

Young People and Play in Newham

The Mayor of London is talking to councils about how and where children and young people can play. In a recent document he described some of the key features of what's called *Youth Space* for young Londoners aged 12 and above in new and existing housing developments. We talked with a small group of Newham's young people interested in their local environment and they told us what they think about play, about the Mayor's ideas for *Youth Space* and where and how they spend their free time. Their responses suggest a need to get the right balance between providing the capital's youth with their own play and recreational amenities and finding ways to include them in our public spaces and facilities.

The information presented in this edition of *Soundings* was collected during a day of activities on the theme of play, held at Grassroots Community Centre, West Ham on Saturday 3 March for members of the Architecture Crew and young people interested in joining. The Architecture Crew is a forum for young people aged 13 to 19 to voice their opinions about the regeneration of their homes and neighbourhoods. The group is facilitated by Fundamental Architectural Inclusion.

Why talk about play?

It is generally agreed that safe, stimulating play facilities are essential to children's health, welfare and development. In fact the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child actually states that children and young people have a right to

play and recreation (Article 13). Recently the Mayor of London has become concerned that the 1.6 million children and young people living in the capital, do not have adequate spaces to play, and he has encouraged local councils to work with children and young people to draw up strategies to tackle the problem¹.

Coming up fast behind this initiative, plans for the 2012 Olympics and Paralympics Park are gathering pace. Located in Newham, well known for having a high level of social and economic deprivation, the park has the potential to make a major contribution to play in the capital. Clustered around the site are thought to be some of the borough's poorest households living on low incomes, many of them in flats with little or no access to private outside space.

Your London Plan

Participants were invited to rank the ideas for *Youth Space* as described in the Mayor's guidance to local authorities on play² by placing them on a ladder, with their favourite ideas on the top rung and their least favourite on the bottom. These are some of the views that came out of the activity:

- *Youth Space* should be open to *all at all times*. It should be a place to go to, a place to have fun. It should include a dedicated meeting place and space for outdoor sports and recreation.
- In numbers, 6 in 10 of the young people who took part thought that being open to all at all times was the top priority for a *Youth Space*.
- However, *Youth Space* does not always need to be a separate place with a boundary around it. And many of our participants were happy for these places to have adult supervision.
- Half of our participants wanted a meeting place and the next highest priority was space to play outdoor sports including basketball.

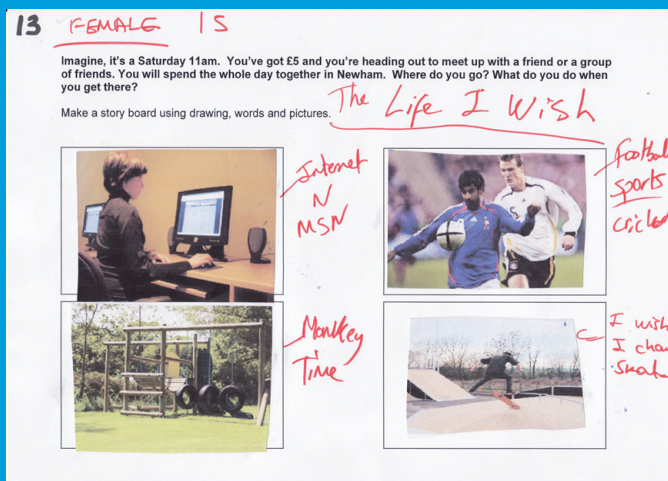
1, 2. Providing for Children and Young People's Play and Informal Recreation: The London Plan (Spatial Development Strategy for Greater London) Draft Supplementary Planning Guidance October 2006

Saturday Storyboards

Participants were invited to fill out a storyboard using photos and their own words and drawings to represent how they might spend a free Saturday in Newham.

Fifteen storyboards were produced, and some of their creators also recorded brief commentaries on what they had produced. A quarter of the 56 photos and drawings used were of specially provided 'play' space, such as playgrounds, parks and sports courts. The rest were commercial premises, public places, such as cafes and arcades, or their homes.

Most of the storyboards represent a fairly normal Saturday or a familiar day out. But a few are about what their creator wishes would happen on a Saturday. For example, one girl said she did nothing on Saturdays and part of her reason was that her local park was unsafe. And two boys wanted to achieve a lot in sport.



"The Life I Wish" is by a 15 year old girl who had this to say about the images she had produced: "The life I wish. Internet and MSN, lots of different sports: football, cricket, basketball etc, monkey time on the climbing frames and something I wish I could do, which is skateboarding. That's the life I wish but in my real life I just sleep all day on Saturdays. [I sleep all day because] especially in the winter it gets dark early and I'm a really active person and there's not stuff around that close. And even stuff like climbing frames that's close it's not that safe to go there and enjoy yourself because there's groups of gangs and drug dealers and my parents won't allow me to go. But [if there was] a safer environment..."



"Mizz Smilez World" is by a 17 year old girl. This is how she described it: "This is Mizz Smiles world. Early in the morning I'll go and ride the bike around the park and that will be roughly seven laps. After that probably I will go to the gym – obviously for fitness – and hopefully go into a dance class. After that I'll go home and listen to loads of music and probably dance to it as well. Later in the afternoon I'll go out and walk around, have some fresh air and probably head into the park. Mizz Smilez world."

About Fundamental

Fundamental Architectural Inclusion is a not for profit organisation based in East London that seeks ways for young people to genuinely participate in the planning and development process of regeneration in their neighbourhoods. The Architecture Crew is facilitated by Fundamental and invites young people aged 13 to 19 to come together and give voice to their views about their local built environment. This is the first forum of its kind in the country and has secured core funding from the Big Lottery Young People's Fund for three years following a highly successful pilot period.

About the project

In March 2007 the Architecture Crew held an open day for members and young people interested in joining. The visitors were invited to take part in a series of drop in activities around the theme of 'play'. The aim was to explore how young people (aged 13 to 19) define 'play' and 'playability' and uncover their experience and views about both dedicated and undedicated play space. Thirty three young people attended the open day and took part in one or more of the activities. The activity, Your London Plan was completed by 25 young people and fifteen participants created their own Saturday storyboards.

The play consultation was carried out with the support of Connexions London East & LB Newham
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