

# The Built Environment and Children's Development

THOMAS G. DAVID AND CAROL SIMON WEINSTEIN

## INTRODUCTION

Children's interactions with physical settings tend to be direct and easy to observe. For the infant who delights in exploration and movement and the preschooler who strives to master physical skills, the immediate environment is the primary medium for learning. Moreover, attachments to beloved objects and places are central to the emotional life of the young child. As time goes on, exposure to a variety of group and institutional settings leads to new understandings about social roles and norms in the world beyond the home. The arrangement of classroom space, for example, communicates expectations for behavior that are reinforced by institutional policies.

Although learning becomes increasingly abstract with age and settings seem to grow less important, the environmental experiences of childhood continue to be influential. As Elizabeth Prescott notes in Chapter 4 of this volume, one way to assess that influence is by asking adults to recall favorite places from their childhood. The vividness of the images they conjure up and the accompanying depth of feeling transcend mere nostalgia. They testify to the significance of an aspect of individual development that we are only beginning to understand.

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In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the importance of contextual variables in research on children's development. Missing from most considerations of context, however, has been an acknowledgment of the potential impact of the *physical* context—particularly the built environment—on children. Beyond appeals for “enriched” and “stimulating” settings, there has been a neglect of physical variables in mainstream child development research that reveals a tacit view of the physical setting as an unimportant backdrop.

This volume challenges that view. Although we would certainly not contend that the built environment is the major influence on the developing child, *we do believe that the developmental process can be influenced by characteristics of the physical setting*. This is particularly true for very young children, who have limited control over their surroundings and who spend much of their time engaged in interaction with the physical, rather than the social, environment (Parke, 1978; White, Kaban, Shapiro, & Attonucci, 1976).

*We also believe that systematic knowledge about children and their interaction with the built environment can be used to improve the design of children's settings*. From the perspective of children's developmental needs, schools, day-care centers, hospitals, psychiatric residences, and playgrounds are often poorly designed. Homes tend to be adult-oriented, to contain large spaces that are off limits to children, and to restrict opportunities for varied, stimulating experiences (Johnson, Shack, & Oster, 1980; Johnson, Chapter 7). Schools and institutions are often stark, uninviting, and designed for easy supervision and maintenance (Wolfe & Rivlin, Chapter 5); playgrounds consist of isolated pieces of single-purpose equipment and fenced-in blacktops.

The present volume reflects both of these beliefs. It focuses on two questions: first, what do we know about the nature of children's interactions with the built environment; and second, how can we apply our knowledge of children and the developmental process to the design of spaces for children?

#### THE STATE OF THE FIELD: CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In Chapter 13, Theodore Wachs notes that developmental psychology has moved far beyond a simple “main effects” conception of environmental influence on development to sophisticated, multivariate models capable of teasing out interactions between specific environmental factors, individual characteristics, and particular developmental outcomes. When it comes to the built environment, however, we are still at a fairly rudimentary level of inquiry. Few child-environment investigators are looking simultaneously at the interplay among these three sets of variables. For the most part, research