COMMENTARY

All Children Are Not 11-Year-Old Boys

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Commentary on Southworth's "City Learning: Children, Maps, and Transit," *Children's Environments Quarterly,* 7(2), 35–48.

As *Children's Environments Quarterly* bids its adolescence adieu, I am happy to see the appearance of "Notes on Policy and Practice." If we don't put what we write about to work in our lives, what good is it? It is in this spirit that I applaud the second half of Michael Southworth's "City Learning: Children, Maps, and Transit." This exploits an adequately detailed but unpretentious little study of urban-American prepubescent male map-reading ability and use to develop a few simple guidelines that apparently could improve map design for this population.

Yet there are aspects of the first half of the article that trouble me sufficiently to occasion these remarks, and even the second half is not without its problems. For example, I am more than a little nonplussed to find reference to what is in effect a paper on map design for kids but no reference to a cartographic literature increasingly concerned with this very topic. Given Southworth's co-authorship of the admirable *Maps* (M. Southworth & S. Southworth, 1982), his acquaintance with *Cartographica, The American Cartographer, Progress in Contemporary Cartography,* and *International Yearbook of Cartography* must be presumed. Yet some of the research he called for toward the end of his article has not only been already carried out, but reviewed (Blades & Spencer, 1987; Ottosson, 1988; Petchenik, 1985; Winn, 1987).

What bothers me here is symptomatic of what disquiets me about the first half of Southworth's article and indeed what has long distressed me about much of what passes for "applied" research in design (I might call it sloppy scholarship). If I take this opportunity to air these grievances, it is not because Southworth's article is peculiarly illustrative—indeed, it is not—but because I would hate to see "Notes on Policy and Practice" be less than it might. I am most disturbed about a type of generalization that produces neither the universal biological child of the age and height charts nor the individual children of my and others' experiences, but some bastard form. An example is the putative child, "Most youngsters" in Southworth's phrase, with whom Southworth is concerned—namely, he or she for whom travel through the city is a confusing and often threatening experience. (When he first introduces this child, Southworth adds a qualifier to travel—"on their own"—but because this implication is dropped in subsequent characterizations, I ignore it in what follows.)

What evidence does Southworth present attesting to the existence of this confused and threatened traveler? None. In support of his policy and design suggestions, Southworth offers 20 years of largely design experience (his dissertation and four design projects), but, to testify about the confused and threatened child who is the subject of his work, he summoned no witnesses at all. But against what thus amounts to no more than his *assertion* of the existence of this child, I have the heavy weight of *my* experience. Southworth's description certainly doesn't apply to my two sons, one of whom is all but foolhardy in his willingness to ride his bike or take the bus anywhere. Okay, one pair of kids doesn't dismantle a general truth; but, accepting this, what then am I to make of the thousands of savvy, confident kids I encounter in the subway and on the buses of New York City? I grant that I haven't interviewed these kids, but few appear either threatened or confused. True, these are Big City kids, and we all know they're different, but then so must be the kids I got to know this summer in Putney, Vermont, who wandered about the hills with the confidence of foxes. But, if every child is to be an exception, where does Southworth's come from? I would be willing to set all these cases aside in the face of serious countervailing evidence, but this would have to consist of more than the 28 preteen boys Southworth actually studied, even had his work been carried out with the kind of controls necessary to permit such generalization. After all, such generalizations could at best be to prepubescent boys, hardly "most youngsters."

Do I doubt that there are kids who are threatened

and confused when traveling through the city, alone or otherwise? Not at all. In my own dissertation research, I described an entire class of such kids. Terming them *fixers*, I contrasted them to *mixers* and *rangers*, the latter of whom move into novel environments with eager confidence (Wood, 1973). In a more immediate context, one of my kids' friends is both terrified and terribly confused about traveling, even with friends, in parts of the city with which he is not intensely familiar. Am I opposed to the use of anecdotes in the attempt to grapple with the lot of children? Hardly. I have often advocated it. What I object to is the unwarranted generalization to "children" from Guy and Kelly, Lutie and Laura.

Such generalization often take one of two different forms. The first—less self-evident than the other—consists of the suppression of information that would tend to render kids unique. But incontestably, massive quantities of data gathered over many years support the contention that experience varies as a function of age, sex, race, nationality, ethnicity, class, religion, and geographic location—to name only the most salient characteristics. Southworth acknowledged this in his dissertation research when he chose to study only boys because girls "at this age had much less freedom to move about the city than boys" (M. Southworth, 1970). But if sex matters, so does all the rest of it. One has only to think of Lynch's demonstration of the differential cognition of Los Angeles residents to see just how significantly (Orleans, 1973). Suppression of any of these data generalizes people, denies them their reality as historical subjects. When the poor are described as "just plain people," the effect can be powerfully reactionary, but the failure to characterize is obfuscatory in every case in which the population chosen for study is not a statistically valid sample of the population to which generalization is being made. Anecdotal data have a necessary place in the social sciences, but they don't let you talk about people in general.

If this form of generalization is insidiously subtle, the other is blatantly obvious—yet so common as to evade attention. Here one simply asserts the universal applicability of an incidental event. Southworth, for example, titles the section of his article in which he touches briefly on a few reactions of some of his 28 boys "Children's Attitudes Toward City Travel." True, his boys were children, and, although this makes their attitudes those of children, it does not transform them into children's attitudes. In noting that "the suggestions outlined here are relevant to the Boston area," Southworth would seem to acknowledge

this, but everything else in his article denies it, as anecdote is repeatedly aggrandized into general truth. One of the sorriest consequences of this kind of argument is its propensity for generating truisms in place of knowledge. When Southworth asserts that "kids also have strong interests in shopping areas," I don't know whether to laugh or cry. And truisms can turn silly. On encountering Southworth's "considering children's interests in eating, food might be a special attraction in ethnic areas different from their own," someone with whom I shared the article wondered whether Southworth had children of his own—so out of touch with reality did the suggestion strike her. My point, of course, is that—justified or not—at this level of generality, being in touch with real, living, breathing kids has been entirely foresaken.

Had Southworth published no more than the second half of his article, none of these comments would have been justified. By citing his work directly in the context of the design problem, by specifying his methods, by circumscribing—most of the time—the applicability of his findings to his boys, and by sharing with us the results of the design work that emerged, Southworth gives us an all but perfect example of how research can usefully be integrated into the process of design. Although I would caution against relying on his results here to generalize about the behavior of children in the distal environment, I would eagerly draw on it as a source of important research questions. The door for the publication in *Children's Environments Quarterly* of this caliber of applied research needs to be kept open. It will be easier to do this if the distinct aims of basic and applied research are kept in mind.

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