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### ARTICLE

# Spatial Biographies of Children's Consumption

Market places and spaces of childhood in the 1930s and beyond

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*Abstract.* Drawing upon historical research, contemporary academic treatments of children's geographies and some preliminary observations of a few 'children's' retail settings in the USA, this article concentrates on building an analytic of commercialized children's spaces. An account of the construction of retail departments specifically for children in USA clothing stores in the 1930s offers an insight into two intersecting spatial dimensions: aspirational and proprietary spaces. These, in turn, inform how versions of the 'child consumer' shape, and have been shaped by, spatially situated market considerations.

#### *Key words*

children • children's geographies • clothing • consumer culture • gender • retail spaces

WE ALL HAVE ENCOUNTERED THEM – THE PRIMARY COLORS, the blocked, angled or backward letters, the scribble-writing effect, the chalkboard motif. At once eye-catching and unmistakable in reference, these symbols and images constitute part of the iconography of children's culture. Most often and most intentionally, they signify a children's *consumer* culture. They say, 'kids' stuff here!' and direct both children and parents to differentiate that which refers to 'kids' from other items in the visual-spatial landscape of commerce.

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The palette and imagery of these signs (in both the semiotic and billboard senses) borrow elements from an idealized notion of children's drawings, coloring books, etc., and extend them to physical places outside of the kindergarten and playroom. The feeling and message of a kids' commercial world is most powerfully conveyed in the cross-referencing between similarly marked and marketed spaces, such as McDonald's Playlands and FunZones, rather than in any single depiction or place. This world implies a number of things. For one, it is a sign that children's goods and activities may be available, from toys to clothing to food to playgrounds. For another, it often means that different rules apply within these spaces than outside them, that things can be touched, handled and played with, as is the case in some toy stores (see Wallendorf et al., 1998) and museums.

Commercial spaces *for* children are not built *by* children. Few, if any, are designed by children or incorporate children's designs. Yet, many make use of so-called children's colors and iconography and make reference to characters associated with children's media culture.

The problematic of children's spaces – in particular, children's commercialized spaces – hinges precisely on what the modifier 'children's' may indicate. For Jacqueline Rose (1984), 'children's fiction' is a misnomer, and ultimately an impossibility, because the 'child' is non-existent in, and for, the text. In the case of Peter Pan, she argues, an adult not only created the characters but also created 'the child' – as symbol and referent – as the purported addressee for the story. The child, in this sense, is non-existent and, thus, so is its fiction. In a similar vein, Lynn Spiegel (1998) notes that children and adults can view programming and websites originally intended for the other without much encumbrance. Producers, programmers and media buyers recognize that mothers and government regulators are potential important audience members in addition to children and thus create their 'children's' product accordingly (see also Hendershot, 1998).

The question of what makes a space a children's space organizes the inquiry that follows. Drawing upon my own historical research on the children's clothing industry in the USA focusing on the 1930s, on contemporary academic treatments of children's geographies as well as on some preliminary observations of a few contemporary children's retail settings in the USA, the following effort concentrates on building an analytic of commercialized children's spaces. I pay special attention to teasing out how discursive versions of the 'child consumer' shape, and have been shaped by, spatially situated market considerations.

In no way intended to be an exhaustive treatment, the following discussion seeks to illustrate how commercial spaces constitute sites where

children's consumer biographies and subjectivities are made material. My approach differs from the consumer socialization perspective, pioneered by Scott Ward, Daniel Wackman and Ellen Wartella (Ward, 1974; Ward et al., 1977; Wartella et al., 1979), which emerged in the 1970s as the dominant paradigm in understanding the changing contours of children's involvement in the market sphere over the early life course. Consistent with an ages and stages template of growth, most consumer socialization research assumes an essentially linear trajectory of child development from less to more knowledgeable, from simple to complex information processors, from unskilled to skilled consumers (Gunter and Furnham, 1998; see also the review in John, 1999).

My work makes no such teleological assumptions. Rather, I take a cultural-interpretative position regarding children's consumer biographies, focusing on what John Sherry (1998) calls the emplacement of meaning. Emplacement refers to the ways in which markets and consumers together situate commercial meanings with regard to specific spaces and places, rather than apart from or in spite of them.

In this article, I outline some connections between children's geographies and biographies, making use of interesting and valuable research being conducted in the UK by social geographers. Next, I present historical material on the rise of commercial spaces created specifically for children, as found in trade discussion about the place of children in US clothing departments in the 1930s.<sup>1</sup> Finally, I offer the beginnings of an approach to thinking about children's consumption as emplaced, biographical practice by extracting some key generalities from the historical material and bringing them to bear on some contemporary children's market spaces.

#### CHILDREN'S GEOGRAPHIES AND BIOGRAPHIES

Children's geographies and biographies intertwine in ways more fundamental and perhaps more intense than is the case with adults. Who children are socially expresses itself in multiple ways by their relationship to and in space – e.g. if they have their own rooms, if they are allowed to go one place and not another and with whom, at what time, etc. Indeed, the very requirement of having to seek permission to move in and across certain kinds of space is emblematic of children's subordinate status. The spatial restrictions which adults experience, on the other hand, most often arise from status differentials other than those premised only upon an age-dependency nexus.<sup>2</sup>

As social geographer Gill Valentine points out in a number of studies, it is particularly an adult power to define right and wrong (i.e. safe and

unsafe) spaces for children (1996a). Adult power works to structure a child's spatial opportunities as well as children's strategies in negotiating with adults about their boundaries and limitations (Valentine, 1999). Children's movement through, and occupation of, public space is always enacted in reference to some order of regulation – be it parental, school-based or governmental in origin – as the 'street' has increasingly become a site coded as 'dangerous', inhabited by various sorts of 'derelicts' and 'deviants' and thus pre-eminently an adult space unsafe for children (Valentine, 1996b; see also Watt and Stenson, 1998). Consequently, children must perform their competence to adults, demonstrating that they can safely traverse the streets – a performance which is read differently according to gender, among other things (Valentine, 1996a; see also Scott et al., 1998). Valentine and colleagues refer to this power imbalance as 'adultist' to the extent that adults impose definitions on children whom they view as passive, dependent, incomplete or otherwise lacking in some way (see also McNamee, 1998; Holloway and Valentine, 2000).

Emergent from the interplay between adult and child is the iterative production of social space. Children, of course, do not passively accept impositions, spatial or otherwise, as a decade and more of thinking and research in the new sociology of childhood continues to emphasize (e.g. James and Prout, 1990; Jenks, 1996; James et al., 1998). Children battle with parents, contesting their constructions about just what kind of spaces exist outside the home. Young people find and make spaces beyond the surveillance of the adult world, often on the edges of neighborhoods, where they improvise and practice their relationships in forms of play, in the process creating local cultures of childhood (Jones, 2000; Limb et al., 2000; Skelton, 2000; see also Punch, 2000). Indeed, it is children's marginality – spatial and otherwise – as Matthews and Limb (1999) point out, which provides them with a commonality of experience. Children often understand themselves as children largely due to their self-recognized and recognizable subordinate status.

Most discussion about children's space does not consider consumption and market activity, while most discussion about children's consumer culture, despite some excellent, mainly historical scholarship (Kline, 1993; Seiter, 1993; Cross, 1997; Kenway and Bullen, 2001), is relatively devoid of an understanding of the analytics and dynamics of space. One recent exception is research on the commercialization of children's play space in the UK by McKendrick et al. (2000). They describe how parties and play spaces for children in the UK have come increasingly under the auspices of commercial planning and execution through the parents' use of, and

children's desire for, planned and branded activities at places like Kidz Kingdom and Play Zone, similar to the FunZone and Chuck E Cheese franchises in the USA. Stuart Aitken (2001) interprets these commercialized spaces as a direct reaction to the 'spectacles of fear' about dangerous streets. Planners build 'kid corrals' where children can be 'sequestered' away from not only the streets, but also from other children who might play too rough. Commercialized play, for Aitken, is part of a larger self-sequestering of the middle-class away from inner city moral pollution into gated, private communities (pp. 151–6).

Consumption weaves through space and place. It has or makes its own geographies, as Michael Crang (1998) notes, which are not dependent upon productive activities like retailing and distribution patterns (p. 120). My view, in concert with a number of others, treats the realm of consumption as a key social arena where identities are crafted, adjusted and deployed regarding the presentation of self and the positioning of self vis-a-vis others (Lury, 1996; Slater, 1997; Miller, 1998). Conceptualized broadly to include the purchasing, receiving, displaying or contemplating (i.e. desiring) of goods (Miller, 1998: 14–19; see also Bloch et al., 1989), acts of consumption always involve and invoke space through the enactment or performance of social identities which are not necessarily fixed or given.

Consumption, in this way, also weaves through one's biography, in the first instance, of course, as a child. From the baby shower to the proverbial child's first Christmas, from the kinds of toys children are given to the television shows they watch and are allowed to watch, the world of consumer goods permeates children's environs and surrounds them with the images and things requisite to acculturate them to that world. Similar to their spatial involvement, children do not have free reign over products. Parents, legislators, peers and manufacturers – in different ways and to different extents – exercise media censorship, sumptuary restriction and various forms of approval and disapproval which regulate children's access to, and posture toward, particular goods and perhaps toward the world of goods more generally.

Children's commercial selling spaces – i.e. those intended to appeal to children themselves, but which may also be inclusive of adults – implicate children's identities and biographies in a register different than those found along the continuum of allowable–unallowable–transgressive movement theorized by Valentine (1996a) and others. Commercial enterprises, to a far greater degree than most other entities, have given over different kinds of spaces to children, purportedly designed with them in mind, suited to their assumed and/or stated needs, wants, etc. Far from being mere 'corrals', child

market spaces, historically and presently, affirm and help create and recreate children as legitimate social actors in the ways in which they, perhaps paradoxically, address children as children. When coded and recognized as 'children's', market spaces thereby reassert and reaffirm a general distinction between children and adults.

Children of North America and Europe, and, most likely, elsewhere, have emerged as more or less fully adjudicated social persons in public culture over the twentieth century in large part by gaining a level of enfranchisement as consumers, i.e. through the medium of the marketplace (Cook, 2000). The view put forward here argues that any consideration given to 'the child' as creator and interpreter of meaning must include the market context of childhood. In no way separate, adjunct or subordinate to children and childhood, 'the market' stands as a third term alongside adult and child in the configuration of space, especially selling spaces, and in the emplacement of meaning.

#### EMPLACING THE CHILD IN THE 1930S

In the 1910s, there were few spaces for children per se in the US urban marketplace. David Nasaw (1985: 115–29; 1992) discusses how working-class urban children of industrial cities like New York spent their money and time in pool halls and nickelodeon theatres. In department stores and some hotels, as William Leach (1993: 215) points out, there were 'special' spaces set aside for children. Most of these were play areas where mothers could leave their children to be supervised by adults while they went shopping. 'Checking' one's children was part of the service department stores offered for decades (Benson, 1986: 82–91).

These areas offered more than an opportunity for children to play. They became commercial spaces often located next to toy departments. Some provided services like children's haircuts while mother was shopping (Leach, 1993). A 1915 *System* magazine article describes one store's arrangements:

In addition [to the large playroom], the store has several small rooms in various parts of the building devoted to the use of children. One of the larger of these rooms opens off from the children's clothing department. Nursery pictures hang on the white-tile walls, and there are toys for the youngsters to play with. . . . A door leads to a little toilet room that is fitted out with special child-size accessories.

Another room nearby is devoted to babies, and a nurse watches out for the youngsters while their mothers shop in the department. Parents . . . find these rooms particularly convenient, and an added 'reason why' for shopping at the store which provides them. (*System*, March 1915: 240)

Not just spaces, these were places for children that were scaled to a child's proportions and decorated with images and iconography of childhood.

The intent and appeal is clear: if one caters to the child, the mother's appreciation and business will follow. It is a dual appeal which can also be seen today in many advertisements for toys, breakfast cereals and the like. Where the educational/health/developmental appeal of any child's product is, so can be found the influence of 'the mother' or mother-surrogates like the State or advocacy groups (see Cook, 1995).

At this time, there were few infants' and children's clothing departments in department stores. Clothing was stocked by size, not by age. Children's shirts could be found in the men's or women's department; their socks in the hosiery department. In 1917, a Chicago infants' clothing manufacturer, George Earnshaw, hit upon and promoted the idea that infants and children should have their own separate, identifiable space in department stores. His reasoning centered around how best to cater to the purchasing agent for the family, the mother (Cook, 1995; see also Marchand, 1985; Benson, 1986). As I have outlined elsewhere in more detail (Cook, 1995), in Earnshaw's trade journal, the *Infants' Department* (a.k.a. *Earnshaw's*), he and staff writers made the case over the course of the 1920s for these departments to be stocked, staffed and physically located with the consuming mother, not child, in mind. By the mid-1920s, infants' and children's departments were beginning to appear on the retail landscape; by the end of the next decade, entire 'floors for youth' were part of the overall merchandising mix for department stores as well as for the newly arising discount stores (e.g. Woolworth's).

### **A change in/of perspective**

Mother appeal has remained constant in some form from the 1920s until today. The change in approach in the 1930s involved how the retail arena was transformed into a place built according to presumed views, anxieties and concerns of the child. As early as the 1910s, but increasingly over the 1920s and 1930s, children's wear retailers sought to offer services, goods and store atmosphere that appealed directly to the children.

One merchandiser of boys' clothing reported in 1920 to the trade

weekly, the *Dry Good Economist (DGE)*, that he increased sales by making the department attractive to the boys:

Immediately upon taking the department, I determined to make the children who came to it feel at home and to this end laid my plans in such a way that I would build up an atmosphere that would have particular appeal.

In the department proper, I established a number of small swings and put in other contrivances that children delight in. I further made arrangements for the older boys. With the purchase of \$10 or more I gave a subscription to the *American Boy*. I bought by lucky purchase several thousand Boy Scout knives at far below the Boy Scout list price and I sold these to every registered customer of the store at actual cost. (*DGE*, 29 May 1920: 81)

This merchant urges others to 'study the boys' ways' and to be 'sincere with the youngsters, to really like them and to show that you like them without any ostentation' (p. 81).

The grouping of clothing by age categories had brought with it problems not previously encountered. Retailers began to realize that children did not like being treated 'as children' and would not be favorably disposed toward their store and merchandise unless appeased with 'equal' treatment. A *DGE* writer discusses the gendered aspects of personhood and salesmanship in a story where a 'salesgirl' talked down to a boy by using 'baby talk.' The writer explains that neither mother nor boy was pleased with the treatment: 'Just as mothers and fathers want their little girl babies to be sweet and dainty so they want their little boy babies to be sturdy and manly – "real boys".' (*DGE*, 7 February 1920: 89). Boys' and girls' clothing sections should be segregated as early as possible, the writer continues, and no later than age two. For when a boy is 'treated like a little man', the infants' department will find it profitable (p. 89).

Gender and subordination are directly linked. They specify the kind of interpersonal relationship a salesperson should develop with each sex:

Salespeople for the baby boys' section should be chosen with regard to a slightly different angle than that needed by those who serve the baby girls. What was said already about the dignity and the desire for privacy for children is true, of course, for both boys and girls. But little boys particularly appreciate matter-of-factness in a salesgirl. (*DGE*, 7 February 1920: 89)

It is girls' wear which carries sales and carries the possibility of future sales with its greater variations in style than boys' wear. The finer distinctions and gradations within girlhood extended and elaborated these kinds of value.

Sales clerks and retailers echoed the virtues of this differential treatment for boys and girls. The buyer and merchandise manager for the children's department of L.S. Ayers & Co., Indianapolis told the *DGE* in 1921:

We treat the children as much like grownups as possible . . . And we find that it pays. It takes a special type of saleswoman<sup>3</sup> to please little girl shoppers, and to hold boys at all, as the latter are invariably bored to death with the whole process of shopping. (*DGE*, 19 November 1921: 231)<sup>4</sup>

The child as customer is the child as person. To treat her any other way threatens 'customer goodwill.'

The focus on the child's comfort and wants was to extend far beyond the confines of intermittent encounters with saleswomen. This attitude toward seeing and treating the child as a person, as a person-customer, became encoded in the physical layout of retail departments as merchandising itself in these departments gradually took into account the position, attitude and emergent culture of children and youth. Ultimately, it is the child's perspective – rather than that of the mother's – that becomes *institutionalized* by being incorporated into the physical structure of children's departments and floors.

As the idea of infants' departments caught on in the 1920s, retailers began to organize their other juvenile clothing along an age sequence. Many mothers and mothers-to-be also had children who were not infants, and shopping for them all in one general area made sense commercially and practically. Throughout the 1920s, *Earnshaw's* trade journal reported on the openings of infants' departments and the expansion of these departments into older children's clothing. In many instances, entire floors of the store came to be occupied with juvenile apparel and merchandise. A typical arrangement of the retail spatial allocation of juvenile clothing until the late-1920s basically follows the size ranges of the time: an infant's department to age six, then one large department for girls to the high school years (6 to 14, 15 or 16), and one for boys, who often shopped in or near the men's departments.

Actual departmental designations often originated from the studied observations of the interaction between children and parents by merchants.

For instance, *Earnshaw's* reported in 1926 on a 'Twixt-and-Tween' section which was started at the Charles Trankla & Co. store in Grand Rapids, MI. This section was 'devoted to the needs of the girls of twelve to sixteen, the twixt and tween age' (*Earnshaw's*, May 1926: 4365). Noticing a lack of business from girls of this age, the buyer decided to physically separate this section from infants' and children's. She reasoned that this type of girl was an 'independent and willful creature [who] felt herself too grown up to buy her clothes in the Infants' or Children's department' (p. 4365).

The buyer situated this section so that girls could shop without having the embarrassment of passing through the other departments. She located it 'immediately in the path of the young lady as she steps from the elevator. Here is displayed merchandise carefully selected for this . . . young lady so she must no longer report to the baby section when selecting her wardrobe' (p. 4366). The mother's convenience is consulted as well since she can shop for different ages of children in 'one neighborhood,' with the infants' and children's department located behind the 'Twixt-and-Tween' section.

Thus, the separation of age-graded sections took into consideration differences between age groups as much as the similarities within them. These sections, taken together, offer something of a gendered, spatial biography of commercialized childhood, designating an appropriate path to follow requisite for specific age ranges. It is a pattern which becomes a model for the design of juvenile clothing departments in the 1930s, and other child commercial spaces thereafter.

Lord & Taylor opened the 'Young People's Floor' at its Manhattan location in 1937. *Earnshaw's* reported that the floor plan was designed so that 'there are no abrupt jumps from one division to another.' The article explains: 'For the older girl sportswear leads logically into millinery and the In Be Teen Shop may be seen through the hat bar arch' (*Earnshaw's*, 5 May 1937: 127). The intended progression of the customer is informative. After disembarking from the elevators, the selection is clear: either the infants' shop on the left or the girls' shop on the right. They are separated from each other by large fixtures of the stock and packing rooms. The infants' shop is entered by way of the older child's section of coats and dresses with infant apparel and the layette room toward the back, so as to avoid leading a young child through these 'baby' spaces. The girls' shop illustrates a similar progression, coded by type of clothing. The lead is sportswear, connected with millinery. Both of these 'style' sections are adjacent to the 'In Be Teen Shop', where the 'more sophisticated', older girl can find appropriate garb.

In 1939, the Saks Fifth Avenue store in New York City and a Kerns store in Michigan each built entire new floors for juvenile wear which were

planned precisely with an idea of age–space progression in mind (see Figure 1). The intended customer, however, was different for each location. From an article written by one of the designers of these floors, we learn that

[c]hildren detest complication. They love and understand only those things which are direct and plainly marked. Thus not only a correct relation of departments is required but a simple, clearly defined one. As to location, it is certain that it is more convenient for the mother to make purchases for all her children on the same floor. Older children, however, are often reluctant to shop on a floor where 'all those babies' are shopping. (*Bulletin of the National Retail Dry Goods Association*, October 1939: 72)

With mother and child both in mind, the floors were constructed to place all juvenile wear on one floor, and to put the older children's clothing up front at the entrance.

This arrangement, the designers thought, could work in promoting the store. It also promoted the *idea* and *practice* of progressive, age-graded desire and consumption: 'The younger children on the other hand are delighted to see the older children shopping as they go through these departments, for all children want to be older than they are. The little boy and little girl seeing the big boys and big girls buying will long for the day when he [sic] too can come to these departments and buy' (*Bulletin of the National Retail Dry Goods Association*, October 1939: 72). The child as a customer, then, is to be developed through age emulation and a longing to be older, acquiring desire by observing an unmistakable and fine-grained age progression, objectified for her/his eyes, and through which he or she can eagerly pass.

The longing to be like older children – to be 'independent' and more of a 'person' – is exploited by designers by being grounded in the child's phenomenal experience of the retail environment:

It will be to this particular store that he [sic] will want to go, because he will have subconsciously developed the idea that here is really the only place where big boys and girls buy their clothes. In this way a valuable shopping habit is created. With the older children's departments located at the entrance end, the other departments follow in logical age sequence with the infants' department at the far end of the girls side of the floor. (*Bulletin of the National Retail Dry Goods Association*, October 1939: 72)

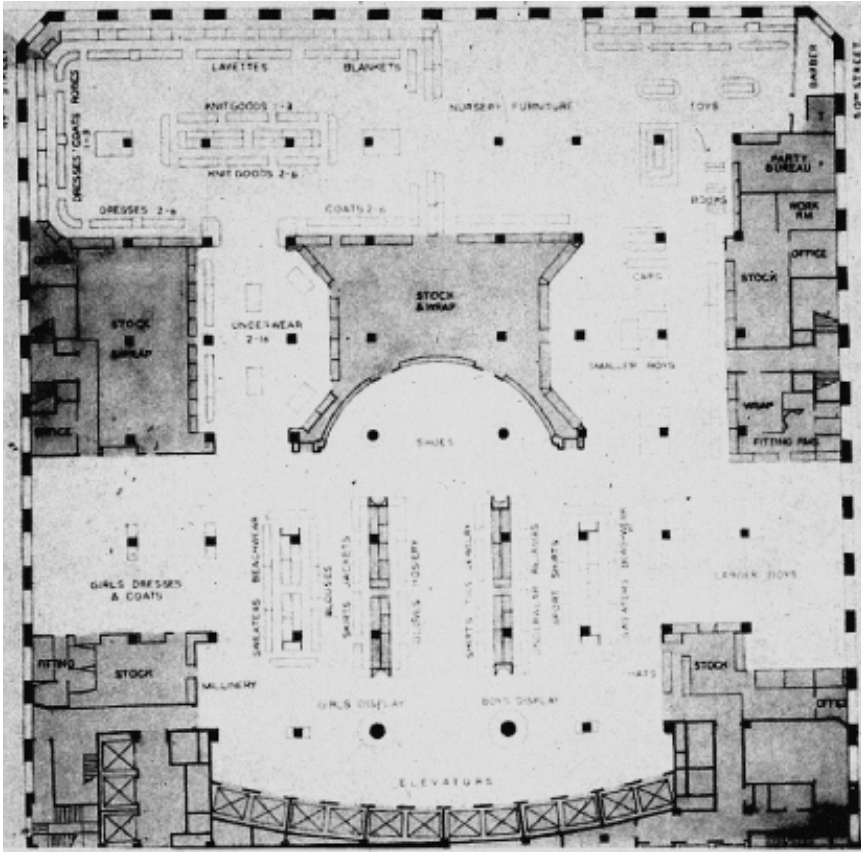


Figure 1: The Saks Fifth Avenue children's floor

The Saks Fifth Avenue children's floor promoted the *idea* and *practice* of progressive, age-graded desire and consumption through its spatial layout of goods intended for older children in front (bottom of map) to younger ones in the back (*Bulletin of the National Retail Dry Goods Association*, October 1939: 72).

Note how the imputation of children's perspective, agency and emergent autonomy are deftly turned into exchangeable values.

This space is an aspirational space, designed to invoke a longing which could be met only through consumption. The sequence allows stores to feature the 'more desirable' age-style clothing while hiding the 'less desirable' (i.e. clothing for younger children) in the back. They are defined as more and less 'desirable', of course, from the standpoint of the commercial persona of the child. Note that this sequence and the reasoning behind it

are opposite from that of the 'anchor store' in a shopping mall which draws the customer past the 'lesser stores'. This is a formula which continues today in clothing, toy and other retail spaces where kids of different ages might come into contact.

At Kerns in Michigan, where the management considered the middle-class child to be the main customer, the stock was exposed on low-hanging fixtures where 'children can see and reach the clothes', rather than being placed behind counters. Also, '[c]ounters and display tables have been made a convenient height for the children' (*Bulletin of the National Retail Dry Goods Association*, October 1939: 73).<sup>5</sup> Child-height mirrors and low fixtures for the child's own selection were complemented with color schemes thought desirable by children:

Most children's floors are painted in what the adult believes to be children's colors; that is, pastel shades, yet tests have proven that children prefer brilliant primary colors. For the younger children's departments at Kerns we have used brilliant yellows and reds, in the older departments less brilliant yellows and greens. (*Bulletin of the National Retail Dry Goods Association*, October 1939: 73)

The experts here position themselves on the side of the child, as knowing more about what children 'prefer' than their own mothers, and thus design for the child's perspective thereby adjudicating it, making it material.

The generic pattern and reasoning in these examples became standardized in the 1930s and grew in prominence, albeit unevenly, over subsequent decades. Some stores followed a similar organization and included toys and accessories as part of the merchandising mix; some expanded into 'junior' sizes for the girls (see, for instance, *Earnshaw's*, May 1930: 724–8). In the middle of the Depression, Wanamaker's of Philadelphia opened a 'juvenile floor' with 10 individual shops, using a graduated color scheme 'from palest yellow in the Infants' Salon to deep buff in the University Shop' (*Earnshaw's*, September 1936: 48).

Complementing the visual/spatial components of these stores were many varieties of iconography, services and names intended to solidify the child's identification with the store or department. Some stores included hobby horses for boys, characters like Peter Pan painted on the walls, clowns, animals and all varieties of images thought pleasurable to children. The manager of a children's wear department in Oakland, CA set up her floor so that 'ducks, squirrels, rabbits, bears and monkeys proudly stand guard at either end of the [clothing] racks' (*Earnshaw's*, June 1935: 62).

Others offered child-centered services, including playrooms and a child's barber shop (*Earnshaw's*, May 1932: 67). Increased sales reportedly followed these innovations. As the floors and departments became increasingly child-centered, they were given trendy and suggestive names to indicate the age range of the clothing with a touch of flair and uniqueness. Schuneman's of Minneapolis had the 'Hi-School Shop' (for ages 10 to 16) and the 'Gradster's Shop' (ages 7 to 14). Wanamaker's floor included the 'Early Americans' shop for toddlers, the 'Juniette Shop' for girls aged 12 to 16 and the 'Go-With-Er Shop' of girls' accessories.

These tactics extended and transformed the idea of play rooms, which were meant to hold children until their mother returned from shopping, to shopping areas for children. They offered youngsters a sense of propriety over the retail space which was decorated with 'their' colors and scaled to their size. The meaning or meanings of the goods were not somehow separate from the space they inhabited – they were emplaced, i.e. put into relation to each other or, if you will, in conversation with each other. The trend, emergent in the 1930s, was not to segregate children into a separate room, but to create a children's space that moved them from periphery to center, from dependency to autonomy, from object to subject.

#### ASPIRATION AND OWNERSHIP: SOME CONTEMPORARY SPACES

The story of the emerging children's spaces in US retail stores in the 1930s represents one thread of many comprising a larger story about the growing centrality of 'the child' in initially middle-class then virtually all families participating in modern, industrialized economies. Compulsory, age-graded schooling (Chudacoff, 1989), the decline of child labor (Platt, 1977; Zelizer, 1985), urbanization and the growing consumer-based economy (Marchand, 1985; Benson, 1986; Leach, 1993; Slater, 1997) together buttressed and made possible the kind of child world of spaces described above. What is distinct – and I believe revolutionary – about this early phase of children's consumer culture centers on how the *child's perspective* becomes institutionalized as legitimate authority within the context of commercial enterprise.

Pediatricity – seeing with children's eyes – has increasingly become the basis for commercial knowledge and action. Emergent in the 1930s, in particular, was a new middle-class morality regarding children and mothering which informed and layered upon the growing centrality of the child in the home. As Martha Wolfenstein (1955) observed, the valuation of children's impulses underwent reinterpretation and became understood as signs of what was good and right for the child, rather than as things which should be feared and controlled. Ellen Seiter (1993) similarly notes how, at

this time, the new *Parents* magazine emphasized that good parenting was about uncovering and catering to, not restricting, children's desires.

It matters not at this historical juncture whether merchants deployed children's 'actual' viewpoints or whether they imputed them by drawing upon personal knowledge and personal beliefs. It would be later, in the 1960s, when market research on children began in earnest, that researchers elicited children's voices and opinions about products (Cook, 2000). The key dynamic at work in the 1930s is the effort made to garner and employ the perspective of the child, in this case, a perspective which is spatially formed and informed. In the process, children have come to acquire the status of persons – of socially adjudicated subjects – in and through the mechanisms of market exchange. Not wholly responsible for children's changing status, markets and the market culture of childhood nevertheless have been necessary to its realization. One cannot readily imagine moving from the 'seen and not heard' Anglo childhood of the Victorian Era to the boisterous, in-your-face global childhood of electronic media society without a children's consumer culture to provide context and trajectory.

The spatially situated commercial biographies – the physical movements in selling space which enact changes in age status – have enabled children's consumption to move beyond the episodic level to that of a 'culture' by providing important intra- and intergenerational linkages. Children's commercial space arose and continues as an *aspirational* space, whereby desired and desirable identities and selves are on display for the picking. These may be thought of as a kind of window shopping for the 'post-traditional self' that Don Slater (1997: 83–8) describes as a self which not only chooses, but itself is understood as an object of choice among alternatives. The choice, however, is not lateral but always vertical where age ascendance, if not achieved in chronological years, can be pursued stylistically and perhaps behaviorally. Aspirational space and consumption simultaneously introduce children to new goods; it is a way of cultivating future markets (McNeal, 1992; 1999).

Children's commercial space, though produced and designed largely by adults, can also be thought of as children's *proprietary* space to the extent that the goods, music, images, decor and scaling can distinguish an area or store from where adults congregate. A 'children's space', in the end, is that space which children encounter and inhabit as theirs, regardless of adult adjudication (recall above how children create their own spaces in the dangerous streets). Children, however, recognize 'their own' commercial space essentially because it recognizes them, beckoning them with recognizable iconography, music and, often, licensed characters familiar from

television shows and music videos. These characters, sounds and images embody narratives – i.e. stories which they represent and which thus assist in ‘storying’ the retail landscape of the child.

Some contemporary examples will help illustrate and extend these points. The Toys R Us chain in the USA recently remodeled and redecorated all 1400+ of its US stores, the first remodel in 20 years (Bloomberg News, 2001). In contrast to its relatively undifferentiated design of the past with straight aisles and high shelving (D’Innocenzio, 2001), the new design creates special alcoves and sections to highlight age grade, gender and/or a particular category of merchandise. One store on the North Side of Chicago combines the toy store with its subsidiary clothing store, Kids R Us, and its baby store, Babies R Us. As one enters, the main aisle on the right side of the store is directly ahead. Immediately on one’s left is a new section, Animal Alley, which comprises a set of alcoves composed of shelves and wire baskets featuring stuffed animals readily reachable by very young children.

Continuing down the main aisle toward the back of the store, Kids R Us clothing racks line the right wall with a predictable older-to-younger, girl-to-boy layout, like that described above, which can be entered at many points. Babies’ and toddlers’ clothing and accessories are along the back walls at the end, in keeping with the age-dependency progression. As one reaches the back of the store, the back wall is lined with younger children’s licensed toys, such as Disney, Blues Clues, Playskool, Fisher-Price, among others, arranged by property in alcoves to ‘story’ each distinctive section. This arrangement is expected to draw young children and mothers through the store to the back and does not expose older children to this section. Along the back wall to the left and beginning up the left side wall is the Babies R Us section, where diapers, strollers, rattlers, bibs and blankets are at the ready for the mother who, if not drawn to the back by her younger children, will make it to this pastel color-coded section on her own. Again, there is no threat that older children have to pass through or enter.

Moving along the left wall back toward the front of the store is another of the new themed sections, the Imaginarium, where ‘educational’ and ‘fun’ toys like counting games and matching shape games exist on a not too strictly demarcated continuum that includes science kits and board games as well as some video games for children of early- to mid-grade school years.<sup>6</sup> This area features carpeted clear ‘stations’ where opened items can be played with and tested out, taking a cue from the interactive environment of Best Buy electronic stores and from the practices of smaller, neighborhood toy stores, giving the area a homey feeling in much the same way

that Wallendorf et al. (1998) describe. In the front left-hand corner stands the new IZone, where video games appealing to teens are held. Situated to completely divorce it from the rest of the store, IZone customers can go directly to the area and pay without having to interact whatsoever with young kids or mothers.

Taking up the most space in the middle of the store are two highly gendered sections. On the right side is the girls' doll and doll accessory section, heavily themed in pink, with several aisles of Barbie products, as well as other properties. Separated by a large wall, unbroken except for one small doorway, are products which stereotypically would appeal to boys from about age six to 10 or 12 – action figures, trucks, cars and play tool belts. Interestingly, the girls' section is configured in straight aisles, while the boys' section has various alcoves which offer a more differentiated space for age-related toys, the obverse of gendered clothing spaces.

The Toys R Us redesign encodes forms of differentiation first encountered on children's clothing floors in department and discount chain stores in the 1930s, combining both aspirational and proprietary aspects of children's spatial consumption. The principle of spatial interdiction – i.e. keeping separate the 'polluting' factors of gender and age (female to male; young to old) – informs much of the design as does the effort to create a sense of distinction and ownership within each age-gender market sector. The apparent 'developmental sequence' in store layout, i.e. an inherent, inevitable movement from one age to another, is tempered by the aspirational components of the space whereby children are encouraged to violate these planned movements. Indeed, one key purpose of retail space, children's or otherwise, is to put products and ensembles of products on display so as to make suggestive selling continuous with the store experience.

In a large toy store where nearly all products are meant for children's use, the spatial biography of consumption offers a nuanced, if discreet, set of markers to guide children and adults to the 'appropriate' sections. Not all stores, like Toys R Us, position themselves exclusively or primarily for children; most retail spaces are intended mainly for adult use. Some make use of the age-old practices of providing play spaces for children so parents, usually the mother, can shop with decreased distraction. Equipped with such things as desks, manipulation and memory games, these 'kid-friendly' spaces are not haphazardly pulled together by making an employee run to the nearest toy store. Their design has become an industry unto itself. Companies such as Play n Store, Koala Corp., Dann Dee Display, People Friendly Spaces and Keebee Play (all North American) service clients such

as the Blockbuster video store chain, McDonald's and Kinko's copies as well as drug stores, hospitals and local businesses (Markley, 1999; Santiago, 1999; Schwab, 1999).

Beyond these intently contrived spaces, the supermarket is perhaps the most regularly encountered adult-child hybrid commercial space. Well-known as most children's earliest shopping memory, the supermarket is where many children make their first consumer selections and their first purchases (see McNeal, 1999: 37-48). Food items are things over which children assert and are allowed a proprietary stake early on in life. Furthermore, they are given this sense of ownership and decision making not only by parents, but also by the retail space. Children have had a place in the modern supermarket at least since its widespread establishment in the 1950s (Humphrey, 1998: 68-9). The shopping cart with its seat for young children offers mothers a convenience and children a mid-shelf view of the goods, putting them in reaching distance of the child where they can, and often do, put items into the cart. Mini-shopping carts for children are but one part of 'shopping facilitators' that a large proportion of retailers, including supermarket retailers, are instituting to make children feel welcomed in their stores (McNeal, 1992: 114).

The widespread practice of placing foods and goodies within view and reach of children deliberately plays on the tension between relatively moneyless children and their parents, again mainly mothers, who wish to either please or appease the child (Guber and Berry, 1993: 117-18; McNeal, 1999: 81-2; Underhill, 2000). As places of high impulse buying where sometimes 60 to 70% of purchases are unplanned (Underhill, 2000: 101), supermarket managers and planners seek to put as many items within sight and reach of children who may make requests as often as 12 times per store visit (McNeal, 1999: 81), surely wearing down even the most resilient of parents who most often are shopping after work or on days off. The placement of candy, gum and snacks at child-eye level at the checkout enacts common merchandising wisdom of children's place in the scheme of consumption, and the recent advent of 'candyless checkout' lanes in some American stores speaks to some parents who are in revolt against practices which entice these sort of purchases.

At the supermarket, the struggle for, and expression of, children's consumer identities and status plays out in a dramaturgy involving personhood and desire. Children are 'represented' - or spoken to or beckoned - in this spatial nexus where self and market intersect early in the life course. In this adult-child hybrid arena, that which is 'children's' space exists in the interstices of adult-oriented coordinates and scales.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Childhood is distinct from other social positions in that it is always known and understood as a time of transition, by adults and children as well. More than a decade of sociological and anthropological research and theory on childhood also emphasizes the child's own creation of meaning in the here and now (James and Prout, 1990; Jenks, 1996; James et al., 1998) including, as we have seen, children's negotiation and transgression of spaces. The child is in transition but never merely so.

Children's market spaces acknowledge this dual quality of childhood. To the extent that they interlace the transitory aspects of childhood in their aspirational dimensions and the present-oriented aspects with their ownership or proprietary dimensions, these spaces speak with a child's spatial vocabulary. In no way 'adultist', they address children as persons. They offer children ways of locating – materially and bodily – their position with regard to key social indices like age and gender, particularly emphasized in this article, but include, of course, social class and ethnicity (see Chin, 2001). More to the point, a child's social location is knowable only in relation to others – where one has come from and where one appears or wants to be headed. Children's stores and areas map life movement, social movement and physical movement onto each other in a calculus of exchange value.

In the historical process of building children's retail spaces, retailers, designers and merchandisers have emerged as veritable commercial real estate brokers – cultural brokers – of childhood. In this way, adult power continues to structure children's spatial opportunities, as Valentine and colleagues contend. They have done so, however, not by ignoring children, but by engaging and taking seriously 'the child's' perspective, in particular by recognizing and giving structured opportunity for children's seemingly ever-present attempts to move out of subordinate status. Childhood may be understood by its 'affective oppositional stance' toward adulthood and those things adult, as Joe Kincheloe (2002: 80) puts it. It must also be recognized, however, that *within* childhood there exists a dynamic series of oppositional stances defining children of different age-genders in relation to each other, not only in opposition to adulthood, which are coordinated by goods and their selling spaces.

In this way, childhood itself is commodified. It acquires exchangeable values in that the very transitions between life stages create perpetual and market-necessary forms of scarcity. Children do not encounter the marketplace as if somehow separate and distinct, but come to realize self, others and perhaps the very idea of childhood itself through the commodity form, their identity and personal agency emplaced vis-a-vis

merchandising categories. Spatially embedded biographies of consumption have, for decades, hailed children as social actors and persons and, in the process, blurred the distinction between child and market. The fusing of biography – indeed, of life – with consumption in this way may thus be seen as a key historical underpinning for the emergence of the postmodern era where the boundary between person and commodity is increasingly irrelevant.

### Notes

1. The larger study, upon which much of the discussion below draws, examines the rise, growth and segmentation of the children's wear industry in the USA, 1917–1962 (Cook, 2004, forthcoming) and makes use primarily, but not exclusively, of trade materials such as journals and business reports, e.g. *Dry Goods Economist*, *System*, *Printer's Ink*, *Printer's Ink Monthly*, the *Bulletin of the Retail Dry Goods Association*, later known as *Stores*, as well as the founding journal of the children's wear industry, *Earnshaw's Review*.
2. For instance, restrictions on adults' use of space include those pertinent to one's occupation, those involving property ownership or those determined by legal restraining orders. One exception here is those restrictions on convicted pedophiles to stay away from young children.
3. These sales clerks in urban department stores at this time were most likely working-class (Benson, 1986). It is difficult to tell whether the advice given them to deal with children indicates a potential class difference in the treatment and view of children during this time, or whether a more general sales persona was being inculcated – or both.
4. In a similar vein, see also *DGE*, 29 May 1920: 81.
5. See also 'Craemer's New Youth Center Opened' (*Earnshaw's*, January 1942: 47) for another description of child-apportioned fixtures.
6. On themed environments, see Gottdiener (1997) and Davis (2001).

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