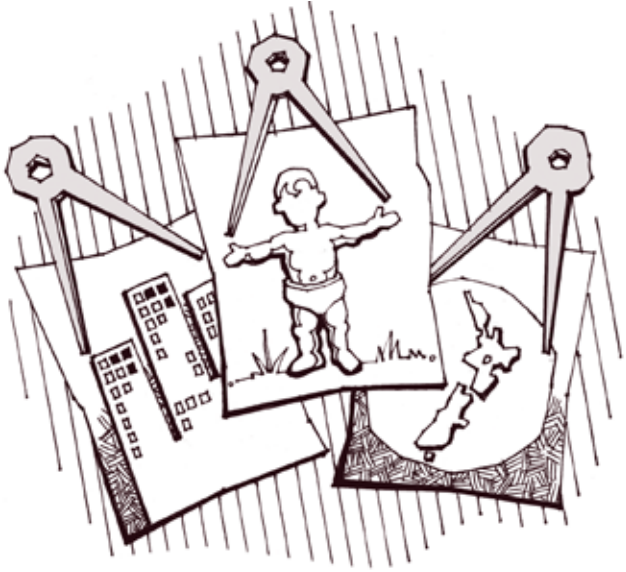

Loving Children:
a design problem

David Orr

Cities like ugly antheaps – a lifestyle which is inhuman. Is it any wonder our children often grow up alienated from the world we have made for them?

The *Skymall* catalogue, conveniently available to bored aeroplane passengers, recently offered an item that spoke volumes about our approach to raising children. For a price of several hundred dollars, parents could order a device that could be attached to a TV set that would control access to the television. Each child would be given a kind of credit card, programmed to limit the hours he or she could watch TV.

The child so disciplined, would presumably benefit by imbibing fewer hours of mind-numbing junk. They might also benefit from the perverse challenge to discover the many exciting and ingenious ways to subvert the technology and the intention behind it, including a flank attack on parental rules and public decency via the internet.

My parents had a rather different approach to the problem. It was the judicious and authoritative use of the word ***no***. It cost nothing. My brother, sister and I knew what it meant and the consequences for ignoring it. Still, I sometimes acted otherwise. It was a way to test the boundaries of freedom and parental love and the relation between the two.

The device approach to parenting is symptomatic of a larger problem – a society absorbed with things, economic growth and self. It is driven by three factors new to parenting in the post-modern world:

- a commercial culture in which we've come to believe that high-tech gadgetry can fix human problems, including teaching discipline and self-control to children.
- parents absent from the home working all hours of the day and night to make ends meet.
- a society that does not love its children competently enough to teach them self-discipline. We have, sheep-like, acquiesced in the design of a society that dilutes the expression of genuine love. The result is a growing mistrust of our children that easily turns to fear and dislike.

Why are the very children that we profess to cherish becoming less than likeable and sometimes less than human? In a recent survey only one-third of adults believed that today's young people "will eventually make this country a better place".

Instead, we find them "rude" and "irresponsible." Often they are. We find them overly materialistic and unconcerned about politics, values, and improving society. Not infrequently they are verbally and physically violent, fully adapted to a society that is saturated with drugs and violence.

Some will argue that every generation believes that its children are going to hell. Eventually, however, things work out. Such views are, I think, fatuous because they ignore the sharp divide imposed between the hyper-consumerism of the post-modern world and the needs of children for extended nurturing, mentoring and imagining.

It is the economy that we love, not our children. The symptoms are all around us. We spend 40 percent less time with our children than we did in 1965. We spend, on average, six hours per week shopping but only 40 minutes playing with our children. Without intending to do so we have created a society that cannot love its children, indeed one in which the expression of real love is increasingly difficult.

The environment we create

No society that loved its children would create places like the typical suburb or shopping mall. No society that loved its children would put them in front of television for four hours each day. No society that loved its children would lace their food, air, water, and soil with thousands of chemicals whose total effect cannot be known. No society that loved its children would build so many prisons and so few parks and schools.

No society that loved its children would divorce them so completely from contact with soils, forests, streams, and wildlife. No society that loved its children would casually destroy real neighbourhoods and communities in order to build even more highways. No society that loved its children would knowingly run even a small risk of future climatic disaster.

We do all of these things in the belief that they are the necessary price of creating a better world for children. But at some level I believe that our children understand that such arguments are phoney. I think this awareness explains what often appears to be their unfocussed anger. Our children often mirror the larger incivility and rudeness that we inflict on them.

Building a world fit for children

What would it mean to make a society that did in fact love all of its children? How do we design a civilisation for children?

The starting point is the child itself and its need for joy, safety, parental love, play and the opportunity to safely explore the wider world. Our minds are rooted as much in the ecology in which our childhood is lived as in our animal instincts.

Paul Shepard once argued that mind and body are imprinted in the most fundamental ways by the "pattern of place" experienced in childhood. For Shepard the conclusion is that children must have the opportunity to "soak in a place" and to "return to that place to ponder the visible substrate of his own personality."

Conversely, the child's sense of connection to the world can be damaged by ecologically impoverished surroundings. And it can be damaged as well by exposure to violence, poverty and even by too much affluence – in other words, when ugliness, both human and ecological, becomes the norm. Ecological design begins with the creation of places in which imagination can flourish. These would be safe urban and rural places that included biological diversity, wildness, flowing water, trees, animals, open fields and room to roam – places in which beauty became the standard.

One consequence of a homogenised and utilitarian landscape is that most young people learn little about how they are provisioned and virtually nothing about better alternatives to meet real human needs. The things we used to do for ourselves as competent citizens and neighbours we now purchase from one corporation or another at a considerable mark-up. It should astonish no one that civility, neighbourliness and communities are in decline and that crime and lawlessness are on the rise. People do not need each other as they once did.

Many children grow up feeling useless. In landscapes organised for convenience, commerce, and crime and subsidised by cheap oil, we have little good work for them to do. Since we really do not need them to do real work, they learn few practical skills and little about responsibility. Their contacts with adults are frequently unsatisfactory.

a child's need for joy, parental love, play – and the opportunity to safely explore the wider world

Rarely do we work with our children. Rarely do we mentor them. We teach them few practical skills. At an early age they are deposited in front of mind-numbing television and later in front of computers. And we are astonished to learn that in large numbers they neither respect adults nor are they equipped with the basic skills and aptitudes necessary to live responsible and productive lives.

What should we be doing?

Part of the solution, I believe, is to rejoin mind and habitat at the landscape level by reconnecting living with livelihood. This can only be done in places where a large part of our needs for shelter, warmth, energy, economic support, health, creativity, and conviviality are met locally in competently used and well-loved landscapes.

A landscape organised primarily for automobiles and trivial consumption tells young people more about our real values than anything taught in school. It is possible, however, to organise landscapes to teach usefulness, practical competence, social responsibility, ecological skill, the values of good work, and the higher possibilities of adulthood.

The farms, mines, wells, waste dumps and factories which provision us are mostly out of sight and so out of mind. We do not know the full costs of what we consume. Ignorant of the damage we do, we leap to the conclusion that we are much richer than we really are. Ecological poverty and poverty of mind and spirit are reverse sides of the same coin.

But when we get the design right, the manner in which we provision ourselves becomes a reminder of our larger relationships and obligations. The true aim of ecological design, then, is not merely to improve the various technologies and techniques by which we meet our physical needs, but to improve the integration of the human mind with its habitat and to fit in a larger order of things.

"To live," in Wendell Berry's words, "we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skilfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration. In such desecration we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness, and others to want."

How we plan our cities

Compare the architecture of the modern world with earlier civilisations. The ancient cities of India, Greece and Rome, for example, were planned as "representations of microcosm and macrocosm, projections of the human body and distillations of the universe" (Peter Wilson: *The Domestication of the Human Species.* 1988 New Haven, Yale University Press).

The architecture of houses and public buildings were means to "portray to people their relation to one another as well as to important features of their environment". Buildings were not simply machines as Corbusier would have it, but a map showing "how the individual, the various orders of groups, and the cosmos are linked and related."

Compare this with sprawling cities of the 20th century that give no clue about any cosmology larger than the GNP. They have become wastelands, islands of sybaritic affluence surrounded by a sea of necrotic urban tissue. For the most part our buildings, in which we spend over 90 percent of our time, are poorly built.

They are often made of materials that are toxic. They are often oversized and use energy and materials inefficiently. They are mostly disconnected from any discernible sense of community or any larger ecological or spiritual pattern.

What do such cities and buildings teach us? They teach us in exquisite detail that we are alone and powerless in the world, that energy and materials are cheap and can be consumed with impunity, that the highest purpose of life is consumption and that the world is chaotic and dangerous.

Conclusion

Good design should instruct us in what we need and the terms of our existence on Earth. In other words, the systems we devise to provision ourselves with food, energy, materials, shelter, and health need to constitute a larger form of education.

But if these systems are designed to educate they must work at a comprehensible scale. They must be devised in ways that create competence and practical understanding. They must be resonant with our deeper needs for meaning embedded in ritual and celebration. And this wisdom must be faithfully transferred from one generation to the next.

Designing ecologically begins in the belief that the world is not meaningless but coherent in ways that are often mysterious to us. Our task is to discern, as best we are able, the larger patterns and scales in which we live and act faithfully within those boundaries. Design, in this larger sense, is not simply making things but rather a striving for wholeness. At its best, ecological design is the ultimate manifestation of love – a gift of life, harmony and beauty to our children. ■

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