

Introduction: City Kids

James Wunsch

In the call for papers for this issue, we presumed that the streets once alive with the sound of boys and girls playing, had become—except for the din of traffic—very quiet. The kids? Inside, hunched over video.



Get some fresh air. Go outside and play!

Glancing at the little girl above, we may be inclined to hand wringing. Whether focused on the screen or confined to school, she is likely to be over-programmed and overprotected. She has no understanding of what it means to

live in a real neighborhood. She will never get to Sesame Street. Denied the freedom to come and go as she pleases, to deal with boredom, to make up games or to take risks, she may become—as some experts suggest—neurotic or worse.

The contributors to this issue say—not so fast! Generations of youngsters have faced and continue to face war, famine and other horrors. Is it not possible then that they may yet be able to deal with Xbox, Angry Birds, and the social media? Their imagination and resilience may yet prevail.

Victoria Yakovlyeva puts the matter in perspective. Her interviews concern the disrupted perestroika generation, which grew up in Ukraine confronting hardships and shortages of food and other necessities. These children lost friends to emigration, heroin and disease. Chernobyl spewed radioactive particles into the atmosphere. Yet Yakovlyeva reminds us that kids can push public misfortune to the “edge of experience and memory.” From her recorded recollections of Ukrainian childhood, we see that joy and friendship can flourish even on a dreary Soviet playground.

In secure and privileged Western Europe, children face the challenge of prosperity. Jeroen Vermeulen focuses on Utrecht, and other Dutch cities where, despite the lure of video and home entertainment, kids fashion their own games in neighborhood streets and playgrounds. In the end he points to those anarchic skateboarders who manage to claim public space, bringing sterile and pretentious office plazas to life.

Aaron Breetwor’s photos also show fascination with kids’ ability to claim public space whether it’s the subway, a crowded park or pristine lakefront. Breetwor seems to have caught his subjects in repose, but he suggests that the child is like a cat getting ready to pounce into yet another adult domain.

What happens when children move into public spaces? In “Block Party,” Van G. Garrett, an American middle school teacher, and the British illustrator, Daryl Gannon, with their “clipped language and bug eyed” point of view offer a kid’s perspective on an imagined street full of color, motion and line. In Keisha Gaye Anderson’s “Anthurium” a child is immersed in joyful domesticity (granny’s house in Kingston?) with its curtsied ladies, shimmy pink hips, the hum of the Singer sewing machine, the scent and color of anthurium, aloe and begonias. Is the wheelbarrow boy’s street cry—“callaloo! callaloo!” an invitation to venture beyond cozy confines? Anderson has brought to life up an old-fashioned place “before the urban sprawl became a rambling sore.”

What then of the child plugged into the ear-buds all the daylong who may never hear “callaloo” or even plain quiet? A doomed generation? In “Public Art with Kids” Blagovesta Momchedjikova reminds us that these critters are full of sass and spunk. And for Douglas Birgfeld, a little boy hurling sharp edged rocks against each other to send off a shower of sparks becomes the new Prometheus, bringing fire and light to humankind.

We hope you will enjoy this special “City Kids” edition of *Streetnotes*. Here’s hoping that bug eyed and curious, you too will walk around the block with a renewed sense of wonder.

About the editor

James Wunsch is a Professor of Historical Studies at the State University of New York's Empire State College.