



Little Kiwis Nature Play Conference

Christchurch 9<sup>th</sup> March 2018

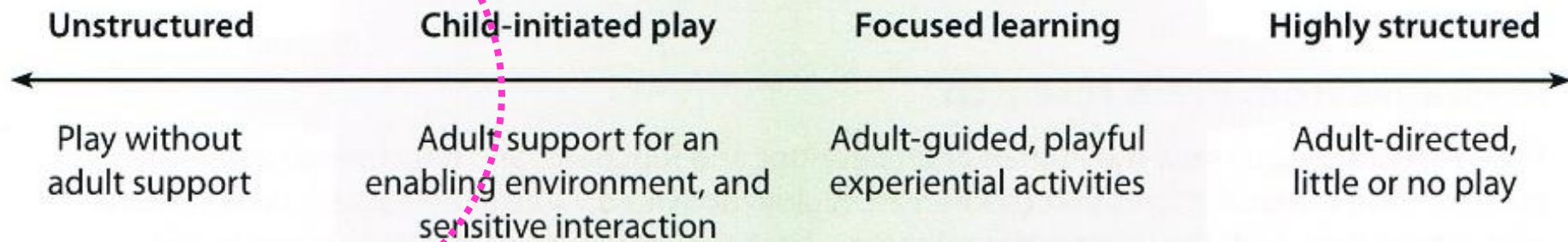
*Take me outside – connecting children and parks*

John Clemens

The space the child lives



# Learning continuum

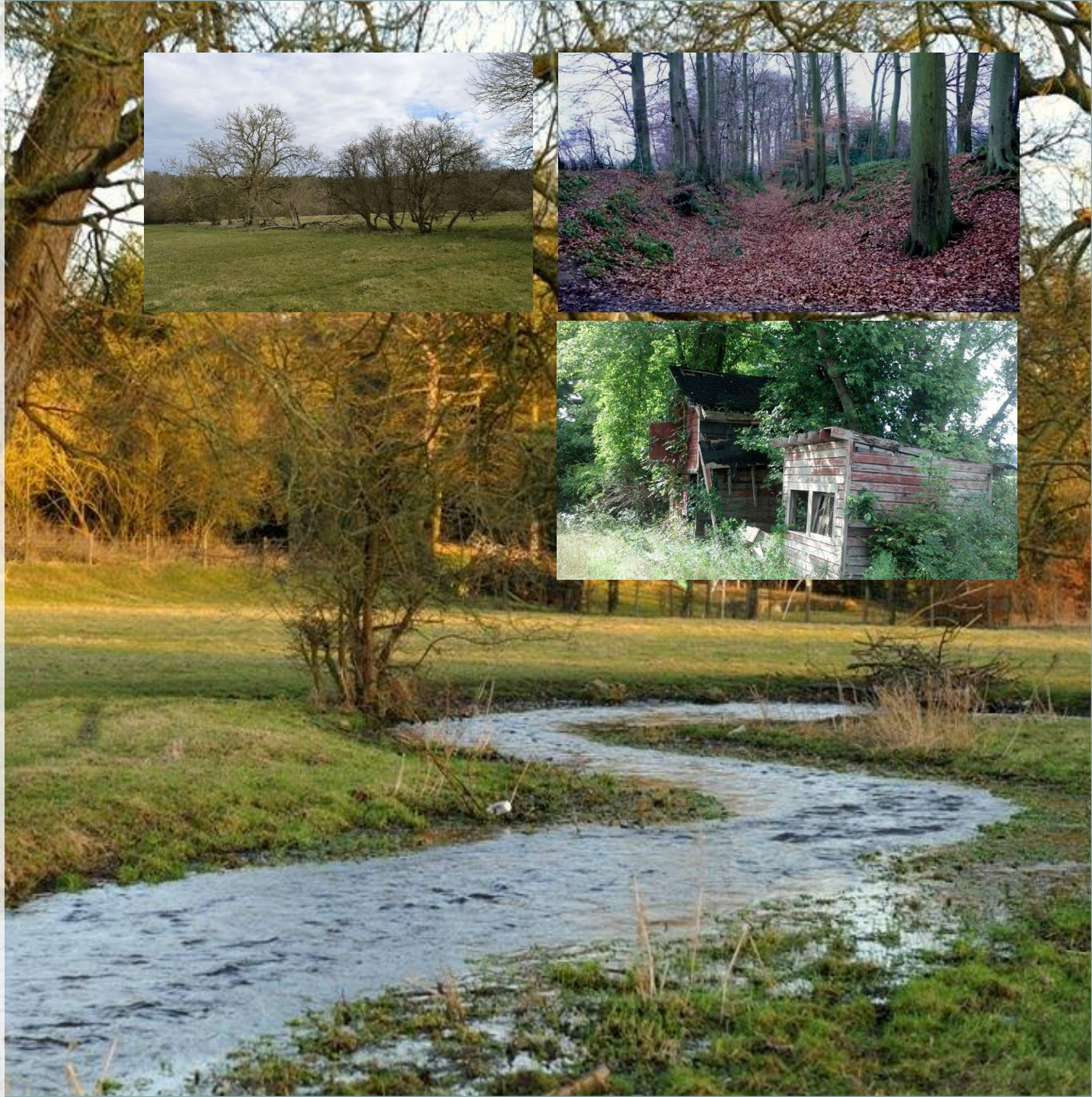
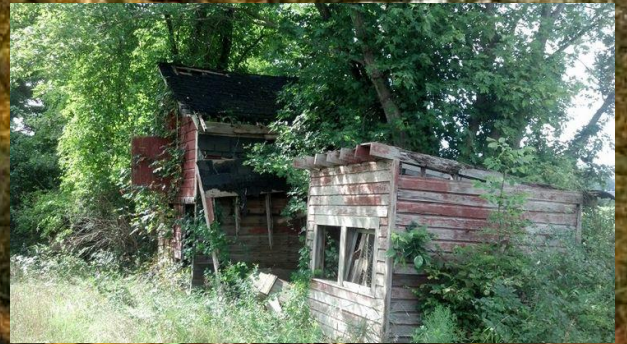


Continuum diagram from Learning, playing and interacting. Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency UK



Where I  
came to life  
and held  
onto it

- What I felt at  
the time
- What did I  
prefer
- What was I  
doing, why?

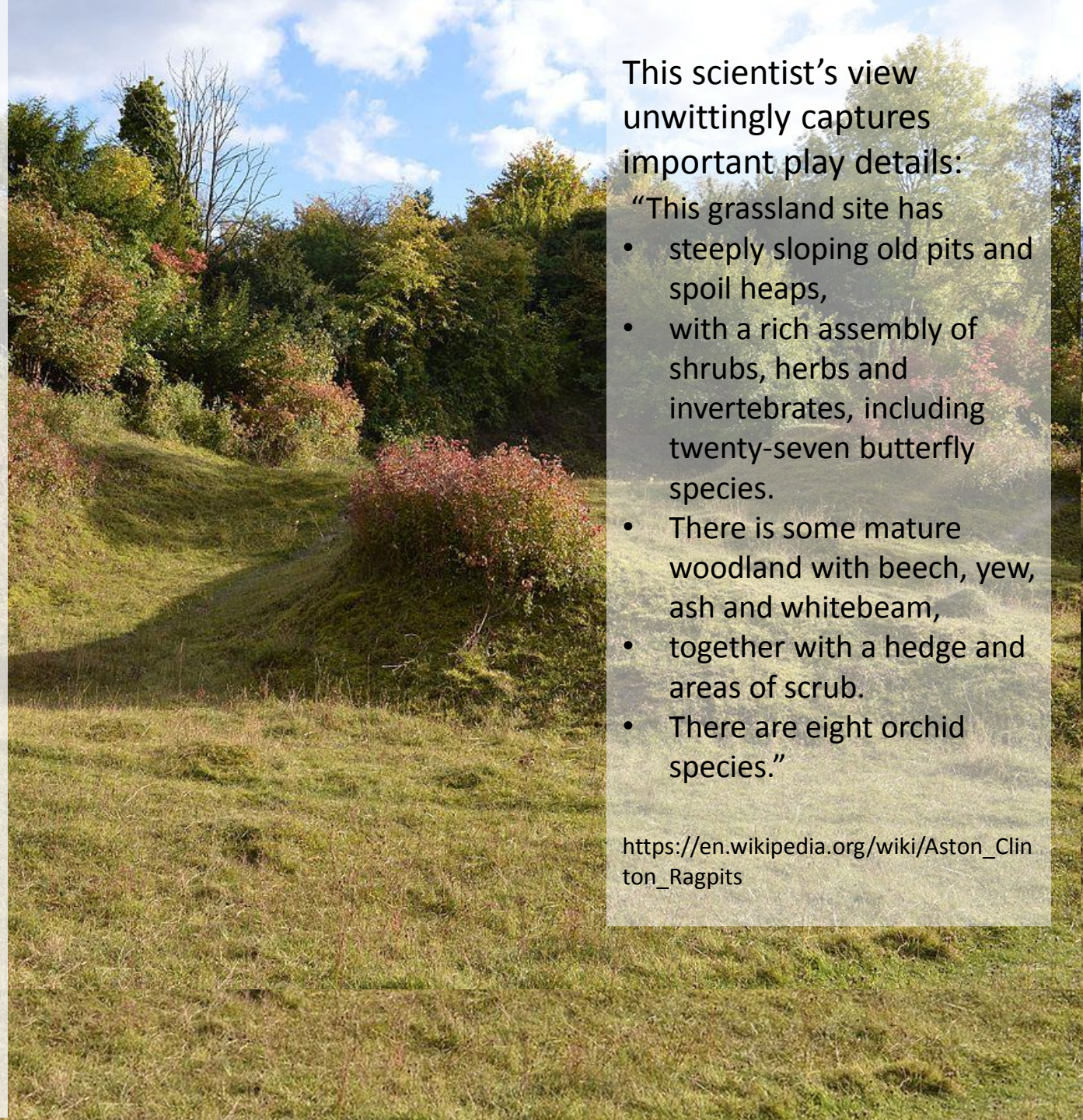




# My early childhood in nature

## What I felt at the time

- escape
  - immersion
  - absorption
  - comfort
  - privacy
  - discovery
  - possibility
  - timelessness
  - times and people past
- 
- What I preferred
  - what was I doing, why?



This scientist's view unwittingly captures important play details:

“This grassland site has

- steeply sloping old pits and spoil heaps,
- with a rich assembly of shrubs, herbs and invertebrates, including twenty-seven butterfly species.
- There is some mature woodland with beech, yew, ash and whitebeam,
- together with a hedge and areas of scrub.
- There are eight orchid species.”

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aston\\_Clin\\_ton\\_Ragpits](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aston_Clin_ton_Ragpits)



# My early childhood in nature

## What I preferred

- ups and downs
- old tracks, traces
- hidden turns
- neglected plants
- derelict stuff
- run down hedges
- multiple routes
- bird song
- wild food
- farm animals
- stream banks
- orchards
- old barns
- solitude





# My early childhood in nature

## What was I doing, why?

- escaping to my space
- doing what made me feel good
- being me
- Why? The other reality hurt





# Outcome 1

## Life-long learning, teaching

- archaeology & ancient history via Chemistry
- landscape ecology, architecture
- cultural landscape  
...
- bringing up next generation of children





# Outcome 2

## Needing to find out more

*The city densifies while the cracks close on relictual play*

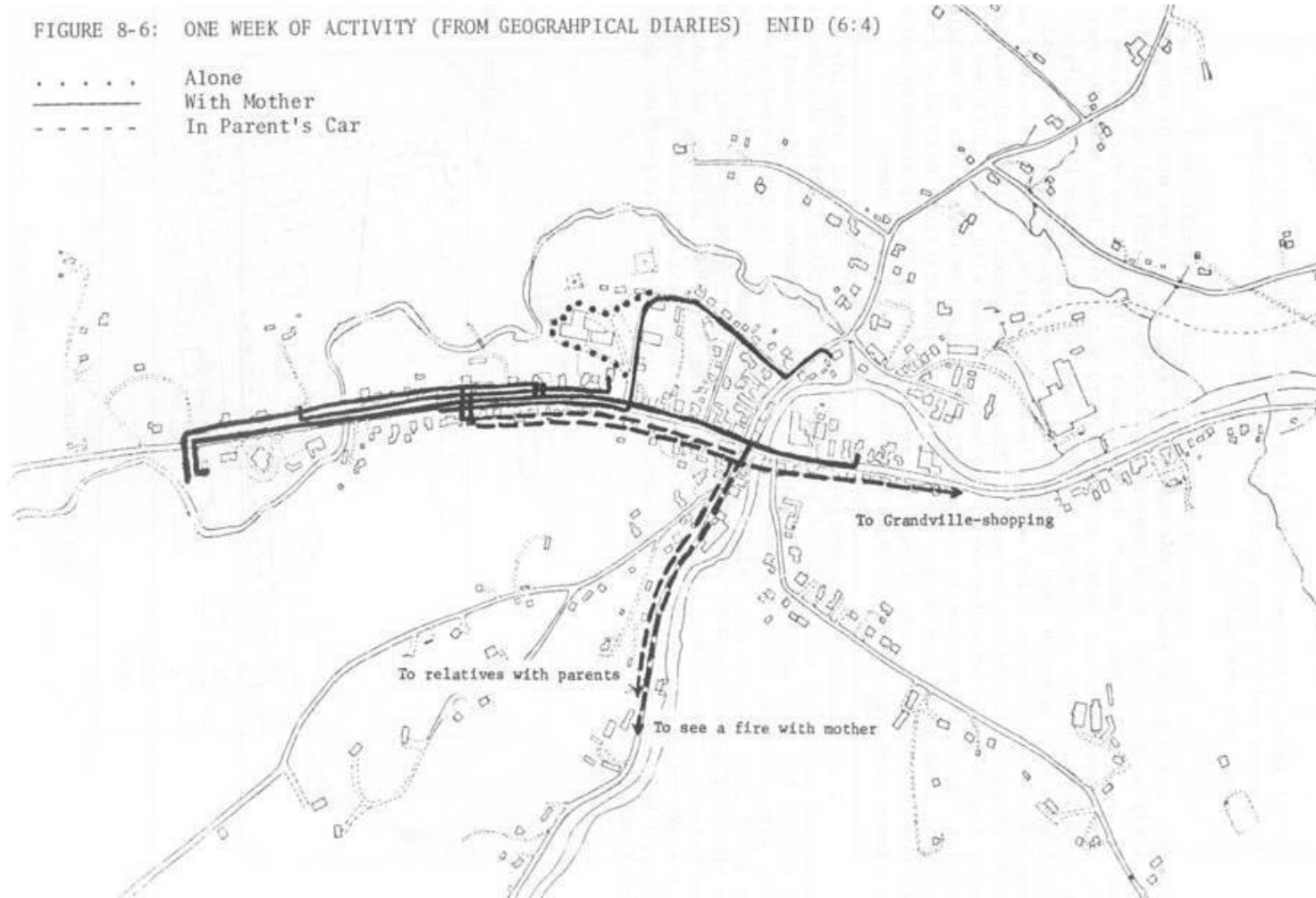
By John Clemens & Shelley Egoz

Talk delivered 10 years ago (pre-EQs) at NZILA Conference  
Auckland, April 2008

So what's changed 10 years later?

FIGURE 8-6: ONE WEEK OF ACTIVITY (FROM GEOGRAPHICAL DIARIES) ENID (6:4)

..... Alone  
—— With Mother  
- - - - In Parent's Car





# A working title: The space the child lives

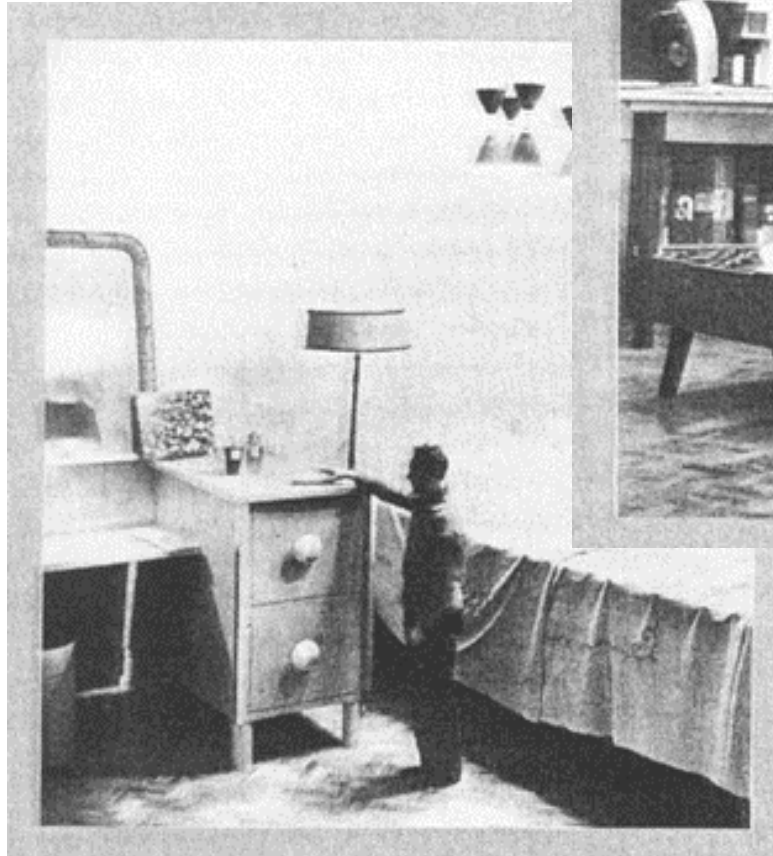
## Different from:

the space in which the child lives, or that the child experiences

(quantifiable, separate from child)

the space in which adults live, or experience

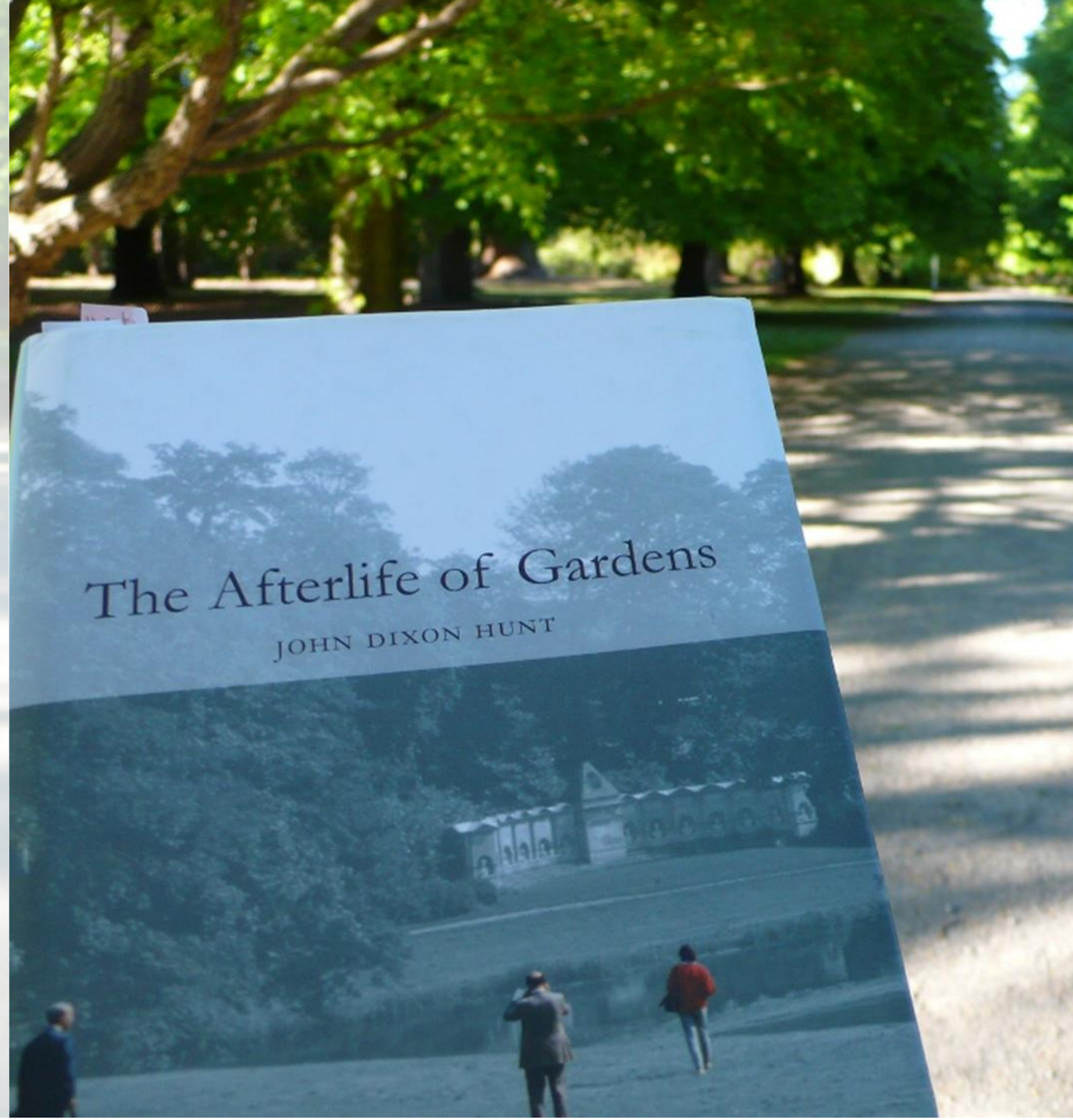
can an adult understand their own former lived space? Can an adult enter other children's lived space (enough)?





Can an adult  
understand  
even their  
own former  
lived space:  
space, time  
travel?

It's difficult enough to remember  
(and how well?) our own  
experience as a child. Also hard to  
restore old landscapes and have  
them read as they were originally  
intended by today's people –  
we're different from the way they  
viewed the world in the past.





Hard to go back and see  
how much is different  
(physically) or different  
emotionally from how we  
remembered.





# Can an adult enter children's lived space?

Examples from  
those who have  
tried (2-3 in bold  
mentioned here):

Sørensen

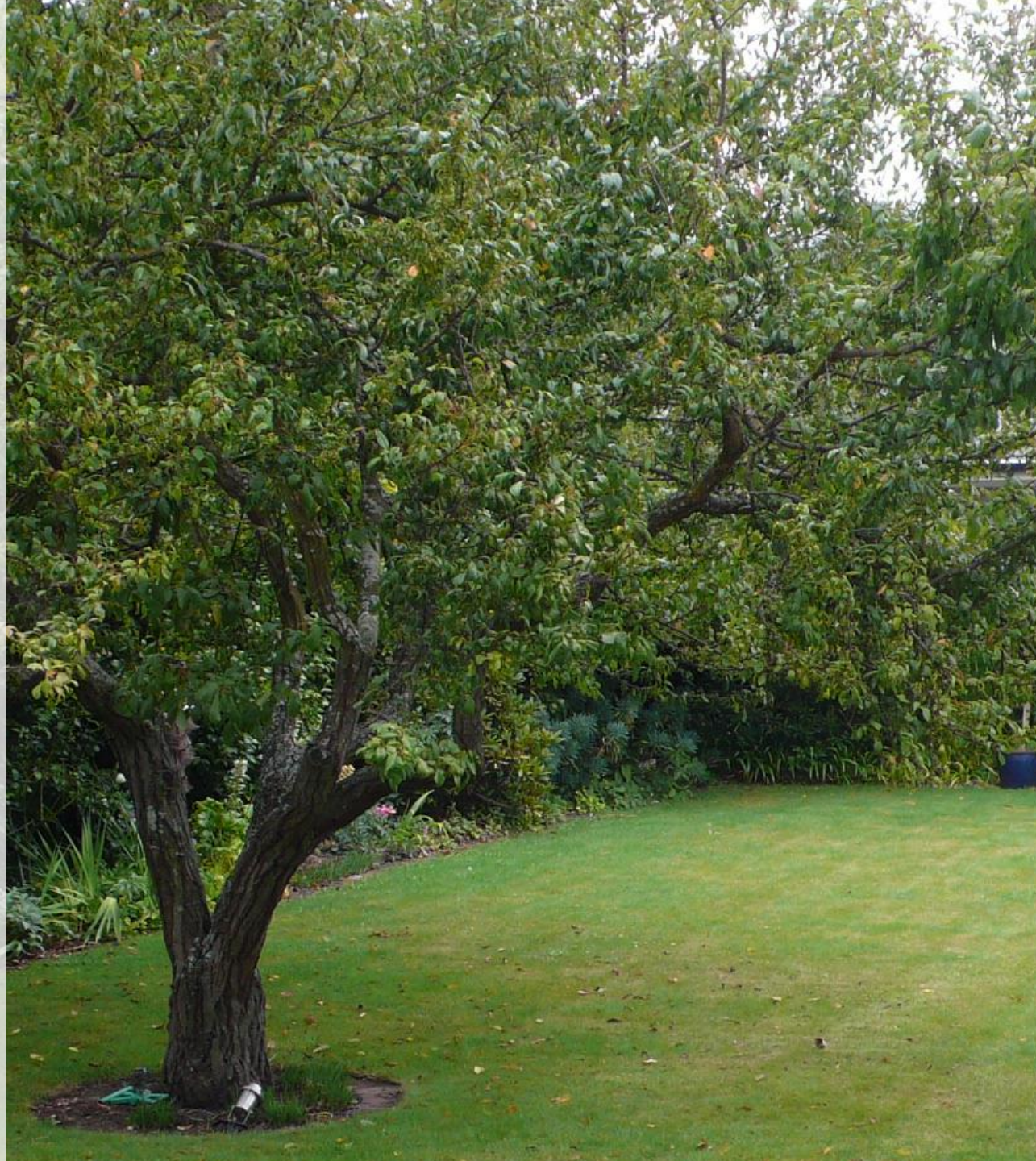
Kevin Lynch

**Roger Hart**

**Robin Moore**

Edensor

**Armstrong**





# Roger Hart



Child rights academic,  
City University, NY

“My favourite play areas are in the Netherlands where landscape designers are making wild lands for children in urban areas. Instead of manicured parks, they just let the land go wild with woods and long grass.”





# Children's experience of place

1978 study of 4-11 year-olds

"...many aspects of the  
experience of place  
cannot be discovered by  
formal procedures"

"ecological field  
approach" tried (but not  
altogether successfully)

Describe children's active  
engagement with the  
environment

...discovering knowledge  
of, and feelings for, places





# Attempting to enter the space the child lives

“Unfortunately, as soon as one asks a child to reflect upon their environment, thought breaks down the unity of experience. It objectifies the environment, separating the child from his or her world.

The ecological-field approach could not offer a valid holistic picture p 13



“So, I chose to reflect upon my own childhood experiences of places,  
and secondly, I decided to share as fully as possible with my children their direct experiences of places.

As “Science” this is of course frowned upon.”



# What did Hart discover?

## **Children had their own path networks**

- Secret and independent of adult routes
- “short-cuts” valued even when they are long-cuts
- inhabiting the paths is the point
- not for getting from A to B
- most adults are avoided
- unless let children watch activities, or elderly people who talk with the children

## **Children have preferred places**

- children can describe some places when asked; but many more small places for different uses can be shown
- rivers, lakes, ponds, streams, wildlife, woods (also feared)
- anywhere forbidden: sand piles, quarries, abandoned buildings
- small patches of dirt
- hiding places and vantage points
- close to home range, no restrictions, no manicuring, with loose parts for building



# Children use their places

- time alone, quietly resting, watching, dabbling in water/sand
- lots of time building places for themselves
- Many self-built “houses” simply found places, little physical modification, furnished with imagination

Children in (newer, safer) suburban areas over-provided with prescriptive toys/play equipment, denied opportunities to develop environmental competence





# Why?

- substantiate own existence
- make sense of places through naming and sharing
- Interactional learning about themselves in relation to the environment





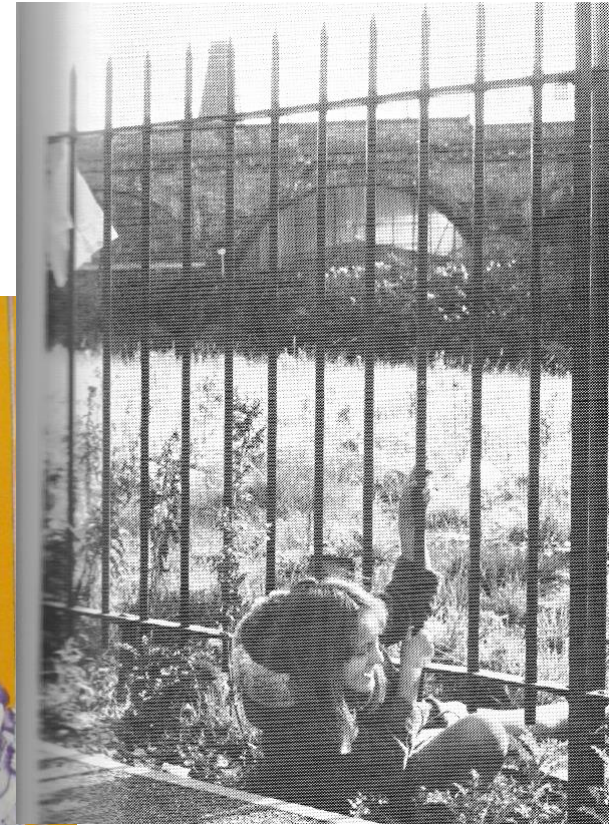
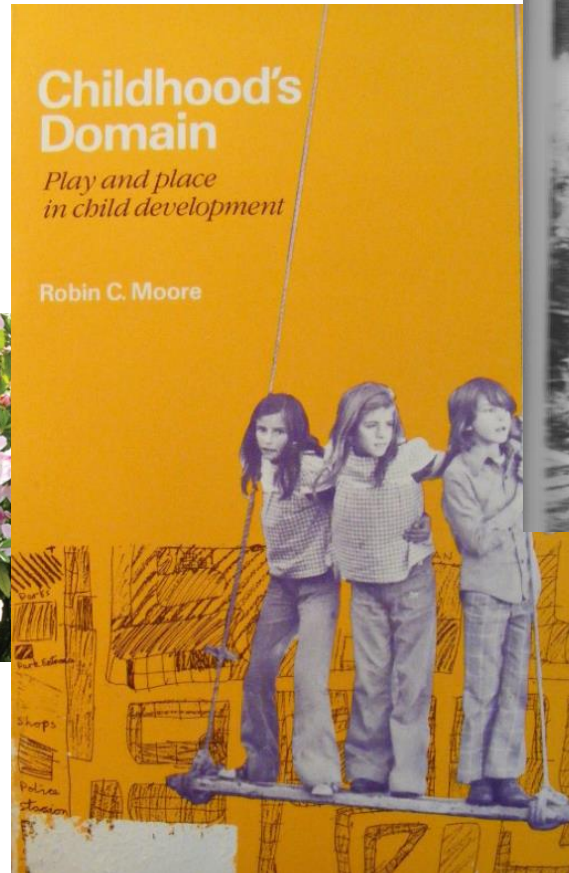
# Robin Moore

Professor Moore,  
international authority  
on the design of  
children's play and  
learning environments

1986 *Childhood's Domain*

1988 *Play for All Guidelines*

1993 *Plants for Play*





# What did Moore find?

Children had intricate networks of alleys, tunnels, climbs and scrambles

squeezing through important (excludes adults?)

Paths were tortuous “short-cuts”, unofficial, hidden as if they were animals, walking not arriving

“To wander through a diverse terrain is to feel the surroundings pass through one’s body and the body pass through the surroundings – at one with each other.



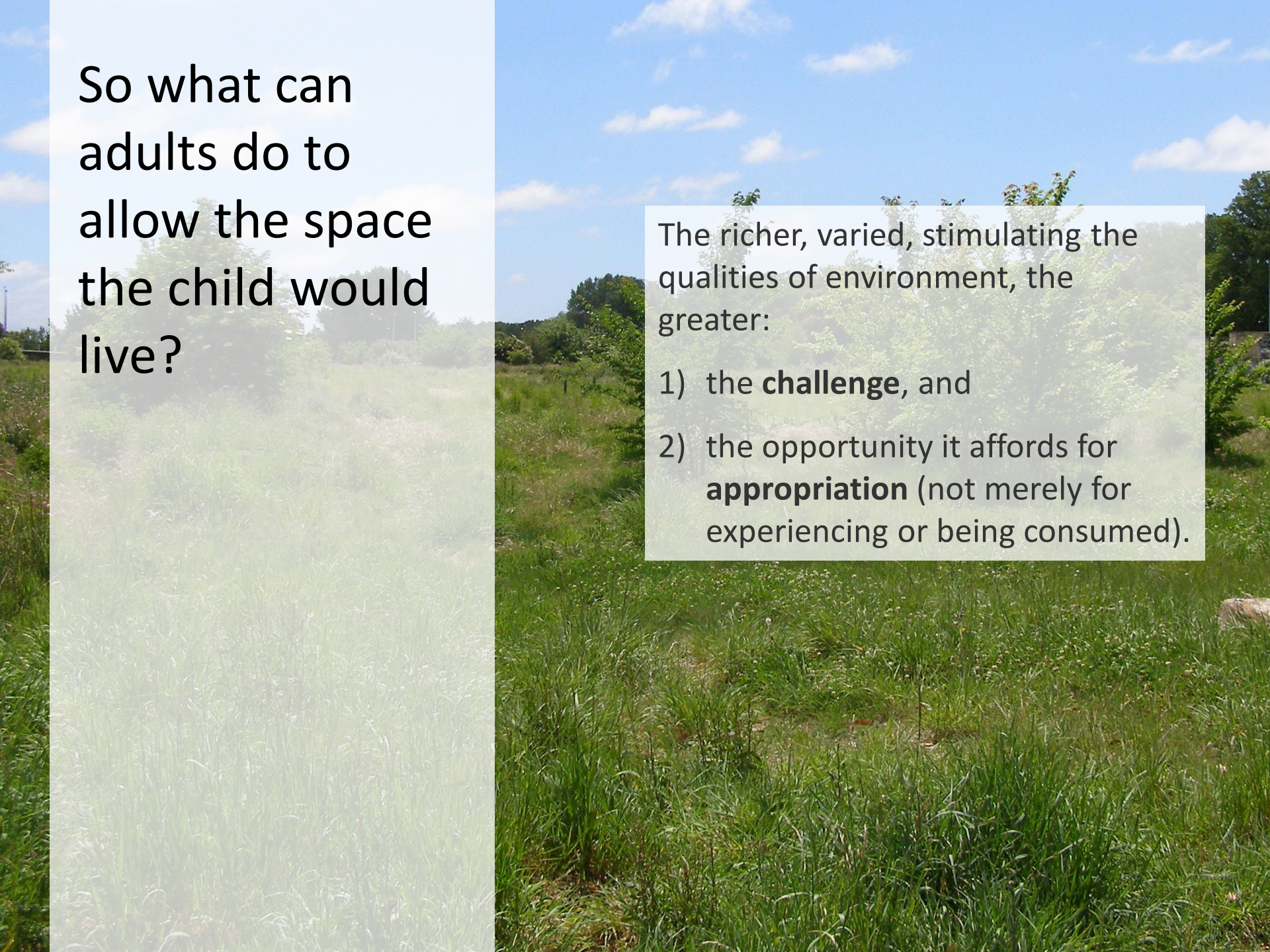
Rough ground and wasteland: unkept unmown, weedy, unpruned trees, ho varied topography, water

Abandoned places haunted by human presence, not yet redefined by adults “historical heritage”

Private places needed for escape: stu can be picked up, thrown about, gathered, jumped on, eaten, kicked, rolled on, climbed into, broken down, up, burnt and taken away without ca offence.

Nothing less than the whole envionm should be under consideration.






So what can  
adults do to  
allow the space  
the child would  
live?

The richer, varied, stimulating the  
qualities of environment, the  
greater:

- 1) the **challenge**, and
- 2) the opportunity it affords for  
**appropriation** (not merely for  
experiencing or being consumed).





Supporting  
the kind of  
space the  
child would  
live

**Features adults can recognise:**

- Sand/dirt
- Small shallow ponds, streams
- Topography, variation in landform (climbing, jumping, sliding...)
- Long, unmanicured grass
- Unpruned bushes, hedges, low trees, woodland
- Discoverable routes/paths, short cuts
- places that might be “found”
- Places once inhabited/occupied now abandoned, neglected
- Broken, decayed things, buildings sites, quarries
- Rough ground, wasteland
- Hidden, narrow, difficult tracks/paths
- Vantage points, lookouts
- Things that can be used exactly as the moment demands
- “Loose” terrain



## Things adults can do

- Permit places of challenge to children, where the environment can be **appropriated** (not just experienced, manipulated or consumed)
- Leave things unfinished, inviting modification to be given order and meaning by children
- Think scale: important landscape qualities are relatively small in size; retain/create “finer-grains”, not blanket treatments
- Forget aesthetic qualities



1:54



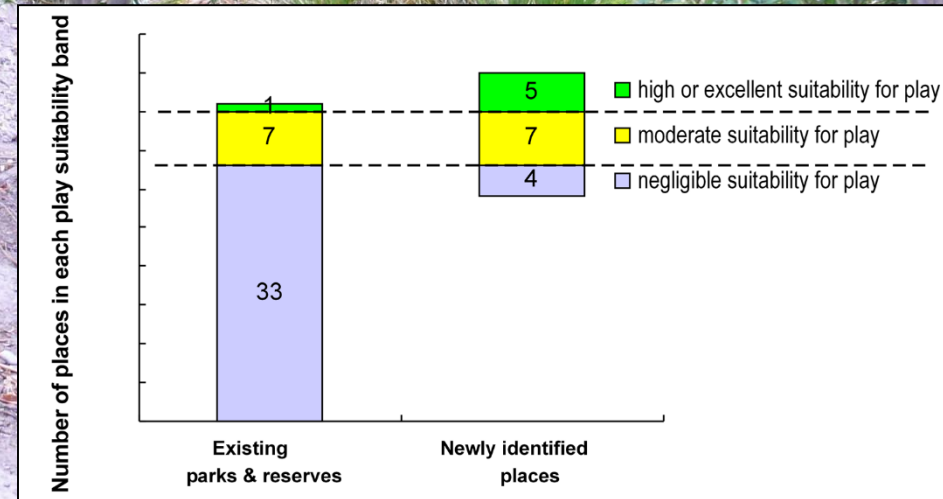
3:55



# What unstructured play spaces do we have in three Christchurch suburbs?

## Test by applying unstructured play criteria:

- vegetation for climbing, hiding, messing up
- unkempt, unmown, unpruned
- rough ground, dirt, bare ground
- former use, old built things, neglect
- varied topography, water
- wandering, connections
- Bar chart is for unstructured play; many existing parks, of course, suitable for other kinds of play

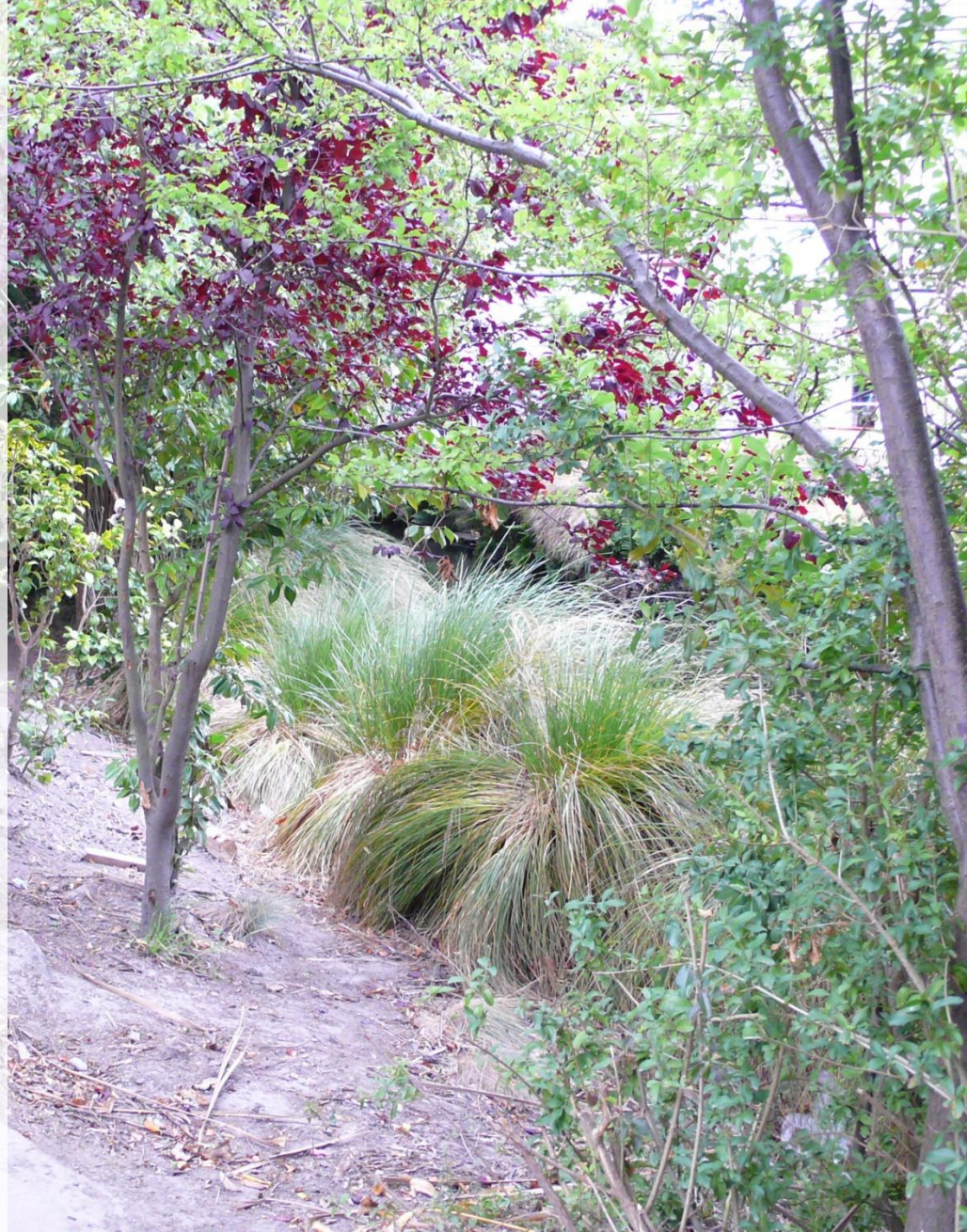




# Stop, recognise opportunities for the space the child lives

## Existing features

- find ways to retain the existing
- respect neglect of former places and homes
- use remnant veg structure, floristics
- spare the un-spoilable, un-improvable, small scale, local





# What of park environments without much living space?

## Create new features

- Relax maintenance regime in carefully chosen places
- roughen up
- look to the edges, slopes
- green, grey and blue [child] habitat connections
- [seemingly] do almost nothing
- [next time don't install fitted green carpet to the edges]





Let's all  
have space  
to live –

**adults like  
unstructured  
play too**

valuing marginal,  
derelict,  
abandoned,  
neglected space

# MARGINAL LANDSCAPES

HELEN ARMSTRONG

“But what about the landscapes that are less easily liked; the rough grasslands ... untidy drainage lines that thread through our neighbourhoods?

They certainly did when we were children. They were places for burying treasure; places for imagination and freedom.”







Gilles Clément, 'Planetary  
Garden'

## Parc André Citroën, Paris

A "Third Landscape" of all  
the indeterminate  
fragments of abandoned  
spaces to be found on Earth.

The proposed wild garden to be  
placed in the centre of a formal  
lawn appalled the Mayor of Paris:  
pushed to an inconspicuous corner.

As Parisians stroll the central lawn,  
children and plants celebrate their  
freedom riotously in a far corner.

Paraphrased from H. Armstrong *Marginal  
Landscapes*

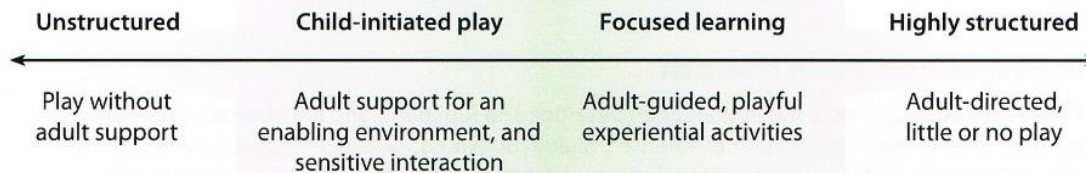
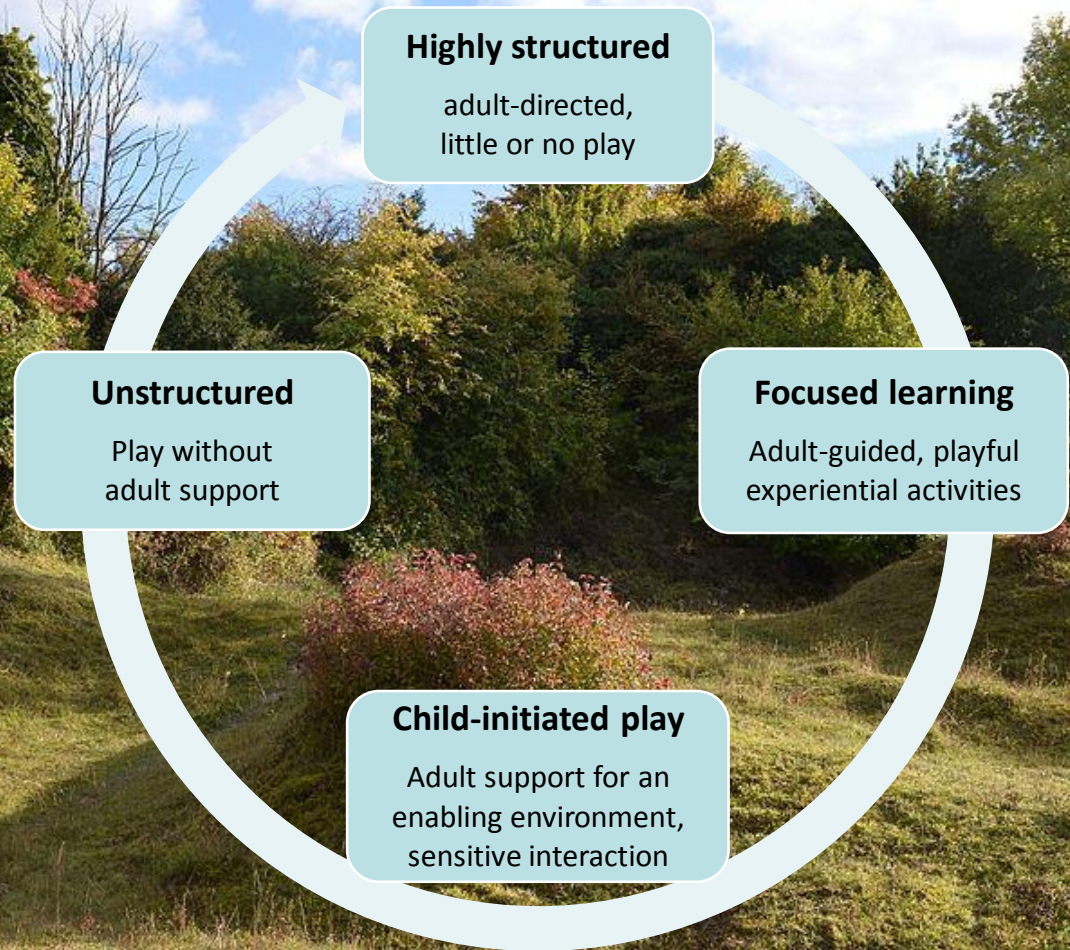


# The Space the Child Lives – key points

- **We're losing child spaces.** Even in post-quake Christchurch. As cities densify, and spaces are “revitalised”, developed, and “finished”, we tend to lose spaces where children (and adults) come to life.
- **Broken is good.** The derelict, abandoned, neglected, marginal, loose places (no matter how small) are precious for a lifetime of unstructured nature play
- **Nature is many-faceted.** Nature can be elemental (land, water, air, fire), biological (indigenous and naturalised), inert (built and broken), and cultural (stories and memories), or imagined...
- **Unstructured play is good.** It satisfies a need, and complements (doesn't need to attempt to replace) benefits of public parks, (pre-)school grounds, kindergartens, home gardens and homes
- **Action needed to do as little as possible.** Recognise, conserve, create new opportunities for the space the child lives – not just where the child plays or learns from/with adults



# Learning continuum or circle?







# What do NZ professionals say about play spaces for children?

as a kid, I can remember ... making giant birds nests and forts in long grass. ...exploring the **bush, the rocks**. It's about imagination, challenge and **unstructured play**, nature and ecology.

D Erwin on Barry Curtis Park in *Playing naturally*. Land Arch NZ 2012

Provide **semi-secluded shrubbery, quiet and peaceful**, within which pre-schoolers can share uninterrupted conversations and learn about communication, co-operation and participation.

R Riddell on playscapes for early childhood. Land Arch NZ 2012

...provide a **tranquil setting for quiet reflection**, outdoor learning and for students to gather together in small groups. If you provide a beautiful environment for young people and expect them to treat it with respect then they will.

J Rice on From playgrounds to play gardens. Land Arch NZ 2012

Children need access to nature so they may develop, via **unstructured play**, capacities for problem solving, creativity, imagination, manual dexterity, social skills...include less of the manicured. If you've just got a hill and some trees and a rope swing you figure it out.

G. Souter-Brown et al. on Nurturing nature. Land Arch NZ 2015



# And UK professionals?

...children don't want to play in traditional dedicated playgrounds. **All landscapes ... should be made 'playable'... long grasses, ambiguous play equipment, topography, movable materials especially water**

F McWilliam Swings and roundabouts. Landscape Winter 2013

**Beach, park, garden, playground, forest. Climbing, hiding, seeking, sandcastles, dens, mud, fire, sticks, swimming, running.** If we are talking about landscape as infrastructure, we would do well to **frame landscape itself as part of the infrastructure of childhood.** It is problematic how little this is talked about within the profession.

Maisie Rowe Look back and play. Landscape Autumn 2017



Children, left to their own devices, played on **waste ground, building dens and damming streams.** It's so obvious that the children thrive here and feel well, they unfold and they live [Sørensen 1940s].

**Freely chosen, self-directed and intrinsically motivated** [cf. adult-controlled, monetised play experiences].

Maisie Rowe Bring back culture. Landscape Summer 2016



