

Playful movements and the creation of play-spaces: exploring the dilemma of 'planning for play'

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This is a slightly longer version of the presentation.

This session should have been presented by my close colleague, long-time collaborator and mentor Dr Stuart Lester. Sadly, as many, but not all of you, will know, Stuart died suddenly and unexpectedly in May this year. Stuart had already had his proposal for this presentation accepted, and when the conference organisers asked me what they could do about this, I decided it would be fitting to try and do the presentation myself as a kind of tribute to Stuart and his highly original thinking on children's play and adult response-ability. Obviously, I'm not Stuart, but I will try and present his work as faithfully as I can, albeit I will inevitably put my own slant on things, hence the subtitle 'Russelling up Stuart Lester'.

There is a huge irony about Stuart's work. He was playing with incredibly complex postmodern and posthuman ideas from philosophy and applying them to play. What he wanted to do was bring play back to life – he felt that through our obsession with fixing it, determining definitions, categorising it and so on, we lost sight of what it is that is so special about our desire as humans to enliven things, to seek a state that is better than just homeostasis. And yet, the ideas themselves are philosophy – the activity of thinking – incredibly intellectual, esoteric and hard stuff to get your head round. But what he did so well was to engage people in practical ways, opening up the in-betweens of classic binaries such as mind and body, nature and culture, adult and child, play and not-play. If you can't get your head round the ideas, you'll experience it through the ludic-rous 'experiments' (as he used to call them) he would get everybody doing.

Our starting point is this deceptively simple statement in General Comment 17 from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 2013):

play takes place whenever and wherever opportunities arise

This apparently straightforward statement is profoundly significant in terms of thinking about 'playing' and the everyday ways in which children go on with their lives.

Of course, we know this about play, but I think we have forgotten it. In studying play, we pin it down, like a butterfly on a mounting board, for observation and categorisation. It becomes a separate thing, a time and space bound activity, and because we are grown ups, we seek to attach a purpose to it as well, to impose a serious benefit to what is often seen as 'just messing about'. Our understandings of play say much more about us as adults, and the way we value the period of childhood, than they do about children's own experiences of playing. This is not to say all play scholarship is nonsense, far from it. But our traditional ways of studying play and placing value on it can exclude other perspectives. It is these that Stuart was interested in and that I will explore here.

I will argue that as adult advocates for children's play, our focus should be on gathering a 'collective wisdom' regarding the conditions in which playfulness thrives. This marks a shift away from only looking at providing designated spaces, times and activities. These are really important, but we

should remember that they are only one part of the mosaic of children's everyday lives. What Stuart and I have been developing is something we call a 'critical cartography' – a mapping process that can pay attention to the conditions in which playfulness thrives through twin braided processes of account-ability and response-ability. I will explain more as I go along. It is an intra-disciplinary account, drawing on ideas from philosophy, anthropology, geography, theoretical physics, arts-based research and more – moving away from the traditional home of play scholarship, that of psychology, and particularly developmental psychology.

What Stuart was working on is a way of looking at play that sees it not so much as a way of gaining skills needed in later life, but as life itself. Our terribly serious justifications for play turns it into something serious, but perhaps its great value is in its very nonseriousness. More on this later.

A principle of the UNCRC is that the articles are indivisible and interdependent. Often, they are grouped into those about provision, protection and participation. When nation states report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the report structure means that article 31 is grouped with articles 28-30, which are 'provision' articles, mostly about education. When Stuart and I wrote *Children's Right to Play* as a concept paper to support the development of General Comment 17, we acknowledged this indivisibility, but also commented on the greater attention paid to provision and protection articles. So, as well as looking at adult provision for play, we suggested that play can also be seen as a form of participation in everyday life, and as an embodied process embedded in the world that can contribute to self-protection. Here, these ideas are taken one step further to look specifically at the connections between article 31 and article 6, the right to life itself.

At this point, I'd like to introduce two of Stuart's 'experiments'

Group one: Jack and the beanstalk: in this fairy tale, Jack lives with his widowed mother, and when their old cow stops giving milk (their only source of income), Jack's mother tells him to take it to market to sell. On the way, he meets a man selling magic beans and swaps the cow for some beans. His mother is so cross that she throws the beans out of the window. In the night, a tall beanstalk grows and next day Jack climbs the beanstalk and finds a giant's castle. Avoiding being caught by the giant, he waits until he is asleep and steals some gold coins. On return visits, he steals a hen that lays golden eggs and a magic harp, but this last visit, the giant wakes up and chases Jack down the beanstalk. Jack calls to his mother to fetch an axe and chops down the beanstalk and the giant falls to his death.

You will be given a slip of paper with something written on it and you have to build a case why that person or thing is the main character in the story.

Group 2: Diagramming lines of movement: for the other group, find a pen and a sheet of paper, and draw a line that represents the 5 minutes before you sat down for this presentation. Pay attention to details, small movements, encounters, delays, and so on.

Jack and the beanstalk deconstructed: In the chapter 'Playing in a Deleuzian Playground' (Lester, 2013), Stuart introduces ideas from the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari and from new materialisms to explore different ways of accounting for the story of Jack and the Beanstalk. As you have probably realised, the story cannot unfold without all the characters, material objects and elements playing their part. Generally, our anthropocentric cut on the world positions Jack as the

main character. Considering others disturbs (or, using Deleuzian terms, it deterritorializes) our habitual worldview and allows us to consider difference. It also presents the concept of an assemblage (*agencement* in Deleuze's original French). The story is not so much a combination of separate elements: cow, beans, soil, Jack, are no longer fixed, static identities that combine to make the story and part unchanged. Deleuze's concept of the assemblage is more fluid and mobile, always in the process of becoming something different, what Jane Bennett (2010: 32) describes as a 'swarm of vitalities at play'. At any moment, there is the potential for the assemblage to become many different things, but only one actuality ensues. Here is another Deleuzian concept, that of virtualities. Stuart (Lester, 2013: 134) says:

there exists in the story of Jack a *virtuality* which consists of a multiplicity of forces that play beneath the surface. The use of virtual here is an attempt to see what escapes cognition by paying attention to the incorporeal, inorganic and the possibilities that pass between them ... The virtual field is actualised by a process of differentiation which brings about exclusions, i.e. it prohibits the actualisation of other virtualities. But the virtual world remains as an ever-present force from which many possible actualities can be created ... Actualisation brings forth specific forms and modes, but does not freeze them ... The body moves as it feels and feels itself moving, it is in a process of constant change, never present in a position but always passing through, it is always being-becoming.

Which brings us to the lines of movement for the other experiment. These are *diagrams*, another concept borrowed from Deleuze and others). This form of diagramming is an experimental attempt to focus on *movement*, and away from traditional ways of representing life in words, which are never sufficient – there is always something more about life that cannot be contained in words. Again, this is a disturbance, a deterritorialisation, giving a different account of life on the move from our habitual ways of describing. Diagrams are an embodied description of movements and encounters.

What were you sensing as you entered the room? Were you wondering where to sit? Was there some anticipation, or anxiety maybe? Were there people you wanted to sit next to or avoid? Were you seeking the best seat or view? How did you sense the atmosphere in the room and the conference generally? As bodies move they sense and as they sense they move. You are entangled in an interrelationship with other bodies, material objects, atmospheres, looking for possibilities that enhance being alive. From this perspective, life is not something that exists within the boundaries of your own skin, it is 'impersonal': beings are never individuals but always caught up in fluid and ever-changing relations.

Sensing/moving bodies are alert to possibilities that exist at any given moment to form connections in-between other bodies, materials, imaginations, etc., in ways that enhance being alive. This might perhaps also apply to what we call play: always alert to possibilities to enhance being alive.

Here's a diagram that Stuart did:



Of course, we don't know what this is, but that is not the point. This approach seeks to defer imposing meaning onto movement: we are not looking for the what or even the why, but the how. This is a fundamental principle to our approach to planning for play. There is a story that accompanies the lines, an extract from an observation during a visit to see an exhibition of Yorkshire landscape paintings by David Hockney (Lester and Russell, 2014: 298):

The gallery was very busy, and movement was restricted as we followed the flow of people through the various rooms. My attention was caught by two young girls (probably aged around 5/6 years old) with attendant adults who appeared very immersed in the paintings, certainly more so than the children who spent time chatting, moving through the crowd holding hands and occasionally breaking out into skipping movements around bodies, at one point sitting on the floor together and doing a small hand-clapping routine. My gaze became more focused as one child stood in front of one of the large landscape paintings stepping over the marked line on the floor which tacitly placed a restriction on adult encroachment to the immediate space around the canvas. Placing her back towards one large tree in the left of the picture, the young child positioned her arms to align with the main branches, effectively mimicking the shape of the tree. The other child stood facing her friend and helped to manoeuvre her arms into a closer copy before standing alongside and adopting a position to represent another tree. This child then proceeded to 'blow' as if it was windy and her friend began bending and shaking in the breeze, and reciprocating with blowing on to the 'other' tree and provoking a similar shaking response. Shortly afterwards they appeared to become conscious of being watched and moved away, giggling, before disappearing into the crowd.

There is very little, if any, verbal communication but somehow through the co-ordination or collusion of moving bodies and things the temporary form of 'becoming trees' emerges. The meshwork of lines of movement show how they become entangled to produce features of playing, or what we might indeed call 'messaging about'.

Life emerges through these mo(ve)ments (Curti and Moreno, 2010), not as an *interaction* between pre-existing entities that form a temporary alliance before returning to some kind of self-contained state; rather, these are entangled acts of 'intra-acting' (Barad, 2007) and intra-relating: life is always caught up and produced through relationships with other bodies, materials, atmospheres and elements in non-linear and indeterminate ways.

We can bring together ideas of lines and movement and life as 'impersonal' and 'in-between' with a quick look at anthropologist Tim Ingold's work on lines. He says we usually think of bodies (people, non-humans or organisations/institutions, elements) as blobs that have insides, outsides and surfaces; that have volume, mass and density – they take up space; and that are turned in on themselves. From this perspective, bodies are seen as separate from the environments they inhabit; furthermore, minds are separate from the bodies they inhabit. But as we have seen, our 'selves' are

not fixed within the skin as non-porous container. Dancer-philosopher Erin Manning (2009) talks about a 'leaky sense of self', always entangled with other bodies, materials, elements, atmospheres and so on.

Tim Ingold suggests that our focus on self-contained blobs means we forget about lines. Lines, he says, have no inside or outside: we are not separate from our environment but intimately interconnected with it. Lines have no start or end point, there is only movement and flow. Lines are always in movement and relationship with something else. Unlike separate, static blobs, lines have vivacity, flexibility. They give us life itself (Ingold, 2015).

He also contrasts ways of moving through the environment, talking about 'transport' and 'wayfaring'. If you have ever watched children walking along the pavement, you see how much they meander: not stepping on cracks, finding a tin can and stamping on it so it attaches to the shoe and make a noise as you walk, playing games of tag, walking along low walls and so on. Children are open to the possibilities the environment offers up for playing; it is this we need to pay attention to.

Adults, on the other hand, want to get straight from A to B (some of you may indeed have drawn straight lines from the door to your seat in the opening exercise). An interesting aside: in the UK (as in other countries), in an effort to encourage children to walk to school, we invented something called the 'walking bus', where children walk together chaperoned by one or two adults. This is an effort to reduce car use and also to get children moving. But the walking bus is an adult invention, so it sees the purpose of the bus as being to get to school – a form of transport. In some areas, children have to sign a contract to say they will behave properly on the bus. The bus has a driver, a conductor, a timetable and designated bus stops. It is very orderly indeed. The research by Roger Mackett and colleagues at UCL tracing children's physical movements (and calorie expenditure) shows how much more children walk in straight lines when with adults than when on their own or with other children. It is an example of how we unthinkingly control children's space and time – although children will usually seek to find cracks in that orderliness for moments of messing about – and being what adults might see as disorderly. Wayfaring, Ingold suggests, is a way of being open to being alive, always moving, the primacy of movement.

The supremacy of the straight line extends beyond our movements and into other aspects of adult life. Thinking straight is seen as A Good Thing, and much of rational science seeks straight lines of causality. In our professional work, we are kept in order too by rational and orderly ideas of inputs, outputs, outcomes, targets, and so on. Ingold (2007: 152) says: 'In Western societies, straight lines are ubiquitous. We see them everywhere, even when they do not really exist. Indeed the straight line has emerged as a virtual icon of modernity, an index of the triumph of rational, purposeful design over the vicissitudes of the natural world. The relentlessly dichotomizing dialectic of modern thought has, at one time or another, associated straightness with mind against matter, with rational thought as against sensory perception, with intellect as against intuition, with science as against traditional knowledge, with male as against female, with civilization as against primitiveness, and – on the most general level – with culture as against nature.'

Nowhere is this more apparent in our work than in the straight line of children's development. This is so pervasive that it is difficult to think otherwise. Life is cut into segments – both of ages and of activities (school, home, playground, and so on), with orthodox theories of development, education, health, play, politics, economics and so on that produce a certain representation of what it is to be

human. This is what Deleuze and Guattari call a 'plane of organisation', a certain way of ordering life that fixes it to a standardised norm and that becomes seen as common sense. Most of our efforts as professional adults working with children are about helping them develop, and to intervene if we think they have strayed too far from the line of development. Again, neither Stuart nor I are saying these ideas are wrong, just that they are all pervasive, they dominate our institutions (education, policy, family life and so on) and they exclude other lines of enquiry.

And we pretty much do the same thing to play: the very act of trying to define play fixes it, turning it into a thing, a 'blob', a demarcated time and space bound activity, closing down play's possibilities. We impose adult meanings onto it and link it to the future focus of child development.

A straight line is drawn from the act of playing to the acquisition of skills. From this worldview, it becomes logical to provide specific resources to encourage desirable forms of play for the benefits it is assumed to deliver, leading to ideas of the 'right' kind of play to develop the 'right' kinds of skills.

Becoming accustomed to talking about play provision – providing play – fixes it in designated times and spaces, and we forget that it also emerges interwoven into children's everyday lives.

Given this, what is a play space? Here is a story from one of the participants on a professional development programme Stuart did with Wrexham, North Wales:

My two bored children were helping with the supermarket shop. They had done the usual look at toys, plead for biscuits and crisps, picked out dinner etc. When we entered the pet food aisle, my eldest started with "when can we have a dog". Before I could answer my youngest had dropped on to her hands and knees to be a dog. She crawled up and down the aisle sniffing at the food on the shelves, my son copied for a bit but soon gave up to be the owner. She let him pat her on the head and came when he called her. They were totally engrossed in their game. A dad and daughter came around the corner, the girl also dropped to her knees, she did not acknowledge my two or them her. When she got to the end of the aisle she got back on to her feet. My two carried on the game until they got to the tills where it was much busier, they then stopped to put the shopping on the conveyer belt so they could race it to the till. The dog game was over.

This story shows how play can emerge whenever conditions allow, it is interwoven into everyday life, mo(ve)ments that feel alive, where anything is possible.

Let's move on now to a closer look at ideas of space itself.

Space is not a neutral or static container for action. Rather, it is constantly in the process of being *produced*, always in the process of becoming through entanglements of bodies, desires, affect, material and symbolic objects, and so on – everything that coalesces at that mo(ve)ment to produce that space at that time.

Playing might be understood as the desire to create worlds where life is better, in opportunistic ways and from current conditions. It emerges whenever conditions allow. Children are alert to possibilities that exist at any given moment to form connections in-between other bodies, materials, imaginations and so on, in ways that enhance being alive. In this way, playing can be understood as mo(ve)ments that disturb rational orderings of time and space, lines of flight away from the plane of organisation, a deterritorialisation of the dominant order.

Another experiment: electric finger

What I hope you experienced here is the connection between movement and sensation as the process of life, where 'life' is an impersonal force in-between everything rather than contained inside blobby individual bodies. As you were sensing and moving, to catch or avoid being caught, or anticipating the command, there were moment-by-moment qualitative change in your bodies. Bodies are open to the environment and not self-enclosed organisms. What I saw was attentiveness, anticipation, and minor gestures. And laughter. As Brian Sutton-Smith (2003) says, what play does is give you greater satisfaction in being alive for the time of playing. This on its own has enormous benefits.

Stuart and I have for some time now been using the term 'ordinary magic' to talk about play. We stole it from Ann Masten's (2001) work on resilience, but we think it works equally well to describe playing. The examples of the girls becoming trees and children becoming dogs may appear to be mundane and apparently trivial, minor low key events, and such moments can appear anywhere and everywhere. This would suggest that playing is ordinary or co-created from everyday stuff to become out-of-the ordinary, times when children can temporarily co-create time-space for life to flourish. As such, these moments/milieus matter and bring more to the world.

These moments are important sources of emergent capabilities (Duff, 2011) and the accumulation of a repertoire of wide-ranging affective and relational resources (Lester and Russell, 2014). Just a few mo(ve)ments in which bodies and materials are arranged (or co-created) into assemblages imbued with a tenor of pleasure, where there is a greater power to act. These moments have intensive qualities – life is more vibrant – and extensive – it can produce new arrangements and connections between bodies, material etc. – ways of enlivening the practicalities of everyday life. And as Sutton-Smith (2003) reminds us, the opposite of play is not work but depression, in other words, a suppression of these intensive and extensive capabilities. Playing generates moments of being-well for the time of playing and shapes an approach/disposition to the near-future (anticipatory readiness and alertness to the possibility of more playing).

The very ordinariness of playing has affective and life-enhancing significance. This apparently straightforward claim is profound and on its own would suggest that any society that claimed to care for children should position play at the centre of policy-making and not as something that is a luxury, to be considered after the serious business of growing up is completed or merely an instrument for adults to use to progress children.

At this point, we shift to consider all this in a broader macro context of planning. Michael Gunder (2010: 299) states that 'Urban, regional, or spatial planning is specifically about making choices about how we use land – it's about governing space'. He situates planning ideology in a neoliberal context in which market forces are supposed to produce a better version of society than other ideologies, especially a state-directed form. Given this, spatial planning gives priority to the process of the market and of capital: production, exchange, distribution and consumption.

Planning is not neutral, and paying attention only to market forces excludes particular ways of being in space. Outcomes-focused and functional approaches to planning privilege order and rationality and discourage disorderliness and performativity – what we might see as play – unless it can be seen to assist market forces and be controlled.

Despite planners' intentions for the functions of space, 'playful acts often pay little heed to the instrumental concerns which urban designers typically aim to serve' (Stevens, 2007: 197). Nevertheless, the dominant use always takes precedence, and in contestations of space, children have little power. Traffic (parked and moving), parental anxieties (real and distorted) and a range of control measures (age curfews, Mosquito, general attitudes) and so on combine in ways that construct children as 'out of place' in the public realm.

Given the understandings of play explored so far, we can see that planning for play is something more than designating spaces and times as play spaces (important though this is). Play is not a subsidiary and separate process set apart from the real world, and given its intimate connection with the full range of everyday activities and spaces, it needs to be considered as an integral feature of all space.

From this perspective, attention switches from providing designated time and spaces for play towards the conditions under which playfulness may thrive. This is an important distinction as it pays attention to more general conditions under which social, affective and material resources may facilitate the expression of children's playful desires, what may be referred to as 'play enabling spaces' or the 'playful feel of space'.

The concepts of navigation and negotiation came out of work Michael Ungar (2008) looking at resilient communities. Navigation is about being able to navigate towards health giving resources – something that is a right for children, and in the context of this discussion, it is about the right to navigate towards play enabling places. Playful navigation, from this perspective, can be understood as full political participation, where 'political' with small 'p' is about the participation in everyday life rather than 'Politics' (capital 'P'), which refers to formal democratic processes.

Ungar's second and interconnected principle is 'negotiation'; this is an adult responsibility, where adults 'negotiate' time/space for children through their actions and attitudes. This is not a formal process, but rather an awareness of how broader Politics (capital P) works to exclude children, and working in small and big ways to, both through Political systems and adult politics, to support conditions in which playfulness can thrive.

This leads us to the twin concepts of account-ability and response-ability ...

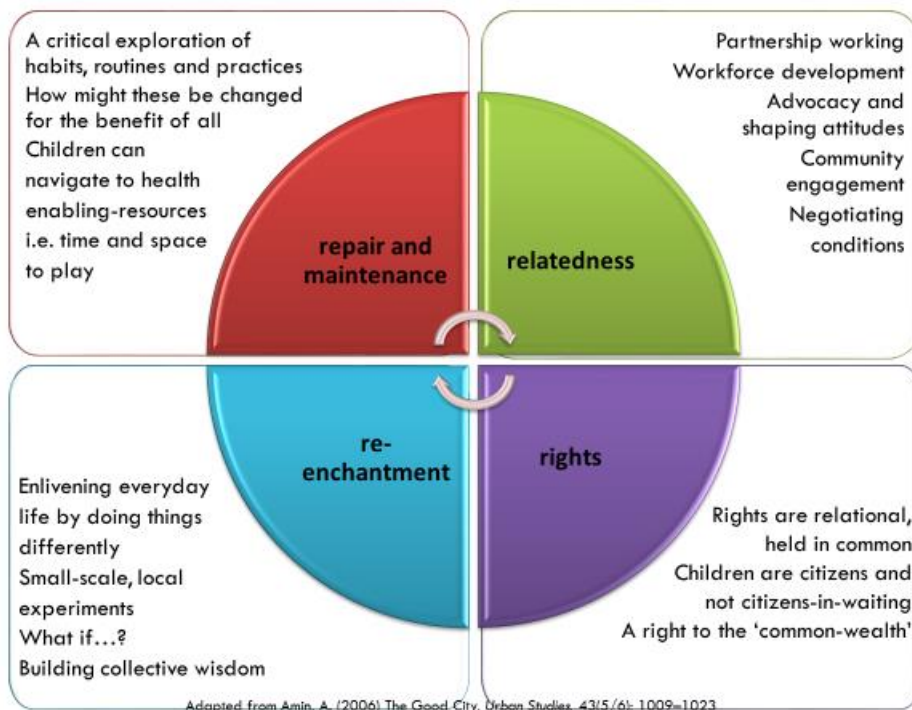
Here, the starting point is to acknowledge the value of 'collective wisdom': everyone, including local communities, professionals and academics working across a range of disciplines, and especially children, have different ways of knowing about space, its configurations and its capacity to be 'play enabling'. This is more than just gathering a range of views, it is about working together to appreciate different ways of relating space, to produce a multiplicity of accounts.

Stuart and I have been working with adults (who have also been working with children) to develop a range of creative approaches to 'mapping' space (accounting for its use by children) in ways that help to develop the ability to pay attention to mo(ve)ments of playfulness and the concept of 'play enabling spaces'. We have called this a 'critical cartography', and the critical aspect comes in the notion of response-ability. The ongoing gathering of multiple (but singular) examples of stories of playing allows for critical scrutiny of the ways in which space is configured and how this might support or constrain playing. From this, a number of small and experimental steps can be tried to

render space more equitable and more open for playing. And to help consider this, we drew on the work of Ash Amin (2006) on 'The Good City'.

Amin talks about four registers of a good city, one where all citizens, adults and children can navigate to health-giving resources – and for children this means play enabling spaces. These are: rights, relatedness, maintenance and repair, and re-enchantment. These registers are all interrelated, but as we developed these concepts, Stuart and I felt that rights and relatedness were very closely linked. Rights, in this context, are not individual, but held in common, as the basis for relations with other people, things, and so on.

We can consider these four registers when thinking again about the stories that have been shared today: girls becoming trees in the gallery, or children becoming dogs in the supermarket.



These examples in this table are taken from our research into the Welsh Government's Play Sufficiency Duty. It is clear to see here that children's right to play becomes the responsibility of all adults, and working across professional roles becomes crucial. Ideas of repair and maintenance link back to adult response-ability to hold habitual routines and practices up to critical scrutiny to see what they might exclude.

Re-enchantment offers to possibility of different configurations of space and time. Here, we have been advocating small-scale 'what if...?' experiments – small ways of doing things differently just to see what happens. And this leads to more stories and more collective wisdom about how to address our shared responsibility for children's rights to play.

This all sounds like a very simple and perhaps idealistic solution, so I have to bring things back down to earth with the reminder that spaces will always, to some extent, be contested. Neither Stuart nor I wish to paint a picture of a future Utopia where children can play happily in the streets without

impediment. The production of space is always about relations of power and there will always be exclusions. For those of us old enough to remember playing out, this was always a process of navigation and negotiation where we knew we had to share space with others who may be more powerful and want to use space differently. Geographer Doreen Massey (2005) called this 'throwntogetherness', and urban activist Jane Jacobs (1961) stressed the importance of diversity of street use and people. The girls in the gallery and the children in the supermarket were fully aware that they were using the space in ways not intended by the planned, and would have acted accordingly.

So, to conclude: Stuart's work is about thinking differently about children's play and therefore about planning for play. Play is no longer a time and space bound activity that can be provided, but rather attention is paid to the relationship between movement and the generation of a 'play space' which leads to a broader appreciation of the supporting relational conditions under which 'play spaces' may emerge.

Thank you

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