



Living on a building site: Young people's experiences of emerging 'Sustainable Communities' in England [☆]



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines experiences of young people (9–16) who live in new communities that are under construction. In the context of large-scale housing developments, built in England after 2000, it analyses various ways in which young people engage with life 'on a building site'. From ethnographic research in three unfinished communities, several inter-linked themes became apparent: how young people engaged with building sites in both aesthetic and material registers; how building sites could, paradoxically, constitute places for both safer play and of significant risk; how such sites could afford sociability whilst simultaneously representing foci for intergenerational tensions. Thus, the paper contributes to studies of architecture/urban design, geographical studies of childhood, and expands a recent call for critical geographies of construction sites. In particular, we argue for the significance of building sites as important, often-overlooked times and places where meaning-making and everyday routines are fostered and normalised in new communities.

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1. Introduction

The UK New Labour Government (1997–2010) introduced a series of large-scale housing policies to address the need for housing provision in England. Significantly, these were subsumed under the 'Sustainable Communities' agenda, formalised in the *Sustainable Communities Plan* (ODPM, 2003) and later *Sustainable Communities Act* (DCLG, 2007). The Sustainable Communities agenda represented what has been termed a 'holistic' spatial strategy (Raco, 2005, p. 333) in which diverse economic, social and environmental problems would be solved concurrently, through an 'urban renaissance' (Lees, 2003) that would aim to reinvigorate urban places and enhance their economic competitiveness. Subsequent policy documents tied together the master-planning of the urban environment (waste, ecology, water run-off) with architectural quality (setting environmental standards in housing design), managing the urban environment (and 'Cleaner, Safer, Greener' public spaces), citizen engagement and social inclusion (ODPM, 2002, 2003, 2005).

Whilst the *Sustainable Communities Plan* (ODPM, 2003) made provision for the regeneration of extant communities, significant attention was also given to the building of *new* communities. The urban-residential expansion that the Sustainable Communities Growth Plan entailed identified four strategically-located 'Growth Areas' in southeast England. The initial projections were that the four Growth Areas were to receive a total of 1.4 million new homes (IPPR, 2005). The research reported here was carried out in one of these areas, the Milton Keynes-South Midlands Growth Area (MKSM). In MKSM the original projection was of 169,000 homes to be built either as 'sustainable urban extensions' (new communities on the edges of existing urban settlements) or as new independent developments, sometimes termed 'eco-towns' (DCLG, 2009). Commonly, such developments were planned to contain upwards of 1000 new homes, shops, public community services and significant green and/or public spaces.

There has been considerable debate about the relative merits of the Sustainable Communities agenda and the definitions of social and environmental sustainability contained therein (for examples, Raco, 2007; Lees, 2008; Tallon, 2009; Cochrane, 2010). However, other than post-occupancy studies of domestic energy consumption (e.g. Gillot et al., 2009; Stevenson and Rijal, 2010), few studies have considered *residents'* perspectives of everyday life in new Sustainable Communities (for a key exception, see Hadfield-Hill, 2013). In this paper we focus on the experiences of young people, aged 9–16, growing up in new Sustainable Communities. We draw

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on data from a large-scale ethnographic study that investigated the everyday lives of 175 young people living in four different communities in MKSM. From the onset of the research, it was notable that despite over a decade of New Labour rhetoric about youth-policy and participation (Mizen, 2003) the concerns of young people as residents were largely neglected in policy documents and citizen engagement strategies surrounding Sustainable Communities. In the plan, young people are only mentioned four times; although play/playgrounds appear more frequently, it is always in the context of creating 'greener, safer' public spaces that will be more attractive to house-buyers (ODPM, 2003). Since children are, statistically-speaking, the predominant users of outdoor spaces in the UK (Schwartz, 2004), the lack of an explicit commitment to designing urban environments for children appears strange, but persists in subsequent policy and planning discourses relating to community-building in the UK.

As we will go on to show, particular aspects of Sustainable Communities implementation render the experiences of young residents of more than ephemeral concern. For over a decade, on-going building work and unfinished spaces have remained part of the everyday life of residents in our four case-study communities. This is due in part to their large scale; in part to the complex and often slow planning, legal and fiscal processes through which they have been constituted (see below); and in part to the historical timing of their development, which was planned and initiated before the global economic downturn in 2008. The economic constriction of the UK house-building sector – which occurred during our research – subsequently severely affected (and even stalled) the building of the four new communities in which we worked. Thus, the young people who took part in our project had spent a substantial proportion of their lives growing up on or in close proximity of building sites. In this paper, young people's experiences throw important light on the ways in which residents of new communities interact with building sites in the production of social meanings. Simultaneously, as we demonstrate, 'living with building work' entails the emergence of new everyday practices and (disruption to) everyday routines that *matter* to young people's lives (Kraftl and Horton, 2007, 2008; Kraftl, 2013). We argue that building sites offer a peculiar time-space in a community through which struggles over meaning-making are heightened and in which residents – especially young people – engage actively and creatively with the 'messy' materialities of architectural and urban forms.

Within the above contexts, taken together, the five empirical sections of this paper makes three key contributions to extant geographical literatures. Firstly, they exemplify and develops recent, 'nonrepresentational' geographies of childhood and youth (Horton and Kraftl, 2006), by opening out some of the diverse emotional and embodied styles through which young people engage with building sites. The paper pays particular attention to the 'messy' materialities of building sites and the ways in which diggers, dirt and ditches were enrolled into children's emergent feelings of belonging within their communities. Secondly, the paper combines two fields of geographical enquiry that have hitherto tended to be considered apart, despite important theoretical resonances: children's geographies and the geographies of architecture. Despite some exceptions, noted in Section 2, few studies have explored in detail children's engagements with architectural spaces. Thirdly, and most specifically, it offers a significant empirical response to Sage's (2013) recent, important call for greater attention by geographers to the everyday geographies of building sites (although see also Datta and Brickell, 2009). Through in-depth empirical work with construction workers, Sage's argument offers a broadly-conceived agenda for geographies of building sites, via engagement with contemporary construction industries, and the materialities and performativities of building practices. However,

despite a long, if patchy heritage of work on children's play in wastegrounds (reviewed in Section 2), and notwithstanding Sage's (2013) attention to construction professionals, there remain very few studies that examine the experiences of *residents* – including young people – who live on or very near building work. This latter contribution also goes some way to fulfilling the key aim of the broader research project on which this paper was based: to examine the experiences of young residents living in new, 'sustainable' communities in England. In so doing, the paper proceeds as follows. First, we review academic literatures to which this paper contributes, combining social studies of childhood with critical studies of architectural/urban forms. Second, we briefly introduce our research project, design and methodology. Finally, we present ethnographic data produced with young people about their everyday encounters with building sites.

2. Childhood, youth and (disordered) architectural spaces

2.1. Children's geographies in urban contexts

The first context for this paper is a rich seam of social-scientific research (not least in subdisciplinary children's geographies) about children's agency and rights in everyday life, recognising how they deal actively with the complexities and vulnerabilities of their social, cultural and material worlds (Christensen and James, 2008; Kraftl et al., 2012; Pells, 2012). Such acknowledgment of children's agency has afforded important critical analyses of adultist assumptions built-into urban spaces. Thus, an important body of work has been concerned with children's experiences of urban spaces (e.g. Matthews et al., 2000; Christensen and O'Brien, 2003; Karsten, 2005, 2011). For example, pioneering work as part of the 'Growing Up in Cities' longitudinal study gathered a wealth of material about how children experience urban neighbourhoods (e.g. Chawla, 2001) and suggested how researchers and policymakers could work together with children to improve and plan them. Recently, there have been several notable studies of children's lives, agency and im/mobilities in urban spaces (including Nordström, 2009; Karsten, 2011; Skelton and Gough, 2013). More broadly, several studies have illuminated the diversity of children's urban experiences (Gleeson and Sipe, 2006), in contexts such as play.

The present paper builds on the above commitment in childhood and youth studies to foreground children's voice and agency. However, it specifically develops studies of urban-dwelling young people in two key ways. Firstly, through attention to the manifold subtleties of the sensuous experiences, bodily movements and emotions of young people growing up in urban spaces (Christensen and O'Brien, 2003). Thus, childhood scholars have shown how agency is not a given but an 'effect' of alliances involving humans, texts, material artefacts (e.g. Prout, 2005; Kraftl, 2013) and contexts of power, social and intergenerational positioning (Christensen, 2003; Hopkins and Pain, 2007). Within geographical research, a proportion of this work has been positioned within nonrepresentational approaches to children's lives, which foreground embodiment, emotion/affect, everydayness and materiality (for overviews, see Horton and Kraftl, 2006; Colls and Hörschelmann, 2009). Recently, such approaches have been critiqued for obfuscating issues such as power and 'voice' in children's everyday lives (see Mitchell and Elwood, 2012; see Kraftl, 2013, for a response). In this paper, however, we seek to demonstrate that nonrepresentational concerns – such as engagements with the messy materialities of mud and emergent meanings gleaned through play on building sites – need not necessarily be divorced from issues that 'matter' to children (Horton, 2010). Indeed, later in the paper, we articulate how, for instance, children's attempts to welcome new families to their communities are *both* situated in their everyday, banal,

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