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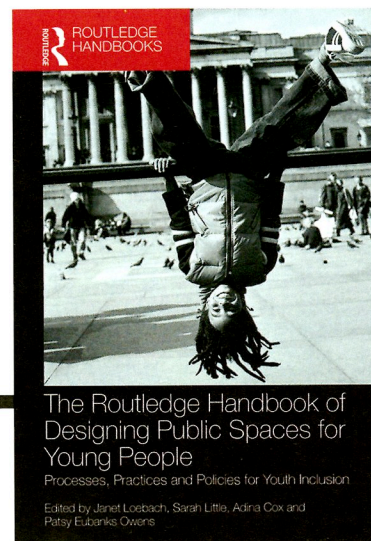


ALL THE YOUTH WE CANNOT SEE

THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF DESIGNING PUBLIC SPACES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE: PROCESSES, PRACTICES, AND POLICIES FOR YOUTH INCLUSION

**EDITED BY JANET LOEBACH, SARAH LITTLE, ADINA COX, AND
PATSY EUBANKS OWENS; LONDON AND NEW YORK: ROUTLEDGE, 2020;
448 PAGES, \$250 HARDBACK/\$47.65 E-BOOK.**

REVIEWED BY LISA CASEY, ASLA



Connecting children to public space outdoors had a watershed moment, a clarion call, in 2005 when Richard Louv published his now classic *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*. A journalist with a gift for storytelling, Louv was able to take the facts of the disturbingly shrinking time that young people spend outdoors and wrap it in a way that sparked the imagination of parents, educators, and child advocates everywhere. Although landscape architects, planners, and environmental psychologists have observed, studied, and discussed these trends for decades, his clarity at a key inflection point opened a movement like that of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* or Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*.

However, there is something of an unspoken assumption around the original research and Louv's framework in saying that the previous generation had better access to nature. Some did, as in the enthralling story that Kathryn Aalto shares in *The Natural World of Winnie-the-Pooh* of the eight-year-old A. A. Milne with his 10-year-old brother going on a long, unaccompanied ramble through the English countryside in the 1890s. Milne was the son of a progressive school headmaster and certainly had an exceptional childhood with such independence. Many of his contemporaries, at least half within the United States, were

already in the workforce by age 14 according to the historian Robert Gordon. Young girls of the same age were in a different but no less dreary position of unending drudgery at home. The image of the carefree youth, which Mark Twain so eloquently captured in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* during this era, is ultimately one of privilege. In the early 20th century, fortunate boys living without the unending chores of a farm or factory hours in the city had more leisure time to explore the woods and streams. "The country road with barefoot boys, dogs, and fishing poles was an important part of early twentieth century small-town iconography," notes Gordon, quoting Sinclair Lewis. The iconic youth in small towns was in various ways an elite group. How many prior generations of children of color and girls were never in Louv's proverbial woods in the first place?

The editors of *The Routledge Handbook of Designing Public Spaces for Young People* focus on providing access and voice specifically to these groups of marginalized young people. Access, in particular, has been a central topic in the research and at conferences. There has also been increasing discussion around social justice. However, empowering voices within the process is a newer concept that brings a different set of challenges to the committed professional.



Personally, it has been a moment of realization. After more than a decade of professional practice with an emphasis on parks across Texas, I am aware of how few projects receive meaningful public input. Out of the subset of projects that I have overseen with public engagement and a client committed to listening, why wasn't engaging disadvantaged voices a priority? *The Routledge Handbook of Designing Public Spaces for Young People* provides inspiration for how the profession's overall approach to public engagement can improve and include more empowered young voices in the process.

The roots of the *Handbook* within the Children, Youth & Environment Network, which is a forum of like-minded researchers through the nonprofit Environmental Design Research Association, show in its academic tone and tendency toward planning and environmental psychology. With 31 chapters and more than three dozen authors, and only a third having ties to landscape architecture, there is a surprising harmony from the diverse chorus of voices around the topic. The use of terminology and concepts is remarkably consistent throughout the text. Callouts provided in one chapter are reliably referenced in other chapters. A few of the chapters do not match the quality of the others, but the miss is not by a wide margin. Kudos belong to the editors who brought this level of organization and discipline to a small army of contributors from across the globe. The editors wrote each section's introduction and some

work matters, explains how to create inclusive public spaces, and closes with what projects look like as case studies. The first two sections conclude each chapter with bulleted takeaways so that the practitioner or advocate can easily synthesize the information into talking points for a city official, client, or other decision maker.

The opening chapters dispel the fallacy that young people cannot benefit from meaningfully engaging in planning and design conversations for public spaces. In his essay titled "Why Is It Important to Provide Child- and Youth-Friendly Streets?" the urban planner Juan Torres notes that childhood is often contrasted to adulthood with an emphasis on the obvious deficits such as awareness, skill, and experience that make young people fundamentally vulnerable. This framework underscores how children should be sheltered and often is bundled with statements that children are the future, which implies that their relevance and meaning is delayed until maturity. This approach silences their present contributions, thoughts, and needs. Torres proposes framing "childhood as a development process in which the moral obligation of the adults is not so much to protect the children, but to do everything in their power so they no longer need adult protection."

The reason that their voices are so critical surfaces in the foundational arguments presented by one of the book's editors, Patsy Eubanks Owens, ASLA, in "A Fundamental Need: Linking Youth Development to the Public Realm." Her research distills two psychological models of youth development into four categories of tasks that youth must complete to attain healthy and functional adulthood. The overlay of these tasks across various built environments

ABOVE

Young people are more likely to have freedom to explore as a group and with the family dog.

BELOW

Through persistent youth advocacy, the city constructed a safer route to school in Vacaville, California.



available to youth makes plain that public space is a key environment for developing these skill sets. Young people need opportunities in unstructured spaces to grow into adults. While society is put off or even afraid of groups of young people passing time in an open space, Owens emphasizes that they are doing essential work for growing up. She also includes an in-depth dive into the history and myths around deviant youth behavior that fuel the more discriminatory practices of city officials and decision makers.

Other barriers to access include adult perception of risk, which media coverage of kidnappings in the 1970s and 1980s inflamed even as the number of actual incidents was concurrently dropping. As the editor Adina Cox, a postdoctoral researcher in landscape architecture, identifies in "Freedom to Flourish," adults are expected to supervise at all times. Traffic and speeds have increased over the past several decades. Streets are wider and unwelcoming to pedestrians. Larger houses with smaller families where all adults work are situated in less dense areas with fewer destinations than used to exist in the ideal small town with a close-knit community. These new barriers, coupled with the rise of entertainment and technology that have largely captured youths' attention, have decreased the amount of time young people spend outdoors independently. The words of a fourth grader who said "I like to play indoors better, 'cause that's where all the electrical outlets are" in the opening of *Last Child in the Woods* is just as relevant and chilling as it was more than a decade ago.

If it is valuable and equitable for young people to access public space independently of adults, what tools must be in place to create a genuinely inclusive public input pro-

cess? In their chapter, "Engaging Racially and Ethnically Marginalized Youth as Stakeholders of Outdoor Public Environments," Mariela Fernandez, Brandon Harris, and Ka-

trina Black provide frameworks to illustrate that the youth must lead the process to avoid well-intended adult manipulation, but adults must stay involved to provide support at key junctures. In "The Rocky Hill Trail," the Vacaville REACH Youth Coalition advocated tirelessly over four years for the city to construct a short concrete trail to replace an unsafe dirt path that connected their neighborhood to the local school. Their effort was successful when coupled with the support of a local city planner and the program's coordinator to navigate the convoluted municipal process.

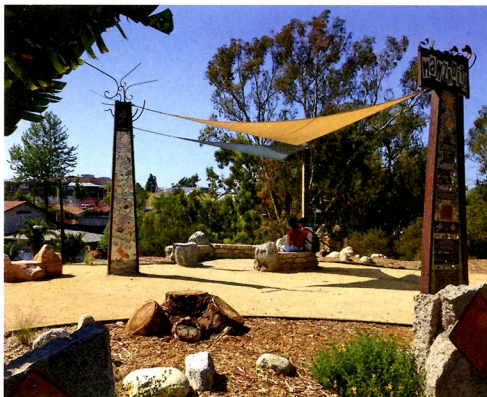
The intersection of political power and the fragile vulnerability of frequently marginalized voices of young people reveals a delicate challenge. Linda Corkery, International ASLA, and Kate Bishop cite research that in the United States, most youth master plans, which purport to include young people as

TOP

A student workshop steered the final design of the Manzanita Gathering Place in San Diego.

BOTTOM

The nonprofit London Play supports temporary street closures that allow young people space to play.



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—JUAN TORRES

stakeholders in the community, are led by community leaders for young people and never find their way to municipal planners or decision makers. In extricating lessons learned from a discontinued steering committee made up of young people in Denver, the eminent environmental psychologist Louise Chawla discusses how the city shut down efforts of the young people to identify youth-friendly businesses because of a concern that businesses would oppose it. With these lessons in hand, Chawla and her team now lead a highly successful collaboration with the City of Boulder, Colorado, in which young people provide meaningful guidance to city officials and employees on planning and design work. Her revelatory look at the partnerships, funding mechanisms, and dynamics required to make this effort succeed offers a useful blueprint for others with similar ambitions.

A foundation of new and old methodologies rounds out the *Handbook*, and it is geared more for the academic audience. Several chapters reflect approaches that seem dated or have been covered better in other literature. However, three chapters stand out as brilliant advances of research addressing new needs and shifting paradigms. Zahedus Sadat's "Fluid Inquiry" begins with the observation that young people are inherently difficult to observe with traditional research methods because of their sensitivity to society's discrimination against them in public places. He then employs innovative research techniques to better understand how they use public space for skateboarding and Pokémon GO. In "How to Use Big Data for Youth Inclusion," Ben Shirtcliff gives a thoughtful methodology for capturing the information shared by young people through social media to understand their relationships to place. And in "How to Integrate Photovoice and Multiple Participatory Methods," Yohei Kato and Amina Charania illustrate how photovoice, a process in which participants narrate their experience through photography, is

a tool that every landscape architect should understand and consider to amplify the voices of the disadvantaged during a planning process.

During the keynote for ASLA's 2016 annual conference in New Orleans, Bill Johnson, FASLA, noted the deep disconnect between planning and design. Unfortunately, this book illustrates that such a divide still exists today. Most of the examples in this book comprise planning efforts with a smaller subset of built work. The role of the practicing landscape architect is sometimes passive and limited to drawing up plans under the direction of others. However, in "The Manzanita Gathering Place," Ilisa Goldman, ASLA, (with whom I worked on ASLA's Children's Outdoor Environments Professional Practice Network) stands out as a landscape architect who led both the collaboration and design/build processes. It would have been encouraging to see more stories of landscape architects filling similar roles for this type of work included.



LEFT
Growing Up Boulder facilitated young people creating a child-friendly city map.

Cultural shifts have an inherent complexity and often seem improbable until they build momentum. While pragmatic about failure, the *Handbook* is essentially hopeful. Speaking truth to power and empowering the marginalized are not trivial tasks, but ones that require the finesse and suite of skills for which landscape architects, planners, and environmental psychologists are fully trained. Some case studies, such as the creation of a play street culture in London, show how play and independent mobility can be increased. The methodologies, tools, and case studies are the guidance and inspiration that leaders and professionals need to support disadvantaged young voices today and to build inclusive public spaces now. ●

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