

**London Social Science ESRC Doctorial Training Centre**

Collaborative +3 or 1+3 PhD Studentship

School of Geography, Queen Mary University of London with  
the V&A Museum of Childhood and the Centre for the Study of Childhood Culture

**ADVENTURES IN THE CITY: THE POLITICS AND PRACTICE OF CHILDREN'S  
ADVENTURE PLAY IN URBAN BRITAIN, c.1955–97**

The School of Geography at Queen Mary University of London and the V&A invite applications for a doctoral studentship commencing on 1 October 2016.

**1. Project outline**

This project will examine the social, political and spatial history of children's adventure playgrounds in post-war urban Britain. Drawing upon the V&A Museum of Childhood's (MoC) recently acquired Donne Buck Archive (an internationally important collection of materials documenting the people, practices and politics of the adventure playground movement since the 1950s) alongside other materials, it will explore debates about the importance of play spaces within post-war urban regeneration; consider changing understandings of the role of (adventure) play within theories of child development, education and learning; look at children and their parents' experiences of new adventure playgrounds; and investigate the role of the adventure playground movement in campaigning for child welfare and citizenship in the shifting political contexts of the late twentieth century. Alongside the academic outputs, the project will make a significant impact on the work MoC, by contributing to its permanent gallery transformation programme and directly informing the construction of a new, collaboratively-designed adventure play area at the museum.

The origins of the adventure playground lie in Denmark in the 1940s when the landscape architect Carl Theodor Sørensen proposed the idea of the 'junk playground' as a site where children were encouraged to play freely and imaginatively with junk materials (Allen 1968; Benjamin 1961; Solomon 2005). Enthusiastically and energetically promoted by Lady Allen of Hurtwood (1946, 1968), the concept arrived in Britain in the immediate post-war years, when it was initially proposed that adventure playgrounds be developed on bombed sites in London and other larger cities. Allen (1946) regarded adventure play as a potential antidote to 'juvenile delinquency' and playgrounds as a space through which to foster a democratic community. This early history of the development of adventure playgrounds has been

explored by Kozlovsky (2008, 2013) as part of a wider study examining the ‘architectures of childhood’ in post-war Britain. Drawing upon Foucauldian ideas of governmentality, he interprets the child-centred, anti-formalist and flexible nature of adventure play spaces as part of the emergent welfare state’s mode of governing subjectivity; adventure playgrounds were a site where children could learn to become self-regulating citizens (Kozlovsky 2013, 52, 83). Although tracing examples of playgrounds in a range of locations including Camberwell, Morden, Clydesdale (Paddington) and, outside of London, in Crawley and Liverpool, Kozlovsky’s analysis is mainly confined to the 1940s and 1950s. By contrast, this project will trace the history of adventure playgrounds through the decades that followed up until the election of New Labour in 1997 to contribute understanding of how both ideas and practices of adventure play responded to shifting political agendas, changing economic contexts and new intellectual understandings of the relationships between children’s play and their development (cf Cranwell 2007). It will also focus on a wider range of ‘actors’ involved in adventure play, from the volunteers, activists and campaigners who worked to persuade national governments, local authorities, planners and designers to create and maintain play spaces, to the children and their parents and carers who visited and used them.

This project thus seeks to understand the ‘production’ of adventure playground spaces through the complex, dynamic and precarious coming together of people, ideas and material forms. Theoretically it will take inspiration from recent work in the social sciences on ‘assemblages’ and ‘actor-networks’, examining the shifting constellations of agency, knowledge and affect that are key to understanding adventure playgrounds over the four decades spanning the mid-1950s to the mid-1990s. This framework will take the analysis beyond a governmental perspective to enable recognition of the varying agency of those most closely associated with adventure playgrounds – playworkers, parents and carers, and especially children – as co-creators of new kinds of urban public space within the wider social, political and material assemblages of the era (see Fitzpatrick and Handscomb 2015, Lester et al. 2014).

Focusing on examples of adventure playgrounds in metropolitan London, the ‘new town’ of Stevenage and the provincial urban centre of Peterborough (the chief locations documented in the archive described below), the project will examine contrasting urban settings that experienced varying forms of social, economic and political change. It will address the following questions:

1. Who used adventure playgrounds and how were they used? What inspired adventure play and what was the role of adventure fiction, children’s television and other media in shaping adventure play?
2. What impact did adventure playgrounds have on those who used them? Did they create ‘adventurers’? Did they foster independence and team work? How did they change attitudes to risk and safety among children, parents and playworkers (cf Valentine and McKendrick, 1997)? What was the role of adventure playgrounds in children’s social worlds, as a venue for nurturing sibling and intergenerational relationships, for making and deepening friendships, or for forming gangs and tribes?
3. What forms of material were used in the construction of playgrounds? From where were they sourced? What agency did children, parents and playworkers have in the construction, building and design of playgrounds? To what extent did the child play the role of ‘bricoleur’, constructing play spaces from the detritus of urban everyday life? Is it possible to think of adventure playgrounds as new sites of civic action, where children contributed to the construction of an urban public sphere (cf Pitsikali 2015)?
4. How were ideas of adventure play and the design and layout of playgrounds influenced by:

changing theories of play and child development; understandings of children's health and welfare; new approaches to planning and urban policy; and evolving ideas of environmentalism?

5. How did adventure play, the child 'adventurer' and the provision of play spaces figure within wider political shifts, notably in relation to the demise of the post-war welfarist consensus and the rise of neo-liberalism? To what extent did playgrounds become a site of protest or a space for the political re-imagining of utopian ideas of childhood (cf Lester and Russell 2013, Lester 2014)?

The Donne Buck archive, acquired by the V&A Museum of Childhood in 2014, is an extraordinarily rich but largely unused resource, primarily documenting the career of leading playworker and campaigner for children's rights, Donne Buck (b. 1934). It will form the main resource for the project and after familiarisation with the materials available, the student will be given the opportunity to select topics, issues or periods to concentrate on.

Donne Buck began his career in the mid-1950s and retired in 1999. A leader and well-networked campaigner within the field, his archive provides a window onto the wider world of adventure play in Britain from early efforts to take adventure playgrounds out of the metropolis and into revitalised provincial centres and the experimental urban environments of new towns, to the struggles to retain play services during the core years of the Thatcher government. It contains over 1400 photographs of adventure playgrounds; children's drawings and writing; unpublished letters; pamphlets, posters and newsletters; clippings, official reports and surveys, along with books and specialist journals (see [www.vam.ac.uk/moc/article/donne-buck-archive/](http://www.vam.ac.uk/moc/article/donne-buck-archive/)). Further relevant collections are held in the Lady Allen Archive at the University of Warwick. To investigate the relationships between children's adventure literature and adventure play the student will consult other elements of the MoC and wider V&A collections, including the Renier collection of children's books. Finally, alongside testimony taken from the Donne Buck archive, oral history interviews with people of different ages and generations will be drawn up on to further understand children's experiences of these spaces. Up to 20 interviews will be carried out with individuals in London, Stevenage and Peterborough. Participants will be recruited via local community, heritage and play organisations (e.g. Hackney Play Association, Our Stevenage, and New Ark Play Peterborough).

Throughout the period covered by this study, adventure play was a continuous focus of international debate amongst urban planners and child psychologists (e.g. Benjamin 1961, Hayward et al. 1974, and Melville 1999). Centred on the Donne Buck archive, this project will contribute new understanding of the lived experiences of adventure play in Britain set within analysis of overarching national and international discourse. It will add to work on children's play and play spaces across a range of disciplines, including geography, history, sociology and children's studies. At a theoretical level it will enhance understanding of the complex productions of new urban spaces, illustrating the ways that discourse and practice are embedded within and constituted through shifting material and social assemblages. Undertaken in collaboration with the MoC and with all the opportunities for wider public engagement that this brings, the project stands to reignite popular debate about the role of the child in the city (Ward 1972, Burke and Jones 2014) and prompt reflection among professionals and others on how cities and play spaces should be governed and designed to address the interests and needs of children (Riggio 2002, Chilton 2003).

#### **References**

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## 2. Outputs

Alongside the academic outputs that the research will make, including conference presentations, the thesis and any associated publications, the project will also support the V&A Museum of Childhood's core work and plans. It is intended that range of different engagement activities will ensure that the impact of the research is felt by different users and audiences, especially children and family groups visiting the museum:

1. Working alongside children and artists/designers, the researcher will help to develop a collaboratively designed children's adventure playground within the grounds of the museum.
2. The research will feed into development of the museum's transformation of its permanent galleries, in particular in the 'Our Spaces' gallery dedicated to children's creativity and agency in

public space and outdoor play.

3. The research will contribute to the museum's public programme (displays/exhibitions/events/learning programmes). It is envisaged that a year of events and exhibitions entitled 'Play' will follow the redevelopment of the museum, which this PhD will feed into.
4. The research will result in improved documentation and cataloguing of Donne Buck archive, including creating new guides for use by other researchers.
5. As part of the project the Museum will host a one-day conference on children's adventure play drawing together academics interested in play and play spaces.

## **6. Supervision and Training**

The studentship will be based in the School of Geography at Queen Mary University of London and will be supervised by Professor Alastair Owens (School of Geography), Dr Kiera Vaclavik (School of Languages, Linguistics and Film), Rhian Harris (Director, Museum of Childhood) and Catherine Howell (Collections Manager, Museum of Childhood). The student will also be affiliated to The Centre for the Study of Childhood Culture, a new research centre jointly led by Queen Mary and the V&A Museum of Childhood. Additionally, the postholder will have a base at the V&A Museum of Childhood. In year 1, fortnightly supervisions will be held with the Queen Mary supervisors and joint monthly meetings will be held with the full supervisory team. In years 2 and 3, meetings will be held at least monthly with all supervisors.

At Queen Mary research training will be provided by the School of Geography and the ESRC Queen Mary-Goldsmith's London Social Science Doctoral Training Centre. More specialist training (e.g. working with museum collections, creating museum exhibitions and displays) will be available via the AHRC London Arts and Humanities Partnership, of which Queen Mary is an associate member. At the V&A Museum of Childhood the student will be required to undertake a range of training including on collections databases, object handling and curation, the development of exhibition displays and learning resources, and other public engagement activities.

The candidate will join a thriving graduate community in the School of Geography at Queen Mary and will be able to work alongside other doctoral students working on collaborative projects with external organisations, including: The Geffrye Museum of the Home, The Ragged School Museum, The National Maritime Museum, The British Museum, The Natural History Museum, and The Bank of England.

## **7. The studentship: value and eligibility**

The studentship covers tuition fees and includes a non-taxable annual stipend currently valued at £16,057 (2015-16 rates). The studentship may be either 1+3 (one year MRes followed by three year PhD), or +3 (three year PhD only, available for those with suitable masters-level social science research training). Eligibility is based on UK residency, although non-UK resident EU students may apply for a fees only award.

## **8. Person Specification**

### ***Essential skills, qualities and knowledge:***

- A first class or upper second class honours degree in a relevant discipline. Candidates applying for the +3 studentship will be expected to hold a Master's degree with suitable social science training by 1 October 2016.
- Knowledge of at least one of the following research areas: social, cultural or political history (especially in a modern British context), design or architectural history, children's studies, social or historical geography
- Experience of undertaking archival research, using manuscript and printed records
- Ability to work critically with secondary literature
- Ability to collaborate with the V&A Museum of Childhood in order to undertake research and to collaborate in the production of archive documentation, gallery displays and to participate in other public engagement activities
- Ability to be self-motivated, well-organized, and to respond to constructive criticism
- Willingness to take a full part in the Queen Mary postgraduate community, and the research activities of the School of Geography, the London Social Science ESRC Doctoral Training Centre, the Centre for the Study of Childhood Culture, the V&A Museum, the V&A Museum of Childhood and other partners.

### ***Desirable skills, qualities and knowledge:***

- Familiarity with current scholarship on the cultural, social and political history of late twentieth-century Britain; on children's rights and the city; or on theories of play
- Experience of undertaking oral history work or qualitative interviewing
- Knowledge of working with museum collections
- Experience of working with children, young people and their parents/carers
- Experience of organizing public engagement activities

As the candidate appointed to this post will be working in environments and have close contact with children, she or he will be required to undergo relevant safeguarding checks via the government's Disclosure and Barring Service.

## **9. Equal opportunities**

Queen Mary University of London's Charter states that our work shall be carried out in a spirit of tolerance, freedom of opinion, mutual concern and community service, and undertakes to avoid discrimination against any person on the grounds of religion, race, sex or politics. The College has a policy statement on Equal Opportunities in Employment, which we are actively implementing.

## **10. Application Process**

1) Candidates should complete an official on-line application form and submit it with the following accompanying documents: a cv, an academic transcript and a 1000 word statement of purpose (see

below). As the doctoral research is already clearly defined, applicants are required to submit this statement of purpose instead of a research proposal.

You should also provide two references. At least one reference should be from an academic referee who is in a position to comment on the standard of your academic work and suitability for postgraduate level study. Ideally the second reference should also be written by an academic who knows your work. Your referees can either submit a paper copy and post it to us, or complete it electronically and send it via email. Please provide them with a reference request form and request them to submit the reference by 5pm Friday 31 January 2016.

2) The 1000 word statement of purpose should explain why you would be interested in undertaking the programme of research and what experience and skills you would bring to the position. The statement should also include details about previous research experience and training and anything else that you feel is relevant.

To be considered for this studentship your application must be received no later than **5pm on Friday 31 January 2016**. All short-listed applicants will be interviewed (either face-to-face or, in the case of overseas candidates, by telephone or skype). It is anticipated that interviews will take place in mid-February.

Informal enquiries can be made to Alastair Owens, [a.i.owens@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:a.i.owens@qmul.ac.uk), 020 7882 2750.