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## Fox Palaces: the playful occupation of a Johannesburg city park

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the playful occupation of an inner-city park in Johannesburg, South Africa, by the Hummingbird Play Association. Playful occupation emerged as a strategy to create and demand spaces for children's play, demonstrating through practice the possibilities for public play provision. Children's play is read as a form of folklore, through which children's and adult's spatial experiences and imaginings of the city can be viewed. It considers how opportunities for play facilitated with Playwork Principles in mind can co-create safe spaces for children which could act as tools for social transformation and justice in the urban public realm.

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... lived moments of playfulness ... both resisted adult intentions and gave rise to a hope that temporarily made life better. (Russell 2013, ii)

On a Saturday afternoon in March 2015, in a small park in inner-city Johannesburg, something unusual happened. A sea of dens appeared, then disappeared; constructed from palm fronds, bamboo sticks and fluttering material, adorned with hand-drawn signs declaring that these were 'Fox Palaces'. They stood in ephemeral contrast to the skyscrapers and towers of the skyline looming behind, a testament to the passing of a lived moment of playfulness.

This paper explores the playful occupation of a park in the South African city of Johannesburg, by a community group focused on improving opportunities for play in the city. It should be noted from the outset that the reflections of this piece are based on the observations and reflections of a community group, as residents and users of a local park, including the author's own children, rather than the result of a piece of research or case study. The insights offered indicate that more formal research on play and public space, and the intersection of these with the lives of children and adults in the South African context would be welcome.

With this caveat in mind, we ask how play might be used as a tool for social transformation of urban public spaces; to radically rethink what a safe space for children might be? Safe spaces here attend not only to the physical environment and 'right to play', but also the potential transformation of the wider social context in which play occurs, enabling a qualitatively different engagement with the space of the city. Safe play spaces are shown to be closely linked to issues of spatial justice, moving definitions beyond physical safety. Safe spaces to play in Johannesburg should not be confined to shopping malls or private property, indeed, this splintering of space and people generates profoundly unsafe regimes of inequality. The politics of occupying a space highlights how place and space are not the background to people's lives, but an integrated part of how they live (and play). Playful occupation here both creates *and* demands safe spaces for children's play to be an integral part of the public realm.



### Contextualising safe spaces and play in Johannesburg

Johannesburg's roots are firmly planted in the extraction of wealth, emerging as a 'gold-rush town' in 1886, on one of the world's richest gold-bearing reefs. It developed as a place of work, where the struggle to control and discipline labour has been bound up with the regulation of leisure time, and concurrent racialised impositions on the development of communities (Crush and Ambler 1992; Van Onselen 2001). The play opportunities available in the city's public and private spaces and how this might connect to issues of spatial and social justice are largely uncharted terrain. Johannesburg's spatial politics more generally have been subject to academic scrutiny such as Mbembe and Nuttall's (2008) application of the ideas of Lefebvre's (1991) representational or lived space, as resistance to oppressive practices and structures. This paper begins to extend this analysis into the realm of play, considering how the lived spaces of playing in a public park create possibilities for shifts in how city life is experienced by its inhabitants.

Johannesburg is home to a diverse range of populations and highly differentiated spaces. This does not make it unique amongst cities, but the violence of spatial organisation along racial lines during apartheid has left a legacy of extreme inequality in the distribution of resources and services. As planners and builders attempt to create the conditions for a 'World Class African City', the tensions between market-driven growth and demands for social and spatial justice, to facilitate healthy social reproduction, are ever-apparent (Murray 2008). Children's play opportunities and facilities sit amongst these tensions and spatial legacies, reflecting the heterogenous nature of the city. They range from neglected swing, slide and see-saw configurations in urban parks strewn with broken glass, to well-equipped private indoor soft play experiences, beautifully appointed playgrounds in affluent areas and staffed play facilities in shopping malls. There are the stark contrasts of the private play worlds of suburban children, conducted behind walls and within gated communities, and the street play of more economically disadvantaged communities. The few remaining wild, natural spaces are perceived as dangerous and it is extremely rare to see children playing in these with adults, let alone unaccompanied. While the larger well-maintained city parks are popular, their use is also plagued with concerns about security and safety.

The marked decline in the amount of free play time available to children despite evidence of its value to cognitive development is an acknowledged feature of industrialised nations, including urban

South Africa (Brown 1998; Louv 2005; Zygmunt-Fillwalk and Bilello 2005; Gill 2007; Ginsburg 2007; Whitebread et al. 2009; Gray 2013). Though there have been shifts in education policy that recognise the importance of play in Early Childhood Development (ECD) (particularly in the current re-working of the national ECD framework), play remains marginalised in discussions about childhood and social and spatial justice in South Africa. Play is commonly viewed as a distraction to formal education, rather than a key part of it. For example, reports on the crisis facing South African education do not mention play at all (Modisaotsile 2012; Ogunyemi and Ragpot 2015). Play is addressed in the *National Plan of Action for Children in South Africa 2012–2017*, most notably for the scope of this paper, ‘to ensure that each community has safe and well-kept play areas for children’ (RSA 2012, 59). However, what constitutes a safe play area is not sufficiently defined and official data tracking such play indicators are not available in the public domain. One attempt to meet this objective is the roll-out of around 200 ‘Isibindi Safe Parks’, driven by the National Association of Child Care Workers (NACCW), which provide supervised play with a focus on rural and underserved areas (Mathews et al. 2014, 83). This provision is grounded in child and youth care theory, but the ‘structured play’ it offers is indicative of a limited understanding of play and the possibilities of play provision in South Africa, which are both under-researched topics. Some inroads have begun in reflecting on children’s experiences of the city (Kruger and Chawla 2002), but these do not pull focus on play specifically.

In these discussions about the value of play, play is problematically located as an activity that is desirable because of its power to produce ideal future citizens. Concerns about play, and childhood itself, become repositories for adult hopes and anxieties about an uncertain future (Katz 2008, 2011). Play cannot exist simply for its own sake, but must be in service to some greater purpose. The well-intentioned siphoning of play into the production of ideal future consumer-producers negates play’s central role in sociality at all stages of the life course; that it exists for its own sake as an essential part of human interaction and becoming (Hamayon 2016). When play is read like this, it can be seen as a messy, even wasteful, practice with liberatory qualities, engaging bodies, space and materials in interactions that offer a counter-narrative to the logic of industrial-capitalist cities and subjects.

### The Hummingbird Play Association

The Hummingbird Play Association was founded in 2013 by the authors. We are both South Africans who spent substantial parts of our childhood and early adulthood in London, and were influenced by our experiences, as users of, and playworkers in, London’s multi-cultural community-based Adventure Playgrounds; as well as academic researchers in anthropology and social policy. In 2014 we were joined by a third member, a South African music teacher and activist with experience in the local public and private education system.

The organisation from its inception was entangled in issues relating to the neo-liberal production of space, and how this intersects with children’s right to the city. Initially registered as the Hummingbird Children’s Centre, we aimed to provide free and subsidised ECD services emphasising child-led play and nature-based learning. Location on a public site was crucial. We attempted to lease a defunct bowling club in the suburb of Observatory from the Johannesburg Property Company (JPC); a firm mandated to manage the City of Johannesburg’s public property. While our application was initially viewed favourably, it became mired in delays. After an 18-month period, JPC informed us that a ‘Highest and Best Use Assessment’ was needed. Requests for details on this process, the methodology, rationale and who mandated it were denied. JPC claimed that as a private company it was not required to disclose this information, despite its mandate to manage public property.

Processes like ‘Highest and Best Use Assessments’ privilege the use of public land for income-generating activities. Another disused bowling club that we had expressed interest in but had already gone to tender was eventually developed into a high-end farmer’s market. Thus, a particular kind of community which has the resources to engage in commercial activities is afforded privileged access to bringing neglected public buildings and space back into use. The space that we had hoped to acquire, like so many of Johannesburg’s publicly owned buildings, still remains out of

public use. The disappointment of the JPC application mobilised us to 'talk less and play more'. As the process dragged on, we drew away from ECD provision and refocused on providing play services to a wider range of ages, with the eventual aim of establishing South Africa's first Adventure Playground. Inspired by the origins of Adventure Playgrounds in post-war UK (Kozlovsky 2007), grass-roots community interventions in public space in the 1970s (Ward 1978) and the long-established mobile playgrounds of Berlin-based group Spielwagen (Johnson 2010), Hummingbird's 'pop-up + play' sessions occupied streets and parks, introducing ideas about loose parts (open-ended 'junk' or recycled play materials) and adventure play into Johannesburg's public spaces; reconfiguring them as playscapes that do not need specific play equipment and are not defined by clear boundaries, shaping the landscape to encourage play and interaction. Events were rarely advertised in advance and were, without fail, wildly popular, consistently attracting between 40 and 60 children. The opportunity to appropriate familiar public spaces, inhabiting them in novel ways, was eagerly taken up by the children in the areas we worked in. Meanwhile, we continued our efforts to secure a permanent site that would allow the communities being formed around pop-ups to have a more secure base.

### A playful occupation

After two years on the merry-go-round of site applications with the City of Johannesburg, Hummingbird's pop-up + play sessions became increasingly related to issues around spatial justice and children's right to the city. Play sessions had been held in various areas, but David Webster Park, in the eastern inner-city suburb of Troyeville, home to one of the founding members, became the site of the majority of pop-up + play sessions.

Troyeville is one of the Johannesburg's oldest areas that was zoned as 'whites only' during apartheid, well known for its Portuguese community. Its proximity to the so-called grey zones of the CBD however, lent it a more multi-racial character than other areas of Johannesburg, which, coupled with cheap rents, also made it a hub for artists and creatives. Since 1994, the area has become more pan-African with immigrants from across the Continent, as well as parts of Asia, moving in. But with these transient and somewhat fragile communities the area has become increasingly run-down, a victim of 'redlining' by major banks in the decade leading up to the regeneration boom in neighbouring Maboneng and Doornfontein. Given its proximity to these developments it seems almost inevitable that Troyeville will be next to gentrify, but its longstanding idiosyncratic character suggests this won't happen easily or overnight.

The park, named after anti-apartheid activist David Webster, has been the focus of incremental improvement works over the last decade, with the building of a conventional playground, skateboarding area, sports facilities and a community centre. However, access to the facilities is limited to schools and clubs, many coming from as far as Soweto, to use the facilities. Local children may not 'drop in' without an institutional affiliation. The playground, though well-used, does not offer opportunities for the kinds of loose parts and imaginative play offered by the adventure play or junk playground model. The site of the park upon which we held pop-up + play events was located on its western side, an undeveloped area edged with picnic tables. The ground here is covered with broken glass due to the frequency of public drinking and ensuing fighting. As little cleaning up is done by the municipality, a sense of neglect, and danger, pervades the space, augmenting its reputation as an 'anti-social' place. Yet, in an area of high-density development, it is a rare open green space overlooked by private and social housing blocks, making it easily accessible to local kids.

Efforts to promote the 'right to play' in South Africa are largely top-down interventions, driven by internationally funded NGOs, seeking to implement a play agenda that is concerned with the role of play as a strategy for engaging with 'childhood as accumulation', in which those who are 'left behind' are viewed as waste (Katz 2011). The marketisation of the non-profit sector requires organisations to adopt the language and behaviour of competition and income generation (Eikenberry and Kluver 2004). Hummingbird's temporary interventions offered an alternative to this way of approaching



play provision, and following the success of our initial pop-ups in David Webster Park, the City's Department of Sports and Recreation approached Hummingbird to partner in delivering holiday clubs in the park's community centre. Hummingbird fundraised and facilitated the initial holiday club in September 2013, but the Department's unwillingness to substantially co-fund subsequent clubs saw the end of this partnership.

In 2014, Hummingbird found support from the Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo (JCPZ) to develop an area of the park into an Adventure Playground, a breakthrough in our aim to find a permanent site. Our work had by now attracted the attention of policy-makers and organisations concerned with children, and Hummingbird was profiled by UNICEF South Africa in a special symposium in 2015. We made the decision at this time to re-structure Hummingbird from a non-profit company to a voluntary association, based on the need to contribute to a play movement driven by community participation. Unexpectedly, in March 2015, an existing plan to build a soccer field by the Department of Community Development, on the site we were trying to secure for the Adventure Playground, emerged. JCPZ proposed an alternative space for us in another neighbourhood, not easily accessible to the children and families with whom we had begun building relationships. Moreover, it transpired that our proposed playground would be used to displace an informal settlement that had sprung up on this site. Devastated by the set back, and unwilling to benefit from an eviction process, we decided to hold a final pop-up + play session in David Webster park. The intention was not to protest in the conventional sense, but to demonstrate through the practice of play itself what the park could become given the support of the decision-makers. Children experienced the day as a continuation of the pop-up + play events and holiday clubs they had previously participated in, rather than a protest event. Appropriation of the space is articulated by Purcell's (2002, 103) application of Lefebvre, 'Not only is appropriation the right to occupy already-produced urban space, it is also the right to produce urban space so that it meets the needs of inhabitants'. We set up the session with a plethora of den-making materials, acting out the significance of the space as a 'home' for our work and the kind of play it facilitates. As the session proceeded, a key folkloric element spontaneously arose: the naming of the dens as 'Fox Palaces'.

## Fox Palaces

Inside the magic circle of play, players take liberties with the policies and practices of their societies. They set customary behaviors aside. Inside the circle, they can practice life, parody it, fantasize about it, and even resist it. (Henricks 2011, 225)

Bundles of bamboo sticks, palm leaf cuttings, fabrics, scissors, wire and string were brought to the park to initiate the den-building play session. As much broken glass as possible was picked up within the perimeter of the pop-up. Word spread that we were playing, and about 40 local children, from ages 5–14 years, soon joined in. It was a session charged from the onset with tensions about the right of children to play in public spaces. Despite long-standing discussions with JCPZ, Hummingbird's running of holiday clubs and established use of the park as a public space, we had to contend with challenges from park security who claimed, erroneously, that prior permission was needed for our activity. Once security had been placated, the play session proceeded, under the protective gaze of life-sized angels made by local artist Winston Luthuli.

The space was cordoned off with rope, providing an ideal frame on which to drape fabrics and make enclosed, sheltered spaces for imaginary play. This created a 'magical circle', cleared of the glass and litter that blemishes the park; marking a gentle boundary between the adjacent picnic benches occupied by teenagers and young adults, most of them smoking and underage drinking (also a form of play). The loose parts were unpacked – laid out and offered as gifts, provocations and invitations to play. A makeshift art studio of crayons and scrap paper created from carpet and cardboard marked a central point of the space. There were eight adults present, three Hummingbird playworkers and the rest of the family and friends accompanying their children. Play opportunities were facilitated using the Playwork Principles (an approach to practice emphasising self-

directed play, discussed in more depth later in this article), so as to maximise children's choice and control of their activity. Some of the adults present, unfamiliar with this approach to self-directed play, were gently coached on how to allow children to experiment and create without offering critical directions. Initially tentative, once the children had had some rudimentary techniques demonstrated, they quickly began improvising their own structures, incorporating them into imaginative narrative play – deconstructing and reconstructing. Within an hour a settlement of dens had sprung up – a counter-city, to the one in whose shadow we played. In line with the aim of playwork, to be low intervention and high response, adults remained available to respond to the children's requests for help; maintaining a culture of respect to enrich the play experience and allowing conflicts to be self-managed, or quickly resolved without violence or exclusion.

The occupation of the space created what Baudrillard (1990) has described as 'Ludic protected space'; where players can live and experiment with representations of social life that have significant communicative potential. The use of this part of the park as a designated play site, for a few fleeting hours, detached the space from its usual point of reference as an open patch of land littered with broken glass at which anti-social drinking, drug taking and displays of aggressive behaviour were commonplace. It momentarily catalysed the adoption of other frames; those in which openness towards a vision of what the park could be used for could be experienced, by both participants and observers. The scope of children's play in this public space is frequently blocked or limited by risks posed by the aforementioned anti-social adult activities, poor maintenance and draconian park security. It is a park that reflects the neglect and mismanagement of public space in low-income neighbourhoods of the city, but it is also only a few streets away from the fashionable Maboneng Precinct, an area of downtown Johannesburg that is in the midst of an intense regeneration programme that has transformed it into a hip global destination. It is within this context of proximity between deprivation and regeneration that we note the emergence of the 'Fox Palace' motif.

The folklore of the 'Fox Palace' arose out of a playful interaction between an adult and child and became a focal point around which meaning and ownership clustered. Precious, a 9-year-old girl, had been working with a playworker on a particularly elaborate and colourful den, of which she felt extremely proud and possessive. The playworker asked her if she wanted to make a sign for it; she was enthusiastic about this and they wondered over to the 'art-studio' where a group of girls were making pastel drawings on brown paper. Asked to make a sign for Precious' den, they asked what its name was, and it was suggested that this should be their decision. They wanted a 'Palace'. Prompted as to what kind of palace it should be, Precious declared that it was a 'Fox Palace'. A fresh 'Fox Palace' sign in bold letters was produced and fixed to the top of the den, at which point Precious requested a photo to be taken of her masterwork. The Fox Palace descriptor then took on a life of its own, spreading like wildfire. 'Fox Palace' signs began proliferating, appearing stuck on other dens or thrust into playworker's hands for approval. We fixed the signs to the roped perimeters of the play space where they fluttered like a row of prayer flags, before being ripped off by the wind. The original 'Fox Palace' was eventually dismantled as the play progressed, and destruction of dens took place in order to create new ones.

Three hours flew by, and the session drew to a close as sunset approached. We dismantled the magic circle and urged children to put down the sticks and grass that had been dens and had now become apparatus for play fights. While another kind of setting could have allowed this development of the play to flow, we were conscious of our earlier hostile encounter with security, and wanted no fodder for complaints. Besides this, the mood in the park was shifting rapidly. A middle-aged man, displaying signs of intoxication, had parked his car in the middle of the street adjacent to the park, blocking traffic. He slumped on the front seat, both front doors open, his sound system turned up to the maximum. The teenagers huddled around pungent 'hubbly bubbles' started playing dodgeball with glass bottles and aggressive skirmishes were breaking out. It was time to go. As we walked away to get something to eat, we realised that we were on Fox St, a major thoroughfare that cuts through the length of the city.

Fox Street (named after Samuel Fox, an early gold prospector) is punctuated on each end with burgeoning private urban regeneration precincts; to the east, the Maboneng Precinct and the latest offering to the west, in Ferreirasdorp, the Sheds@1Fox. The 'old' CBD of Jeppestown (the site of eviction riots and xenophobic violence in 2015) flanks the Maboneng Precinct. This is 'the cradle of Johannesburg', running parallel with the reef of gold that runs from east to west of Johannesburg's present-day city centre. After the 1886 gold rush, the camp established by British allied Colonel Ignatius Ferreira grew rapidly, eventually formalised into the CBD area of Ferreriasdorp (Murray 2008). The city of skyscrapers that grew from the sea of tents was one marked by attempts to control and segregate a diverse population. When influx controls designed to keep the city white began failing in the late 1970s and 1980s, disinvestment in the CBD began, accelerated by 'white flight' and the relocation of the Johannesburg Stock Exchange to the northern suburbs in the period following 1994 and majority rule. After years of decline, the new wave of city regeneration schemes since 2010 have brought significant investment and kudos to inner-city Johannesburg, but have also been described as islands of gentrification surrounded by oceans of urban poverty (Smith 2015). The story of how the city of Johannesburg was made, and is continuing to be made, is one in which makeshift dens become palaces. So too, the sea of dens in our play session become Fox Palaces, constructed in David Webster park against the background of Johannesburg's skyline. Who may occupy space, and how, has been a constant feature of Johannesburg's spatial politics.

Over communal bowls of injera we reflected on the afternoons' den-making and play. Children appeared to have positioned themselves at the heart of the spaces in their community, where the most dramatic transformations are occurring, and have occurred historically, spaces they are largely excluded from, but witness as adult 'den making'. Sandberg (2003) has noted that play memories, associated with children's relationship to their environment, particularly between the ages of 7 and 12, are a critical node around which adult identity is formed. Initial thoughts about the play that occurred during the session, and the labelling of dens as 'Fox Palaces', are that children are developing a place-identity about the neighbourhood they are growing up in that is attuned to the wider developments taking place. Their play suggests synchronicity; a ludic identification with the part of Johannesburg they are located in. An awareness of the dynamics of this world permeates their play.

Elelwani Ramugondo's (2012) exploration of play in the context of rapid social change in South Africa avoids pitching adults and children against each other, approaching them as co-creators of what becomes of play as it evolves across generations. Her analysis can be applied to the dialogical relationship in playwork between adult and child, in which children are steering what of the world they incorporate into their own play, and adults have some sensitivity to children's engagements and mediate where necessary. This seems pertinent in the context of the pop-up + play as playful occupation, and the way in which our adult analysis relied upon an interpretation of the children's play within our own reference points and social critique of processes at work in the city. Acting as adult facilitators, we co-create the meaning attached to the folklore generated by children's engagement with play materials to make our own critique of spatial politics in the area.

## The problem with pop-ups

Harvie (2013, 123), drawing on Hakim Bey's (1991) concept of the 'Temporary Autonomous Zone', articulates the potentials of pop-ups as follows:

Pop-ups hold out a socially micro-utopian potential, making creative interventions that are temporary, tactical, multiple and dispersed – and often deliberately social – in ways that might intervene politically in how people see and experience the world ... temporary sites of activity (or inactivity) which challenge conventional structures and practices and encourage alternatives to emerge.

While the liberatory potential of play is increasingly seized upon in urban discourses (Mariani and Gandolfini 2012), these can mask both the exclusions that exist in regeneration programmes, and the



tensions between investing in the visibility of built infrastructure and the less easily quantifiable services of care. The current vogue for pop-ups is not sufficiently critical of the fragility of interventions which could under more stable conditions offer a more sustainable transformation of social and public space. However, there are tensions implicit in making sites of temporary autonomy permanent, integrating them into systems which require a codification and justification for the practice that undermines the radical repositioning of subjects in space. Many formal Adventure Playgrounds in the UK were originally a kind of pop-up – conceived as temporary interventions to provide safe and free spaces to play – now incorporated into systems that require justification for continued funding in the language of policy-makers that emphasise play and play provision as key to producing future citizens. And yet, as Russell (2011) points out, this tension between needing to talk in the language of policy-makers to secure space, sits alongside lived moments of playfulness that can be, ‘a way of disordering the expectations of more powerful others’. Reflecting on our pop-up session, the beginnings of play fighting with sticks at the end of the session was an example of ‘the space where play resides’ (2011, 15) – a playful moment that resisted adult intentions, including our own as adults concerned with performing the potential of the park to contain children’s activities safely.

While it is necessary to acknowledge the tensions implicit in making spaces for play, our efforts to transform the pop-ups into a permanent site for our activities was an attempt to mitigate the structural violence of the city to make a home for children in its public spaces. The on-going intrusion of ‘more powerful others’ makes it difficult to sustain peripheral positions. In the end, the little patch of broken-glass spiked green, transformed for a few hours into the adventure playground of our dreams, was earmarked for another kind of intervention. Bulldozers arrived a few weeks after and began the work of grading the ground for a soccer pitch. Recreational facilities of this kind are in demand and their provision much appreciated. But they do not fill the gap for safe play provision that is open ended and playful, in a way that organised games are not. The soccer pitches in David Webster park could complement the vision for the permanent adventure playground. The possibility to create a truly vibrant, community-focused safe public space in which the activity of multiple users are facilitated and encouraged is not impossible.

Children are in some respects almost sub-altern (Spivak 1988) in their subjectivity, and the voice we claim to give them is one that is always filtered through our own intent. However, children’s play, supported by a community of engaged adults who are themselves transformed by participating in a space that is for play without a defined purpose, can in the words of Russell give, ‘... rise to a hope that temporarily made life better’. The theoretical underpinnings of playwork as an approach to working with space can help us think about what spatial justice for children in the context of the ‘right to the city’ might look like, even as we acknowledge the limitations of operating in the structural and historical conditions we do.

### Playwork as the production of safe spaces for children

... these spaces were children’s private areas that were not overlooked, and often incorporated wild space, dirt and undergrowth. Increasingly, however, these wild, private areas were becoming less and less accessible to children ... The problem was, how children could access the private, non-adulterated experiences that would enable them to form their own unique view of the world, if the spaces they needed for that were either hazardous, dangerous, or perceived as dangerous. (Hughes 2001, 7)

This quote from Bob Hughes is one of the defining statements on the *raison d’être* of the adventure playground movement and playwork; compensating for the lost wild, natural spaces and producing the spatial conditions whereby children could create their own unadulterated spaces and interact with the elements. From the onset these spaces were seen as anarchic, almost feral and in stark contrast to sterile, static and conventional playgrounds.

Hummingbird has drawn much from playwork as a theoretical framework for understanding play as distinct from educational or therapeutic understandings of play (Hughes 2001), and provision of

supported play spaces as indivisible from issues of spatial justice. It is a practice-led theory developed in the adventure playgrounds of Europe (primarily the UK) over the last 60 years. The Playwork Principles are the set of core ideas that underpin the profession and provide a definition of play – ‘a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated’ (PPSG 2005); and describe the role of the playworker in the play process and the development of play policy, training and education. The official articulation of the playworker’s role is ‘to support all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play’ (PPSG 2005).

It is this emphasis on the production of space that marks playwork out from other play-based practices. In occupational therapy, Bundy et al. (2008) demonstrated how the introduction of loose parts materials into a school playground in Australia changed how children interacted in the space. Teachers reported that children were, ‘more social, creative and resilient when the materials were on the playground’ (Bundy et al. 2008, 5). This work supports the theory that the introduction of loose parts materials into play settings increases playful behaviour. Play becomes more inclusive as activities rely on children’s ability to be creative, so those side lined by games and sports-based play became more assertive and confident in activities. The evidence shows children’s playfulness may be amenable to intervention that does not require costly investment in equipment, ‘... the cost effective nature of the materials and the fact that no structural changes to the playground were involved means that a similar intervention could readily be replicated in any school’ (Bundy et al. 2008, 526). However, the emphasis on institutional space as the site of intervention is where divergence between playwork and occupational therapy occurs. Playwork is more explicitly about interventions in space that significantly alter how non-institutional time and public space is used for play. Acknowledging where convergences and divergences with other approaches assists in developing a practice-based theory that has play at its heart, while extending the argument to show that play interventions must extend beyond institutional or educational settings, to enable radical changes in how public spaces can be experienced.

Informal observations offer some limited insights into the deeper structural issues affecting the commonly identified ‘barriers to play/provision’ that are not sufficiently discussed or addressed in the mainstream play sector. These structural issues are intimately bound up with the production and use of space, the effects of chronic unemployment and overwork. For people trying to break out of the cycle of poverty, play can be seen as an economic waste of time with little value. Alongside this is the increasing commodification of play and leisure, which requires money, thus work. As well as these financial barriers to play, and perceptions of public space as unsafe, we observed another factor around economically marginalised people’s relationship to public space: a deeply entrenched lack of ownership, stemming from experiences of the apartheid city, as a place of work, not of leisure or play. This has not significantly shifted in the post-apartheid period. We noted during our pop-up + play sessions how some of the wider community of adults connected to the children were drawn into the sessions, enquiring about future events, being drawn into the activities, indicating that once the conditions are right, the relationship to public space and interaction can be swiftly reconfigured.

These observations have sparked our interest into further research on the historical and sociological aspects of play and public space in pre-colonial South Africa which offer a glimpse of other kinds of playscapes, such as *Mahundwane* described by Ramugondo (2012, 338).

With some characteristics similar to ‘playing house’, this play form however has very distinct features. It was seasonal, played during winter as maize was being harvested, and livestock could be left alone to roam grazing land. During this time there would be dried maize stalks available to build ‘pretend’ homes. Some crop would be left behind intentionally in the fields so that children could forage, to use as food in their ‘pretend’ households. Much of what happened at Mahundwane mimicked ordinary life, including a political system with chiefs and elders to preside over judicial matters. While children would sleepover at Mahundwane for the whole season in earlier days, this changed with time and children went there everyday from home. It is a play form that appears to have disappeared during the late 1960s.

This is a beautiful description of how adult interventions to create the conditions for play to emerge were part of the fabric of everyday life, before colonialism and apartheid ravaged community

life. Historical accounts of children's play also reveal that work and play were not such distinct concepts; children contributed to the social production of their communities and managed to weave play into these roles (Sibeko and Lesson 2015). We find ourselves in a dynamic period of renewed and intense discourse and activism around decolonising education and urban space in South Africa. Hummingbird's work suggests that play could be a key part of dismantling the dysfunctional, post-colonial/apartheid spatial psychology, which as Shields (2015, 318) suggests has the potential to change, 'the apparently inescapable conditions of late-modern capitalism, which seem to have placed such a stranglehold on political imagination'. Recovering our play history and playing out the trauma of our history is a crucial aspect of this work.

The intersection of play and space in playwork theory is foregrounded in Wendy Russell's interviews with playworkers, where she observed how they 'articulated the purpose of playwork in the language of space' (Russell 2012, 6):

I think we provide a space ... it's an accepted place (Russell 2012);

It's a safe space ... you're seen as being a safe container of that kind of emotion. (Russell 2012, 15)

playwork could empower children to change their own circumstances through giving them power over the space. (Russell 2012, 16)

Adventure playgrounds were gonna save the world! ... By offering children a different life experience, yeah. By making ... by giving them a real place, and a recognised place, and power. (Russell 2012)

The playworkers also felt that these spaces offered 'something children need and value that they cannot get anywhere else'; as the design and organisation of urban space, its 'institutions (including the home/family) were not always supportive of children or their play.' Most interestingly, 'the spaces offered opportunities for the dominant adult-child power relations to be reframed' (Russell 2012, 7) and offered an alternative way of being with children. Playwork produces physical safe spaces which favour more risk, thus inverting conventional notions of health and safety; and emotional safe spaces, providing a sanctuary for freedom of expression, tolerance and acceptance, where messy and difficult emotions may surface. It is interesting to note that the concept of safe spaces in feminist and LGBTQI movements emerged in the 60s and 70s, around the same time as the Adventure Playground movement – all attend to an idea of safe spaces as being not just about physical safety, but emotional safety too.

Literature that positions children as central to play transformations can assume the agency of all children, downplaying the significance of adults in supporting time and space to play, and the significance of the kinds of spaces available for play. The impulse to play freely and in a self-directed manner is a powerful one. Even in contexts in which play is adopted as part of specific learning outcomes or frameworks, children's play can subvert adult intention. Moore (2015) in her study of children's play in a preschool setting, describes the 'secret places' created by children where outdoor space conceived by adults within sound pedagogical principles, is used and experienced by children in a way that is about removing themselves from the adult gaze. While this provides hopeful evidence that the impulse to play is a resilient one, subverting in unexpected ways the constraints placed upon it, it must be read in the context of diminishing safe spaces and time for play, and limited understanding of what constitutes a safe place. Other evidence demonstrates that when space and time to play is diminished, the natural impulse to play is suppressed at great cost to children's mental health. Jarvis, Newman, and Swiniarski's study (2014) on children's mental health and the decreasing access to wild, 'unadult-erated' spaces and free play in the USA and the UK's found a direct correlation between shrinking free play space and adverse mental health outcomes. While more formal research is needed to avoid presuming an extension of this into South African contexts, our observations indicate that providing play services in public spaces could be key to improving children's quality of life in the city of Johannesburg, and generate conditions for building supportive community networks. Children, it seems, do need adults to co-operate in the creation and facilitation of time and space to play. They need them to play along, and they also need adults to leave them alone when the time is right.

## Conclusion

The playful occupation of David Webster Park attempted to enact a performance in which the spatial possibilities of the city were temporarily reconfigured. It also provided a temporary open-access Adventure Playground in which local children could play freely in public city space that is normally coded as unsafe. Play, read as folklore, speculated on children and adult's experiences of the part of the city they are located in. This reading of play through an adult lens can only ever be partial, but it remains a rich site both for imagining social transformation of public space in Johannesburg, and reading the layered meanings and experiences of social life in the city.

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