However, for some of the children the process of building and constructing is the most important issue. The den as such is secondary. Robert and Mirelle, for example, had a den in a Salix next to a marl pit.

- What is the best thing about dens?
- It is to construct. After that the only thing to do is to take it down and build a new one. I don't know what you should do with them. But this time when we built one, we just sort of kept it up there, and Mamma had some rugs she wanted to dump, so I cut them and put them in, and then I took some planks and built sort of a window, and took some, this wide maybe, and then we put out some newspapers and then... I've built lots and lots of dens...

- *When do you stop building dens?*
 - *When you're finished.*
 - *Do you mean how old you are?*
 - *Yes.*
 - *Maybe when you reach 60. You never stop building dens. My grandfather built one for me in Yugoslavia last year, before I got there.*
- interview, two boys, grade six

These children talk about the den as a process, in which they participate from start to end. The starting point is to find a place and then to collect and arrange valuables and treasures, then they continue to construct what they can from the loose or breakable materials on the spot. If it is possible, they then transport valuables and building materials to the place and engage in further construction. When the den is considered to be finished, the children enjoy taking it down or, as in one example, setting it on fire.

...After a couple of years Tobias and Charlie and Nicklas and I started building another den, although this was on the ground. It was 30 meters from our house. It was huge. Papa couldn't help much then. It had two big rooms. First we built one room, and then we thought it was too small for us big ones, so we built another room that was a little larger than the other. We worked for about two to three weeks. When it was finished there was only a month to bonfire night (30 April). So when bonfire night came, we set fire to the den and it too burnt down completely.

-essay, boy, grade six

These dens are built more for the joy and the challenge of the process than for their use as finished artifacts. Hart (1987) observes "Because, unlike the world of people, the physical world does not itself change in response to a child's actions but simply reflects his or her manipulations, it offers a particularly valuable domain for developing one's sense of self" (page 224).

Age and Gender Differences

The material shows a difference between age groups in how interested they are in building dens. There was also a difference between what boys and girls emphasized that they do in the den and how they construct them.

All 12–13 year olds talked about dens, but most of them referred to it as an activity of the past. It turned out that many of them knew very well where there were dens, and they remembered playing in dens themselves "every day when the weather was good." All 9–10 year olds were eager to show me their dens where they played actively. Several of the younger children said that they "played there every day," and some had dens in the countryside near their vacation cottages and played in them "every day during the summer."

- *Why did you stop playing in dens?*
- *It wasn't fun any more. We wanted to do other things and sort of forgot about them.*
- *But you know younger children that build dens?*
- *Yes, yes ... I know three, but I can't tell. It's a secret.*
- *Is this the kind of dens that the younger children build, or ...*
- *Yes, they crawl, they build them deep in the bushes so that no one sees them, but I know them, they showed them to me... there is one farther away built against a fence, just by a corner. It was completely full of bushes and then it was clear. You could put up a hammock outside it... The young kids are in the bushes*

and we older kids are in town and mess around.
-interview, two girls, grade six

There were differences between what boys and girls reported about their activities related to dens. Girls emphasized what they did inside the den, whereas boys put emphasis on the construction. While girls "made it nice," "swept" and "tidied," the boys "built." It seemed sometimes that they themselves tried to mark the difference. It could be seen that the girls structured and manipulated their environment just as much as the boys, but with different tools, for example with hedge clippers and rakes instead of hammers and wood saws. Girls and boys also used different terms to describe what they did. While a girl might call it "making it nice" when she uses clippers to cut open a space in a thicket, a boy might call it "building a wall." Both boys and girls simply use the tools and concepts they are most familiar with and considered most appropriate for their gender. In this study there was a greater difference in the appearance of dens according to the age of the children than there was between dens built by boys and girls.

...We cut in the bushes with hedge clippers. It became a big open space. We also raked it; we swept it and made it nice...
-essay, girl, grade three

...We built it between two trees.... Sometimes we don't play. We usually build new things for the den. We can easily get hold of planks to build with since we have so many....
-essay, boy, grade three

Different Types of Dens

All children experienced the den as a social place and a secret place, but this could range from "very secret" to "very social" depending, among other things, on the child's age and gender, but both aspects were always included. This is reflected by where, how, and with what the children build the dens. Both younger and older children need a site to start with, a "found place" where the "hidden from view" and "space defining" aspects are important. For younger children it must be close to home or another safe place; for older children it should be far enough away from home. The older children make more elaborate constructions than the younger ones, who rather manipulate and work with elements and materials found on the spot. If the den is mainly meant as a social space, it probably will have a more open design, but if it is meant mainly as a secret place, then it will probably be more closed and less visible to the world around.

Thus, children's different experiences and understanding of dens influence the den's physical expression, e.g., a well-hidden den with an elaborate and closed construction is more likely to be built and used by older children using the den as a secret place. A den that consists of a hole in a bush with a forecourt and "arranged" treasures is more likely to be used by younger children as a social place.

In order to illustrate these physical expressions, I classified the dens into types. As Figure 11 shows, the types relate to the elements used, the process in building, and the age differences. The elements used are bushes and shrubbery, trees and loose material. In a different location with different elements, the list could probably be complemented. The process of "finding," "collecting" and "expanding" is the same for a den made in a tree or in a bush or elsewhere. A "found den" is described and perceived as an important place by the younger

children just as much as the more elaborate dens are described and perceived as important places by the older children.

Figure 11. Matrix of Types and Uses of Dens by Children of Different Ages

Discussion

The Den as Physical Object

This study shows that there are certain aspects of the physical environment that are important for children if they are to be able to find places to make dens.

First is the character of the outdoor environment, here found to be environments where children can find places hidden from view and that have space defining qualities. This is consistent with Lindholm (1995) who showed that areas with "character of nature" allowed more space for children's own activities and creativity than those that lacked them. The qualities that are common to the places considered natural by children in her study consisted of vegetation that grows freely and a variation in age and of height of the plants.

Children's urge to make dens sometimes seems to overrule desolate environments. In my observations of a schoolyard in Lund where 120 children of six to nine years shared a paved schoolyard containing 12 bushes, there were dens in the remnants of every bush. Even a spiky Juniperus had a den under the branches. The urge to have "one's one place" is discussed, for example, by Sobel (1990), who describes a situation of children in a large city who had their own place between some billboards; several similar examples of this are given in the Michigan Quarterly Review 39(2), 2000.

Secondly, the materials and building elements available in the area are important. In Eslöv, the most common type of den was constructed in and out of shrubbery; the next most common type in and of trees; and yet other dens were built of loose material. This is consistent with results in the study by Fjörtoft and Sageie (2000) that show that deciduous shrubs and mixed shrub vegetation dominate in the areas with construction play. Titman (1994) also observes that for children, bushes are not important as bushes but hugely important as symbols of the den, and trees are essentially symbolic of climbing. Hart (1979) shows that the most used elements for making dens are deciduous bushes and trees and different loose materials, such as sticks, grass, wood pieces, boxes and "scrap."

Finally, I found that the distance from home was an important factor for both younger and older children. Younger children had less elaborate constructions in the thickets nearer home than older children who often had more complicated constructions in trees and of "loose parts" farther from home. This is consistent with Hart's (1979) distinction between "found" dens, made by younger children, and "built" dens made by older ones.

Children's Understanding and Experiences of Dens

The most interesting part of children's experiences and understandings of dens is the connection between the den's role both as a social place and a secret place, where one does not exclude the other. This can be explored with the help of several theories.

Wolfe (1978) approaches the concept of "privacy" through different perspectives. She concludes that a large group of children define privacy through independence, with the meaning that it is possible to control and determine

access to a place: "a place that is mine— no one knows where it is —no one disturbs me." According to Wolfe (1978) the unknown place and control over access represent an important part of the sense of autonomy, while "aloneness" is a secondary effect. She draws the conclusion that in contrast to many other children, children with their own places do not primarily consider "privacy" to be the same as "aloneness." Autonomy, aloneness and privacy are separate concepts that Wolfe considers. A sense of privacy can be achieved by having one's own place with control over access, but where the sense of "aloneness" and solitude is not relevant.

Sobel (1993, 72) refers to the Jungian perspective that draws parallels between external construction and shaping a space for one's self (the den) with internal construction and shaping one's self (identity). "The special place outside serves to symbolize the special person inside."

I consider that "shaping one self" (creating an identity) is an intricate process requiring some protection from unwelcome and uncontrolled external disturbances, so that the secret aspect of the den becomes especially important. At the same time, it is helpful to be able to share with someone or some chosen others at certain stages in the process of "shaping one's self," and then the social aspects of the den become important. This dialectical process requires, however, that children perceive that they have control over who is invited to one's "own place." Dens can, like the children and the process they are in, range between "very secret" and "very social," but both aspects are always present to some extent.

The common factor in the experience of the den as a social and a secret place is the sense of control that children feel they have, both over the den as a physical space and over the other children who share the den. In his research, Lieberg (1992, 125) discusses teenagers' interests in establishing their own territories, limited in time and space according to different degrees of freedom: "To indicate uniqueness and identity assumes some form of territory or bounded area that one can control." My study indicates that dens are a way for children to establish private territories where it is important to have a high degree of control.

The research reported here shows that the greatest difference between the girls and boys studied is that they use different terms to describe how they build dens. Both boys and girls simply used the tools and concepts with which they were most familiar and considered most appropriate for their gender. Hart (1979) and Sobel (1993) emphasize girls' greater interest in the insides and furnishings of the dens, and the fact that many of their games are related to playing house, and boys' greater interest in the outside and construction in itself. Powell (2001), on the other hand, observes that boys are somewhat more interested in construction, and thus have more closed dens, but inside the den, they often have space for social activities. Girls more often build open dens with a center around which they can gather. Powell thus links the differences between boys' and girls' dens with their appearance and the type of play in them. He also observes that open dens are more used for social play with many children, play that involves household activities (e.g., sweeping the floor, cooking), and that construction in itself is more important for the more elaborate and closed dens that many of the boys prefer. When the latter type of den is ready, there is too little space for any kind of play, so it is rather the construction in itself that is important and the den is demolished to build a new one. Powell refers to similar findings by Dovey (1987) who outlined a typology of dens (huts), where three main types are considered: huts consisting of an open space with boundaries

marked out with stones or sticks in the dirt, huts that are constructed and enclosed and finally, huts in trees.

In this context, shrubs and thickets have excellent qualities in terms of the balance between open and closed spaces. The shape of shrubs and thickets offers the opportunity to have both open space for social activities and closed space for secret activities. If the thicket is a little bigger, it is also possible to expand. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that shrubbery is such a consistently important element in the building of dens.

Planning for Children

There is a built-in conflict between the approach to the outdoor environment of adults/planners and children. Many adults/planners hold the visual aesthetic values together with the measurable units of analysis as important, while the child's value of a place has more to do with how much importance and meaning that they put into it through their own activities (Lindholm 1995). It is reasonable to ask whether there is any point in "planning" for children. Olwig (1990, 47) observed, "The resultant planning and landscaping of environments designated for children can run counter to the needs of children to find and form their own special places." Several researchers show that understanding of the significance between the place's social and psychological aspects (place) and the physical spatial aspects (space) is formed and established in childhood (Olwig 2000). I consider that in the dialogue between child and the environment, the den is created as a physical manifestation of children's activity to transform their environment into a meaningful "place." If adults can see dens as such, this provides possibilities to interpret environments with "a child's eye."

If by planning one means designed and structured areas where every shrub and pavement stone has a designated place, planning leaves little room for a child's own creativity, which is often seen as disturbing and messy. Planners' predilection for planning based on quantitative analysis is perhaps why some other aspects of planning, e.g. maintaining biodiversity, have had much greater impact than children's needs. There are techniques to measure and analyze the rate of biological diversity, even if these techniques are not uniform and constantly under discussion. As a consequence, there are legal means to save an area to protect a rare species. To save an area that is valuable for children is not done to the same extent, even if discussions are held in parts of Sweden of how children and youth can be involved in planning (Boverket 2000).

I believe it is necessary to see planning as an opportunity where adults together with children create the conditions for areas with physical frames for children's own creativity, such as building dens. These do not necessarily have to be in separate areas that are reserved for children, such as schoolyards or playgrounds. In a society where children are becoming a scarce resource, we are losing a general understanding of childhood, an understanding gained by associating with, listening to and meeting children in their daily life. Economic and political decisions on child-friendly environments can gain support and be advocated only if there is a broad understanding of children. If child-experts are the only voice advocating children's rights, there is a great risk that this voice will not be heard. Instead, adult demands for features such as tidy courtyards, greater accessibility for cars and more densely built neighborhoods will dominate.

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