



Living on a building site: Young people's experiences of emerging 'Sustainable Communities' in England [☆]



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines experiences of young people (9–16) who live in new communities that are under construction. In the context of large-scale housing developments, built in England after 2000, it analyses various ways in which young people engage with life 'on a building site'. From ethnographic research in three unfinished communities, several inter-linked themes became apparent: how young people engaged with building sites in both aesthetic and material registers; how building sites could, paradoxically, constitute places for both safer play and of significant risk; how such sites could afford sociability whilst simultaneously representing foci for intergenerational tensions. Thus, the paper contributes to studies of architecture/urban design, geographical studies of childhood, and expands a recent call for critical geographies of construction sites. In particular, we argue for the significance of building sites as important, often-overlooked times and places where meaning-making and everyday routines are fostered and normalised in new communities.

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1. Introduction

The UK New Labour Government (1997–2010) introduced a series of large-scale housing policies to address the need for housing provision in England. Significantly, these were subsumed under the 'Sustainable Communities' agenda, formalised in the *Sustainable Communities Plan* (ODPM, 2003) and later *Sustainable Communities Act* (DCLG, 2007). The Sustainable Communities agenda represented what has been termed a 'holistic' spatial strategy (Raco, 2005, p. 333) in which diverse economic, social and environmental problems would be solved concurrently, through an 'urban renaissance' (Lees, 2003) that would aim to reinvigorate urban places and enhance their economic competitiveness. Subsequent policy documents tied together the master-planning of the urban environment (waste, ecology, water run-off) with architectural quality (setting environmental standards in housing design), managing the urban environment (and 'Cleaner, Safer, Greener' public spaces), citizen engagement and social inclusion (ODPM, 2002, 2003, 2005).

Whilst the *Sustainable Communities Plan* (ODPM, 2003) made provision for the regeneration of extant communities, significant attention was also given to the building of *new* communities. The urban-residential expansion that the Sustainable Communities Growth Plan entailed identified four strategically-located 'Growth Areas' in southeast England. The initial projections were that the four Growth Areas were to receive a total of 1.4 million new homes (IPPR, 2005). The research reported here was carried out in one of these areas, the Milton Keynes-South Midlands Growth Area (MKSM). In MKSM the original projection was of 169,000 homes to be built either as 'sustainable urban extensions' (new communities on the edges of existing urban settlements) or as new independent developments, sometimes termed 'eco-towns' (DCLG, 2009). Commonly, such developments were planned to contain upwards of 1000 new homes, shops, public community services and significant green and/or public spaces.

There has been considerable debate about the relative merits of the Sustainable Communities agenda and the definitions of social and environmental sustainability contained therein (for examples, Raco, 2007; Lees, 2008; Tallon, 2009; Cochrane, 2010). However, other than post-occupancy studies of domestic energy consumption (e.g. Gillot et al., 2009; Stevenson and Rijal, 2010), few studies have considered *residents'* perspectives of everyday life in new Sustainable Communities (for a key exception, see Hadfield-Hill, 2013). In this paper we focus on the experiences of young people, aged 9–16, growing up in new Sustainable Communities. We draw

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on data from a large-scale ethnographic study that investigated the everyday lives of 175 young people living in four different communities in MKSM. From the onset of the research, it was notable that despite over a decade of New Labour rhetoric about youth-policy and participation (Mizen, 2003) the concerns of young people as residents were largely neglected in policy documents and citizen engagement strategies surrounding Sustainable Communities. In the plan, young people are only mentioned four times; although play/playgrounds appear more frequently, it is always in the context of creating 'greener, safer' public spaces that will be more attractive to house-buyers (ODPM, 2003). Since children are, statistically-speaking, the predominant users of outdoor spaces in the UK (Schwartz, 2004), the lack of an explicit commitment to designing urban environments for children appears strange, but persists in subsequent policy and planning discourses relating to community-building in the UK.

As we will go on to show, particular aspects of Sustainable Communities implementation render the experiences of young residents of more than ephemeral concern. For over a decade, on-going building work and unfinished spaces have remained part of the everyday life of residents in our four case-study communities. This is due in part to their large scale; in part to the complex and often slow planning, legal and fiscal processes through which they have been constituted (see below); and in part to the historical timing of their development, which was planned and initiated before the global economic downturn in 2008. The economic constriction of the UK house-building sector – which occurred during our research – subsequently severely affected (and even stalled) the building of the four new communities in which we worked. Thus, the young people who took part in our project had spent a substantial proportion of their lives growing up on or in close proximity of building sites. In this paper, young people's experiences throw important light on the ways in which residents of new communities interact with building sites in the production of social meanings. Simultaneously, as we demonstrate, 'living with building work' entails the emergence of new everyday practices and (disruption to) everyday routines that *matter* to young people's lives (Kraftl and Horton, 2007, 2008; Kraftl, 2013). We argue that building sites offer a peculiar time-space in a community through which struggles over meaning-making are heightened and in which residents – especially young people – engage actively and creatively with the 'messy' materialities of architectural and urban forms.

Within the above contexts, taken together, the five empirical sections of this paper makes three key contributions to extant geographical literatures. Firstly, they exemplify and develops recent, 'nonrepresentational' geographies of childhood and youth (Horton and Kraftl, 2006), by opening out some of the diverse emotional and embodied styles through which young people engage with building sites. The paper pays particular attention to the 'messy' materialities of building sites and the ways in which diggers, dirt and ditches were enrolled into children's emergent feelings of belonging within their communities. Secondly, the paper combines two fields of geographical enquiry that have hitherto tended to be considered apart, despite important theoretical resonances: children's geographies and the geographies of architecture. Despite some exceptions, noted in Section 2, few studies have explored in detail children's engagements with architectural spaces. Thirdly, and most specifically, it offers a significant empirical response to Sage's (2013) recent, important call for greater attention by geographers to the everyday geographies of building sites (although see also Datta and Brickell, 2009). Through in-depth empirical work with construction workers, Sage's argument offers a broadly-conceived agenda for geographies of building sites, via engagement with contemporary construction industries, and the materialities and performativities of building practices. However,

despite a long, if patchy heritage of work on children's play in wastegrounds (reviewed in Section 2), and notwithstanding Sage's (2013) attention to construction professionals, there remain very few studies that examine the experiences of *residents* – including young people – who live on or very near building work. This latter contribution also goes some way to fulfilling the key aim of the broader research project on which this paper was based: to examine the experiences of young residents living in new, 'sustainable' communities in England. In so doing, the paper proceeds as follows. First, we review academic literatures to which this paper contributes, combining social studies of childhood with critical studies of architectural/urban forms. Second, we briefly introduce our research project, design and methodology. Finally, we present ethnographic data produced with young people about their everyday encounters with building sites.

2. Childhood, youth and (disordered) architectural spaces

2.1. Children's geographies in urban contexts

The first context for this paper is a rich seam of social-scientific research (not least in subdisciplinary children's geographies) about children's agency and rights in everyday life, recognising how they deal actively with the complexities and vulnerabilities of their social, cultural and material worlds (Christensen and James, 2008; Kraftl et al., 2012; Pells, 2012). Such acknowledgment of children's agency has afforded important critical analyses of adultist assumptions built-into urban spaces. Thus, an important body of work has been concerned with children's experiences of urban spaces (e.g. Matthews et al., 2000; Christensen and O'Brien, 2003; Karsten, 2005, 2011). For example, pioneering work as part of the 'Growing Up in Cities' longitudinal study gathered a wealth of material about how children experience urban neighbourhoods (e.g. Chawla, 2001) and suggested how researchers and policymakers could work together with children to improve and plan them. Recently, there have been several notable studies of children's lives, agency and im/mobilities in urban spaces (including Nordström, 2009; Karsten, 2011; Skelton and Gough, 2013). More broadly, several studies have illuminated the diversity of children's urban experiences (Gleeson and Sipe, 2006), in contexts such as play.

The present paper builds on the above commitment in childhood and youth studies to foreground children's voice and agency. However, it specifically develops studies of urban-dwelling young people in two key ways. Firstly, through attention to the manifold subtleties of the sensuous experiences, bodily movements and emotions of young people growing up in urban spaces (Christensen and O'Brien, 2003). Thus, childhood scholars have shown how agency is not a given but an 'effect' of alliances involving humans, texts, material artefacts (e.g. Prout, 2005; Kraftl, 2013) and contexts of power, social and intergenerational positioning (Christensen, 2003; Hopkins and Pain, 2007). Within geographical research, a proportion of this work has been positioned within nonrepresentational approaches to children's lives, which foreground embodiment, emotion/affect, everydayness and materiality (for overviews, see Horton and Kraftl, 2006; Colls and Hörschelmann, 2009). Recently, such approaches have been critiqued for obfuscating issues such as power and 'voice' in children's everyday lives (see Mitchell and Elwood, 2012; see Kraftl, 2013, for a response). In this paper, however, we seek to demonstrate that nonrepresentational concerns – such as engagements with the messy materialities of mud and emergent meanings gleaned through play on building sites – need not necessarily be divorced from issues that 'matter' to children (Horton, 2010). Indeed, later in the paper, we articulate how, for instance, children's attempts to welcome new families to their communities are *both* situated in their everyday, banal,

material engagements with building sites *and* expressive of their (limited) agency as citizens of new communities.

Secondly, this paper develops geographical scholarship about how children and young people subvert or play with elements of urban environments (e.g. Matthews et al., 2000). For instance, recent research on skateboarding and parkour has revealed how young people's bodily movements offer a platform to transgress power relations delegated, via design, to the built environment (e.g. Saville, 2008; Chiu, 2009). Similarly, emergent studies of children's mobility (Mikkelsen and Christensen, 2009) have critically unpicked cultural assumptions underlying contemporary notions of children's so-called independent mobility within built environments (Alparone and Pacilli, 2012). For instance, Mikkelsen and Christensen (2009) argue that children's mobility is rarely *independent*: given that children may be navigating their local communities with an array of friends, relatives, pets and other agents, Mikkelsen and Christensen raise a compelling argument for why there is no reason to presume that 'independent' mobilities are any more beneficial or valuable for children than more 'social' or accompanied forms of mobility. In many ways, these diverse strands of research find their lineage in much earlier studies of urban-dwelling children's play. In his classic book *The Child in the City*, Ward (1978) documented beautifully how children played in patches of left-over waste-ground deemed worthless to adults. Like many childhood scholars since, Ward's message was simple: that these spaces, and the experiences of those children, *may* be ephemeral, but that in any case they are meaningful and warrant attention in their own right.

This paper echoes Ward's work, and a line of subsequent attention to children's experiences of what Cloke and Jones (2005) call 'disordered spaces' – not least in repeated attempts to document children's play in all its richness and creativity. However, it differs in several important ways. Empirically, it differs through its focus upon contemporary policy and planning contexts where *building sites* (rather than wastegrounds) have become more enduring features of life. In addition, it offers an attentiveness to children's multisensuous experiences of place that, although not ignored by Ward and others, have come recently to be framed through nonrepresentational-geographical parlance. Finally, it offers an original contribution through a parallel acknowledgment of geographical research on architecture and, especially, recent calls to address a lacuna in terms of research on building sites (Sage, 2013). It is to this parallel literature that we turn next.

2.2. Geographies of architecture, geographies of building sites

The second context for this paper is represented by cross-disciplinary efforts to develop more nuanced approaches to built environments (Lees, 2001; Jacobs, 2006) that foreground the material and performative processes underpinning especially architectural spaces (Kraftl, 2010a; Jacobs and Merriman, 2011). Within disciplinary geography, this work has extended beyond political-economic interpretations of built forms that, it is argued, over-emphasised both their symbolism and the role of professionals in narrating meanings of built spaces (Lees, 2001). Rather, inspired by Actor-Network Theory and a 'nonrepresentational' turn in cultural geography, there has followed an attempt to de-centre architects, planners and other professionals to allow alternative stories to emerge (Kraftl, 2010b). Thus, several authors relate the diverse, changing constellations of human and nonhuman (bricks, pipes, cables) agents involved in architectural processes from design to demolition (Jacobs et al., 2007). Relatedly, studies have accounted for the everyday, embodied practices of inhabitation (Lees, 2001), and the affective atmospheres and emotions (Kraftl and Adey, 2008) that are central to the ongoing experience of built spaces.

Geographical work on architecture is, thus, relatively well-established (see Kraftl, 2010a, for an extensive review). However, as Sage (2013) points out in an important recent paper, few studies of architecture attempt to witness the diverse experiences of those people who *live* with building work. In other words, the majority of studies of architectural inhabitation are ostensibly post-occupancy studies (Jacobs, 2006) that chart what happens after the builders have left. Admittedly, many studies of architecture account for political and material processes of architectural construction (e.g. Kraftl, 2010a; Jacobs et al., 2007) as *part* of a theorisation of built forms that sees them as never-'finished' (Lerup, 1977). Yet, even with recent calls for 'ethnographies of construction' there is an insistent focus upon the architects and/or builders (Datta and Brickell, 2009; Pink et al., 2010; Sage, 2013) themselves, not those people whose *inhabitation* overlaps with the construction phase. At the same time, quite simply, geographers of architecture have been slow to attend to children's voices and experiences of buildings, despite isolated studies showing how they contribute to the 'atmosphere' of a building (Kraftl, 2006), participate in their design (den Besten et al., 2008), or disrupt attempts to visualise their presence in buildings (Thornham and Myers, 2012). Yet, neither these nor the other few studies that exist attend in any great depth to children's experiences of the *construction* phase of buildings. Thus, a key overall contribution of the five empirical sections that follow, especially to research on architecture, is that they attend to hitherto unacknowledged actors (residents, and specifically, young residents) in a particular phase of the life of built forms (construction) that itself has been neglected in social-scientific research.

In all, this paper brings together and makes contributions to three areas of literature that have tended to be kept apart. Firstly, it exemplifies and develops recent, 'nonrepresentational' geographies of childhood and youth (Horton and Kraftl, 2006), by articulating – especially in the first two sections of analysis – how young people's multisensuous engagements with building sites *matter*, to their lives and to some extent to those of older residents. Secondly, with its focus on building sites for residential housing, it combines research on children's geographies and the geographies of architecture. Thirdly, again with a focus on building sites, it offers a significant empirical response to Sage's (2013) recent, important call for greater attention by geographers to the everyday geographies of building sites – in particular with a focus on *inhabitants*, and not construction professionals.

3. Case study context and methodology

This paper is framed by the political-historical contexts in which Sustainable Communities have been built across England. In historical terms, the timing of the Sustainable Communities agenda was such that mass house-building bookended the global economic downturn of 2008. Their construction slowed down or stopped in many places as developers shed jobs, declined in profitability or filed for bankruptcy (PMI, 2010). This, combined with the complexities of master-planning processes in some communities, has meant that large swathes of land razed for immediate building have been left as semi-permanent patches of empty, waiting land. In other cases, houses and infrastructure have been left half-built. Thus, far from being an ephemeral, temporary feature of newly-built urban forms, or the wastegrounds of Ward's (1978) classic work, building sites have gained a particular prominence and (semi-)permanence that has rendered them important features of community life – especially to young people. A corollary of this observation is that it heightens a sense in which building sites *matter* in a way that throws into sharp relief the deprivileging of building sites within academic research because they have previously been deemed 'ephemeral' (Sage, 2013).

Within this context, the current paper is based upon a major three-year, interdisciplinary research project that explored ethnographically the everyday experiences of 9–16-year-olds living in Sustainable Communities. Couched in a collaboration of anthropologists, sociologists and geographers, the project had three aims: to understand young people's experiences and issues in new and rapidly-expanding urban communities in England; to explore young people's sense of belonging to their community and implications for their 'citizenship'; and, to inform the planning and design of new urban communities, and to foster young people's participation.

The project focussed upon four communities in MKSM, chosen for their differing urban environments and responses to the sustainable design agenda (details below). Young people were initially recruited via local primary and secondary schools in all four communities. Table 1 lists the research activities conducted in these communities: all work was subject to a detailed ethics review at the principal investigator's university with informed consent being obtained from all young people and their parents/carers, for all phases of the research. All ethnographic data were transcribed and analysed thematically using a single coding frame in NVivo. Given the historical-geographical context of house-building in the UK, and through analysis of our datasets, it became clear that building sites *mattered* to young people. Thus, from an overall analytical frame, a series of carefully-formulated codes relating to 'building sites', 'building work' and related terms were developed into key thematic codes for the present paper.

The remainder of this paper draws upon ethnographic data produced with the young people. The data presented here derive from three of the case study communities.¹ Each community houses over 2000 residents, with approximately 150 residents in each community falling into the age group covered by our research. Community 1² is a Sustainable Urban Extension directly adjacent to a large town in the Southeast Midlands. Outline planning permission was granted in 1997 for more than 1000 new homes, a community centre (now built), primary school (now built) and local shops. Community 1 has been vaunted as an 'exemplar' for sustainable urban growth because it contains several important design features, such as a system for managing excess water run-off, high standards of energy-efficiency and photovoltaic panels in most houses. A further key component was the complex, multi-stakeholder 'inquiry by design' process through which it was planned, and which led to a meticulous (but slow) master-planning procedure. At the time of writing, building work was still ongoing. Community 2 is a stand-alone new 'village', built on previously agricultural land, two kilometres from the nearest extant village and 5 km from the nearest town. Although construction began in 2003, Community 2 is nearer completion than Community 1, with 950 houses now built, a medical centre, community centre, several shops and a primary school. At the time of writing, however, some limited building work was still ongoing and many roads had still not yet been adopted by the Local Authority. Community 2 has been described as a 'Sustainable Community': the houses meet standards of energy efficiency, and there has been a significant attempt to make the buildings and public spaces look like a 'village'. However, it does not contain the kinds of 'exemplar' features of sustainable urban design as Community 1. Community 3 is a very large new suburb built on the edge of a large town in the South Midlands. It began in 2001 and will eventually contain over 3000 houses; house-building stalled in 2008 but, at

the time of writing, had begun to pick up again. It contains a primary school and a small neighbourhood shopping centre. There is significant green space, with pedestrian pathways separated from road traffic, in a style reminiscent of post-war New Town planning in Britain. Although built under the rubric of the Sustainable Communities Agenda, Community 3 is the least radical in design terms, with little to differentiate the development from other large suburban housing estates in the UK (i.e. mainly semi- and detached housing with gardens, car-oriented street design, standardised housing design).

4. Living on a building site: the experiences of young people

For more than a decade the presence of building work has been a significant feature of everyday life in the three communities. From residents' perspectives, building work manifests itself in: the daily presence of workers and machinery, with their associated dirt and noise; large patches of land cleared several years ago and awaiting development; fenced-off parcels of land, some shielded by advertising hoardings; un-adopted roads with raised drains and roads only partly tarmacked; ongoing infrastructure work by different utilities companies. The sheer scale and complexity of the communities described above mean that residents experience all kinds of delays, intermissions and absurdities, such as land parcels being cleared but becoming overgrown several times, houses left half-built or roofless for years, and lengthy disputes between stakeholders over responsibilities for community infrastructure. Thus, whilst we did not quantify how many young people routinely *played* on building sites, *all* of the young people in our research had routinely lived with building work, some for nearly a decade. Drawing principally upon semi-structured interview data, supplemented by some observational material and extracts from guided walks, the rest of the paper turns to young people's experiences of living with ongoing building work. We examine five key, inter-linked themes: the aesthetics of messiness and dirt; play, materiality and emergent meanings; children's play as presumptive generosity; building sites and 'risky' materialities; ownership and inter-generational tensions. In order to provide a richer sense of how these themes cross-cut in individual young people's everyday lives, our analysis recounts the experiences of selected research participants in several places.

4.1. *Is it a village? The aesthetics of messiness and dirt*

The young people who took part in the research had moved with their families to live in communities that promised *new* houses in *new*, attractive, urban-village-style environments. In this context the unfinished character of communities, with the mess and dirt created directly by building work, contrasted starkly with the selling-point of Sustainable Communities: the meticulously master-planned, 'safer, greener' ideals (ODPM, 2003). For many young people, the ways in which developers operated as the communities continued to grow was a daily issue. Young people described how pieces of wood, bricks, mud and dust were common features left on roads and pathways. Some young people complained that construction workers did not clean up when they had finished work. Ella described the effect of such remnants thus:

Ella^a Maybe [bits of wood] fell out of the cars or something, I'm not sure but, but the builders, where they're building it's really muddy and everything but afterwards they tend to clean up and if they, ooh, if they don't, [...] it's like, how muddy it is.
(12 year-old girl, Community 2)

^a To protect the identity of our participants, all names are pseudonyms.

¹ Community 4 was not included in the analysis for this paper because it had been completed when research was undertaken and experiences of living on a building site did not form a key theme for data collection.

² For ethical reasons, we are not disclosing the names of our case study communities. We will refer to them as Community 1, Community 2 and Community 3 throughout this paper.

Table 1
Overview of research project discussed in this paper.

Participant observation	30 weeks of observation in each case study community: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participant observation, with continuous field diaries kept whilst working in local schools, youth groups, community events and everyday spaces
Four semi-structured interviews	175 young people participated in a programme of up to four interviews: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews lasted 20–90 min and covered the following themes: 'everyday spaces and routines'; 'mobility and risk'; 'citizenship and participation'; 'sustainability'
Guided walks	51 of the young people led researchers on tours of key spaces within each community: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guided walks were led by individuals or friendship groups • Conversations were recorded and participants took photographs en-route
GPS activities	90 young people in communities 1 and 2 participated in a week-long GPS activity ^a : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants were given a GPS device for 1 week to record daily mobility patterns • kmz files of 'tracks' were downloaded and mapped using ARCGIS • Participants took part in a post-GPS week interview, to discuss maps produced via the GPS activities

^a Since this paper does not draw upon data from the GPS component of the project, this method is not discussed in further depth here. For a detailed account, see [Mikkelsen and Christensen, 2009](#).

Having lived in the community for just over a year, Ella's house was in a part of the village which had not yet been completed; she envisaged that unfinished roads, mud and debris would be part of her life for a long time. Meanwhile, Daniel was concerned that debris left behind by the construction workers affected the animals grazing in neighbouring fields:

Daniel We do [go to building sites] just to see what's going on, but sometimes there's like, there's like these black pipes in the middle of the road and just where they've chucked it over the fence and there's horses right next to them [...] it's really not a very good environment for them. (10 year-old boy, Community 1)

The accounts of Ella and Daniel illustrated the views that many young people harboured about the aesthetic 'messiness' of the building works, the ways in which it affected inhabitants and degraded the local environment. From their perspective, debris in the form of 'mud', 'wood' and 'pipes' were literally *out of place*. In this vein, Martin described how building work 'ruined' the expectations that new residents had of their communities as pristine, aesthetically-pleasing environments.

Martin There is construction now. It's kind of ruined the view, a big building, the field makes it look really good but when they put a building on, do you know the building, it's going into the field because it's going like quarter into the field.
(ten-year-old boy, Community 3)

Other young people sought to integrate their observations of the 'messy' environment into a broader understanding of the community where they had come to live. In Community 2, which, as we described earlier, had been built in a neo-traditional, 'village' style, Billie raised the possibility that the roads had been deliberately left unfinished to make the community appear more 'like a village'.

Billie It's just trying to make it village-y isn't it? [It's not been] tarmacked yet, they've still got raised drains and stuff. (eleven-year-old girl, Community 2)

However, whilst building work clearly mattered – aesthetically – to many young people, it also became clear that such work became readily incorporated into the normalities of daily life. For instance, Abbie was typical of the majority of our respondents who found it difficult to imagine what everyday life would be like to *without* building work:

Int. What do you think about all the building work that's still going on because you're living opposite a building site aren't you really

Abbie Erm, I don't really know, I can't really hear it or anything so it doesn't really make any difference and like I've been there for coming up to three years now and you get used to it, like it's just, I think if it wasn't there I'd sort of get a bit confused and wonder where it was.

(12 year-old girl, Community 3)

As we have shown above, young people viewed the messy materialities of building work from an aesthetic perspective and engaged in an ongoing classification of messiness as 'out-of-place'. Alternatively, 'messiness' became integral to their conception of the community as a village. Moreover, as Abbie's account indicated, building sites could become an unspoken, habitual element of everyday life – ambivalently present and absent such that they don't "really make any difference". Thus, young people's aesthetic judgments corresponded to an aesthetic hierarchy – not so much of 'finished' versus 'unfinished' spaces, but of more and less acceptable forms of *mess* that either made their community feel more "village-y" (Billie) or "ruined the view" (Martin). We might hypothesise that such aesthetic categorisations are influenced by pre-existing, adult aesthetic norms (for instance, of what a rural village should look like); however, our data neither prove nor disprove this assertion. More tellingly, such empirical details demonstrate how the materialities of un-finished spaces were entangled in broader processes of children's learning about, navigating around (literally and figuratively), and creating *meanings* in their communities, some of which were articulated through an aesthetic register ([Horton and Kraftl, 2006](#); [Christensen et al., 2011](#)). As we will go onto show, however, children and young people's experiences of the messy materialities of building work were far from confined to aesthetic judgments.

4.2. *Play, (messy) materiality and emergent meanings of unfinished spaces*

We have shown elsewhere that young people played in and used outdoor spaces extensively in the new communities ([Horton et al., forthcoming](#)). This is a significant finding against the backdrop of repeated claims that children's independent mobilities have declined in Britain in recent decades ([O'Brien et al., 2000](#); for a critique, [Mikkelsen and Christensen, 2009](#)). This may lead to the conclusion that new, Sustainable Communities – and the

building sites that characterise some parts thereof – are well-suited to young people's use of outdoor space. Certainly, in young people's accounts, 'building sites' featured noticeably among their most preferred places to go for play and sociability. In this section, in contrast to the aesthetic judgments discussed above, we attend to the embodied engagements of young people, in the course of their play, with the messy materialities of building work. Broadly speaking, from our observations, young people interacted with the building materials in several ways: playing with builders' sand in various locations; crouching down, touching, feeling and building dens and other impromptu play structures using abundant remnant materials; using discarded construction materials, such as boards, planks and broken construction signs, for games, including biking and skateboarding (compare Chiu, 2009). In the rest of this section, we provide some more detailed examples of these kinds of material engagement with building sites.

Ethnographic observations of younger children revealed how they experienced 'un-finished' spaces as both safe and benign (although this argument is complicated in Section 4.4). For example, 9 year-old Rachel described a particular area of Community 1, where she lived, to which she took her three-year-old-brother to play: a tarmacked space which had been 'temporarily' blocked off by the developers from vehicle use due to the un-finished nature of the surrounding roads. This space, she told the researchers, "is a good place to play". Rachel accompanied her younger brother to the 'un-finished' space where they could be safe to play ball games. In particular, she and her brother liked to play catch with a ball in this space, precisely because it was closed off from car traffic. She told us how playing similar games – especially with her very young brother – was very difficult in other parts of the community due to speeding cars.

In another example, Zed and Daniel told the field researcher excitedly about a parcel of land, which young people had named 'Mud Hill' during a 'guided walk' where they identified important places in their community.

Zed You know what Mud Hill is don't you? Well it's a bit wicked, Mud Hill we made it in, last year, about a couple, five months ago, basically we, okay, we come out of our houses, my house, oh where is my house? Come out my house yeah, I go to Daniel's on my bike, he comes out, we drive through here.

Daniel We have to stand up (on our bikes) and you lean back so [demonstrates]

(11 and 10 year-old boys, Community 1)

The researcher later visited 'Mud Hill' together with the young people. 'Mud Hill' was characterised by a slope, mud and weeds, and the children had gone to considerable effort to create a bike ramp. To an adult observer the area might be viewed as an un-used messy and wild space; nevertheless, this site was identified by young people in the community as a particularly 'good place to play'. Daniel and Zed's experience of spending time at Mud Hill was interwoven with the shared bodily habits that surrounded playing there – the route they always took to get there and how they would keep their balance ("lean back") when they were riding their bikes.

In another community, James described a favourite space with piles of mud behind his school, and the enjoyment of exploring leftover materials on building sites. Similarly to Zed and Daniel, James spoke with affection about the everyday routine of "normally going" to the piles of mud behind the school in what for him is a relatively unremarkable act of "just walking" the dog. Once again – as per our previous observations about aesthetics – building sites become entangled and normalised with/in young people's everyday routines:

James There's like a big building site that there's nothing done to it, just big piles of mud over there behind the school.

Int. Okay, is that somewhere you remember particularly or?

James Yeah, because we normally go there a lot.

Int. Okay, to do what?

James Just to like take the dog for a walk. And go on adventures.

(10 year old boy, Community 3)

There was significant *diversity* within children's play: from playing catch in empty parcels of land to riding bikes on "Mud Hill", from going on "adventures" to making dens and much else besides. In a sense, these examples echo earlier work that has highlighted the ways in which children play creatively in spaces 'left-over' by adults (e.g. Ward, 1978). Our study shows that children will still play in the ways that, since the 1980s, have been romanticised as part of a forgotten past – when they have the opportunity to do so. Moreover, in light of contemporary theorisations of non-representational children's geographies (Horton and Kraftl, 2006), young people's engagement with building work could be seen as a series of detailed micro-scale interactions that were embodied, affective and performative. Significantly, however, the building-sites were not the post-industrial wastegrounds surveyed by Ward, nor the rural hideaways that have escaped colonisation by urban development (Cloke and Jones, 2005). Rather, these spaces can be seen as a repertoire of messy *spaces-in-waiting* developed as part of *deliberate* attempts to build new urban communities. Strikingly, patches of soil like "Mud Hill" are constitutive of the multifaceted *newness* of new urban places – it is just that a combination of factors has led to building sites becoming rather more enduring features than were originally planned.

Taking the above examples together, a further feature of young people's material engagement with construction sites was how their play and socialisation therein formed part of the gradual allocation of *meaning* to places in their newly-emerging communities. This process was visible in the naming of "Mud Hill" and the ways in which young people laid claims to dens or other niches in the urban environment (compare Matthews et al., 2000). The messy materialities of playing (including naming and claiming) on building sites are part of broader cultural processes of young people's place-making and making themselves at home. These observations build on earlier work by Christensen (2003) that argued for the importance of understanding children's lives as formed through processual relationships in which personal biography, intergenerational affiliations and growing-up are interwoven with the use and meaning of the physical environment – in our case, foregrounding the role of 'un-finished' physical environments within that relationship.

4.3. Children's play as presumptive generosity

As noted by play theorists, play can be seen as central to the performative practices of meaning-making in children's daily lives, with broader repercussions for the social lives of communities of all ages (Gill, 2007). In this light, it is our contention that playing on building sites was intrinsically linked to the negotiation of sociability in our case study communities, as these three separate conversations from Community 1 illustrate:

Colette Yeah, it's really good but at the minute it's pretty mucky because of all the building, because they're still building.

Sarah Yeah, there's been two or three people that have just moved in last week.

- Colette But he doesn't play out much but the new people, there's this little girl down the lane but we ain't knocked for her yet because they ain't settled in and they've still got moving in to do so, because we keep seeing lorries of stuff coming down.
- Int. So do you have to do, like wipe your feet all the time then?
- Colette Pretty much and take our shoes off on the mat. That's our rule.
(11 year-old girls, Community 1)
- Jim I can't see where my, if my friends are on the field anymore, couple of things [new buildings] in the way. I have to, we have to, we have to drive all the way into the car park then look across.
- Int. What, so before did you used to just see if they were playing?
- Jim Yeah [...] we used to look over here and see if friends are there or not.
(10 year-old boy, Community 1)
- Int. What about there's a wooded area [...] have you ever been in there?
- Amy Yeah.
- SHH Okay, so how would you say that space makes you feel?
- Amy Get togetherish, if that's a word [laughs]
(10 and 11 year-old girls, Community 1)

The discussion between Colette and Sarah is striking because the routines they employ to deal with mud are entangled with what Jane Bennett (2001, p.131) calls a kind of presumptive generosity: "of rendering oneself more open to [...] other selves and bodies and [being] more willing and able to enter into productive assemblages with them". That is, these young people were sensitively attuned to the material *and* social rhythms of living in/moving-into a new community (Prout, 2005). They had agreed "rules", both about how they dealt with mud, and about when it would be most appropriate for them to knock on the door of a new family to welcome them. Our argument here is that such presumptive generosity is an ongoing socio-technical performance. This performance is negotiated within the *material* dynamism of the built environment that gains a particularly pressing temporality during the construction phase (compare Jacobs, 2006; Sage et al., 2011): as houses are built on land; as Jim has to find new ways to find out whether his friends are playing out as new building work now blocks the view; or as Millie and Amy interpret a community's gradually growing green spaces as a place gaining an affective atmosphere named 'get-togetherish' (compare Kraftl and Adey, 2008).

4.4. Building sites and 'risky' materialities

Young people's experiences of building sites are complex and in some cases ambivalent. Thus, as well as more positive opportunities for play and sociability in what were perceived to be the 'safer' spaces of building sites (discussed thus far), young people's accounts also emphasised particular *risks* of living with ongoing building work: including trips caused by piled construction materials, falls from raised kerbs or ironworks, and punctures to bicycle wheels caused by unfinished surfaces. Apparently ephemeral, these risks can be added to dangers that children identify in ostensibly 'finished' urban spaces (Nayak, 2003). Indeed, the details of the embodied engagements of children with their surroundings add further empirical richness to previous research on risk and parenting (Backett-Milburn and Harden, 2004; Pain, 2006) and chil-

dren's risk management (Christensen and Mikkelsen, 2008). The quotes below illustrate young people's experiences of risks associated with their mobilities around their communities:

- Becky I went past that corner to get out, caught my, the thing caught my leg, the electric scooter caught the wood corner bit, went like that, and fell and scrapped all my lips and I was bleeding and crying, like and then there was blood everywhere.
(10 year-old girls, Community 1)
- Amy Sometimes, if we take walks with some of our friends that come and visit us and they have little children they, if they walk like close to the edge [of the pavement], like sometimes they, their foot goes off and then you scratch your ankles and stuff because they're so high [the final layers of tarmac on the road have yet to be added].
- Int. Do you think the streets are good to cycle on?
- Daniel Yeah.
- Zed Yeah, but some of them have bumps in, it really spoils it, it can just, ruins our tyres. Remember when I got a puncture
(11 and 10 year-old boys, Community 1)

A particularly vivid example of the risks involved in interacting with building sites is illustrated in the extract from a field-note below. It describes how a young person, when climbing over the developers' screening boards (he had been into a space screened off from the public), jumped down and pierced his foot with a building nail, a painful reminder of the risks of playing around building work:

As the bus pulled into the square I saw a boy (approx. 16) jump down from the screening boards, [when he hit the ground he almost instantly] rolled around on the ground. A nail had gone straight through his trainer and into his foot. Fortunately, one of the Scout leaders came to the rescue as he is a trained paramedic. He dressed the wound. The boy was subsequently taken to the local Accident and Emergency unit by his mother (Extract from field note diary, 23rd June 2010).

From our discussions with parents and young people, it transpired that building sites figured repeatedly in judgements that parents had to make about which places in the new community they considered safe and which they considered dangerous. Access to specific parts of the village where building work took place figured more prominently in the ongoing negotiations between parents and children than locations where building work was not a routine feature (see also Pain, 2006). In addition, local police and PCSOs routinely monitored and safeguarded the boarded off building sites and would thus attempt to hinder young people's free access to these patches by making them move on. Thus, ongoing negotiations around the riskiness of building sites were as much a feature of everyday encounters with building work as the materialities of play and sociability discussed previously.

4.5. Ownership of temporary spaces and inter-generational tensions

Beyond the negotiation of risk, the material and social processes involved in the design and construction of Sustainable Communities have led to extensive intergenerational tensions. Such tensions surround the uncertain status and ownership of the very 'greener, safer' public spaces that were so central to New Labour's Sustainable Communities agenda. But they figured especially during the long construction phases and as a result of the complex

administration of Sustainable Communities: at different temporal phases, responsibility for the management of public spaces could shift (for instance, from a developer to the Local Authority). Daniel's story, shown below, is indicative of a whole series of tensions that surrounded *seemingly*-public spaces in our three case study communities.

Daniel They [younger children] go in there [green space] all the, like all the time, you can't get them out of there and they're always, they're like, they build swings in there and they make their dens but then there's this really funny bloke, he moved [...] here and, and he came and told them off and was like that's private land you're not allowed to play in here. And we were all like weren't you a kid once?
(10 year-old boy, Community 1)

There was no clear indication (in situ) of whether the plot referred to above was indeed privately-owned. Thus, Daniel is describing an example of the kinds of negotiations that go on almost daily as residents try to work-out whether particular places should be for children's play (or not) and as adults attempt to assert their authority over the use and 'ownership' of particular community settings. This was also the case in Community 2, where it was not clear whether some small parcels of grass were for public use, for use by residents of immediately proximate houses only or, indeed, whether they were actually long-term spaces-in-waiting that would be built upon at a later date. For, in one case, an area of mown grass that for a long time seemed to be for public use, and which children used for play, was eventually the site for several new houses. More broadly, though, these brief examples indicate that building sites were entwined within, and in some cases central to, emerging social (and especially intergenerational) tensions within new, Sustainable Communities (Hopkins and Pain, 2007).

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have prompted more detailed, empirical reflection upon the new urban forms that have been developed under the auspices of the UK Government's Sustainable Communities agenda, with regard to the experiences of residents of such communities. A key contribution has been to present empirical evidence of young people's experiences of life in three Sustainable Communities. Given the enormity of this aim, given the context of a compromised housebuilding sector at the time of our research, and given the lack of attention to building sites in most geographical studies of architecture, we have focussed on children and young people's experiences of building sites. Through detailed empirical reflections upon ethnographic data produced with young people, we have shown young people as a key source of multi-sensuous, embodied understandings about building work. From our ethnographic research we know that at least half of our participants spent considerable time around building sites, engaged in diverse activities: playing catch, making dens, cycling on large piles of mud, walking past them, hanging out near them, and engaging in struggles with adults around their right to play on patches of land whose status was uncertain. Meanwhile, *all* of the young people in our study lived routinely with building work, and commented on how that work, and attendant noise, dust and visual presence, were incorporated into their everyday lives. Indeed, the very material stuff of building sites – especially mud – became folded into the routines of their daily lives to the extent that some young people found it difficult to imagine life *without* building work.

We hope that our empirical findings will offer a robust platform for continued inter-disciplinary dialogue between studies of child-

hood and architecture/urban form. This paper has therefore sought to make some broader, conceptual points that cross-cut these literatures. Firstly, we have shown how mundane, everyday, embodied, material interactions of young people with building sites form part of broader processes of meaning-making in new communities. We argued that 'messy materialities' of the building site were integral to childhood experiences of play, risk and sociability (compare Cloke and Jones, 2005; Prout, 2005; Taylor, 2011). Simultaneously these materialities became enfolded into everyday routines through which meanings of new architectural forms were worked-out (compare Lees, 2001; Jacobs et al., 2007) – for instance, how parents and young people constructed and negotiated knowledge about which places in a community were 'safe'. We have emphasised that young people's engagements with building sites are not merely confined to the material register. Rather, as Jacobs (2006) highlights so beautifully, built forms are always-already social-and-technical processes in which the seemingly obdurate thing-ness of pipes, cables and mud become intertwined with multiple legal, fiscal and political frameworks. Specifically, as we argued briefly in relation to social tensions around the ambiguous ownership of public spaces and young people's play therein, generational struggles and tensions about 'ownership' relate to wider debates about land ownership and local planning, as well as contemporary views of young people in public spaces (Karsten, 2005). Our final contribution has been to present a compelling reason for an academic focus on building-work from the perspectives of residents, especially important given the context of renewed commitments to large-scale housing development in the UK from 2012 onwards.³ Building sites – especially when they endure for years – offer a particular time and space in the life of a community through which struggles over meaning-making are heightened and in which locally acceptable everyday routines are (provisionally) worked-out. Moreover, they also constitute a time and space where residents – especially young people – engage actively and creatively with the 'messy' materialities of architectural and urban forms.

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³ See, for instance, Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg's speech on 22nd November 2012 to the National House Building Council, outlining UK Government commitment to investment in large-scale housing projects (<http://www.dpm.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/news/deputy-prime-minister-s-speech-national-house-building-council>, last accessed 15th January 2013).

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