Childhood's changing terrain: incorporating childhood past and present into community evaluation
Louise Chawla
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What is This?
Childhood’s changing terrain: incorporating childhood past and present into community evaluation

Chawla L. Childhood’s changing terrain: incorporating childhood past and present into community evaluation.

Two Kentucky communities are compared to evaluate the changing quality of children’s community experience since 1900: Portland, an old working-class area of Louisville, and New Castle, a rural county seat. Through a combination of oral histories, archival research, and contemporary children’s evaluations, pre- and post-World War II community resources for children are identified, along with the social contexts of their use. Parallel social and land-use changes in the two communities, subject to parallel economic policies and social trends, challenge the urban-rural dichotomy that has characterized histories of children’s lives.

Re-visioning childhood

Visioning has become a ubiquitous term in North American community planning. Rather than leaving decisions to professionals and public officials, local residents describe what they want their community to look like in 20 or 50 years, and then backcast how to reach this goal. Along with this process come questions. Whose vision? Shared how? Who is invited to participate and who is omitted? What array of possibilities do participants know as they consider future alternatives?

This paper reports on a project which extended the visioning process backward as well as forward in time, with a focus on how well an old working-class community of Louisville, Kentucky, and a small rural town, have functioned for their children. Entitled ‘Childhood in Kentucky, 1900 to Now,’ the project was based on two premises. One premise is that community change impacts children’s lives, yet the effects of change may be elusive. As communities alter in form and use, who remembers the activities which they once supported? Without a memory of past possibilities, how can we assess gains and losses, and move intelligently into the future?

The second premise behind the project is that a popular topic that bridges past and future is the experience of growing up. Observing their children, parents and grandparents make comparisons, which inevitably place the quality of children’s lives in the context of community change. Therefore children’s experience of their community – in the memory of adults, and in the contemporary perspective of the young – has the poten-
tial for bringing local transformations to life for a broad public, of relating changes to the needs of families and children, and of identifying past and present advantages to incorporate into plans for the future. The subject of children’s experience brings people together with a focus on localities’ resources for children: a subject which should be a planning priority, but one that easily gets lost, even in the process of visioning.

This paper describes the project’s combination of ‘retrospective visioning’ and student involvement as a practical model for engaging young and old, parents as well as professionals, in the process of community evaluation. At the same time, the paper challenges academic categories of children’s lives. On the map of academic disciplines, city and rural countryside have been partitioned between departments of urban and rural sociology, urban and rural studies, urban planning and rural development, urban and landscape design. An extensive literature has distinguished urban and rural experience (review Bender 1982). The ‘Childhood in Kentucky’ project began by questioning the relevance of this dichotomy to children’s experience, and concluded by reconfiguring it.

This project was inspired by remarks by the Kentucky novelist, poet, and essayist, Wendell Berry (1987). After reminiscing about his boyhood in New Castle and surrounding rural Henry County, he observed changes in children’s lives since the 1940s: a gradual erosion of wide-ranging mobility; of community oversight of children; of opportunities for work in local economies; of unstructured free time outside of school and work; of occasions for multigenerational work and recreation. To this author, a developmental and environmental psychologist trained in metropolitan Philadelphia and New York, Berry’s remarks were startling, for they corresponded to histories of twentieth century changes in children’s lives in major industrial cities like New York, Chicago, Copenhagen, and London (de Coninck-Smith 1990, Gaster 1991, Goodman 1979, Hart 1986, Nasaw 1985, Parr 1967, Ward 1978). Berry, however, was describing a small rural town that, for all appearances, still fits an idealized picture of a tranquil place in which to raise children.

Motivated by the disjunction that Berry’s remarks regarding rural changes have been the stuff of urban histories, the ‘Childhood in Kentucky’ project was designed as a small comparative study of two communities (Figure 1). One is New Castle, in which Berry grew up. Chosen county seat of Henry County in 1798, it lies 35 miles northeast of Louisville amid the fertile farmland of the outer Bluegrass region. From 1900 to 1990, New Castle’s population increased from approximately 500 to 850: but these census figures are misleading, as most African-Americans in 1900 lived just outside town limits.

The second community, Portland, forms part of the working-class West End of Louisville. Although the block-by-block census data needed to piece together Portland’s population at the beginning of this century was lost in a public records warehouse fire, a figure of approximately 15,000 in 1990 can be compared to 6,000 in 1880.

![Map of Kentucky](image)

Fig. 1. Thirty-five miles separate Portland, on the west side of Louisville, from New Castle in the outer Bluegrass region. Since the Second World War, investment has been concentrated in new development on Louisville’s eastern edge.
A comparison of information gathered at these two sites was guided by the following questions. What 20th century changes in children’s Portland experience have been distinctively urban? What New Castle changes have been distinctively rural? What changes transcend an urban-rural dichotomy?

Stephens (1994: 6) has noted the need to “address systematic links between changing ‘ecologies of childhood’ in diverse regions and social contexts,” in order to identify connections between the qualities of children’s lives in the First, Second, and Third World in response to common global forces. More modestly, this paper describes changing ecologies of children’s lives in two Kentucky communities, subject to forces of change in the continental United States. It does so with the hope that the processes of retrospective visioning and children’s participation described here may prove a useful model for examining other possibilities for children’s lives in other places, and for extending the connections that this work begins to draw.

Childhood and children, past and present

The ‘Childhood in Kentucky’ project may be described as an impressionistic study designed to gather a general sense of comparisons—past and present, urban and rural—in the limited time that this author had available (a four-month sabbatical). Its goals required a broad scope rather than an intensive focus on a single cohort or location, in order to identify methods and issues that merit more detailed exploration.

Nevertheless, there is reason to trust the reliability of the results presented here. The final interpretation of the project’s rural dimension was presented at a meeting of the Henry County Historical Society, and reviewed in detail by a society member. Portland findings were reviewed and discussed with staff at the Portland Museum and a former member of the Portland Historical Society. As this paper will observe, findings parallel the results of similar studies.

In order to examine how interdependent physical, social, and economic forces have shaped children’s community experience over time, the project gathered comparative New Castle and Portland information through three means:

1) Oral histories by 33 residents born between 1895 and 1955. These interviews focused on childhood memories, but they included questions about community change and changes in the conditions of children’s lives. Narrators were selected for diversity in age, sex, race, and fathers’ occupations. In addition to lifetime residents, 13 narrators were former residents (Table 1).

2) Archival research into community history, and its place in the larger context of state history. In addition to old newspapers, maps, photographs, and reports, material included four autobiographies of childhood in Henry County and one in Portland, which have been added to the oral history analyses.

3) A community study by fourth graders in the Portland Elementary School and New Castle Elementary School. From September through December 1991, fourth graders at these schools spent one afternoon a week evaluating and studying their localities.

Because a previous paper has already summarized New Castle results (Chawla 1994), this paper will stress Portland experience, with observations regarding similarities and differences between the two communities.

In comparing children’s experience past and present, there are some inescapable threats to validity. Lacking longitudinal data, there is no way to verify whether community aspects that stand out in memory at the age of eighty, for example, are the same aspects that would have been identified at the age of eight. Childhood remembered, and children’s own expressions of their experience, cannot be strictly compared.

Research into autobiographical memory, however, shows that memories of important places and events are fairly accurate and enduring (Hoffman & Hoffman 1990, Neisser 1981), and the project’s purpose was to explore community characteristics of such salience. Agreement among oral history narrators, speaking independently of each other, also gives credence to their observations. Be-

<table>
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<th>Birth dates</th>
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<th>Portland Female</th>
<th>New Castle Male</th>
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<td>1940–1955</td>
<td>3</td>
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* Based upon 33 oral history tapes and five archival autobiographies. Three Portland and five New Castle narrators were African-American. The fathers of all Portland narrators, and fifteen New Castle narrators, were working-class.
cause this project's focus was on community resources for children, places and events mentioned in oral histories could be verified from old photographs, maps, business directories, and newspapers.

The following sections summarize salient characteristics of Portland that oral history narrators repeatedly described, followed by contemporary nine- and ten-year-olds’ perspectives on the community today. The paper’s conclusion will revisit urban-rural dichotomies in light of these results.

**Remembered community**

As Portland’s name suggests, the community began in the early 1800s as a stopping point for boats coming up the Ohio River, where they unloaded passengers and cargo for land transport past the rapids of the Falls of the Ohio. In 1830, the Louisville & Portland Canal was built, becoming the new channel for river transport. In 1852, burgeoning Louisville annexed the town, and ran streetcar lines down its main avenues. In the late nineteenth century, the Kentucky & Indiana Railroad chose Portland as its site for a large rail yard and river bridge. After a destructive flood in 1937 and passage of the federal Highway Act in 1956, a floodwall embankment and Interstate Highway 64 were built along the river, cutting the community off from its riverfront heritage. (Fig. 2 for a map of Portland c. 1935.) This transition from dependence on river, to rail, to highway characterizes many old settlements, along with the changing economies and land uses that each shift has entailed.

This section on ‘remembered community’ describes the mixed land uses that Portland’s economy supported, along with consequences for children’s experience. The mere existence of resources within a geographic space, however, is no guarantee that they will be part of children’s lifespace. Therefore this section also examines factors that combined to ensure children community access.

**Plenty to do in plenty of places**

‘What a neighborhood to grow up in!’ exclaimed Charlie Coddington regarding Portland in the 1930s. ‘There were so many things to do!’ Through the first half of this century, other narrators’ accounts and old pictures and maps bear him out. At the beginning of the century, farms on Portland’s western edge delivered milk and cream to downtown Louisville, and rural vestiges persisted into the 1940s. Every few blocks throughout the community, there was a commons where people grazed delivery horses and sometimes cows: prime real estate for boys to build forts and dig hideouts. These green spaces co-existed with coal heaps and quarries, factories and small businesses, and a treasure trove of a dump.

Grocery stores on almost every block served as casual meeting places for friends. Two theaters offered weekend matinees for children (whites only), and there were fiercely played ball games in the public parks. The local Carnegie library sheltered reading indoors and crap games around the back. For those who didn’t have money for streetcar fare, downtown Louisville was just a walk away (where black-owned theaters were available). Even closer was Fontaine Ferry, an amusement park on Portland’s southwest edge (whites only). And then there was the irresistible canal and river.

Ecological psychology has introduced the concept of ‘activity range,’ which takes into account not only the distance that children can travel, but also the density of different activities possible within their territory (Wright, cited in Gump & Adelberg 1978). This measure is related to the idea of ‘behavior settings’: physical/social settings which cast participants in place-specific roles (Schoggen 1989). Although behavior settings cannot be identified without direct observation, a greater variety of physical settings in the past, based on the evidence of old maps and directories, suggests correspondingly greater opportunities for different forms of action.

There are several reasons for greater variety in the past. For one, children composed more of the population, and therefore they had the power of numbers when they wanted to colonize spaces for play. In 1900, when families were larger, young people under 18 formed approximately 42% of Kentucky’s population, in contrast to 26% in 1990 (figures comparable to those of the nation). Therefore children were more likely to encounter their own kind when they went outside, and were more likely to have older siblings to tag after, or younger siblings tagging after them. With less competition from traffic, children took over the streets. Portlanders remember particular streets that were designated for shinny (a street hockey played with forked branches and tin cans) and touch football.

Adults also seemed to tolerate having children every-
where. In Portland, saloons and bookie offices (one of each on every block, narrators reported) provided free sandwiches, making them popular attractions. Viola Becker (born 1899) remembers playing tag among great steaming vats of mash in a brewery, and Charlie Coddington (born 1928) recalls ducking into local factories and staking camp with his gang in a corner of the streetcar yard. Property owners were not worried about safety, security, and insurance regulations, as they are today. (Given children’s proportionally greater numbers, perhaps this tolerance of their intrusions also included a measure of resignation?)

In addition to these opportunities for unprogrammed play, Portland children were served by religious and social reformers. The churches sponsored social gatherings and children’s activities. As young members of old Portland families have moved elsewhere and as society has become more secular, church events have declined; but the Boys’ Club (now Boys’ and Girls’ Club), Neighborhood House (also a former boys’ territory), and Catholic-supported Mackin Gym remain popular spots to this day. They were built in the spirit of a 1919 report on Child welfare in Kentucky:

Shall the pugnacious and competitive impulses and tendencies of boys run riot in quarrels and fights, or find expression and catharsis in football and pom-pom-pullaways? The sight of children ‘hanging around’ in the streets, loafing in country stores, or playing by twos or threes instead of deriving the benefits of playing in groups, suggests what is needed. Contrary to widely held belief, children need to be taught how to play. (Fuller 1919: 98–99)

For young Portlanders, the gyms, clubs, and caring counselors provided by the social reform movement...
were accepted as so many more valued opportunities, in addition to loafing around streets and stores.

This diversity of settings, most not specifically designed for children, reflected the community’s large degree of economic self-sufficiency. The river, canal, railroad, factories, and small businesses provided local income; and narrators’ memories reflect a corresponding excitement and proud sense of being in the center of things.

Of this variety, only organized institutions - the library, the parks, the gym, the neighborhood centers - remain. The river and canal are now largely inaccessible. One supermarket has replaced most of the corner grocery stores, and displaced the former streetcar yard. The commons have been built up. All the farms are gone. The streets are more dangerous. Fontaine Ferry and the movie theaters have closed down. The 'center of things' has moved out to the new subdivisions, shopping malls, and office parks on the south and east of Louisville and across the river in Indiana.

A parallel transformation has reduced New Castle businesses to two-thirds of their 1940s level, as Henry County residents, too, now travel to Louisville’s East End for work and services. In both communities, children still explore their streets and green places, and play on their front steps and yards. Some places still stand out as central, such as Portland’s parks, or the Boys’ and Girls’ Club. Like their parents, however, when young people in Portland and New Castle want to go 'where the action is' now, they tend to get into a car or bus and go elsewhere.

An extended sense of family
The presence of resources within a community is no guarantee of their accessibility. In both Portland and New Castle, a cohesive web of adult networks made it possible for children to move about safely. Twelve Portland narrators, and ten in Henry County, spontaneously recalled ever-present adult solidarity and surveillance, from which they sometimes benefited, sometimes suffered, as children.

From its beginning, Portland’s importance as a transportation node attracted a diverse population of French, Irish, and German settlers and freed slaves. Although the community has always seen fluid in- and out-migration, to this day it has a core of families that trace their local roots back three, four, or five generations. Through the first half of this century, there was still land and money for new housing, and local jobs on which a man could raise a family, making it possible for newlyweds to remain near their parents. The result was that many families had an extended network of kin throughout the community, as well as long-term neighbors.

At its best, this adult solidarity gave security. Molly Leonard, a third-generation Portlander born in 1932, recalled:

It was an extended sense of family. ... If a parent had to have an operation, the husband of the household never had to worry about his kids getting up in the morning or going to school or getting their baths or getting their meals or anything. It was automatically done. You never had to ask. They asked you. And it was a wonderful, wonderful way to grow up.

Even first-generation Portlanders in this period remember similar support. Ernestine Canty, who grew up on one of Portland’s African-American blocks in the 1930s, noted that this interdependence was compounded by families’ intermarriage.

For children, one consequence of this network was a total lack of fear in moving about within their territory: as long as they behaved. In Molly’s words again: "If I misbehaved a block from home, my mother knew about it before I got home. And there weren’t telephones back then. I mean, these worked faster than phones!"

Molly and other narrators believe that this mutual help continues, although not to the same degree. Philip Chery, born in 1955 to one of the area's old African-American families, and now raising five children of his own, stressed the ‘attenuation’ of community - to borrow the apt word of the sociologist Gerald Suttles (pers comm). According to Philip:

I still think there is a strong sense that people care about each other, but they don’t show it as much. Nobody calls me and tells me my kids are doing something. Nowadays people just say, ‘Oh, look at those kids,’ and then just close their curtains and go on back to doing something. When I was growing up, the difference would have been that they would have come out there and gave me a spanking by themselves and then pulled me by the ear to my grandmother, who gave me another spanking.

When Sharon Wilbert (born 1945) and her daughter Sherry (born 1964) discussed this issue, they concluded that older residents inevitably find holes torn in the fab-
ric of community as their acquaintances have died or moved away. Salient to Sherry, in contrast, are her old high school friends who have remained, who will call if they see her young son misbehave. The difference (at both study sites) appears to be that young parents who know each other still look out for each other’s children, whereas oversight once extended across generations and across a wider territory of recognition.

A rough equality

A partial explanation of older residents’ former readiness to both protect and discipline each other’s children is a rough sense of equality. ‘Rough,’ in this context, signifies both ‘approximate’ and ‘rugged’. Although well-to-do families lived on the main avenues in Portland and on Main and Main Cross Streets in New Castle, both communities as a whole were staunchly working-class. People as a rule lived simply. Portland, in particular, had a tough reputation: to outsiders looking in, it still does. From the inside, it had a closely defended common identity and loyalty.

Community homogeneity was reinforced by three factors. For one thing, few families had much. As Tommy Layman, born in 1939 and raised by a widowed mother, expressed it, “There wasn’t a whole lot of money in the West End. But you didn’t care, because no one had any money.”

As another factor, the general marginality and precariousness of working-class life made neighbors and relatives serve as each other’s ‘safety net.’ When fathers did dangerous work in an age before safety regulations, disability insurance, or advanced health care, disaster could strike at anytime. Nine Portland narrators expressed a prevailing sense of security that, in case of need, they could depend on neighbors’ aid.

A third factor in solidarity was Portland’s compact structure as an old ‘walking industrial’ community built when interdependent classes and services co-existed in close proximity (Bartelt et al. 1987). Portland was a social and racial mosaic of large colonial, Italianate, and Victorian homes of the prosperous on Portland Avenue and High Street; shotgun homes of the working class on side streets and secondary avenues; African-American blocks scattered around the community; alley dwellings of poor whites and African-Americans; and a shanty town by the wharves.

One result of this proximity and rough equality was racially integrated play groups. A few Portland narrators said that, as young children, they didn’t realize that there was segregation. They assumed that black children went to ‘their’ school by choice, just as Catholics went to theirs. In this respect, Portland was characteristic of other old urban neighborhoods in the United States, where geographic segregation was consistently low throughout the nineteenth century. In Southern cities like Louisville, it remained low into the twentieth century, as Jim Crow laws controlled blacks so effectively that geographic segregation was unnecessary (Massey & Denton 1993). For children, the result was a distinctively urban freedom to form mixed play groups. (In rural New Castle, racial lines were generally more strictly drawn.)

Free time and free range

Not only was children’s access to their community facilitated by dependable adult surveillance, but also by unscheduled time. In this respect, Portland narrators reported more freedom than their rural contemporaries, who often faced heavy farm work. Portland kids belonged to what the historian David Nasaw (1985: 24) has described as the golden age of urban childhood, when children enjoyed ‘more unstructured and unsupervised free time than the generations that preceded or followed them’: freed, on the whole, from toil in factory, field, or mine, and not yet herded in front of T.V. sets or into after-school programs and Little League.

Portland narrators were more likely than their rural peers, however, to report spatial boundaries to their play. In general, their remembered free range depended upon whether they were male or female, black or white, born early or late in this century. If they were white and male, they reported either freedom to go anywhere they wished, or to casually break rules. Parents’ resignation that ‘boys will be boys’ tacitly encouraged them to act, in fact, like boys. Paradoxically, it also prompted them to seek out-of-the-way dangerous places: by the river, at the bottom of an old gravel quarry, jumping boxcars in the rail yard.

All six men reported frequenting the river and canal, with or without permission. There boys took challenges that would have given their mothers a fit, if the truth got out: sitting on the canal gates as they swung back and forth, climbing the K & I bridge, riding river currents. Charles Meagher, for example, born in 1940 and an illicit river visitor, recalled how older boys in-
structed younger ones in how to both take and survive risks:

There was a part under the K & I bridge where you’d actually ride the current for maybe 200 yards, and if you were out there, and didn’t know it was there—which we were taught by the older boys that it was there—it would suck you under and it didn’t bring you up until you were 150 yards down the river. So if you went into it feet first and you knew it was there, you could hold your breath long enough. That was the thrill of riding the current.

Meagher noted that he wouldn’t want his own son in the river today, given the loss of these traditions of instruction.

As the century progressed, girls were more likely to find the canal and river off limits, and only one woman reported breaking these rules. As for the community as a whole, girls’ ranges varied: from the total freedom recalled by Viola Becker (born in 1899 to a large family, who roamed with her brothers), to strict confinement to the yard or block reported by four women. Most commonly, women remembered that they had to account for their time and location, and travel in groups.

Like girls, African-American children faced variable rules. White narrators’ memories of black playmates and Dorothy Harris’s stories about her husband Gus (born 1909) suggest that some black boys ranged widely. All three African-Americans in this project, however, recalled strict supervision until they were 12 or older.

Both adults’ and childrens’ changing access to their environment is epitomized by Portland’s relations to its river. Before the Second World War, all ages frequented Portland’s wharves, locks, and riverbanks. Viola’s aunt, for example, took the children on picnics to Sand Island. People also dove and swam in the locks. By the 1960s, the canal was deepened (making currents more dangerous), its walls were raised, factory sludge floated downstream, and a flood wall embankment and Interstate 64 were completed. As the Ohio River became increasingly inaccessible and forbidding, it became a forbidden place, mostly frequented by single men and older boys, who didn’t need permission, or protection, to swim or fish.

This sequence in families’ use of the river reflects a general pattern of environmental use in both communities. Early in this century, locks and riverbanks, adult workplaces, and streets were multigenerational affairs. As floods, flood control measures, and pollution destroyed river quality; as child labor laws and insurance regulations kept the young out of workplaces; as automobiles took over rights of way; and as people learned new attitudes to risk, both adults’ and children’s pedestrian range contracted.

Following the Second World War, population shifts eroded parents’ confidence that they knew everyone in their communities and that everyone would look out for their children. New families moved in to work in wartime factories; and the city, as a surreptitious part of its postwar urban redevelopment plan, redlined African-American families out of the downtown into western Portland, among other areas. With Portland’s aging housing stock filled by older residents, and among rising racial tensions, many of Portland’s younger families moved out to new subdivisions.

This history reflects federal and private mortgage loan strategies, which have targeted funds to areas that are ‘new and homogeneous’ (Massey & Denton 1993: 50–55). By this system, money for new building and renovations has been steered away from old, mixed, working-class areas like Portland. At the same time, New Castle lost a whole population of sharecroppers, and gained newcomers in a low income housing project and three subdivisions.

Many parents have reacted to these population shifts by restricting their children’s range and freedom. Margo Winborn, a fourth-generation Portlander with two young children, expressed the change in the nature of parent’s worries: ‘I don’t worry about what my kids will do. I worry about what somebody else will do to them.’ In New Castle, some parents voice similar new fears. Richard Louv (1990), a journalist who has examined the changing context of United States children’s lives, and who found this fear prevalent, suggests that it embodies less specifiable insecurities in response to the residential mobility and intensified economic, geographic, and generational divisions that now characterize society. (For a review of this issue, see Stephens 1993.)

A child’s eye view

Concurrently with oral histories and archival research, the ‘Childhood in Kentucky’ project involved fourth graders in the study and evaluation of their communities. Fourth grade was chosen because Kentucky students at this level learn state and local geography and history, and therefore teachers could adopt the project as
a supplement to their required curriculum. Studies of children’s place use and knowledge also show that nine- and ten-year-olds are intensive users of their local environment (Hart 1979).

Portland Elementary School, which the children attended, reflects both the community’s sturdy identity and its vicissitudes. In the 1960s, the public organized to have the old 1853 school building renovated and enlarged, rather than abandoned. The school is also one of few in the city that has escaped mandated school busing, as Portland has maintained an African-American population of approximately 15% (although African-Americans are now concentrated on the community’s western side rather than more evenly scattered). As a consequence, most students still walk to school, and they are able to identify with a shared local territory.

Less happily, like other old manufacturing and rail-based communities around the nation, Portland shows the wear and tear of systematic government and private capital disinvestment, and it has become concentratedly poor. In 1990, over 80% of Portland Elementary School students qualified for free lunches.

From September through December 1991, one fourth grade class of 22 children spent one afternoon a week studying Portland’s geography and history, writing stories and drawing maps and pictures to illustrate their out-of-school activities and places, filling out surveys, and corresponding with New Castle pen pals about their lives, schools, and localities. The evaluative material presented here was gathered at the beginning of the term in order to minimize the effects of project involvement. Later in the term, the class created a model of their vision of an ideal urban neighborhood; and in the spring, a small group worked with Portland Museum staff to create a public exhibit featuring the class’s work. In late spring, the class as a whole did an assessment of the nearby riverbank and drew up suggested plans for a proposed riverwalk.

Favorite, friendly, and dangerous places

Consistent with the double standard for boys and girls that some older residents remembered, a few boys claimed that they could go anywhere they wanted, whereas a few girls were not allowed to leave their block. Within their home-based ranges, when students drew and wrote about their favorite place, their most frequent choice was a green retreat: in tall grass or bushes, up trees, or exploring the golf course on Portland’s western edge (35% of the 20 students present). The second most frequent choice was their own room (25%). This emphasis on green places, where children can make their own private worlds, or the privacy of their home, conformed to the same choices made by children at the rural New Castle school, and to a large international body of studies of children’s favorite places (Chawla 1992).

This preference for quiet withdrawal or exploration contrasts with older residents’ emphasis on more active, public places. Perhaps quiet places recede in memory, as years go by, while more boisterous memories persist. Perhaps the silent medium of writing encourages their expression. Or perhaps this generational difference reflects this century’s actual social shift from more public to more private lives.

Children showed that they still value conviviality through their third most frequent choice in each community, which was a friend’s or grandparent’s house. Other choices reflect Portland’s special opportunities: Portland Park and the Boys’ and Girls’ Club, places cherished in memory by older residents as well.

Students filled out a simple word association task which helped explain their choices. At the word ‘comforting,’ and again for the word ‘peaceful,’ Portlanders listed their bedroom. Not surprisingly, at the word ‘friendly,’ almost everyone listed a friend’s house. At the word ‘exciting,’ the most frequent Portland associations were parks and ball fields, enduring landscape attractions. At the word ‘dangerous,’ students’ choice of the river reflected its reputation as an inaccessible, forbidden place.

Community advantages and improvements

When students were asked, ‘What is the best thing about your community?’, almost half identified friendliness and peace and quiet, showing that the traditions of stability and friendliness, which older residents praised, were still perceived, and still highly valued.

Nevertheless, most children thought that Portland could be improved to make it a better place in which to grow up. They wanted drugs and crime cleared out, trash cleaned up, and an end to the cutting of trees: probably without their knowledge, a return to prewar conditions when drugs and crime were not yet common, when most homes were owner-occupied and
maintained with pride, and when double rows of trees lined the avenues.

Future plans
At the end of the fall term, all three fourth grade classes in the Portland school filled out a simple survey regarding their future life plans, including where they wanted to live and to raise their own children. In Portland, half of the project students (like their peers in Henry County) wanted to remain where they were, and described Portland as friendly and fun. Most who wanted to leave were lured by Florida, California, or the countryside.

The school's two fourth grade classes that had not participated in the project also filled out this final survey. The results were striking. In contrast to half of the project participants, only 12% of these students answered that they wanted to remain in Portland. Almost a quarter described the community as violent or ugly: in contrast to only one project member. Because there was no pretest of this survey, it isn't clear whether these differences can be attributed to the project, or to preestablished student attitudes. Studying their community, nevertheless, appeared to affirm students' local allegiances.

Conditions for successful student involvement
This project's site comparisons highlighted Portland's advantages for local study. Because the Portland Elementary School had remained a neighborhood school, to which most student's walked, the project's geographic focus encompassed the children's in- and out-of-school lives, evoking keen interest, and uniting the class around the study of shared places. In addition, their teacher made a strong personal investment, using the project as a catalyst, and extending the topics and activities suggested. Not least, Portland Museum staff served as guides to local resource people and information.

This local foundation contrasted with the New Castle Elementary School, typical of most contemporary rural schools in the United States in that students are now bused in from several small towns. In this setting, the idea of a 'local community' is in some ways an artificial construct. Although students enjoyed mapping and describing their personal territories, they shared no intimately known common base.

Given Portland's advantages, the project's original intention was to initiate students into an ongoing process of community study. To a limited degree, this goal was successful. Some of the project activities have been adopted by another Portland Elementary School teacher. The Portland Museum created a gallery exhibit that combined oral history excerpts and old photographs with the children's drawings, writing, and model city, which have inspired other visiting teachers. Funding was also found for a museum artist to create a large local map with pictures illustrating activity sites that were repeatedly mentioned in the oral histories, as a permanent record of Portland's prewar resources for children. Finally, state educational television featured the project on its cable channel for teacher training.

Despite these successes, the project failed in its larger goal of initiating children into the political process of design and planning: a necessary step, if children are to go beyond the skills of local research and evaluation, resulting in well-founded visions of their community's potential, to an understanding of how to work toward community improvement (Hart 1992). The reasons for this failure highlight the critical components of successful participation.

In keeping with a city government invitation for public input into proposed plans to extend a riverwalk from downtown Louisville out to Portland, the museum, the project teacher, and the project director involved students in a child-scaled site assessment, user needs analysis, and preliminary design proposal for the Portland riverbank. Over the summer, however, the project teacher was diagnosed with fatal cancer, the museum had to lay off staff, and the riverwalk plans became indefinitely stalled. For the successful incorporation of childhood and children into the articulation of community visions, all of the project's original components are needed: a committed adult who works with the children on an ongoing basis; outside resource people (such as the project director and museum staff); a local resource organization; the political will to involve the public in planning; and children who share a common local interest.

As a final note on this process, this project was typical of other participatory efforts in that it focused on developing methods for engaging the young rather than on the effects of engagement. The dramatic difference between project and non-project students' answers on the final community survey, however, indicates that the evaluation of effects of participation needs to be an important part of future projects.
Re-visioning urban and rural revitalization

This final section returns to this paper’s original questions regarding the relevance of urban-rural divisions to an understanding of children’s changing experience in the twentieth century. As the introduction noted, the ‘Childhood in Kentucky’ project was inspired by remarks of the Kentucky author Wendell Berry (1987). After describing how small rural towns were active economic and social centers up through the Second World War, and how their vitality gradually diminished following the war, he observed: “There’s no way to separate the economic life of a place from its spiritual life, social life. When the economic necessity goes, why then the other things go too.” In many respects, these remarks apply to Portland, an ‘urban village’, as well as to a rural town like New Castle. Both locations show the effects of systematic postwar disinvestment in old working-class communities, urban and rural.

Given that adults and teenagers with cars, from both locations, can now travel on interstate highways to jobs in new places of investment, neither community has died. A loss of economic opportunities within has been partially offset by opportunities outside. For children, however, whose mobility is largely dependent on their own feet and the range that their parents allow them, the result has been an attenuation, or thinning out, of opportunities for local experience.

In this respect, ‘urban’ Portland and ‘rural’ New Castle are more alike than they are different. As capital has flowed away from these old centers into sprawling new suburbs, malls, office complexes, and industrial parks, and as highways have taken families that have cars away to new sites for work, shopping, and recreation, local opportunities for all ages have declined in both places. The result is a sense that ‘the center of things’ has moved elsewhere.

These economic and geographic changes have been accompanied by social changes. In both Portland and New Castle, people report a weakening of once reliable adult oversight of children, and parents voice new fears of strangers. Correspondingly, recreation has become increasingly private, played out in the yard and home with toys and TV sets, or at distant commercial locations, rather than an affair for the street, the riverbank, local movie theaters, or parks, where all ages once came together.

These similarities challenge the urban-rural dichotomy that has partitioned academic and professional practice. Frønes (1993), like Stephens (1994), has noted the need to understand how common forces are affecting children’s lives in diverse regions. As he has observed:

Children are often regarded as part of the micro-universe, of the family, the play group or the local community. To relate childhood to the fundamental elements of the economic and social fabric is one of the tasks of research on children. (p. 1)

Even the limited range of this study, which has examined changes in resources for children in two communities in one region, suggests that when we do as Frønes suggests, we discover that a web of connections replaces disciplinary divisions. More dramatic differences may characterize Third World cities and rural villages; but here too, children’s destinies are linked.

Even ways in which Portland and New Castle have diverged over time reinforce this conclusion. Some constant urban-rural differences characterize the two communities: in Portland, stricter rules limiting community range; more philanthropic institutions for organized recreation; more social and economic freedom for African-Americans; less work outside of school. Nevertheless, some current differences obscure greater commonality in the past.

Underlying urban-rural categories is an assumed division between commerce and nature. This study challenges this assumption, however. Whereas an examination of old maps and business directories shows a decline in commercial diversity in New Castle, Portland maps show diminishing access to natural areas. A better balance of commerce and nature characterized both communities before the war. New Castle combined diverse small businesses with nearby woods and fields. In Portland, businesses and factories coexisted with access to the riverfront, commons, gardens, parks, and tree-lined avenues. In the past, these communities were not as distinct as conventional categories assume.

Nor does a division between city and country, commerce and nature, fit contemporary children’s aspirations in either community. When Henry County nine- and ten-year-olds recommended changes that would improve their communities, they wanted more stores and places where they could meet each other: a restoration of commercial meeting places, such as characterized prewar rural towns. In Portland, as in Henry
County, students highly valued natural areas for play and privacy. In valuing both commercial meeting places and green spaces, students at both sites were representative of other young people around the world (Chawla 1992).

A great irony behind this history is that, in the industrialized Western world, a disinvestment in urban and rural working-class communities has been justified on the grounds that suburbs, as places of 'pure' passive nature, are the best setting for families with children. As this paper has noted, mortgage funds have been targeted for 'new and homogeneous' communities, in contrast to the social, racial, and often ethnic diversity of old communities. Suburbs were not only designed to be pure in nature, but also in social class and color.

Rather than a division between nature and commerce, country and city, however, the historical record for Portland and New Castle, memories of the old, and aspirations of the young show a complexity of land use that places nature and commerce in proximity. In the old communities, black and white, rich and poor, also lived in proximity. These communities are better described as mosaics of difference rather than as a dichotomy.

Although this paper has focused on two sites in the industrialized world, it can be argued that it has broader significance. Development schemes that foster homogeneous land uses and social divisions are being exported overseas; but along with this global movement of capital has come a growing consciousness that the destinies of cities and countryside, rich and poor, in the First, Second, and Third Worlds, are linked. Prescriptions for a sustainable society that will heal environmental and social wounds point toward many of the characteristics of old communities: viable rural economies, such as Wendell Berry experienced in prewar Henry County (Berry 1986); and urban villages like prewar Portland, where gardens, farms, parks, businesses, river, rail, and small industry combined on a pedestrian scale (Gordon 1990, Platt et al. 1994).

The 'Childhood in Kentucky' project hopes to have made a persuasive argument, however, to the effect that the resources for a sustainable future are not only clean rivers, viable family farms, and a mosaic of rural-urban land uses, but also childhood within us and the children who will outlive us. Frones (1993: 2) has claimed that, 'Childhood is a mirror of what has been, what is, and of visions of what will be.' By involving older residents in remembering childhood in their communities as they once were, and by involving contemporary children in evaluating their communities today, this project has sought to enlarge visions of what may be.

The project demonstrated that by the age of nine or ten, children can already study and assess their localities with enthusiasm and judgment, and bring important perspectives to discussions of the future. In the process, this project has suggested, they may themselves gain a new vision of where they live, preparing themselves for the personal and political investment that the revitalization of old communities will require.


