‘One big playground for kids’: a contextual appraisal of some 1970s photographs of children hanging out on a post-World War Two British council estate.

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Abstract
This article gives a broad assessment of a number of photographs taken in the early 1970s of children on a post-World War Two British council estate in Gainsborough, Lincolnshire. As one of the cornerstones of postwar social reconstruction in Britain, the provision and design of new public housing often had the well being of the future citizen – the child – in mind, and the photography of these estates at the time often included children as a way to promote a sense of well-being and community. This article offers a reading of these photographs as a representation of the child’s day-to-day life in this particular environment, and to present an understanding of how the planning and layout of the estate was intended to function as a crucial influence on the development of the children who lived there.

Keywords: childhood; memory; photography; council estates; Radburn, planning, post-war Britain.

Introduction: the British council estate, the photograph, and the shaping of postwar childhood.

Two boys, who seem to be brothers of around eight or nine years of age, are perched on the rim of a litter bin by a modernist shopping precinct, in a photograph taken circa 1972 (Figure 1). As well as these boys, there are a number of other children congregating around the shops. The high-level distance shot here means that they are unaware that the scene is being photographed, and so they are acting naturally, meeting up, interacting with one another and running around. But the two boys remain seated on the litter bin because they have seen the camera, and are looking up at the photographer with calm curiosity.
This is a photograph of ‘The Precinct’, a block of shops and flats that were designed as the centrepiece of a local authority housing development, the Middlefield Lane estate in Gainsborough, Lincolnshire. The estate was built by the Gainsborough Urban District Council (GUDC), and was completed in 1965. It can therefore be considered as a representative example of the post-World War Two, ‘Welfare State’ reconstruction of British society and culture: between 1945 and 1969, around 4m public dwellings were built on estates much like Middlefield – some 59% of all housing built over that period (Glendinning and Muthesius 1994, 1). This local-authority housing boom produced a number of diverse estate types, from the garden suburb model that was embodied in New Town projects such as those at Harlow and Stevenage, to the inner-city estate that came to be dominated by the high-rise tower block. Almost two-thirds of total public housing built in that period however consisted of provincial and relatively traditional two or three-bedroom houses that
were laid out in ‘suburban’ estates – a model with which the Middlefield Lane estate was almost entirely consistent, with the exception of a limited number of three-storey walk-up flats, some of which can be seen in this photograph.

We do not know the name of the photographer, but the photograph itself, along with the others of the estate examined here, was part of a set that was held in the photographic collection of the GUDC Architects Department. Many local authorities over this period kept photographic records of the new estates they created, including those for instance made by the Photographic Unit of the Greater London Council in the early 1970s (Alaam 2008). Other, similar, photographs of post-war council estates were also used by the architectural press of the time to illustrate reports on new housing developments. Figure 2 is a case in point, which was taken for the Architect’s Journal. But while photographs like this one were produced to help stimulate debate over the merits (or otherwise) of the architecture and planning in question, they shared one important characteristic with many of the photographs produced by local authorities, including the one seen so far of The Precinct: they also tended to informally represent the people who lived on these estates.
The architecture of the welfare state was intended to establish a sense of social cohesion and personal wellbeing within the dual constructs of family and community. As one of the cornerstones of post-World War Two social reconstruction in Britain, the design and provision of new public housing also had the wellbeing of the future citizen – the child – in mind. As a consequence, the photography of these estates frequently made children the centre of attention, showing them interacting with these new environments as a clear representation of the values the architecture was meant to embody (Kozlovsky 2013, 4). Furthermore, it has also been argued that children were used in these photographs as signifiers of both innocence and new beginnings, where ‘the newness of the modern’ could be emphasized by ‘photographing it with its ideal subjects: children, unencumbered by the weight of history, convention, or tradition’ (Allen 2000, 124). Figure 2, a photograph of the Linford housing area in Milton...
Keynes, was used in a typical example of this discourse, a photo-piece tellingly entitled ‘Growing up in Milton Keynes’ (*Architect’s Journal* 1978, 154).

Of course, we must be careful in using photographs like these as some kind of conduit for understanding and interpreting the children’s lives in these particular places, at that time. As a means of enquiry today, these photographs are naturally open to different interpretations, and we can all too readily dismiss them as being somehow manipulative of reality. But, by doing so, we also ‘risk neglecting a type of evidence that links us to the past with an immediacy and a power often lacking in the written record’ (Thomson 2013, 21). Despite questions of, for instance, the interests of the photographer, the selective framing of the image, and – importantly – how the human subjects can be all too conscious of being photographed, the photographs which will be examined here are all fundamentally representative of one simple fact: children frequently occupied and appropriated these particularly ‘new’ and ‘modern’ spaces to their own ends.

Indeed, I should know. The research and thinking embodied in this article has a personal dimension to it: I also grew up on the Middlefield Lane estate. In the spring of 1964, when I was three years old, I moved into a brand-new, two-bedroomed house with my parents, and I lived there until I moved away in the early 1980s. I knew The Precinct and its environs intimately, and hung around there in exactly the same way as the children in these photographs (in fact, I can also name some of them, including the boys sat on the litter bin). So while this article will naturally aim to give an objective appraisal of these photographs, and of how the children interacted with the spaces within this estate, I also hope that the reader will allow for an element of personal subjectivity here. In the 1960s and 70s, images like these were in any case raising new subjectivities and meanings in relation to childhood: ‘increasingly, this was a
photography in which its subjects were recognised as looking back … a new understanding of the landscape of the child in which the social observer no longer had all the answers’ (Thomson 2013, 16).

In his study of a number of innovative postwar buildings and environments that were developed with the child specifically in mind, Kozlovsky provides two causes for this changing discourse: the identification of ‘the conditions of possibility in terms of modes of knowledge and power concerning children’, and the ‘the role of urban planning and architectural design in shaping postwar childhood’ (2013, 3). This article will examine the photographs of the Middlefield Lane estate to similar ends, but while Kozlovsky considers post-war health centres, hospitals, playgrounds and housing, he only makes limited reference to the planning and layout of the external spaces of post-war council estates, particularly those which expressly aimed to separate the car from the pedestrian. These photographs show that Middlefield was predominantly a pedestrianized environment, based on a specific mode of urban planning which was virtually unheard of in Lincolnshire at the time the estate was being built. As such, they also present a contrast to the study of other postwar photographs of childhood (eg. Johnson 1964, Marcus 2006, Thomson 2013) which tend to focus on the child in the street, predominantly in slum areas, and usually within the wider context of emphasising the need for social and housing reform. Indeed, we shall see how there were virtually no ‘streets’ in any conventional sense on the estate. The photographs here show the children of Middlefield within what was for them a novel environment – a blank canvas even – designed to allow them to thrive, grow and develop.
The child in the council estate landscape.

At the start of the 1960s, Gainsborough was a small, provincial market town with a population of around 17,000 people. At that time it had just one, redbrick post-war council estate which had been completed in the mid-1950s. By the time that the construction of the Middlefield Lane estate had commenced in July 1963 however, an ‘officially sanctioned and unstoppable’ programme of modernization was transforming many of Britain’s towns and cities (Kynaston 2014, 265). Gainsborough was no exception: according to the local newspaper, The Gainsborough Evening News, Middlefield was an end product of the town’s ‘drive against the slums, to house people in decent homes’ (12 May 1964).\(^1\) A year later, and just as the estate had been completed, the newspaper celebrated its modern architecture and planning of with an aerial photograph and the headline ‘Take a Look at New Gainsborough’ (25 May 1965).

Figure 1 clearly shows this new environment and, in particular, the bold and very up-to-date modernist style of The Precinct complex, which consisted of a low-rise ‘superblock’ in three sections: the shops in the centre with the maisonette flats above, and two blocks of flats either side (‘North’ and ‘South Parade’) that were connected by short underpasses, with ‘link maisonettes’ above. A 1975 Ordnance Survey map of Middlefield (Figure 3) shows both its full extent, and how it was physically situated to be what its architect described as the ‘core of the estate’ (Waites 2015, 265).

\(^1\) The same article described the town’s slum housing, which consisted of densely populated late-eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century yards and terraces, as having ‘no modern conveniences, no bathroom … only one cold water tap’, and where the kitchen looked onto ‘a dreary back lane’, ‘empty boarded up houses’ and ‘signs of decay’.
Indeed, the Precinct was intended to be part of what architects and planners of the time referred to as a ‘Neighbourhood Unit’, an American residential model of planning which intended to create self-contained, family and community-centred residential developments, with purpose-built educational, shopping and communal facilities nearby. As such, the Neighbourhood Unit was also based in large part on providing for children’s needs, where the ‘postwar strategy of positioning the child as the centre of communal settlement’ was ‘realized in its most exemplary form’ (Kozlovsky 2013, 208-209).

Figure 1 shows the children of Middlefield taking full advantage of this Neighbourhood Unit-influenced environment, but it also highlights the analytical distinction made by the sociologist, Kim Rasmussen, between ‘places for children’
and ‘children’s places’. According to Rasmussen, this distinction arises from the
‘interfaces and discontinuities’ between the intentions of adult authorities that design
places where children live, and of how the children can then ‘take over’ and use those
places for themselves (2004, 155). At that moment, children become ‘legitimate
social actors’ who both ‘perceive and appropriate’ the places where they live
(Kozlovsky 2013, 6). A ‘place’ therefore becomes ‘somewhere’ through a process of
socialisation. Figure 1 provides us with an image of this actually happening: unaware
of the camera’s gaze, the children are actively using the open, communal, spaces in
front of the shops in order to create their own momentary social world. The shops
themselves also acted as a crucial meeting point and initial catalyst for this. In 2014,
the Gainsborough Heritage Association (GHA) posted another, similar, contemporary
photograph of The Precinct on their Facebook site, which elicited around two hundred
comments from people who used to live on the estate. Many of these started by
recalling the shops themselves: ‘Happy childhood memories - my grandma often gave
me a threepenny bit to spend at Deakins, mum sent me to Vivo's on errands …’.

Both ‘Deakin’s’ (a newsagent), and the supermarket ‘Vivo’ can be seen
amongst the shop units in Figure 1, and on the next photograph (Figure 4), which
shows The Precinct at ground level. The wall clock at the end of the block indicates
that it is just before 4pm on what looks to be a rather overcast late spring, or early
summer, afternoon. The dress of the majority of the children seen here suggests they
have been to school that day (the primary schools in that area were a five minute walk
away) and that they are in the process of heading home. According to Zeiher (2003),
everyday life for children in a welfare state can be configured in terms of an
‘institutionalized triangle’, where home is taken to comprise one corner, and the route
to school constitutes one leg. School marks the second corner, and the route from
school to a ‘recreational facility’ is the second leg. The recreational facility is at the third corner, and the route from this place to home is the last leg. At this time of day, the shops on The Precinct became that ‘recreational facility’, a natural stopping-off point for the children on the estate. Deakin’s, which sold sweets, comics and cheap toys, was a particular magnet for them as part of their everyday, after-school activities (several GHA Facebook comments reflected on this: ‘I used to go for my sweets there, it used to be really nice then’/’I remember walking round to deakins when i was 4, to get some caps for my gun’).

**Figure 4**

Figure 4 shows some of the children that can be seen in the first photograph, plus a few others who have turned up, and they gather in front of Deakin’s for the photographer, forming a curious, if self conscious, and perhaps slightly apprehensive group. They want to know what the photographer is doing, but they instinctively pull
together because they do not know who this man is, nor why he should be taking photographs of where they are. It is as if no one has taken an interest in them before: some of them stand and stare and, by return, they seem to make the photographer concentrate on them and take the shot. Rasmussen’s interfaces and discontinuities are played out here in a wonderfully cyclic manner. The Precinct was an adult-designed space but, at that particular time of day, the children temporarily made the space theirs. In the photograph however, this has been momentarily checked by the presence of an adult carrying out an activity that is interesting to the children, but which also has the potential to disrupt their activities. The children would not necessarily know that this person was an employee of the local council, but they would recognise a working adult who momentarily pulls ‘their’ place away from them, and back into the adult world. Despite this, some of the children are paying no attention to the photographer at all: two boys continue to act within ‘their’ space regardless of the ‘official’ presence of this adult: the boy on the left in the white shorts appears to be completely engrossed with something he is holding in his hands, but he is also about to be kicked by the boy behind him who has been caught in shot with his leg in mid-air.

The most conducive ‘interface’ however, between the design of Middlefield and of how the children used the spaces to their own social and developmental ends, was the system of pedestrian ways that also characterized the estate. A typical Neighbourhood Unit was planned to enable children to travel safely, and within walking distance, between home, school, and other facilities on an estate. As a consequence, it also became imperative that the pedestrian and any pedestrian networks should be clearly separated from traffic. The map in Figure 3 shows that, apart from two vehicular access roads (‘The Drive’, and the road between ‘Dunstall
Walk’ and ‘Priory Close’) Middlefield was almost entirely pedestrianized, with an extensive network of footpaths spreading outwards from The Precinct, across ‘The Green’, and ‘North’ and ‘South Parade’. Additionally, the houses themselves were largely grouped around open green spaces, for example ‘Priory Close’, ‘Upton Walk’, ‘The Walk’ (indicated on the map by the shaded areas), which were also delineated by further self-contained, interlinked systems of public footpaths in almost complete seclusion from the two access roads. This was known as ‘Radburn’ planning, so called because it was based on the layout of the small, unfinished settlement of Radburn in New Jersey, one of a number of experimental housing projects started in 1928 by the Regional Planning Association of America, and which was supported by President Roosevelt’s ‘New Deal’ programme of social and cultural reforms around the time of the ‘Great Depression’. Radburn layouts were first acknowledged in Britain in a 1949 government Housing Manual (Esher 1981, 46), but it came to be more widely applied to the design and layout of many English council estates in the 1960s, when it was envisaged that personal car use would rapidly increase over the decade. As a consequence, Middlefield was planned to accommodate the car but also to minimise its intrusion onto what was primarily intended to be a safe, spacious and interesting environment for children to play in.

It is widely understood that opportunities for gross motor play and movement are vital for physical and intellectual childhood development. Access to outdoor space is essential for this because it ‘allows and encourages children to relive their experiences through their most natural channel: movement’ (Ouvry 2003, 11). Furthermore, it has also been acknowledged that children generally need open, level spaces for social activity-based games (Day and Midjber 2007, 14). Early studies evaluating Radburn-type layouts on estates in British new towns tended to find that
pedestrianized landscaped areas intended for play and socializing remained relatively unused, with many children playing instead on the roads and the culs-de-sac (Miller, Courtis, and Cook 1965). Within just a few years however a process of acclimatization appeared to have taken place. An evaluative survey of a Radburn-type scheme in the Pin Green neighbourhood of Stevenage New Town, made within just a few years of the photographs of The Precinct being taken, revealed that 85 percent of children there used the sequences of communal, landscaped open spaces (predominantly of open, grassed areas, paths suitable for playing on, and the pedestrianized links to neighbourhood shops and schools, such as those found around The Precinct) for play and socializing (Architecture Research Unit 1969). This is particularly evident in an earlier, late 1960s photograph of The Precinct (Figure 5), where the children appear to be interacting with the open space there ‘more through life-energy than pre-thought out rational intention’ (Day and Midjber 2007, 5). Once again, the GHA Facebook comments (2014) bear this out: ‘I remember swinging round on the bars near the steps’/‘Used to roller skate on the precinct’/‘Remember playing blocko and kick can round there’/‘I spent lots of time playing round there lol’.
Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote about how the body and its sensory-motor functions ‘commune’ with the places and spaces it inhabits – with what he called the ‘lived-through world’ (1964, 71). As the children in Figure 5 chase each other around the open pathway system of The Precinct, they are ‘communing’ with their environment: the space enables them to ‘live through’ their world. The photograph shows how the layout of the estate gave its children the freedom to move around, and to develop what Moore (1986, 56-57) has described as an ‘intimate, fluid and intense interaction with the flowing terrain of place’. Indeed, when he writes about children’s movement being ‘choreographed by the landscape, as their bodies responded to every opportunity’, he could almost be writing about the dynamic and kinetic forms of the children here, as they play, run, fall down, get up and start running again across this landscape.

The next photograph of The Precinct (Figure 6) also demonstrates this fluid and intense interaction with the place, but with different, social, consequences. The
presence of the photographer is now attracting a great deal of attention from some other, older, boys, including those to the right who appear to have seen the younger children being photographed, and who are rushing determinedly towards the action. In this case, we can take Susan Sontag almost literally in her assertion that the camera encourages whatever is going on to keep happening (1999, 12). Some of the younger boys are still there from the previous photographs, but two older boys confidently cross the photographer’s path, with one smiling slightly as they momentarily disrupt the shot. Rasmussen’s ‘interfaces’ and ‘discontinuities’ between the intentions of adult authorities in creating and maintaining these places, and those of the children who want to appropriate the place for themselves, become more intense and pronounced at this moment, as the fragile relationship between the photographer and the younger children seen in Figure 3 is momentarily broken down here.

Figure 6
Another social discontinuity that emerges from these photographs relates specifically to the nature of pedestrianized, communal spaces on estates like Middlefield. Moore claims that access is an important factor in the way that the child interacts with their environment (1986, 234). Critics of the post-war council estate however have argued that the open-plan, pedestrian-orientated environment could encourage socially unruly, or uncontrollable behaviour because of too much access, caused by a lack of any clear territorial distinctions between public and private space, and by inadequate physical buffers between dwellings and public footpaths and open spaces (Ravetz 2001, 188; Cooper Marcus and Sarkissian 1986, 82). An illustration of this can be detected on the extreme right of the scene shown in Figure 1, where the ‘front’ doors of the ground floor flats (which were originally designated for the elderly) almost immediately open out onto the public footpath and the open green space beyond. Here though, the children passing the flats appear to be keeping to the path. Indeed, the research for this article (examining editions of the local newspaper and the council’s housing committee minutes over the first eight years of the estate’s life) found only one instance of how the open, pedestrianized nature of the estate might have produced some tensions between children and adults, when a housing committee meeting in July 1965 noted that some complaints had been received regarding the ‘nuisance caused by children riding cycles on footpaths near to the old people’s developments [the flats seen in Figure 1] on the estate’. As a consequence, ‘no cycling’ signs were put up in the vicinity of these flats, and no further incidents were reported.

Children tend to fit in with the adult-defined patterns and structures of private and public space, but this also depends on the extent to which the boundaries of these spaces are permeable or impermeable (Jones 2000, 41). If these boundaries are
essentially permeable, as they were in the open public space around The Precinct and across the estate as a whole, children will naturally build their own geographies, actively reordering and reforming those spaces in line with their own desires and needs, and in parallel to the adult sphere. Again, these photographs of The Precinct show moments when the children are in the midst of doing this. As such, the open plan nature of the estate can be understood as being a ‘pure space’, which can be viewed as being particularly conducive for a child’s developing sense of ‘being-in-the-world’ (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Sennett 1970; Sibley 1992).

If we look at these photographs again however, it becomes clear that this ‘being-in-the-world’ is not entirely inclusive of all children. The attitude of the boys walking into shot in Figure 6 also highlights the gendered nature of children’s use of space where, in general, boys have been found to have a more direct, ‘physical’ relationship with their environment (Brown et al. 2008, 392). Furthermore, boys have also been found to have a wider spatial terrain or ‘Home range’ than girls (Prezza et al. 2001; Tucker and Matthews 2001). In contrast, girls were more likely to see their friends at home and, as a consequence, were less likely to hang around and to claim outdoor spaces than boys (Brown et al. 2008, 390). This is borne out by the photographs of The Precinct seen so far, where the children are predominantly male, with the particular exception of a girl in Figure 4 placing her arms protectively around a boy who presumably is her younger brother. Figure 7 however, specifically shows a small group of girls on nearby North Parade (The Precinct would be just a few yards away behind the photographer) but they seem to be in transit, and appear to be heading more or less straight home after school. Figure 1 also shows girls passing by The Precinct but three of these appear to be accompanied by their mother, further reinforcing the suggestion here that girls’ relationships with the environment were
fundamentally mediated by ‘home’, and by smaller, more concentrated social networks and spatial terrains.

Figure 7

This ‘imbalance’ in the different way that boys and girls might use the communal, pedestrianized spaces of the estate has also recently been emphasised by the findings of a recent Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded community archaeological dig led by archaeologist Carenza Lewis, that took place on the Middlefield Lane estate in May 2016 (Figure 8).
The project created over twenty, one-metre square test pits in residents’ gardens and across the numerous green pedestrianized areas created by the Radburn-style layout (including three in the vicinity of The Precinct). The dig produced an abundance of child-related artefacts from the lifetime of the estate and – significantly, given that the estate was designed to accommodate children in a safe, pedestrianized environment – proportionately more than from other community digs in rural, village locations. These finds go some way to verifying the notion that the children on the estate used the pedestrianized spaces as ‘children’s places’, but they also suggest a gendered use of space on the estate in that none of the test pits made on the pedestrianized communal areas revealed anything that might be viewed as being girl-related (eg. doll/doll related items). In contrast, just over a quarter of the same pits
produced toys (predominantly bits of plastic soldiers and toy cars) that can be
categorised as being associated with boys (Lewis, Waites, and Picksley 2016).²

**Conclusion – the meaning of these photographs today**

The girl with the scooter in Figure 7 can be seen as the example of the child whose
‘perception of the environment is not yet "tainted" by social considerations’ – she ‘has
not acquired that selective vision that distinguishes the beauty of the flowers from that
of the weeds' (Ward 1979, 23-24). Post World War Two British council estates like
this one are routinely and stereotypically viewed today as grim, outdated, rundown,
and worthless. The negative perceptions of these places have been fostered both by
academic studies (Coleman 1985; Ravetz 2001) and within a more popular discourse
of communities seemingly blighted by dilapidated housing, a ‘benefits culture’,
ignorance and ‘neighbours from hell’, for instance with Channel 4’s television series
*Skint* (2013) which put a pejorative spotlight on the everyday lives of the residents of
a 1960s council estate in Scunthorpe, Lincolnshire.

Arguably, the scene in Figure 7 does little to dispel that perception: an
overcast day, a long, relatively empty vista lined by regimented rows of modernist
flats. From the late 1970s however, the social and physical fabric of many council
estates in Britain deteriorated not because of the way they were planned, or because of
people’s lifestyles, but because of a severe national economic downturn. The
Middlefield Lane estate suffered this fate because Gainsborough as a whole went in to

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² The Middlefield dig is so far unique in relation to the archaeological exploration of a post-
war council estate. Obviously more work needs to be done on this, and Lewis and Waites plan
to carry out similar community digs on a wider range of post-war Radburn-type council
estates, firstly in order to understand how the pedestrianized areas were used communally,
and by children, which will further test any assumptions regarding gendered use of these
spaces. More comparative analysis is also necessary, particularly with studies on the nature of
gender and play, and the use of toys in the post-war years.
a severe social and economic decline after its two long-established main employers both closed in the early 1980s, causing massive redundancies. By October 2000, the council’s planning committee was noting that the shop units at The Precinct had been subject to a ‘long history of low demand, serious vandalism and unlettability’ [sic] and the whole block, along with the North Parade flats seen in this photograph, were soon demolished to make way for a number of new ‘shared ownership’ bungalows built not by the local authority, but by a private housing association.

In the post-war years however, these estates were vitally necessary at a time when it was estimated that around eight million homes in Britain were unfit for habitation (Grindrod 2014, 22). Estates like Middlefield Lane therefore gave many people a chance to live in a good, modern home in a thoughtfully planned, spacious and pleasant estate. Furthermore, the idea that the design of the estate was intended to be beneficial to the development and well being of the child was noted by its residents from its inception. Several months after they moved into their new homes, The Gainsborough Evening News (29 December 1964) led with an article entitled ‘The Likes and Dislikes of a New Estate: Middlefield Lane residents have few complaints’. According to the article, Middlefield was a ‘nicely laid-out, compact, estate’, and it went on to stress the experience of one ‘mother of very young children’ who expressed her long-term commitment to life on the estate by stating that ‘she could think of few better places for her children to grow up’. Significantly, the article also noted how the pedestrianized nature of the estate would ‘come as a boon to the mothers who can now safely allow their children out to play.’ Fifty years later, this was confirmed by a Facebook comment: ‘Used to go to these shops as a kid as lived round the corner on Priory Close. Happy memories. I fondly remember this estate being one big playground for kids’ (2014).
It is generally accepted that memories of childhood, and photographs of children in the past can easily and ‘actively promote nostalgia’ (Holland 1992, 15). That Facebook comment is heartfelt, but its tone however is matter-of-fact. In turn, this article has tried to avoid viewing the photographs of The Precinct as conduits for a nostalgic reverie on childhood, especially as they date from the 1970s, a decade which tends to be an easy target for a popular, gimmicky nostalgia. Instead they have been offered as visual evidence of a very particular landscape, and of how children situated themselves in that landscape. Sontag (1999, 4) asserts that photographs ‘provide most of the knowledge people have about the look of the past and the reach of the present’: those examined here provide us with the knowledge of what these estates looked like in their time but, more significantly still, they testify to the presence of children there, and to how these places gave them a significant amount of space and freedom to shape their environment to their own needs through autonomous playful activity. If they were not quite places for children, they were child-centred in the hope of fostering children’s well-being as future agents for a model of social democracy.

As such, the photographs of The Precinct ‘reach’ to us now in a very different way, reminding us of a world when local authority-built housing estates were still viewed as being socially beneficial. Today, children and families are no longer afforded any such concern. Architecture and planning today serves a different ideology, of private spaces, individual autonomy and choice, at the expense of the common good. Sadly, children ‘no longer signify communal values and ideas about life, happiness or human potentiality’ (Kozlovsky 2013, 250). Indeed, Britain is currently experiencing a housing shortage so acute that almost 120,000 children currently live in temporary accommodation – a situation that, to many, can only be
properly alleviated if we start building council homes again (Foster 2017). When the photographs of The Precinct were taken, local authorities were building upwards of 150,000 homes to rent per year (Hanley 2007, 100). In 2015-16, that figure struggled to reach 1500 (Local Government Association 2016, 13). If nothing else, these photographs sharply remind us of a nearly-lost world that needs to be urgently revisited.

References