

Junk Playgrounds. The “Anti-Aesthetics” of Play in Post-World War II Playground Design

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Junk Aesthetics. The “Anti-Aesthetic” Qualities of Play.

In his influential book from 1938, *Homo Ludens*, the Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga investigates the relation between play and human culture from the archaic period until the nineteenth century. He highlights conditions of play in various aspects of human culture, both in the culture of everyday living, such as the way humans dress, as well as in cultural production or activities, such as visual arts, music and sports. According to Huizinga, the aesthetic influence of play in the various forms of cultural production relies on the fact that play offends “seriousness” and deconstructs serious and established aesthetic values. The main result of play, according to Huizinga, is that it breaks down the determinism that defines our understanding of reality. He stresses the role that play holds in deconstructing established conceptions of reality in the various eras and fields of human culture:

“Play only becomes possible, thinkable and understandable when an influx of mind breaks down the absolute determinism of the cosmos. [...] We play and know that we play, so we must be more than merely rational beings, for play is irrational.”¹

Huizinga also believes that play challenges moral values, making it anti-deterministic and, by extension, an activity that opposes “seriousness” and morality. Play for Huizinga is “the direct opposite of seriousness”² and for that it is not based on fixed values, neither does it reproduce established moral values, because, as he highlights, when an action possesses an “ethical value it ceases to be play.”³ What makes Huizinga’s approach interesting to this article is that, firstly, he highlights for the first time the historical value of play and that, secondly, he argues that, historically, play acts as an equilibrium that tilts between frivolity and reason according to each era. He characteristically argues that after the French Revolution and the Enlightenment it was reason and the ethical stance that gained purpose instead of play. Especially the nineteenth century can be considered the main part of human history where play has the least influence in human culture. Huizinga argues about the nineteenth century that: “Never had an age taken itself with more portentous seriousness” and that this is an era where “Culture ceased to be ‘played’.”⁴

Based on Huizinga’s theory, the play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith also investigates the historical significance of play. Sutton-Smith however goes a step further to link play with imagination and art and, in this way, he links play with aesthetics in a historical context. According to him, play was for the first time understood as an essential human activity, instead of a secondary part of human life, during the Romantic Movement at the end of the eighteenth century. It was during that era that play was directly linked with an aesthetic function, even though still with

1 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-element in Culture* (Beacon Press: Boston, 1955), 3.

2 Ibid., 5.

3 Ibid., 210.

4 Ibid., 192.

a moral content: “By making play essential to the aesthetic, and by attributing moral power to the aesthetic, play was potentially dignified for the first time in Western civilization.”⁵ Sutton-Smith describes how Enlightenment created the idea that imagination possesses a central role in human psyche, while the eighteenth century that followed helped the idea to grow until it became a central concept in understanding human motives. This is the main reason why most Romantic thinkers — such as Coleridge, Blake, Schelling and Shelley — based their work on the catalytic power of imagination over the diversity that was created by the Enlightenment.⁶ More than that, Sutton-Smith argues that during Romanticism imagination became such an important concept that, eventually, it took in people’s conscience the place of the soul. The elimination of the importance of soul as a metaphysical entity due to the belief in scientific reason during the Enlightenment created an empty place that was then occupied by imagination as the right substitute during Romanticism.⁷ Even the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, one of the most influential thinkers of the Enlightenment, stresses the importance of imagination in the formation of the hypothesis, the elusive and unpredicted factor that is able to intermediate between the sensory knowledge and the formal reason, as a mental skill for judgment, linking in this way aesthetics and reason.⁸ Despite the introduction of imagination as a central concept, Enlightenment, however, still failed to understand the central role of play, while Romanticism, in many cases, continued to attribute to play a moral function. Kant and Schiller, among others, did not see in play distinct forms or categories, but only accepted “high” and “low” forms of play, that is, play that has a moral value and play that is immoral.⁹ On the one hand, they consider playful imagination as a form of an “aesthetic intuition,” but, at the same time, they attribute to it a “central moral function, thus neglecting many kinds of play phenomena as irrational or mere play.”¹⁰ The relation between play and aesthetics is then reduced to mere aestheticization. Romantic thinkers, such as Schiller, idealized play, by aestheticizing it, with the support of ancient Greek case studies, such as that of the Olympic Games. This idealization resulted in a rejection of other forms of play, that could be more “messy”, that did not comply with an accepted sense of aesthetic or beauty, or that were “useless” for the development of the spirit. The same idea about play, as a necessary conveyor of intuition and elusiveness, but not of frivolity and messiness, that is, its understanding as a moral laboratory, also passed on to the main educational theories that were developed during the nineteenth century. The German educator Friedrich Froebel, who influenced education theories until the late nineteenth century, highlighted the importance of imagination and, by extension, of play, as a main function of a child’s education. Froebel’s view, however, is also an idealization, and eventually aestheticization, of play. For Froebel the forms of play that do not promote a “moral” function are rejected.¹¹ The historical dimension that Huizinga and Sutton-Smith have established in the investigation of the role of play in post-Enlightenment societies shows, firstly, that play is understood in relation with imagination and, secondly, that its main role is to reproduce a moral function such as combining knowledge with reason. This highlights that up to the nineteenth century forms of play that do not bear a moral value are considered inferior forms of human activity. Aesthetically, play is considered up to the twentieth century, the elusive and unpredicted part that is needed in order to produce new knowledge about the

5 Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 129.

6 *Ibid.*, 130.

7 *Ibid.*

8 About that connection Sutton-Smith argues: “Immanuel Kant stipulated that it was the imagination that mediated between sensory knowledge and formal reasoning. It was the imaginative faculty that provided the hypothesizing without which science would be impossible.” *Ibid.*, 131.

9 Sutton-Smith further argues that Kant, Schiller and other thinkers established a “distinction between the higher kinds of play, such as imagination, and the lower and more nonsensical or crude kinds, most of which they termed ‘mere play’.” *Ibid.*, 132.

10 *Ibid.*, 131.

11 As Sutton-Smith notes in the case of Froebel: “Dark play is not put down as it is by Schiller, it is just rejected.” *Ibid.*, 132.

world, however it must comply with a higher mental function. Frivolous, messy or useless forms of play are considered ugly and are rejected.

The French theorist Roger Caillois, in his book *Man, Play and Games*, published twenty years after *Homo Ludens*, uses Huizinga's research on the cultural influence of play as a base of his investigation in the several categories of play. The contribution of Caillois' research, however, is that it does not stay on the cultural role of play, or the placement of play in a historical context, but goes a step further than Huizinga, to distinguish different categories of play and their distinct characteristics. Beyond the generically deconstructive role of play, as discussed by Huizinga, Caillois builds a diverse list of categories of play, that includes even the ones that could be considered irrational, non-useful or anti-aesthetic. In contrast to the thinkers who, up to the nineteenth century, define play as either moral or non-moral, Caillois investigates a range of forms of play, by discussing, until then untouched notions, such as that of "waste": "Play is an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill."¹² Caillois's contribution is decisive in the philosophy and theory of play, because, for the first time, he overcomes the binary approach of moral / non-moral in the understanding of play and, in its place, he introduces a typological understanding that also accepts dark or irrational sides of thought and imagination as forms of play. With Caillois, play becomes an autonomous category with its own aesthetic function. With the typological approach Caillois revolutionizes our understanding of play, by highlighting that, regardless of its relation to common sense, the useful or the valuable, any kind of play is important, because it performs a distinct need of the individual player, the team of players, and, by extension, the society. The distinction between Huizinga's historicist approach and Caillois' typological approach is also indicative of a social transition from the nineteenth century to the twentieth century, with the threshold of this transition being the first half of the twentieth century. Huizinga and Caillois represent two different worlds: the first lives and works in the era that precedes World War II, publishing his influential book in 1938, while the latter develops most of his work after the war, contributing in this way to the post-war criticism to modernism as a political project and being part of the post-war humanist approach.

In contrast to the pre-twentieth century theorists who relate play with more poetic functions and who understand it only as a catalyst of inspiration in scientific thinking, theory during the twentieth century accepts that human imagination related with frivolous, dark or even monstrous sides of thought is still a form of imagination and can equally contribute to playful engagement with the world.¹³ This new conception of play follows a different direction from the one that only accepts playful behavior when this is useful and morally valuable. This new condition forms an anti-idealization, and, by extension, an anti-aestheticization, which understands that play which is ugly, deformed, or against a common sense of aesthetic, can be contradicting established values and, yet, it can be still considered play without any doubt. This approach helps us understand that forms of play that do not idealize and do not aestheticize imagination and which do not promote ideals of higher beauty or moral value should also be subjects of research regarding the social role of play. Sutton-Smith argues how, in their plays, children often invent stories that portray "a world of great flux, anarchy and disaster."¹⁴ These ugly or destructive forms of play should however not be mistaken for an anti-social condition or a behavioral problem. They should rather be considered as a necessary part of child psychology that has been suppressed by our Western belief in rationality.¹⁵ This release of play from moral burdens has opened up play to countless possibilities. One of these possibilities is to relate suppressed forms of play with counter-aesthetics and what our Western culture define as ugliness.

In his book *On Ugliness*, the Italian literary critic Umberto Eco investigates the ugly as a distinct category of aesthetics. Eco highlights the fact that while history and theory of aesthetics mainly

¹² Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games* (University of Illinois Press: Chicago, 2001), 6.

¹³ Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, 132.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

discuss different expressions of beauty, there is no mention about ugliness as part of aesthetic theory. Moreover, ugliness, whenever it appears as reference: “most of the times was defined as the opposite of beauty.”¹⁶ Eco observes that the understanding of ugliness as the opposite of beauty means that aesthetics is historically perceived as an entity that has both a positive and a negative aspect. While there is a prevailing aesthetic, there is also an anti-aesthetic, and that is why the opposite of what is commonly understood as aesthetically appealing, can be called “anti-aesthetic.” Eco also discusses the moral aspect of aesthetics, by arguing that in the history of aesthetics the beautiful was many times identified with a specific existential model or a moral character. Nietzsche, for example, talks about an anthropocentric beauty, while Tomas Aquinas identifies beauty with integrity, and Plato identifies beauty with specific moral rules.¹⁷ According to Eco, the German philosopher Karl Rosenkrantz constructs such “an analogy between ugliness and moral evil” when he argues that, “Just as evil and sin are the opposites of good, whose hell they represent, so is ugliness the ‘hell of beauty’.”¹⁸ What Eco’s research offers to the discussion about the definition of the anti-aesthetic is that he argues for an “autonomy” of ugliness.¹⁹ The understanding of ugliness as an autonomous, distinct category of aesthetics renders the ugly a far more rich and diverse category than it would be, if only considered the opposite of the beautiful. Anti-aesthetics, then, should be considered as more than the opposite of aesthetics. It should rather be understood as a distinct aesthetic category, with its own autonomy. Eco argues that in his struggle to define the specific anti-moral characteristics of ugliness Rosenkrantz, offers a meticulous and quite detailed investigation in the distinct characteristics and qualities of ugliness and anti-aesthetics. In this way he offers involuntarily an important help in the understanding of ugliness and, by extension, in the definition of the anti-aesthetic category, as a rich and complicated, autonomous category of aesthetics:

“Rosenkrantz performs a meticulous analysis of ugliness in nature, spiritual ugliness, ugliness in art (and the various farms of artistic incorrectness), the absence of form, asymmetry, disharmony, disfigurement and deformation (the wretched, the vile, the banal, the fortuitous and the arbitrary, the gross), the various forms of the repugnant (the ungainly, death and the void, the horrendous, the vacuous, the sickening, the felonious, the spectral, the demonic, the witchlike and the satanic). Too much to allow us carry on saying that ugliness is merely the opposite of beauty understood as harmony, proportion, or integrity.”²⁰

The anti-aesthetic, in the way that Eco discusses it as an autonomous category and not as a counter-category of conventional aesthetics, contains many qualities that have been neglected or excluded from the mainstream, dominant readings of what is the aesthetic. If seen as an autonomous category, it opens up many possibilities also in understanding activities, social or cultural phenomena that have been neglected from dominant patterns of activities. Play is such an activity that has been divided in socially accepted and socially rejected forms. As the example of Caillois shows, the first half of the twentieth century defines a transition in the understanding of play as a more complex and autonomous category of social activity, while the end of World War II forms a milestone in this transition. The aim of this article is to investigate the actual architectural and urban ideas that emerged along this transition, as well as unfold the thinking that lies behind these ideas. While the method to approach this transition is by following the turn of the architectural thinking from a pre-war pro-Modernist understanding to a post-war understanding that critically challenged modernism. Post-war architectural theory was critical of the Manichaeism of modernism and its inability to accept the complexity of human societies that was often accused even as anti-humanist. Play was used in many ways as a tool to lead this anti-Manichaeist and anti-authoritarian criticism to modernism.

16 Umberto Eco, *On Ugliness* (London: Harvill Secker, 2017), 8.

17 *Ibid.*, 15.

18 *Ibid.*, 16.

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Ibid.*

Junk Sites. Playground Design and the Anti-aesthetics.

The acknowledging of play as an activity that can be ugly, or that is linked with ugly spaces took place mainly in the western cities in the aftermath of World War II. The shock of the war changed the architectural community and redirected its priorities. This change reflects on the differentiation in the agenda between pre-war and post-war discussions in architectural forums, such as that of the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM). The outcome of the 1933 CIAM 4 that takes place in a pre-war world focuses on resolving urban problems through the meticulous programming of space. In the Athens Charter, the document reflecting the proceedings of the conference, published in 1943, activities such as play, recreation, exercise are considered part of the same homogenous category and put under the umbrella term "leisure activities." The Charter specifically refers to the need of urbanism to define "weekly hours of leisure time"²¹ and relates this need with the demand for the assignment of specific spaces, separated from other activities, that would secure healthy outdoor-space qualities, dedicated exclusively to leisure without mixing with other urban activities, such as living, working or transportation. The Charter relates leisure with the modernist ideal for a hygienic living that promotes wellbeing and freshness and contact with nature and clearly distinguishes leisure from unhealthy environments or activities. CIAM 6 on the other hand, the first post-war conference held in 1947, although it does not yet totally reject the modernist ideals, asks for a "more humane" modernism. The members of the conference refer to a more humanitarian architecture that should be the focus of architecture and urban design, while they shift from the modernist ideal of the healthy and spiritual man, to the need for a "simple man" and the satisfaction of his/her sentimental needs, rather than of any abstract moral demands. The MARS team specifically highlights the need to perform research in the social context for each project instead of universalizing and reproducing abstract prototypes. During this conference the focus of all participants is on the different ways that architecture and urbanism can help the post-war reconstruction of the cities.²² During the same conference play appears for the first time in architecture discussions as an autonomous brief in architectural and urban design, not necessarily linked with other priorities as a secondary companion, such as for example with that of education.

The "neighborhood playground" in the form of an open-air meeting place for the children and adults of the local communities, as we see it today in many European cities, did not exist in pre-war Europe. Play spaces had appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century in some European countries, such as the UK, Germany and France, but they were few in number and many of them took the form of a club with limited access, or with a strict educational orientation.²³ Although play was mentioned as an important part of a child's mental development, it was thought to be an activity that should be guided and programmed. In the pre-World War II period, play was considered important only as an educational tool. The post-war conditions, however, created a social need for a purpose-built and neighborhood-scale site for children to play. Post-war reconstruction is linked with the evolution of the playground design and, by extension, to the change and re-consideration of the role of play and contribution to social changes.

The city was still suffering the long-term results of war in the form of a large number of ruined buildings, vacant lots and gaps in the urban fabric. The increasing number of children and the existence of many ruinous sites in many European cities found an unprogrammed equilibrium: children spontaneously found their way to the "bombsites" or "junk sites" as places that were available and that offered countless possibilities for play. These sites lacked specific uses and provided a lot of raw material for informal play or even for setting up temporary constructions. Post-war children's need for places of free play, as an activity distinct from education, formed a new understanding of the post-war "play-grounds" as opposed to the pre-war "play-clubs." The

21 Le Corbusier, *The Athens Charter* (New York: Grossman, 1973), 69.

22 Annie Pedret, *Team 10: An Archival History* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 52-53.

23 Mara Gutman and Ning De Coninck-Smith (eds.), *Designing Modern Childhoods: History, Space, and the Material Culture of Children – An International Reader* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 5.



Fig. 1. Lollard junk playground in post-war London

Fig. 2. Carl Theodor Sørensen, Emdrup playground, Copenhagen. Drawing, 1943 (opposite page, up)

Fig. 3. Carl Theodor Sørensen, Emdrup playground, Copenhagen (opposite page, down)

new playgrounds were dedicated to play and respected play as an autonomous children's activity. They were open air, easily accessible and offered numerous possibilities to the imagination. The observation of the self-evolving phenomenon inspired many post-war architects and landscape designers, while at the same time triggered discussion among educators and social scientists who were looking for new paradigms for educational innovation. (Fig. 1)

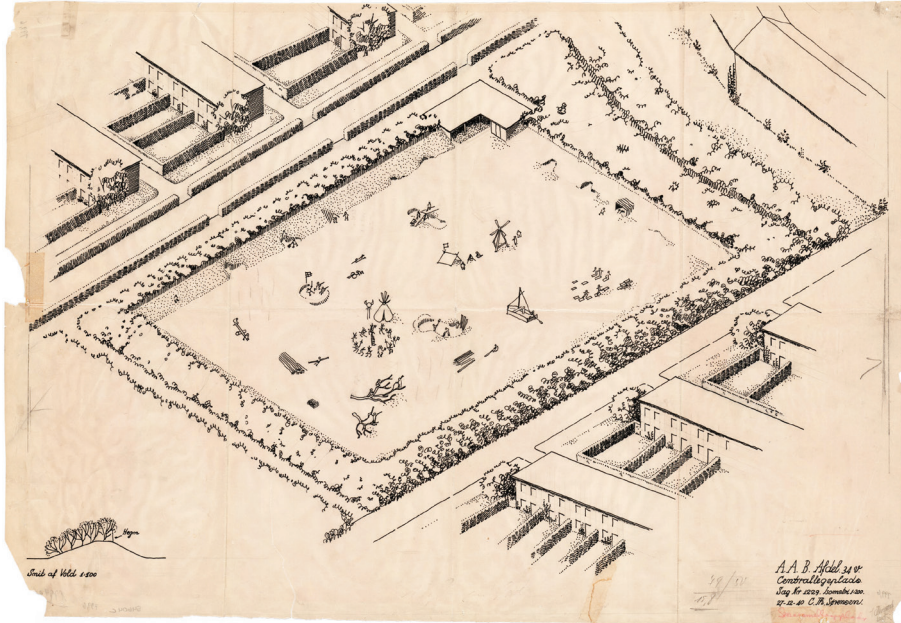
The idea of using the bombsites for playgrounds was first developed by the Danish landscape architect Carl Theodor Sørensen. According to the Israeli historian Roy Kozlovsky,²⁴ Sørensen introduced the idea about using junkyards and leftover sites for play from as early as 1931.²⁵ He later had the opportunity to test his idea by designing an actual playground at Emdrup in the outskirts of Copenhagen in 1943, during the German occupation of Denmark. (Fig. 2) Sørensen came up with the idea by observing the free play of children in junkyards and bombsites and their imaginative use of disposed objects found on site. By observing children's unofficial play in bombed sites, he was convinced that the playgrounds should incorporate debris, waste objects, and junk and favor construction and destruction as equally important forms of play.²⁶ He called this the "junk playground," thereby highlighting the use of junk objects found on site as an important part of the playground. He believed that such a playground could promote an anti-aesthetic²⁷ as an important quality linked with free play. Sørensen, with his junk playgrounds, introduced the idea that play should not be a didactic activity that consumes established aesthetic values. Instead, play could be anti-aesthetic and, consequently, it could take place in anti-aesthetic places, such as junkyards and other leftover sites. It is remarkable how Sørensen, who was a landscape designer, and not a philosopher, managed to link the idea of free play that had been a subject of discussion since the eighteenth century, with environments with counter-aesthetic qualities, while, at the same time, he led the post-war necessity to find or even

24 Roy Kozlovsky, "Adventure Playgrounds and Postwar Reconstruction," in *Designing Modern Childhoods*, eds. M. Gutman and N. De Coninck-Smith, 6.

25 *Ibid.*, 175.

26 *Ibid.*, 176.

27 Gutman and De Coninck-Smith (eds.), *Designing Modern Childhoods*, 7.



invent places for play by using very practical, plain, as-found means. As a result, his case can be defined as a characteristic paradigm of a use of architecture and urban design as means for an unorthodox contribution to the post-war reconstruction: he did not provide “beautiful” and “hygienic” playgrounds to the post-war children; he did not propose new beautiful and strong structures at the place of the war ruins, but, reading the children’s sentimental needs, he provided to them some “ugly”, “dirty”, “junk” spaces filled with just ruins and debris. (Fig. 3)

The British landscape architect Lady Allen of Hurtwood²⁸ was the next after Sørensen to become involved in the idea of the junk playground. Lady Allen, beyond her career as a landscape architect, was also an active supporter of the rights of children and promoted the importance of free play as a means for the development of children in contrast to a structured, didactic form of play. At the time, this was a radical idea. In 1946, she had the chance to visit the Emdrup playground. She was instantly impressed by the idea that Sørensen introduced with his playground and she enthusiastically presented it in the UK. In 1946, she published an essay entitled *Why Not Use Our Bomb Sites Like This?*²⁹ which promoted the link between the reclaiming of the sites in British cities that were destroyed by war and the idea that children should get off the streets and establish their free play within controllable boundaries. In 1949, six years after the construction of Sørensen's playground, Lady Allen designed and constructed her first playground in Clydesdale, where she took advantage of a junk site and its contents to offer an environment favorable to children's imagination. Her playground was the second to praise the qualities found in a junk site. It was, however, the first playground to raise unintentionally the social controversy of the same idea, since parents and neighbors, linking the junk playground with anti-social behavior and hooliganism, began opposing the initiative. In order to rename the project, Lady Allen introduced the term "adventure playground" as a substitute for the term "junk playground" that had been used up to then. (Fig. 4) The opposition to Lady Allen's playground indicates that the idea of using leftover sites by turning their negative qualities into new uses was not necessarily welcomed by society, as unfavorably received as was also the idea of a play that is free and that takes place in spaces that are considered derelict, dirty and dangerous. After the renaming of her intentions with the more socially acceptable term, Lady Allen continued with more playgrounds between 1948 and 1960, such as those in Camberwell, Morden and Lollard Street in London. The idea became a subject of discussions and conferences, before spreading to other British cities, including Liverpool, Hull, Coventry, Leicester, Leeds, and Bristol, in each case taking advantage of bombsites in the cities.³⁰

Lady Allen's contribution in the development of post-war playgrounds in Europe was twofold. Firstly, she acknowledged the potentiality of the bombsites as a resource for reconstructing British cities, not through building them up, but by taking advantage of their junk qualities and using a small budget. Secondly, as a designer of the playgrounds, she insisted that their construction and maintenance should involve the local community. Due to her efforts in that direction, the playgrounds were built with the contribution of children, parents and other volunteers, and they operated as independent associations formed by the local communities.³¹ Lady Allen was responsible for the construction of ten such playgrounds, most of which were destroyed by the end of 1960s as their sites gained value in the real estate market and were eventually developed for other purposes.

When the Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck was building his first playground at Bertelmanplein in 1947, Amsterdam was actually not the first to take advantage of a bombed site, as the projects by Sørensen and Lady Allen were already built and used. Van Eyck, however, provided a different angle to the discussion about the "junk playgrounds" than that of his predecessors. Although he stood against many aspects of modernism, with his criticism targeting mainly the inhumane aspects of it, Van Eyck was nevertheless in favor of some of its ideals as developed by the arts and sciences in the first half of the twentieth century. In particular he was interested in the abstraction of forms and the domination of geometry, which he used in order to establish a creative relativity in space between two or more contradicting elements. Instead of using the junk qualities and irregularities of the found objects in their raw form, as Sørensen did in his playgrounds, Van Eyck supported the use of simple geometrical forms and objects, such as

28 Marjory Allen, Baroness Allen of Hurtwood.

29 Roy Kozlovsky, "Urban Play, Intimate Space and Postwar Subjectivity," in *Intimate Metropolis*, eds. Vittoria Di Palma et al. (London: Routledge, 2009), 14.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid., 16.



Fig. 4. Collage of stills from a 1971 documentary where Lady Allen presents one of her playgrounds in London

Fig. 5. Herenmarkt playground by Aldo van Eyck. The picture shows playground as it was in 2009, almost unchanged from its original condition in 1954. The sandpit, which appears often in Van Eyck's designs acts as the element that contains all the "messy" activities of children's play and represents an "ugly" condition that, however, triggers creativity



cubes, cylinders, domes and polyhedrons. His playgrounds were also the most successful in terms of the contemporary social impact. Liane Lefaivre and Alexander Tzonis describe how people from other neighborhoods who visited the first playground in Bertelmanplein were surprised by the positive impact it had on local children and how, as a result, they started sending letters asking for the construction of a playground in their own neighborhood. The number of letters from various neighborhoods around Amsterdam grew rapidly and the municipality – following a unique social sensibility – responded by building more playgrounds. As the number of playgrounds expanded, the municipality began to recognize the endeavor as a distinct project under van Eyck's direction. At its peak, the *Playgrounds* project consisted of a network with sites in almost every neighborhood across the wider district of Amsterdam. During the course of 30 years from 1947 until the 1970s Van Eyck had the opportunity to design and build more than 700 playgrounds in the wider metropolitan area of Amsterdam. The playgrounds were not built by the involvement of voluntarily work force from the local community, such as in the case of Sørensen's or Lady Allen's playgrounds, however, the local community was closely involved, as most of the cases were a demand raised from local communities to the municipal authorities and an outcome of negotiations. Also, in many cases, in the making of the playgrounds, there were local artists involved, such as in that of Zeedijk playground where Van Eyck called the Dutch artist Joost van Roojen to curate the painting of the blind walls that surrounded the site. (Fig. 5)

As Van Eyck's playgrounds grew in number and spread across the city, they created their own reality parallel to the common reality of the city, but one which nevertheless seemed to fit naturally into the existing city. Lefaivre and Tzonis note that "Van Eyck's achievement was to transform leftover city sites from 'blind spots' on a city map into what a contemporary and sympathetically inclined architect and urbanist, John Voelcker, called 'an inescapable reality'."³² However, this notion of an "inescapable reality" suggests also a paradox: How did the program of play, which is not usually considered an urgent need for urban planning, and which, furthermore, was hosted in spaces that were neglected by the city, become instead a reality that could not be escaped – a necessary condition?

In his playgrounds, Van Eyck brought together two different, seemingly opposing needs in the city, creating in this way an opportunity. On the one hand, he acknowledged the growing need of children to claim back their role in the post-war city; on the other hand, he perceived the need for all the neglected sites in a post-traumatized city to acquire a new role.³³ Van Eyck merged the two needs and, by this cost-effective solution, he also contributed to the resolution of wider problems, such as the post-war fragmentation of the city, which was the result of the traumas that both society and the built environment had suffered. His contribution to the idea of "junk" play was that he managed all the junk and neglected sites of the city as an entity, a resource and, more than that, a network, that could provide neglected users of the city, such as children, with access to urban infrastructure.

Van Eyck, following the problematization of Sørensen and Lady Allen, was also aware that children tend to be attracted to neglected and even dangerous places in the city. In 1956, van Eyck wrote that the child "discovers its identity against all odds, damaged and damaging in perpetual danger and incidental sunshine. Edged towards the periphery of attention, the child survives an emotional and unproductive quantum."³⁴ This suggests that van Eyck was probably aware of the work of Lady Allen, who, a few years before him, had also argued for the educational

32 John Voelcker was part of the Team 10 and appreciated Van Eyck's work. The specific expression is cited in Liane Lefaivre and Alexander Tzonis, *Aldo van Eyck: Humanist Rebel* (Amsterdam: 010 Publishers, 1999), 17.

33 Van Eyck's perspicacity and his ideals were mainly responsible for the creation of this strategic link. However, as Lefaivre and Tzonis's research shows, the involvement of citizens expressing their demands and the trust that van Eyck's supervisors had in him, as well as the support he was given by the municipal landscape architect, should also be credited for the idea.

34 Francis Strauven, *Aldo van Eyck: The Shape of Relativity* (Amsterdam: Architectura&Natura, 1998), 56.

value of free space and had introduced the adventure playground as a new urban type. Van Eyck however extended the interpretation of what a junk site is, by including also other unwanted or derelict sites, or sites skipping attention, such as traffic islands, canal banks or other sites in-between uses. Van Eyck's playgrounds do not have the "ugly" qualities that the playgrounds made by Sørensen and Lady Allen have. His playgrounds however contribute to the argument about the "counter-aesthetic" of play, because Van Eyck in his playgrounds meticulously avoided the use of "cute" forms of play objects, by rejecting animal-formed objects and by investing in the design of structures and objects that mostly resemble the plane, casual forms and structures of the city. In this way he linked the "anti-aesthetic" approach of playground with his idea about the "indifference" of forms that merge with the urban context and disappear in it.

Counter-Aesthetics as Counter-Modernism.

The evolution of the playgrounds during the first half of the twentieth century, which is described above, takes place in parallel with the social transition from the pre-war to post-war condition. This happens in two different ways: first, this transition can be related with the development of various forms of negotiation with modernism. All the above different cases of playground design can be considered as different kinds of reaction to modernism, which partly adopt and partly reject its values. Kozlovsky touches this issue when he investigates the way in which modernism treated childhood which, as he mentions, resulted in a paradox:

"On the one hand, modernity has conceptualized play as a biologically inherited drive that is spontaneous, pleasurable, and free. It valorized the subjective experience of play as an attribute of the autonomous, individual self. On the other hand, modern societies began to rationalize and shape children's play from the outside to advance social, educational, and political goals."³⁵

Modernism held a specific social agenda in relation to play and childhood that relates with its wider political concerns about order, hygiene and economy. Kozlovsky argues that playgrounds for modernism: "are very much about censoring and restricting types of play deemed undesirable and displacing them from places deemed dangerous or corrupting, such as the street."³⁶ This modernist understanding of play as an activity that has to be rendered safe, hygienic, and eventually, purified, actually makes play an instrument in realizing a specific social and political agenda. This condition of instrumentalization of play is a clear political demand of modernism, expressed even in the most innovative political initiatives of the era, such as the 1959 *Declaration of Rights of the Children*, which describes play as an activity that must comply with educational values, leading as a result to the understanding of play as an instrument of social policy.³⁷

Play aesthetics becomes for modernism a field to exercise its influence on society. Kozlovsky defines two main "schools" in the design of playgrounds, according to the degree of their influence from modernist ideals. On the one hand, he puts the work of Van Eyck and the American-Japanese artist Isamu Noguchi, both of whom believed in the abstract aesthetics of the play objects and the ideal of the playground as a landscape of play. On the other hand, he puts Sørensen who believed in the "functionalist" value of the playground, and promoted the idea that the playground should serve children's play and their imagination, regardless of any aesthetic value and by decreasing the importance of the architectural composition.³⁸ In this view Van Eyck's contribution to playground design complies with the Modernist understanding of the child as an abstract subjectivity that has to be formed, according to predetermined conceptions of self.

³⁵ Kozlovsky, "Adventure Playgrounds," 171.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 176.

The influence of modernist ideals which Kozlovski describes notwithstanding, I argue that this does not necessarily mean that Sørensen's and Lady Allen's view should be considered more critical to Modernist ideals than that of Van Eyck. In the various case studies of playground design that I have discussed above, modernism has been applied either as a pressure or as an influence; the outcome of this pressure or influence however cannot clearly be defined as positive or negative. An example is that of Lady Allen whose attempt to introduce the logic of Sørensen's junk playgrounds in the UK was not always successful, as the local community, influenced by a long Modernist ideal of rational thinking, related "junk" with degrading values.³⁹ In this course Lady Allen had to change her terminology in order to persuade the local community of her project, by adopting, in some cases, even some modernist ideals: at a point she presented her playgrounds as safe heavens that would get children "off the streets." Although this can be considered a win of the modernist ideal of hygiene and economy and the assignment of specific functions to specific spaces (the street is destined to cars, the junk sites are destined to garbage), it can also be considered an opportunity for Lady Allen to adjust the idea that Sørensen developed specifically for Denmark to another context, that of UK with different social and cultural demands. This served the birth of the "Adventure Playground," as an interesting version of the junk playground, and, at the same time, advanced the importance of narrative as a main tool of the activity of play.

Even in the cases of more complicated structures, Van Eyck always avoided the use of representational and figurative forms. He did not want the structures in his playgrounds to look like animals, or to have iconographic or symbolic references to the natural world, which he considered aesthetically simplistic. His structures were intended to provide abstract forms that were not tied to a specific reference or function but were rather to be completed and altered by a child's imagination. They were, as Strauven argues, "elementary, archetypal constructions whose powerful simplicity evoked different associations."⁴⁰ The aim of abstract formalism was the conversion of the child's violent attitude into a creative engagement of imagination by avoiding figurative preconceptions. These elements would

"Offer children the means of discovering things for themselves: the primal, elementary forms, on the other hand, have an urban character and stimulate the imagination. They are not tied down to a particular function, but evoke all kinds of use, including unexpected ones. They offer children the means of discovering things for themselves. The climbing arch, for example, was not just for climbing and other gymnastics. It could be used as a hill to sit on the lookout or to hold a meeting, and even covered with a canvas it could function as a house."⁴¹

This means, I argue, that although Van Eyck did not use raw, ugly primal material in his playgrounds, he actually promoted a different perspective to the "anti-aesthetic" qualities of play by introducing the "messy" interaction with the play structures and their alteration according to children's imagination. Moreover, all these objects, due to their simplicity and stillness, deliberately maintained an urban character that can also be considered an "ugly" formal character. In the city, they could be identified as objects of urban equipment, resembling lamp posts, benches, protection bars, street verges or litterbins. It was Van Eyck's intention to let the play objects be absorbed by the urban fabric and become indifferent urban objects in the consciousness of an everyday resident or visitor. Seen as urban objects, the play objects could be considered somehow crude or ugly, or at least unrefined. Van Eyck uses the modernist ideal of mass production, abstraction and non-representational formalism; he however also resists other Modernist ideals linked with idealization, purification, and distinction. Some of his play objects, such as the sand pit can also be considered highly anti-modern, as they form the most "messy" part of many of his playgrounds and, at the same time, the most central one. The playgrounds become part of the urban context and, the urban context bestows upon them the qualities of irregularity, informality and multi-functionalism, which cannot be considered typically modernist.

39 Ibid., 168.

40 Lefavre and Tzonis, *Aldo van Eyck*, 67.

41 Strauven, *Aldo van Eyck*, 70.

Another way to understand the evolution of the junk playgrounds in relation to the transition of society from a pre-modern to a post-modern condition is in relation to the post-war social and political demand for a catharsis and social reconstruction. Post-war society discovered the potentialities of play as a condition that would promote healing and recovery.⁴² The use of junk playgrounds was the outcome of a humanist discussion that was taking place after the war, and which also interested the CIAM summit of 1955. In the post-war architectural community, there developed an interest in whether children, with all their creativity, could be the agents of change that would lead the regeneration of post-war society. The junk playgrounds were also seen as a social experiment about the capacity of children to produce constructive experiences out of places that in the recent collective unconscious were linked with destruction. The activity of destruction and reconstruction that the junk playground promoted by using play as a catalyst can be considered as a testing ground for the practicing of reconstruction as a wider social practice in the post-war European cities. At the same time, the junk playgrounds in post-war Europe, and the values that they introduced, acted as criticism to the, also Modernist, model of the rational political subject, or the identification of a society with an inspired leader, both related with fascism.⁴³ During the CIAM 6 of 1947 many expressed a criticism to modernism by considering it an ideology that had helped authoritarian regimes to grow during the first half of the twentieth century, even if in an involuntarily mode. Anti-authoritarianism, as a political view, and as an objective of the Junk playgrounds program, was also obvious in the way the playgrounds worked. Sørensen's playground, as well as the other junk playgrounds that followed in Denmark, were always accompanied with the assignment of a person as a "play leader" that would act as a catalyst in the activities in the playground. The play leaders led different policies, based on more or less creative activities, however their intention was always to promote through play a criticism to the authority and the belief in the authenticity of the "leader."⁴⁴ The involvement of a play leader on the other hand shows how, even in this anti-authoritarian idea, play was also considered as a way for practicing social policies. Led by the "play leader", the play in the junk playground was meant to educate, in a liberal and anti-authoritarian way, but still educate.

The contrast to authoritarianism and established values also took the form of a criticism at an aesthetic level. As I have discussed above, Sørensen highlighted the "ugly" character of play as a central characteristic of his playgrounds, which he also used to describe certain aesthetic choices in the playgrounds, mainly related with the use of waste, discarded and junk objects in the constructions that took place in the playgrounds. Sørensen characteristically used the term "anti-aesthetic" in order to describe this "ugliness" as an aesthetic condition. John Bertelsen, Emdrup's first play leader introduced the term "junkology" in order to describe how children's play appropriates objects that are rejected by the common social values of what is considered useful, beautiful and aesthetically appropriate.⁴⁵ The art historian Hal Foster notes that the term anti-aesthetic, as a "negation of art or of representation,"⁴⁶ is actually a modernist invention that

42 Kozlovsky argues about the post-war understanding of the "healing" qualities of play: "More important than the issue of direct influence is the junk playground's role in popularising the regenerative myth of play, through which playgrounds assumed the status of urban theatres for staging a cathartic drama in order to heal the city and its inhabitants from the adverse effects of the violence of war." Kozlovsky, "Urban Play," 206.

43 According to Kozlovsky: "The act of building playgrounds on bombed sites established a correspondence between the narrative of reconstructing the nation and the self, by which marginalized and damaged subjects could integrate themselves into society. Paneth provided an alternative to both the contractual mode of citizenship based on a rational model of the subject and the model of citizenship based on group identification with the nation or the leader, as both models were brought into crisis by the mass appeal of fascism." Kozlovsky, "Adventure Playgrounds", 183.

44 Ibid., 179.

45 Ibid., 168.

46 Hal Foster, "Postmodernism. A Preface," in *The Anti-Aesthetic. Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Washington: Bay Press, 1983), xv.

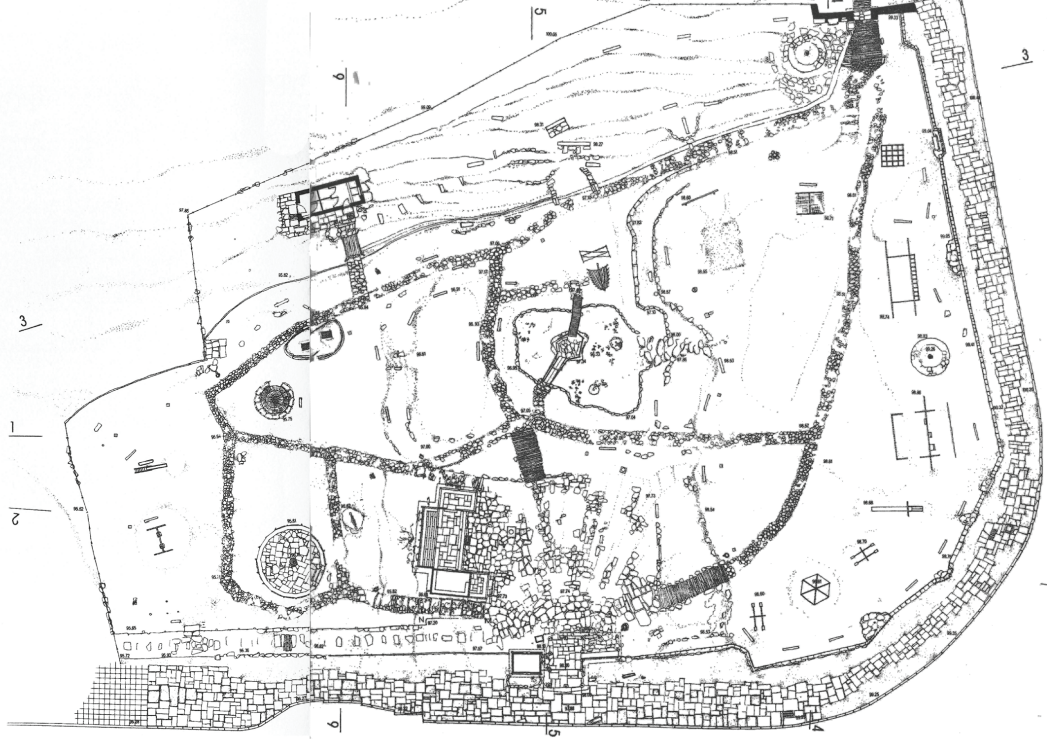


Fig. 6. Dimitris Pikionis, *Playgarden at Philothei*. Plan, hand-drawn by the architect

Fig. 7. Dimitris Pikionis, *Playgarden at Philothei*. The straw hut



introduced a number of negations as part of an emancipatory agenda.⁴⁷ In a way we should be thankful that along its proposal modernism has also offered the chance for the formation of a counter-proposal. Foster sees the anti-aesthetic not as a sign “of a modern nihilism – which so often transgressed the law only to confirm it.” He rather sees the anti-aesthetic as “a critique which de-structures the order of representations in order to reinscribe them.”⁴⁸ He describes how the criticism to the aesthetics acted as a “subversive, a critical interstice in an otherwise instrumental world.”⁴⁹ The discussion about anti-aesthetic should not lead to a negation of aestheticism, but should rather work as criticism and a process of deconstruction of the dominant understanding of aestheticism. This means that a kind of reconstruction is something that could follow the period of criticism and which can adopt qualities and characteristics of this criticism. Within this view of adopting criticism in a process of reconstruction, contemporary architectural and urban design can be seen, as the British architectural critic Kenneth Frampton argues, as more than merely a “culture of reaction” but rather as a “culture of resistance.”⁵⁰

From the “Junk Playground” to the “Adventure Playground”. The Philothei Playground

An example that describes this “culture of resistance” that followed the transitional period of post-war junk playgrounds I consider to be the playground at Philothei by the Greek architect Dimitris Pikionis. This is an example of a playground that does not belong to the immediate post-war period, as it is built between 1961 and 1964. In the early sixties, most western societies already enjoyed established processes of social and urban reconstruction. At the same time, the architectural community developed more complex concepts leading them form a post-war “reaction” to the formation of an agenda of “resistance.” The CIAM 9, which took place in 1953, introduced new discussion subjects, such as that of the “habitat” by denouncing universalizing conditions and relating the condition of urban living with examples from traditional and local communities.⁵¹ As an outcome of this short post-war process, Team X introduced in the agenda new concepts, such as that of the “as found” and the “belonging” or the importance of locality, that we still discuss today.⁵² The specific playground should be considered an important part of this discussion. The construction of the playground was quite interesting as a process, as it was under the daily personal supervision of the architect, involved very few drawings, none of which were construction drawings. The architect had previously drawn a general plan, but in the process, he had used a lot of intuition; subsequently, he relied on hands-on involvement in the construction. (Fig. 6) The playground was built on an irregularly shaped site, close to an existing stream in the district of Philothei in northern Athens. With the use of a short retaining wall, Pikionis divided the site into two height levels, and with the use of a round pathway he arranged the site in two frames, an interior and an exterior one. The part of the site at the right of the entrance was flattened and the architect placed there the most typical play objects: a merry-go-round, a sandpit, a steel structure, a set of swings, and seesaws. Pavlos Kalantzopoulos, a former collaborator with Pikionis, argues, however, that the most important part of the play-garden was the low-level part of the site, to the south of the entrance and within the circular path, where, as he says, “the main part of the story was played”.⁵³ This part of the site is equipped with three main structures: the entrance gate, a sitting kiosk, and a straw hut. (Fig. 7) There are also other structures, such as a tube and an elevated round sitting place, that do not have the form of usual play objects, but which are intended to create play conditions.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid., xvi.

51 Pedret, *Team 10*, 81.

52 Ibid., 124.

53 Pavlos Kalantzopoulos, *Dimitri Pikionis' Play-Garden of Philothei* (Athens: Indiktos publications, 2002), 20.

One of the most important features of this part of the site is the landscape, which is largely designed. An artificial lake with a small pond, a crossed wooden mark and a boat wreck on one side create the impression of a scenography that refers to a myth or a narrative. (Fig. 8) A path guiding through a purpose-planted and arched set of trees to the upper level of the site creates the impression of climbing through a forest. (Fig. 9) The arrangement and the materials of the artificial pathways and patios suggest a walk in an imaginary landscape. Kalantzopoulos argues that none of these objects have any particular relationship with the others, beyond being built out of similar materials, like wood and rock. It is as if each object ignores the existence of the rest; however, together they create a sense of context, a background. The result, as he argues, is “unconstrained and unexpected and perfect, like that of a natural phenomenon.”⁵⁴

Pikionis did not intend to construct a usual playground as a collection of play objects. His playground creates the illusion of a place that has always been there, or that was formed as an outcome of natural processes, time and chance and not as an outcome of human intervention. It is not the separate objects that were the most important, but rather the distinct conditions that the architect had created around them: the shipwreck after a storm, the cross that marks a treasure, a walk through the woods, the ruins of an unknown world. Each condition resembles an episode of a narrative and the result is highly scenographic and theatrical. Pikionis has constructed what he has called a “sentimental topography”, a term that sums up most of his ideas about the mythical origin of the landscape:

“Here, the natural forces, the geometry of earth, the quality of light and ether, define this place as an origin of culture. There, mysterious vapours are exhaled, as if from the earth. [...] This cliff is overwhelming. This cave is the home of mysterious spirits, of supernatural forces. These are the ancient places of worship. [...] In front of the primeval image of the Earth that they hold, the soul accepts a secret shake, like the dowser in the invisible presence of an underground communion wine.”⁵⁵

The play objects and the components of the landscape are made of humble materials, such as wood, straw, bamboo and pieces of stones in irregular sizes and shapes. All look like materials that were found on site or were recycled from other older structures. The objects are placed on site in the form of incomplete entities: the straw hut is not completed; the ship is a wreck, and the ascending rock path is part of an artificial landslide that could have been formed after a strong storm or as a dried riverbed of an ancient river. The intension of the architect was to decrease the impact of the various play-objects and to create, at its place, play conditions that contribute to the creation of a larger play-landscape. The objects themselves lack any formalistic or functional meaning and are ambiguous enough to offer opportunities for different play narratives, created by the imagination of the children. By creating an artificial archaeological landscape, Pikionis’ uses Sørensen’s junk qualities and, at the same time, extends Lady Allen’s idea of the “adventure playground”, while it can also be considered parallel to Van Eyck’s intention to create play landscapes and offer them to the city. The contribution of Pikionis is that he leads the idea of the junk playground a step further, by establishing grotesque opportunities for play that are related with notions such as the chthonic, the “mysterious,” the “supernatural,” the “overwhelming,” while, in order to achieve that, he uses humble materials, such as formations of the soil, rubble, debris, natural elements, such as water and “poor” natural material such as bamboo and straw. While Pikionis is critical of a moralization of play, at the same time he avoids a reactionary, anti-aesthetic intervention. He rather believes that these repulsive qualities, which are closely linked with play, can have their own aesthetic, which is expressed architecturally by the soil, the leftover natural waste, and the informal and incomplete structures that together can form an artificial landscape. Moreover, he promotes the Adventure Playground as an urban type that reserves a distinct place in the urban environment.

54 Kalantzopoulos, *Dimitri Pikionis’ Play-Garden*, 20.

55 Helen Binet, *Dimitris Pikionis 1887–1968: A Sentimental Topography* (London: AA Publications, 2004), 74 (own translation).



Fig. 8. Dimitris Pikionis, *Playgarden at Philothei*. The lake, with the cross

Fig. 9. Dimitris Pikionis, *Playgarden at Philothei*. The climb through the forest

Junkology and Play. The Appropriation of the Waste and the Soil.

It is important to highlight the fact that although the junk or adventure playground survives over the years with a common objective — the engagement of children’s anti-aesthetic qualities of play — these anti-aesthetic qualities are reflected each time in different conditions, materials and techniques. While Sørensen and Lady Allen mostly work with the post-war destruction and debris, Van Eyck works with the idea of abstract, yet indifferent objects that merge with the urban environment, and Pikionis with the formation of a landscape by the use of natural “found” materials. The question that emerges then is what kind of materials, conditions and techniques would reflect a contemporary anti-aesthetic role of play in a junk playground? Could a contemporary aspect of junk playground still offer a different kind of social reconstruction or healing, the way it did for the post-war society?

The British cultural theorist John Scanlan, in his book *On Garbage*⁵⁶ investigates how the junk, the garbage, the discarded objects can be seen as cultural objects, related with the anti-aesthetic view. He extensively discusses how art has diversely used this category of objects taking advantage of their character as waste. Scanlan attempts to define a distinct aesthetic category dedicated to this kind of objects and their cultural significance. Like Eco, Scanlan seeks to define waste as an autonomous category. He discusses the notion of junk as the by-product of mainstream production, in a similar way that Sørensen discussed the junk playground, as a condition that is established on leftover sites, the “by-products” of war or the post-war urban development. Scanlan investigates the “readymade”, the use of objects that are devalued and stripped from any contextual reference in new contexts and discusses it as focus of artistic production during the twentieth century. He investigates the work of Joseph Cornell, Marcel Duchamp and Robert Rauschenberg, who have used junk material in their art detached from

56 John Scanlan, *On Garbage* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005).

their original context and use, in order to highlight the garbage as a residue, a by-product of the process of creating commodity during the twentieth century. Scanlan investigates how these artistic objects are not only non-aesthetic, but removed from their context, from affinities of time and space, from use and eventually from any kind of value. As Scanlan argues:

“If the utility of objects signified the extent to which industrial society had attempted to make the material world more responsive to need, to make the stuff of the world more functional or efficient, Duchamp theoretically inverted the relation. With the readymade, any evaluative – and thus aesthetic – context was denied not only because the objects were ‘non-aesthetic’, but also because they were often removed from any contextually given reference points; from associations of time and place that give all objects a functional definition, and thus from any cultural or social conditions that normally made things recognizable.”⁵⁷

The ready-mades in visual arts as introduced by Duchamp and Rauschenberg express a criticism to the industrial society as a production of waste. The objects in Rauschenberg’s work are stripped of any aesthetic value and also of any value of use, of association of time and place and any functional definition. They are eventually stripped of any social and cultural recognizability. In order to explain this process Scanlan uses the term “refinement” as a process that refines a raw material and, as he mentions, results both in a useful product, as well as an unwanted, excessive by-product (the garbage). Industrial society has treated childhood and education as an object to refinement and they have also treated play in the same manner, as a by-product of education that either has to be suppressed or become “useful” and didactic by transmitting social values to children. Scanlan argues:

“A reanimation of garbage takes place as the consequence of a world of increasing specificity, a world of refinement, in which we see a necessary residue in excess matter, which is removed from the valuable sphere of economic production. Cast aside like the lacquer that would accrue formlessly as a by-product of the marvellous technology that once etched a world of sound into the grooves of a piece of plastic, such visible remainders nonetheless stand as the evidence that something else is going on besides the conventional uses materials and products are put to.”⁵⁸

The incorporation of these kinds of materials in his art resulted in an anti-aesthetic process. According to Scanlan the use of garbage as a base of artistic production meant the use of devalued objects which, due to their “lack of worth” helped Rauschenberg to avoid “the difficult question of suggesting a relationship between the object and the world through either stylistic conventions or representationalism.”⁵⁹ The lack of stylistic conventions acted for the artistic production as a relief, placing it very close to the category of play, while the search for “evidence that something else is going on” with these objects, beyond their conventional uses, as Scanlan argues, opened to the artists a wide range of possibilities.

The idea of the “unconventional use” of objects, as discussed by Scanlan, can also be described as “informal use.” The British academic Louis Rice, extensively discusses the concept of “informal space”, as a side category, or anti-category of contemporary urban space. He argues that informal space is a distinctive category of urban space that is defined by a series of specific characteristics. First, it is not owned by those who use it; second, its possible use is not designated by its owners or designers; and third, its use is usually temporary. According to Rice, an informal use can be, in some cases, even illegal. However, this illegality can also be meaningful as a resistance to socio-economic factors that devalue the presence of free spaces in the city, such as raising land prices, aggressive developments of areas, and eviction of users from other parts of the city. The characteristics of the informal space in many ways resembles that of the junk space, while in others also specializes the concept of junk space, by adding more qualities, that in the time of Sørensen were not considered, such as that of its temporality, or its possible illegality.

57 Ibid., 108.

58 Ibid., 99.

59 Ibid., 107.

Rice however goes on further than Sørensen as he defines the specific qualities of these spaces focusing on their material qualities. According to Rice, informal sites have certain physical characteristics that render them distinguishable from other spaces that participate formally in the network of public spaces in a city. He argues that informal spaces contain soil in its most original form. This kind of original – albeit not necessarily pure – soil serves in such spaces as a base for the production of small ecosystems that are closer to original forms of nature. Soil, according to Rice, can be seen as an informal type of ground, one that cannot be controlled and which provides a rich base for growing and sustaining original ecosystems. In addition to soil, informal sites also contain weeds and other forms of self-determined and self-grown nature that can be classified as informal, as it is unwanted and uncontrollable. His research on the materiality of informal sites concludes in the term “dirt”, which he uses to describe the totality of the other physical characteristics of informal space: “Dirt is a metaphor for: pollution, weeds, impurity, contamination, and waste; it is also: soil, nature and bio-diversity. [...] Dirt produces and is produced through the physical and material world of deterioration, decay and dilapidation.”⁶⁰

Rice points to how the characteristics of informal sites – soil, nature and dirt – serve as the qualifying factors of these sites, defining the way they are used by the people, as well as the special contribution they can make to the life of cities. Similarly, to Scanlan’s conception of waste, Rice’s informal sites talk about the idea of “waste space” that can be experienced outside dominant aesthetic conventions. Likewise, to Scanlan’s view the lack of aesthetic conventions related with the appreciation of dirt, weed and other informal forms of nature in the city can act as a relief and can provide a rich play environment. Informal sites, like Scanlan’s discarded objects can provide “evidence that something else is going on” with these spaces beyond their conventional uses. This can also open a wide range of possibilities for the playful use of these spaces, and the perspective for the production (by children playing) of unconventional knowledge about urgent contemporary subjects, such as that of biodiversity, sustainability and the autonomy of nature.

By looking at the examples of Sørensen, Lady Allen, Van Eyck and eventually Pikionis we can follow an evolution of the Junk playground in the course of three decades, from the first post-war years until the 1960s. The rapidly changing conditions during this short period in the recent history of the Western societies is reflected on the different ways that these examples contribute to the typology of the Junk playground. While Sørensen focuses on the use of post-war “rubble” as play opportunities, Lady Allen introduces the importance of risk as a factor in play, Van Eyck turns the interest to the city and the urban environment while eventually Pikionis relates play with an artificial landscape. At the same time this course shows the evolution in the relation between play and aesthetics: from the use of anti-aesthetics as an opportunity to react to authoritarianism, to the invention of a distinct category of aesthetics, related with specific materials. Along this course either as an anti-aesthetic or as a distinct new aesthetic, play is recurrently related with the same materials — junk, garbage, rubble, debris, dirt, soil — while play structures and play objects retain similar aesthetic qualities: informality, incompleteness, abstraction, looseness. Contemporary ideas about what the anti-aesthetic can mean today should include the appropriation of waste, dirt and soil and enrich Sørensen’s idea about junkology as a practice for appropriating materials, conditions and structures that are rejected by society. The incorporation of materials such as the garbage, as the by-product of consumption, and the soil, as the subject that today suffers contamination and overuse may form what we can call the new anti-aesthetics of rejection. The research into the relation between anti-aesthetics and play may then contribute in this way to the discussion about the recovery from an environmental trauma and the reconstruction of a more sustainable future for our cities. Play can again retain a central role in a new era of reconstruction.

⁶⁰ Louis Rice, “The production of informal space: A case study of an urban community garden in England” (PhD diss., University of the West of England, 2015), 86; available at <http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/25191>, last accessed March 2017.

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