

WAR AND WONDER

An exploration of children and play within a city during times of war.



HOSN HOUSSAMI
Critical Transformations

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Image on Cover (*Boys Create Allotments on Bomb Site*; Ministry of Information Photo Division Photographer, 1942)

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Abstract

No matter how a child tries to occupy a space in the city, they are often policed by the adults who view their childish behaviour as disruptive. War, though unfavourable, often creates physical voids – blank landscapes - within cities which during times of peace, offer no places for childhood. In addition to this, war offers a distraction to the adults, which allows children claim to these voids. With little implementation of structural regulations, children are given the opportunity to become architectural contributors to the cityscape.

I wish to explore the different ways in which children create spaces for themselves within cities in times of conflict. I look to explore why children are allowed more imaginative freedom in times of war, and why they can disassociate themselves from the horrors of war to create spaces of play and wonder for their own use and entertainment. Using the ‘Child’, ‘Childhood’ and ‘Childishness’ as facilitators of thought, I will be referring to children’s form of play and construction during the Lebanese-Israeli July War of 2006 and the bombsite playgrounds of London post-World War II.

The Child and Childish Spatial Occupation

“For scholars, the temptation is strong to frame their experiences as if children were a subset of the adult population. Unless they are the focal point of the story, children’s experiences are often cast across the arc of the adult narrative. They are painted onto the backdrop while their parents and caretakers squarely occupy the colourful central foreground” (Honeck and Marten, 2019: 230).

As adults, we are often hasty to ignore the existence of the child. Whether in the pages of history books, or in physical spaces, we are quick to contain them. Often the child is not seen as a complete human being, but as a semi-formed adult (or in the case of infants; a living organism to be cared for). Because of this we deem it acceptable that the rights of the child are limited for the comforts of the adult. Although this is prevalent in most aspects of life, it is very apparent in cities, where the child often has no ownership; no sanctioned freedom to express their childish yearnings. The child often has to break away from the watchful eyes of the adults and find childhood spaces for themselves. “In cities [...] it will discover places where it can play as it chooses, [...] material with which to construct, [...] and other facilities imaginatively designed, waiting to be imaginatively used” (Eyck, 2008: 23). Nevertheless, no matter how a child tries to occupy a space in the city, they are often policed by the adults who view their childish behaviour as disruptive. It is a harsh reality that it is only in tumultuous periods that the child can occupy space in the city in a childish and unregulated manner.

Economic collapse, famines, disease epidemics, and wars are all incidents which affect the adult’s ability to supervise the child. They are distracted by ‘bigger issues’, and it is in this distraction that the child can wonder; physically and mentally. When regarding children in states of war their safety is always the prime consideration. Shelter, as designed by adults, forms the spaces which children are meant to occupy in these situations. These shelters however, often fail to acknowledge a child’s fundamental need to be

childish; to play. Where imagination and wellbeing are not compromised by the stresses of war and adulthood, children are often noted to create spaces for themselves - 'playgrounds' designed by and for them - woven into the landscapes created by the destruction of war.

“In the last ten years, as part of a wider trend in the study of the cultural and social histories of the world wars, children have been treated as full-fledged actors on the home front and have thus come into their own as a subject of study. The challenge for the historian is to try to capture childhood experience in all its complexity” (Honeck and Marten, 2019: 170).

War, though generally detrimental, creates voids – blank landscapes - within cities, which during times of peace offer no places for childhood. With little implementation of structural regulations, children are given the opportunity to become architectural contributors to the cityscape. This is a phenomenon that has occurred through several wars, irrespective of the historical and geographic locations. With negligible construction knowledge and limited material resources, childish resourcefulness is allowed to thrive, creating spaces that simply cannot be produced by an adult designer. A child's psychological ability to compartmentalise the horror surrounding warfare, is what allows childish wonder to inhabit the scenes of war.

I wish to explore the different ways in which children create spaces for themselves within cities in times of conflict; focusing on both internal and external spaces. Juxtaposed to this, I look to explore why children are allowed more imaginative freedoms in times of war, and why they can disassociate themselves from the “real anxieties” (Freud and Burlingham, 2011: 25) of war and create spaces of wonder for their own use and entertainment.

It is imperative that I first define what differentiates a child and childishness in time of war and that of peace. I then wish to come to my own simple conclusion about what the events that affect children the most are, and what forms of imaginative outlets they use to discuss their experiences. I realise that a ‘simple conclusion’ can be viewed as a flawed premise, however it is more flawed a practice to try and comprehend the creations of a child without even a slight attempt at understanding the psyche of the creator.

From there I will be referring to my own experience as a child who experienced life through war (the Lebanese-Israeli July War of 2006). I will be drawing from my memories, recollecting how we altered our living quarters as children when we were given the autonomy of choice. It is through this that

I may be able to validate the definitions I reach when evaluating the war child. Using a historical reference – the bombsite playgrounds of London post-World War II – I will also assess how childish resourcefulness is used in play, and how the war child is especially skilled at this.

The War Child

It is often assumed that ‘Child’, ‘Childhood’ and ‘Childishness’ are all synonyms of the same definition; however, it is important to clarify that which distinguishes these terms. I cannot with sincerity profess to not have any idiosyncratic notions as to what these terms mean. I have already framed the discussion of childhood spaces in times of war with them as facilitators of thought. The choice I have here is to either leave these differences to your discretion, or to assert for us a theoretical lens through which we may deliberate.

First let us look at the ‘Child’. It is not unfitting to state that “a child is... well, a child is what you recognise as a child [...]” (Ward, 1990: Vii). Different cultures have different beliefs as to what state of being a human fits within the category of a ‘Child’; often using markers such as puberty, legal rulings, and emotional ‘maturity’ to define what a child is. By the legal standards set in the country of this writing, a child is legally defined as a being under the age of eighteen. I must for the sake of this analysis disregard this, as it does not acknowledge the stage of ‘adolescence’, whereby a person has mostly relinquished tendencies adopted by children for more ‘adult’ acts. “The issue of age is absolutely central to any historical analysis of children’s visual representations [...] To the older children’s preoccupation with verisimilitude and realism, the younger children respond with representations that are less ‘repressed’ [...]” (Honeck and Marten, 2019: 173). I will therefore in this discussion define the ‘Child’ as a being post-infancy and pre-pubescence (roughly the ages of three to thirteen), with ‘Childhood’ being used as a term of reference to this developmental period.

Although I chose here to specifically discuss the ‘Child’ in war times, I must also recognise that it’s not the child or childhood which irritate adults in society, as “children are gradually being acknowledged as children: and childhood as a full-fledged form of life, an integral part of society, physically indispensable and spiritually inspiring” (Eyck, 2008: 22). Rather,

it is childishness – that those who don’t possess it – consider as a bother. It is the child’s ability to imagine and wonder, to separate themselves from reality, to play rather than to address the issues around them, that is labelled as ‘childish’. A shared experience by both an adult and a child is often viewed differently because of this; “when adults go over their experience in conscious thought and speech, children do the same with play” (Freud and Burlingham, 2011: 67). Childishness here is not a state of being like the child or childhood, but rather the response to reality; adults can be childish just as the child, however through their developed understanding of the world, they have categorised this as an act which should solely reside in childhood, otherwise it is a distraction.

Now that I have (for myself, if no one else) differentiated these terms, I am still engulfed by the notion of the war child. What is then intrinsic about the child, which allows them to retain this childishness even in times of war? Why do they still play?

“Knowledge and reason only play a limited part in a child’s life. It’s interest quickly turns away from the real things in the outer world, especially if they are unpleasant, and reverts back to its own childish interests, to its toys, its games and to its phantasies [...] they drop their contact with reality, they deny the facts, get rid of their fear in this manner and return, apparently undisturbed, to the pursuit and interests of their own childish world” (Freud and Burlingham, 2011: 26/28).

This hypothesis, that play is integral to the child’s development is further backed by Froebel “[The] aim of these plays [games]... is to exercise and develop the child’s power of independent movement. They are journeys of discovery. They are plays which enrich the child with perceptions and experience” (Froebel, 1895). It is therefore a natural predisposition of the child to play in such times; it is both a learning and a coping mechanism. Play is deemed as so natural and such a key characteristic of child psychiatry and psychology, that the UN Conventions have considered it as a basic human need when discussing the rights of the child (Play Well: Why Play Matters, 2020).

The child may use several forms of play, all directed by the wonder of imagination. The form that continually arises in accounts of children in wars is that of construction. Often in times of war a child is inclined to emulate that which surrounds it, in this case shelters. Shelters are not common in times of peace and a way for the child to grasp the necessity of the shelter is to



(*Boys on Bomb Site*; Russell, 1954)

replicate it in play. Using the materials that are at their disposal in whatever locations the adults have abandoned, children recreate “shelters [which] are built out of everything and take the place of what children formerly used to call ‘playing house’” (Freud and Burlingham, 2011: 70). The child here explores the resourcefulness of their childishness, using found items for their potential, not their current worth. Through imagination the child may use debris and household items to create structures made specifically for them, often in a way no adult could reproduce. They become architects; composers of childhood structures. For “composition is in the most literal sense of the term, the art of composing different parts into a seemingly harmonious whole” (Aureli and Giudici, 2016: 121).

The History of Apartment Trenches

When discussing children and war, I find myself stuck in a memory, reliving what psychotherapists have described as a ‘childhood trauma’. It is not uncommon for you to recoil at the combination of these two words. As a species, we have decided that children suffer from a very specific type of mental and physical vulnerability; the ‘Adult World’. When a child is exposed to this world, we label it as ‘traumatic’. It is not that I think childhood trauma does not exist – for it is scientific fact – however regarding my own memories, I fail to associate them with this term. I find myself stuck in a memory, not because it was a horror that still distresses my adult mind, but out of childish wonderment.

I wake up to an empty apartment, my mother and father nowhere to be found – it is not so strange, they’re probably having coffee with the neighbours. I notice how dark it is, I’m sure I slept through the night however day hasn’t broken. Onto the balcony I step, curiosity guides me. The sky is black – not a night-time darkness – I know this as I see the sun failing in its game of hide and seek. No, it is dark because the clouds are black and heavy. Not clouds, smoke, like when my father cooks on the barbeque. The city beneath is on fire.

I wake up to a full apartment; full of my friends. Our parents visit us for meal times and to bathe us, but the rest of the day we play. For the first time in our lives, our parents say nothing about our games. I think they like the mazes we are making; the forts and hideaways, the lava rivers and secret passages. We play all day and all night, creating and destroying. We know what is happening outside, but it doesn’t matter - we are inside. The city outside is on fire, but we can still play.

Certain wars make the pages of history, and there are others that are seldom spoken of. My memories belong to the Lebanese-Israeli July War of 2006 – a war that not many are aware of – a war that caused the deaths of a thousand civilians and displaced a million others. I will not bore you with the rhetoric that war is a dreadful thing – as I recognise that in most civilised societies, there is a preestablished awareness of this. However, as controversial or even distasteful as it may seem, I do believe that there are benefits to wars

(albeit it very few). In retrospect, the July War offered children like myself a freedom we would not have encountered in times of peace; the freedom of creation without adult scrutiny. In wars the protection of children is a primary objective, often they are sent away, as with the some of the youth of London during the Blitz, or in cases such as my own, the children remain in the cities as there is nowhere else to go. It is here that the opportunity for childish innovation lies.

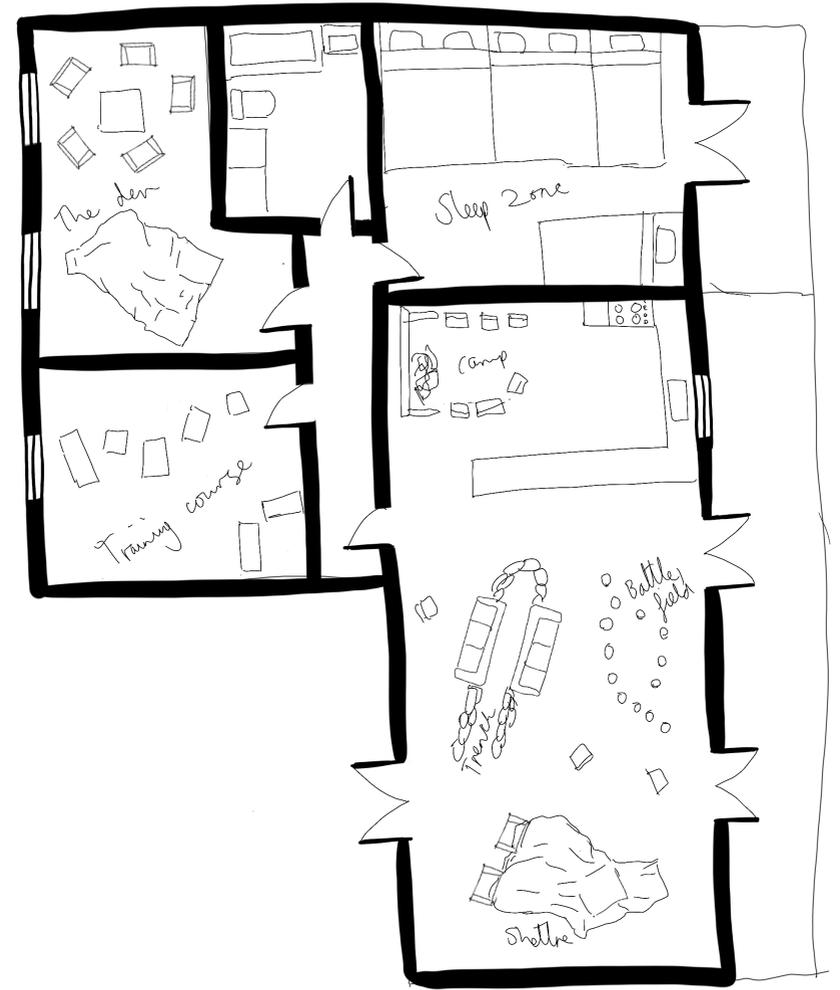
The adults of the building convened and decided to place all fifteen of us children in one of their fully furnished apartments. It would not protect us from harm if a bomb were to have fallen from the sky, but in case of evacuation it was reasonable to have us all in one accessible space. They often left us to our own devices and simply observed as we disassembled that which we viewed as tedious and reassembled to make something wonderful. Mattresses and pillows were used to construct the walls of ‘trenches’ and ‘bomb shelters’ with blankets draped delicately on top. Large pots were placed upside down across the floors as ‘battlefields’ and desk chairs magically became ‘tanks’ that would spin us into a Neverland of War. It is a curious and wonderful thing, how children emulate their environments in the games they play.

“Children [repeat] incidents of a more impersonal kind in their games; they [play] active and embellished versions of events which had actually happened. This [serves] the purpose of relief and abreaction” (Freud and Burlingham, 2011: 69).

Play here becomes emotional education; a tool to learn how to process the reality of the adult world they face. For thirty-four days we were able to recreate the world we knew in our own design, to suit our perspective; we were architects before even understand the profession. Everyday we adapted the space to suit the needs of the current game, and without realising, we had created a microscopic civilisation. A civilisation at war. Slowly we made our own unspoken rules, we specified roles based on who could accomplish them (as with heavy lifting; the role of the older, large children), and play became our timetabled occupation. With this I often wonder whether (like with the games we played) we were emulating adult life as we then understood it, or whether children share the same social instincts of order as adults. Although I have claimed to be stuck in this memory, I nevertheless must admit to myself that memory is indeed precarious. I can not recall why we made such decisions, I do however recall the joy and self-admiration of being able to create.



(Apartment Before July War; Houssami, 2020)



(Apartment After July War; Houssami, 2020)

I ask my father what he recollects of the time. His answer is short; “We worried, and you played”. I ask why the parents chose to contain the children in a singular apartment. He tells me that it’s what they were taught to do. He tells me that during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) his parents and their neighbour did the same; a case of learning from history. He describes to me the apartment which they were given, and what they then moulded it to be. The more he describes, the more I am aware that our choices during the July War may have indeed been a child’s natural response to the distressing events around them. We were not privy to the stories of our parents’ childhoods during their wars. Yet across two moments in history, two groups of children created mazes of their own, in apartments they were confined in, because they were simply given freedoms usually reserved for adults. The freedoms of creation, expression and ownership.

The Transformation From Bombsite to Playground

This act of childish creation during wars can be seen throughout history; as established, it is a recurring pattern that allows children to come to terms with the perturbing events surrounding them. One of the most dominant examples of this in recent history is the use of bombsites as make-shift playgrounds by children during and post-World War II. In parallel to the way my friends and I viewed aspects of the Lebanese-Israeli July War, “the bombing of London was a blessing to the youthful generations that followed.” (Opie, 1969: 15). The children of London, who had previously been quite contained within the internal domestic and educational space, were suddenly given the opportunity to explore parts of the city that formerly were reserved for adults.

Bombsites and shelters, both then useless spaces to adults became hubs of wonder and ingenuity to the children that remained in the city. Desensitised to the air raids and the destruction that followed, children would gather in these spaces, and use whatever material was at their disposal to fabricate toys and structures to suit the use of play. “With a creativity and ingenuity that often impressed their adult contemporaries, young people forged new toys from cardboard, bits of wood, scraps of metal and cloth – the refuse of the captive society which surrounded them” (Honeck and Marten, 2019: 237).

They often used scraps of timber and brick to build with; jungle gyms (ironically named considering these were fashioned from the remains of a city) and playhouses. Anything and everything would be used for this task, as in times such as those “children develop the habit of exploiting everything their environment can provide. They unfold as individuals through creatively manipulating their surroundings” (Ward, 1990: 210). What from the outskirts can be viewed as a collection of rubbish – an architectural graveyard – is in fact a reincarnation of materials. The bombsite is given new life, and the newly formed bombsite playground is a childish creation; a childhood space; and in its own right, an architectural child.



(Children meeting on Bombsite; Hue and Cry, 1947)

“The bombsite–demolition site as an accidental or purposeful playground for children added to the vacillating meanings of these ruined landscapes, as they signalled both the destructive power of modern industrial violence and the resilient and resourceful power of children and play to reconstitute and repair such landscapes [...] The bombsite becomes a sequence of lists of what has been lost and what has been gained” (Highmore, 2013: 323/329).

These bombsites, though utterly dangerous, were retained as childhood spaces in the few years following World War II. Adults, still trying to regasp the normalcy they were accustomed to prior to the war, were still distracted enough to continue to allow children the use of these sites. Bombsite playgrounds became so prevalent as a social space for children, that they found their way into the works of fiction. In the 1947 British movie, Hue and Cry, the bombsite playground was shown to be the primary meeting spot of the group of children the movie follows. It is a movie “famous for its extensive shots of children playing among bombsites filmed on location in [...] Hue and Cry was unique in representing children’s play in bombsites as enabling them to reshape space and society” (Glasheen, 2019). It was one of the rare cases of documentation where adults recorded the use of these sites in a practical manner. The bombsite playground as used by Joe Kirby and his friends was represented as a space exclusively for children, and astonishingly the film makers were able to frame this space not through the adult-lens as a safety concern, but as a place of excitement and childishness (here viewed as a positive attribute by adults). This representation ignited in adults a conversation regarding such city spaces, and the handing over of ownership of said places to the children of the city; a conversation pioneered by the likes of Lady Allen of Hurtwood and Marie Paneth.

It was not only bombsites which were occupied by children for the use of play, the bomb shelter became to the youth of London what that singular apartment was to myself during the Lebanese-Israeli July War. However, where we were given dominion over an apartment by the adults, the children of the Blitz did not acquire the use of their play space in such a way. “After the grown-ups had deserted the shelter the children had taken possession of it and used it as their playground. The bunks played a prominent and dismal part in their games” (Paneth, 1947: 11). Children, although ignorant (or possibly more accurate; indifferent) to the dangers of a bombsite were still affected by the time boundaries set by their parents. Most bomb shelters were either on the family’s property or the street on which they lived, and therefore meant that while some children had a curfew that drew them away from the bombsite playgrounds, they were still able to explore this

constructive play. The shelters offered a more intimate space, hidden away from the eyes of the adults, and the natural elements, which could disrupt the play usually reserved for the bombsite playgrounds.

The existence of bombsite playgrounds further reaffirms the notion that the child (although may understand the negative consequences of events such as wars and though may also later in life recall said events as traumatic) will customarily absorb the events as a script of play propelled by childish desires. They will recreate the environment they bare witness to with whatever materials they can gather, and re-enact the scenes of war, undeterred by the horrors. They will do this with whatever space and permission – or lack thereof – they can obtain.

The Influence of Childish Wonder in Wars

Childishness is what distinguishes the child and the adult in times of war. It is how the child reacts to the predicament they find themselves in that we as adult find quite intriguing. What we have here ascertained is that the child doesn't only use play for the means of entertainment and distraction but also as a learning device. Where we adult have already grown accustomed to the realities of our own world, a child is still being introduced to it, and therefore must experience it in the way they are capable of. They should be allowed to pursue this childishness we disparage, and we should allow the child the freedom creation and ownership, as they are fundamentally human behaviours. "We can argue that the invention of the house as an architectural apparatus is motivated [...] by a desire to settle and to give ritual form to life [...] the house inevitably becomes a way to occupy and claim ownership of a place [...] Archaeological evidence indicating that the ritualization of ownership was the main purpose of the house" (Aureli and Giudici, 2016: 105). If ownership is but a nature ritual of life, then we a gravely mistaken in our current treatment of children, especially within the city.

We have, in our contemporary way of regarding (more disregarding) the child, allowed for war to be a facilitator of opportunities that should have already existed. The Lebanese-Israeli July War gave my friends and I ownership of an apartment to mould into a childish nirvana of creativity and education. With adult thinkers now "support[ing] the motivation for designing and building playgrounds in Lebanon as spaces for education [...] the playground typology has provided an area of play, rest and, most importantly, a space of security in what is otherwise a highly vulnerable environment" (Denhardt, 2017). Rarely has the child's playgrounds entered the Lebanese social discourse, and for that it must be acknowledged that war is a setting in which children and the requirements of childishness are finally addressed in society.

This not only occurred in Lebanon, but as touched upon previously, the

occupation of bombsites by children prompted social thinkers to discuss the use and ownership of destroyed land within the city of London post-World War II. “Lady Allen of Hurtwood suggested that Britain’s bombsites could be turned into adventure playgrounds for disadvantaged children, more was at stake than the quick and cheap transformation of bombsites into something useful [... and] for Marie Paneth, the bombsites should be given to the children: they would become the legal and economic landlords of that space” (Highmore, 2013: 330/331). Lady Hurtwood went on to found playgrounds in London for children with learning difficulties, as well as a scheme for repurposing discarded materials from the bombsites into children’s toys.

Adults should no longer rely on wars to make way for creative prospects for children. As their custodians, we are the ones that should promote this childishness and allow it to have its place within society and the city. A child’s construction; although often a reflection of the adult world, the imagination used is lost to the adult. We have for too long disregarded the resourcefulness of children and refused them access to space where they can fashion things out of the materials we no longer have use for. Just as the artist in has throughout history been given a stage for their art, the child must be given the same opportunity.

For if “imagination is indeed the prime detector of change, art is the language of continuity: without them, at any rate, we shall never succeed in meeting the child on its own terms, let alone in solving the complex problem its long neglect has left us [...] the relation between the child and art is indeed vital [...] society will remain the sterile construction it is today unless both child and artist are given the place they deserve” (Eyck, 2008: 22/23).

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