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# On Lines, Place-making and Children's Play: an Exploration of Street Life in the Netherlands

**Jeroen Vermeulen**

## **Abstract**

In this essay the author explores the diverse ways in which children are creating places for play in the streets of the city of Utrecht in the Netherlands. More specifically, the focus of the essay is on the lines that children actively draw in place-making for play and on the meaning of lines that have been drawn for them as part of the design of playgrounds in streets. The written and visual observations about children, places and lines are the result of ethnographic inquiry.

*To be a place, every somewhere must lie on one or several paths of movement to and from places elsewhere. Life is lived, ...along paths, not just in places, and paths are lines of a sort.*

—Tim Ingold, *Lines*, 2007, p.2.

### Chalk Lines

One summer's day, during the 2012 London Olympic Games, three nine-year-old boys were drawing lines with colored chalk on the street in front of my house. They drew long lines that went all the way into the next intersection. The boys tried to make straight lines but the friction of the chalk on the surface of the asphalt made their long lines shiver, instead. They drew four long parallel lines, one slightly longer than the others, and then capped them with short lines, forming a long rectangle. The lines became three lanes. Finally, the boys wrote the numbers 1, 2, and 3 at the start of each lane. Watching them work, it became clear that they were drawing a racetrack; they were up for a running contest, the one hundred-meter sprint. Drawing these lines, the three boys were simultaneously playing and making the street a place to play. They were creating a surface distinct from the street itself, a superimposed playground. While their play was regularly interrupted by passing cyclists and cars, it didn't seem to bother them much; they played along with the rhythm of street life. Place making, by means of drawing lines and playing with them, was woven into the other activities on the street. Rather than creating a closed space to play, the boys drew a place that became part of the street.

Children use various kinds of lines to define their places as well as their play, and place-making activities such as these are the focus of this essay. How do children use lines in place making? What are the differences between their play with lines they draw themselves, and their engagement with pre-designed lines? My purpose here is to explore children's street play and their use of lines in place making in order to add to our understanding of the development of contemporary street life in Western cities. The inspiration comes from the seminal work of anthropologist Tim Ingold (2007) on lines and life. Throughout this essay I will refer to some of his ideas in the discussion of my observations about children playing in the streets of the city of Utrecht in the Netherlands.

### Line of Thought

Streets are diverse places and streets are places of diversity. The call for papers of this special issue on City Kids enticed potential writers with the beautiful line from the Bible's Book of Zechariah: "And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing" (Zechariah 8:5). The New Jerusalem envisioned by the prophet Zechariah is a city of children, both boys and girls, playing in its streets. But children are not the only ones. As the preceding line says: "There shall yet old men and old women dwell in the streets of Jerusalem, and every man with his staff in his hand for very age" (King James Bible). Zechariah's streets are diverse in terms of the people there as well as the activities taking place: dwelling as well as playing, children as well as adults. The Dutch urban geographer Lia Karsten (2005: 281), reflecting on the play of children in the streets of Amsterdam in the 1950s and early 1960s, writes: "Children used the outdoor space of the street for many different activities, and urban public space was regularly appropriated for their own games. They built tents and even huts on the pavement and defended these against intruders of all ages. Playing in the streets with few toys or other means generally demanded a high level of creativity."

This image of, let's call it, integrated diversity has disappeared from many streets in Western cities. Since roughly the 1960s, their streets have gradually transformed into places where children are excluded, mainly due to the arrival of cars and increased street traffic. At the same time children have been pulled indoors, into their own houses, attracted by the arrival of television and the ready-made toys that people increasingly could afford to buy for their children (see Karsten 2005). Public play spaces were created for children, the result of which is that today's streets are characterized by a much more fragmented diversity. In Amsterdam, the Dutch capital, the play spaces of the famous designer Aldo van Eyck are examples of this development. In their study on public space planning in Amsterdam with regard to places for children to play, Verstrate and Karsten (2011: 97) claim: "Children were provided with public niches of their own, dedicated to play, yet at the same time it can be argued that the installment of separate child domains limited their rights to claim the urban streets as their play domain." Karsten's (2005) study confirms that over time the public space of city streets have changed into places where there is less space for children's play.

Children do still play outdoors on urban streets, however, particularly on streets that are relatively quiet, surrounded by greenery, and situated in more or less well-to-do and socioculturally homogeneous areas. Moreover, children from migrant backgrounds—usually low-income groups in the Netherlands—play outside on their streets, often in specially designed urban playgrounds (Vermeulen 2011). In the remainder of this essay I share some observations of children's play in the streets of Utrecht, focusing on how children organize their play on streets by means of lines. First, however, a few details about the urban

neighborhoods where the activities took place: Utrecht is the fourth-largest city in the Netherlands, located in the center of the country, with a population of about 325,000 inhabitants. I observed children's play in two neighborhoods. The children's play with chalk lines described above as well as the jump-rope play described below took place on the streets of neighborhood in the western part of Utrecht called Oog in Al (Eye on All). The neighborhood is semi-urban, mostly meant for dwellings. Homes, mainly built in the 1920s and 1930s, are spacious, and the streets are quiet and surrounded by greenery. The neighborhood is populated mostly by white, middle-class, highly educated families with young children. In the second neighborhood, I observed children's activities on a pre-designed playground. This neighborhood, called Overvecht, is a postwar, multicultural neighborhood in the northern part of the city, designed spaciouly with lots of greenery between high apartment buildings. The neighborhood is populated mostly by people with migrant backgrounds and lower incomes.

### Jump Rope

In Oog in Al, two children, a boy and a girl, are playing in the street with a ball. They take three rather large garbage bins that residents have left on the street, and position them in such a way that they form a goal. They could have used just two of the bins as posts of the goal, or placed the three bins next to one another, forming a straight line. However, they decide to put two of the bins a bit forward, away from the curb. They place the third one a bit behind, thus creating a small space. The outer bins become the goal posts; the third bin becomes the goal itself. After building the goal, the children start running along the street, chasing one another and kicking the ball. The street is theirs on this quiet Sunday afternoon. After a while they start kicking the ball towards the goal, aiming for the space between the bins. There is one other aspect of their building of the goal that escaped my attention until the children finish their play and start to break up the goal. The garbage bins are connected by means of a jump rope. The jump rope creates a line between the bins of the outer sides, which must be passed in order to score a goal. When the play ends, the girl quietly and carefully takes the jump rope from the garbage bins, disconnecting the line, and then walks home. The garbage bins remain standing to be collected. They're now just bins again, not a goal anymore.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The photographs and video stills presented throughout this essay are by Hadas Lieber, except for "field lines" (photo Jelger Spijkerboer) and "street lines 2" (photo by Jeroen Vermeulen). I thank Hadas Lieber for her sharp eye when seeing the children play on the street and for her work with the camera on the spur of the moment.







What happened here in terms of lines and place making? By way of arranging things (bins, a jump rope) in a line, the children built their goal and, thus, a place to play a form of soccer. Their acts of positioning the bins and of laying a rope on top of the bins, transform the street into a place of play. The rope seems to be important for the making of this place. First, the rope is the visible line connecting the outer bins. It confirms the bins as a goal: in order to score, one needs to kick the ball between the bins and over the line. Second, the moment the girl takes away the rope, the bins stop being a goal. What is more: the place stops being a place of play. The drawing, as well as the withdrawing, of the rope is essential for place making, and the ending of the game is an activity in itself. It is a performative act. In that sense the acts of the children (of play, of making lines) contribute to the continual becoming of the street as place of living. The line itself as well as the process of drawing lines are fragile parts of this becoming, and “contribute to its weave and texture” (Ingold 2007: 81). These are place-making activities, rather than place-bound (Ingold 2007: 101). The process of play doesn’t stop: the children go home, come back another time, play again with other children, play again with other things, and making new lines for place making.

### Circle

There are more examples of these ongoing processes of place making by drawing lines on the street. Take a look at the picture below of children standing in a circle. The circle is another sort of line. The children, gathered around an older girl, would stand in such circles evening after evening. The manhole cover in the middle of street is their point of orientation. The circle is not perfectly round, hence not closed. It is more like a half moon, and one girl—with the stick in her hands—is standing a bit outside it. The children’s play is not about the circle itself. No play happens inside the circle. The circle, rather, is the starting point for initiating other forms of play. The circle allows the children a moment of rest in between movements of play. It enables them to look at each other and to deliberate the next game. The next game could be a collective game, like hide and seek or tag, or the group might disperse, splitting into individual games. In any case, the circle is an unfolding line. It is a line “that goes out for a walk” as Ingold (2007: 73) would say, following the painter Klee. It can go in any direction. This means, as we noticed in the example of the jump rope, that the children’s play is not place-bound. The street, in this case, is not so much a place that the children *occupy* as a place that they *inhabit* (Ingold 2007: 80). The children can experience the street as a place they live in. They participate in its liveliness and in its coming to life, precisely by creating the circle.





### Field Lines

As I wrote above, specifically designed playgrounds were established in Dutch cities since the Second World War. As these places concern matters of urban planning, the design of the playgrounds reflect political views on and ideals about children in society (Verstrate and Karsten 2011). Views of the child as “resilient” would put emphasis on the child’s freedom to act and to explore her potential through play; adventure playgrounds should be understood from this perspective (Kozlovsky 2008). The “vulnerable” child, on the other hand, needed protection and proper adult guidance in safe playgrounds (Verstrate and Karsten 2011: 95). Such a perspective might result in a more safety-conscious design. Kozlovsky (2008: 171) argues that these opposing views present an irresolvable contradiction that marks the history of the playground. Urban playgrounds are typically pre-designed, or designed by professionals before children make use of them. The (pre-)design finds its expression in the sort of lines characteristic for playgrounds. Take a look at a picture of a Dutch playground, one very similar to the playground that is described in my observations below. Lines here are traces on pre-designed surface (Ingold 2007: 43ff). The lines are field lines marking the playing space. The lines, painted in different colors, define the play beforehand. The lines enable formalized, rule-governed, games, foremost basketball and soccer. The fence surrounding the playground obviously is a line as well. It defines the playground as separated from the rest of the street, and thus from other activities as walking, bicycling, and driving. The fence acts as boundary, which means that upon entering the place children need to engage in the practice of in- and exclusion. The place is contained. The playground is part of the street as a meeting point next to other meeting points or points of neighborhood activity. The playground has an

address, so to say. The playground invites children to enter the place with the intention of engaging in sports. Let's make some observations about the life on a playground.



The group of boys in the age between seven and thirteen years old, that play here regularly in a daily basis, is on the playground. The boys play a game of soccer on the field. On the concrete-made table tennis table next to the soccer field, some girls are watching the game. Gradually, a few older boys between the age of fourteen and nineteen years old walk up or bike to the playground. One of them took a ball with him. Together with his friend he passes the ball along the line of the soccer field. The younger boys still continue their game without taking notice of the two older kids. After a short while, however, the two kids enter the field with their ball and start to play together without saying a word. Others join them. Without any protest the younger boys stop their game and leave the field. They position themselves outside the field and start watching the older boys playing.<sup>2</sup>

The field lines are boundaries here. The group of young boys and the group of older boys alternately occupy the soccer field. There is only a short moment of simultaneous presence. The field lines define the soccer field as a closed place: one game must stop before another game can start; one group of children must leave before the other can start its game. You're either in the place or you're not. At the moment of the observation, the girls were excluded from the game.

<sup>2</sup> The observations described here are from an earlier published chapter (Meij van der and Vermeulen 2011).

They were sitting outside the field. The playground is a meeting point to which the kids walk or bike. It indeed is part of the street, but it is a *different* part of the street, a different location characterized by different activities, people, and rules of conduct. Balls and other play gear must be brought to the playground, and kept in one's possession. The field lines enable certain kinds of play, but they are not part of the play itself. Let's have another look:

There is an atmosphere of tension between two groups on the playground. The 'regulars' – the young ones – of Moroccan descent come to the soccer field to play. A small group of three Dutch boys play table tennis. Boys of both groups shout to each other. Then one of the Moroccan boys asks one of his friends if 'the Dutchmen' may join the game. They then invite the other group for a game. The Dutch boys enter the field. The two groups agree on the rules. One of the Moroccan boys shouts: 'We're enemies on the pitch'. The game is intense, but fair. The Dutch team wins. They leave the field and go.

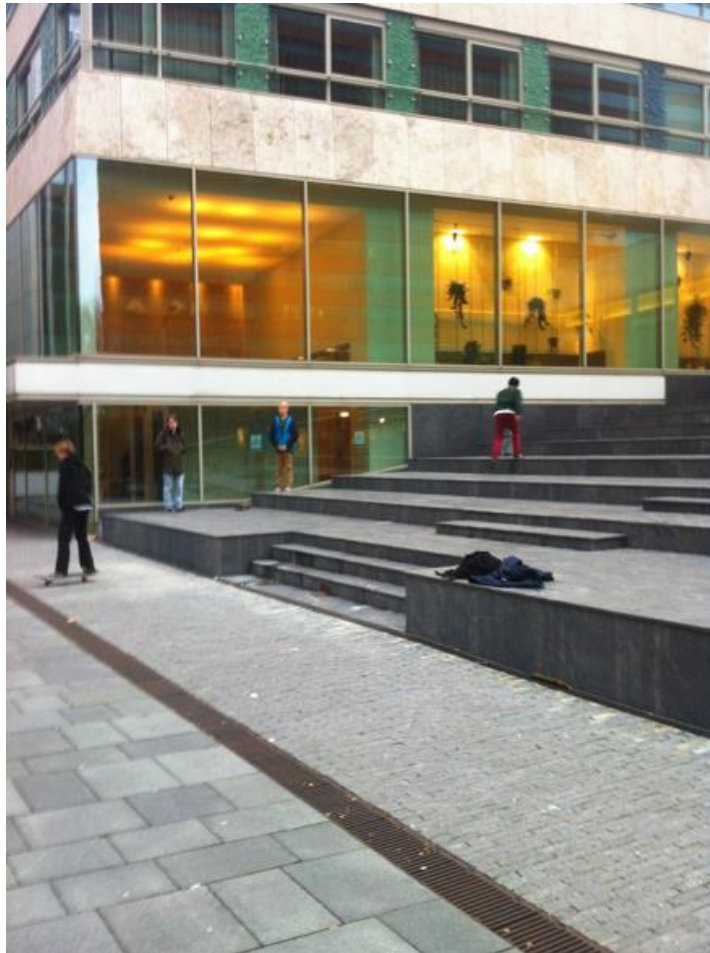
The playground is an assembly of pre-fabricated things, such as the goals on both sides of the field, making the activity place-bound instead of place making. It doesn't add to the (rest of the) street, except that it keeps the boys "off the street" in a contained and more or less controlled area. The soccer field also is a territory, occupied by the group of Moroccan boys. It is precisely the pre-fabricated design of the place that enables the children to regulate their behavior. The ownership of the place is not contested here. In fact, ownership enables the Moroccan boys to invite the "Dutchmen" to play on their ground. Moreover, the field makes it possible to solve the tension between the two groups by way of playing the rule-governed game of soccer.

However, having emphasized the regulatory workings of pre-designed lines, we must take care not to overstate the case. City kids have their own tactics, even with pre-designed places, to personalize those places and to appropriate them in their own ways. For instance, by way of playing sports according to their own creative variations on the existing rules. Conversely, open streets can also be claimed as territories, and imaginary and hand-drawn lines may work as boundaries of in- and exclusion as well. Still, the examples suggest that playing with lines on streets, more than on pre-designed playgrounds, encourages inventiveness. The acts of making lines are themselves creative acts that contribute to the flow of street life. Playing on the streets in this sense is place-making and emphasizes the children being active in that process. That stands in contrast to the playing of children on pre-designed playgrounds that is place-bound and that excludes them from engaging in street life.

### **Coda: Street Lines**

Although there seems to be a tendency to ban children from the street and to send them to their own niches, to pre-established places, there are movements

that counter such fragmentation. New ways of playful engagement with city streets, next to that described in this essay, have emerged in recent years, such as parkour and skating. Lines in the street, especially materially hard lines, are attractive, even irresistible, for those who engage in this kind of play. Take a look at the picture of skaters using the stone stairs in a business district in Amsterdam. They do bring life to the place, as they inhabit the street. And, finally, watch the boy climbing the pole with the street sign. Playing with lines is fun!









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