

From Primitive Hut to Children's Forest Forts

Architecture, Play, and the Transformation of Wilderness into Landscape

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Abstract – This essay is an experiment emerging from a long-term photographic project. For over six years, we have done a photo documentation of the structures that children build in the forest. A small selection taken from this substantial archive will be presented here, alongside this essay. With this text we want to demonstrate, that these 'dens' or 'forts' echo the concept of the Vitruvian 'primitive hut' and raise profound theoretical questions: Are these naïve forts a form of *architecture*? How does their creation transform the wild forest (a natural wilderness) into a meaningful landscape? With this article we aim to explore these questions from the perspectives of architectural theory, philosophy, and sociology, arguing that the makeshift woodland dens of childhood are indeed an architectural act – one that mediates between human imagination and nature, thus turning space into place and wilderness into landscape. We draw on European intellectual traditions (from Vitruvius and Laugier to Heidegger, Bachelard, and others) to demonstrate that children's forest forts embody fundamental architectural principles and reveal the innate human drive to shape nature into landscape.

The Primitive Hut: Origins of Architecture in Theory

European architectural thought has long been fascinated with the idea of the *origin* of building¹ – an origin imagined in a state of nature. Vitruvius offered one of the earliest narratives: In Book II of *De Architectura*, he describes how 'primitive'² humans, after the discovery of fire, gathered and sought shelter, first in natural caves and arboreal bowers, and then by *instinctively* inventing simple huts.³ According to Vitruvius, some of these early people made arbors of "green boughs, others dug caves on mountain sides, and some, in imitation of the nests of swallows and the way they built, made places of refuge out of mud and twigs."⁴ Through trial and error and by observing each other's efforts, they improved these shelters, gradually progressing from crude

1 cf. Hill, 2010, p. 323

2 We use the original terminology here, without any normative claims.

3 Vitruvius, 1914, p. 38

4 Vitruvius, 1914, p. 38

lairs to “a better species of huts”.⁵ In Vitruvius’s account, architecture is thus born from *necessity* and *nature*, as humans respond creatively to the elements for survival.



This origin story was later revived and mythologized in the European Enlightenment. The French theorist Marc-Antoine Laugier famously articulated the concept of *the Primitive Hut* as the ideal and elemental model for all architecture. In his *Essai sur l'architecture* (1753), Laugier imagines a lone man in the wilderness who, needing shelter from sun and rain, erects a simple structure: four tree trunks for columns, supporting horizontal branches (an entablature) and a rudimentary pitched roof of thatch. This “little rustic cabin,”⁶ Laugier asserts, is the prototype from which all architectural magnificence is elaborated. By approximating the *simplicity* of this first hut, architects can avoid fundamental errors and attain true perfection in building.⁷ Architecture’s ‘true principles’ lie in what is *natural and intrinsic*, Laugier believed, not in Baroque ornamentation or artifice.⁸ The Primitive Hut as an architectural formation thus symbolizes a return to fundamentals – structure over decoration, need over excess – and it posits an anthropological relationship wherein architecture is the mediator between humans and the natural environment.

5 Vitruvius, 1914, p. 38

6 Laugier, 1755, p. 11

7 cf. Küreli, 2016, p. 113

8 cf. Laugier, 1753, p. 203



The Primitive Hut idea resonated widely in European theory. It was a “founding myth”⁹ of architecture, a cosmogony for the art of building just as the Garden of Eden or Romulus and Remus were origin myths for society. As Rykwert noted in *On Adam's House in Paradise*, the motif of the primitive hut has repeatedly surfaced to remind architects of the essential meaning of all building: providing authentic shelter and connection to nature.¹⁰ In summary, European architectural discourse began to interpret the rustic hut not simply as a historical artifact, but as an *archetype*, i.e. a conceptual ideal embodying the foundational essence of architecture.¹¹ It came to be seen as a symbolic reference point, preserving the original and thus essential meaning underlying all forms of building.

Children's Forts as Primal Architecture

If the primitive hut is an archetype of architecture's origins, then the forts and hideouts children build in forests can be seen as *spontaneous re-enactments* of that archetype. Across Europe (and indeed around the world) children possess a remarkable impulse to construct ‘dens,’ ‘forts,’ ‘huts,’ or ‘cabins’ in their play, especially in wooded or wild settings.¹² Developmental researchers have noted that this behavior is virtually universal, since “[f]orts have always been a part of childhood.”¹³ This quote stems from an interview with David Sobel, who emphasizes that children in diverse cultures consistently engage in making their own small shelters, driven by a “biological genetic disposition”¹⁴ during the course of growing into independent individuals. Even in today's era of comfortable modern housing, a young child will drape blankets over furniture to form an ‘indoor fort,’ and slightly older children venture into backyards, gardens, or nearby woods to build hideaways of branches and leaves. This recurring pattern suggests that the act of building a personal shelter is an instinctive form of human expression – essentially, an innate architecture that manifests in play.¹⁵

9 Crosby, 2023

10 cf. Rykwert, 1981

11 Freigang, 2020

12 Kylin, 2003, p. 30

13 Margolin, 2020

14 Margolin, 2020

15 cf. Sobel, 2002, p. 98



Philosophers and psychologists have observed how deeply these secret huts satisfy emotional and imaginative needs. E.g. Gaston Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space*, reflects on the child's urge to withdraw into cozy corners, tents or treehouses. Even a child sitting in a family living room might daydream of "a hut, of a nest, or nooks and corners in which he would like to hide away, like an animal in its hole."¹⁶ Bachelard recounts the reverie of a little boy who, while safe at home, imagines "he lived in a hut in the depth of the forest,"¹⁷ delighting in the solitude and the feeling of being "cut off [...] from the entire world."¹⁸ This oneiric image – the child in his imagined forest hut – highlights a profound point: to the child, a self-built fort offers an experience of primal dwelling. It is a place of one's own, small yet emotionally grand, where the child can both feel secure and exercise freedom. In the words of one 11-year-old, inside a fort "you're in a safe place, your own bubble of coziness [...] blocked out from the world."¹⁹ Hence, children often refer to their outdoor forts as a "home away from home,"²⁰ indicating that they consciously create an alternate dwelling apart from the adult-structured world.

¹⁶ Bachelard & Jolas, 1994, p. 30

¹⁷ Bachelard & Jolas, 1994, p. 30

¹⁸ Bachelard & Jolas, 1994, p. 30

¹⁹ Margolin, 2020

²⁰ Sobel, 2002, p. 99



Crucially, these forts are not just imaginative; they are built artifacts, however rough. A fallen branch becomes a beam; sticks are leaned to form a tepee; stones outline a wall or hearth. In building these, children mimic the basic *architectonic* actions: selecting a site, defining an enclosure, roofing a shelter. The parallel to Laugier's primitive hut is unmistakable – just as Laugier's archetypal man gathered four branches to raise a roof,²¹ a child in the woods might prop up four poles for a makeshift tent. Just as Vitruvius's early humans interwove twigs and mud to shape walls,²² children weave twigs or grass into their den's structure. The scale may be diminutive and the construction clumsy, but functionally these forts satisfy the Vitruvian triad of architectural essentials: *firmitas*, *utilitas*, *venustas* – a bit of firmness (forts usually stand up, at least temporarily), utility (they offer shelter/privacy), and even delight (children decorate them with leaves, flowers, or personal tokens to make them *special*). Indeed, children show pride and creativity in these works, often spending hours perfecting their "home away from home."²³ In these ways, a child's fort fulfills not only the physical function of shelter but also the social and symbolic functions of architecture – it is a setting for human interaction, ritual (think of 'passwords' or pretend ceremonies), and the creation of meaning. Anthropological speaking, this might be called a microcosm of society, since traditional cultures often saw the house as an *imago mundi*, an image of the world, imbued with cosmic significance.²⁴ Likewise, one might poetically say the child's fort is *that child's world* in miniature.

Architecture as Mediation Between Human and Nature

Beyond the personal and social value for the child-builders, these forest forts illuminate a broader architectural principle: architecture mediates between humans and the environment, transforming the experience of nature. The primitive hut was celebrated by Laugier and others precisely because it exemplified how a few deliberate structural moves could tame the wilderness into a livable place – "an intervention through the manipulation of nature that tempers life in the wild – a civilizing force."²⁵

²¹ Laugier, 1755, p. 11

²² Vitruvius, 1914, p. 11

²³ Sobel, 2002, p. 99

²⁴ cf. du Preez-Spaun, 2013, pp. 59–60

²⁵ Crosbie, 2023

In the same spirit, when children stake out a little fort in the woods, they are performing a mediating act. By roofing it with foliage and marking its boundaries, they introduce distinctions and order into what was previously undifferentiated thicket.



The wild forest is thus partly domesticated by this tiny human imprint.²⁶ Heidegger's reflections on building and dwelling provide a vivid analogy. In his essay *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*, he describes how a simple structure like a bridge can actually bring forth a place. A bridge over a stream, he notes, does not just connect two banks that were already there; rather, "the banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream [...] [t]he bridge gathers the earth as landscape around the stream."²⁷ In other words, it is the act of building – the presence of the bridge – that reveals and frames the natural setting as a meaningful landscape with banks, a river, and paths relating to human use. Similarly, a child's fort *gathers* the forest clearing into a kind of place. Where there was just a random grove of trees, now there is a *hut* beneath an oak, a *clearing* that might serve as a 'yard,' perhaps a ring of stones that becomes an 'entrance.' The forest in the vicinity of the fort is no longer simply wilderness; it has been reorganized in the child's perception into something akin to a designed space. The fort *anchors* a locality: *this* is our camp, *here* is where we sit and tell stories, *there* is the path we use, etc. Therefore, the builders are 'bringing meaning out of nature' by delineating places to dwell – a process that may lead to the revelation of the *genius loci*.²⁸ In the case of the children's fort, the *genius loci* might be felt in the special atmosphere the place gains: the familiar tree that supports the shelter becomes 'our tree,' the sunbeam that falls through the leaves into the fort is cherished light, the surrounding brambles form a protective wall of privacy. The environment is personalized and given narrative.

26 In regard to the semantic separation between human influence, nature, wilderness and landscape see (Ereshefsky, 2007).

27 Heidegger, 2008, p. 70

28 cf. Norberg-Schulz, 1976



Human geography offers a complementary insight: the conversion of space into place: “What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value.”²⁹ A forest to a stranger might be just ‘space’ – an indistinct sea of trees. But to children who have built a fort in that forest, it becomes a map of meaningful places: here’s our fort (a valued center), there is the stream where we get water, beyond is the ‘edge’ beyond which we don’t go. The act of building and naming parts of the environment thus endows value and differentiation. In essence, the children have turned a segment of wilderness into a *landscape*, in the sense that landscape implies human apprehension and interpretation of the environment. In European thought, especially since the Renaissance, *landscape* is not just the physical terrain, but nature as perceived through a cultural lens³⁰ – often shaped or framed by human presence (think of pastoral landscapes with a cottage, or the English picturesque gardens where follies and grottoes punctuate nature’s scenery). Here, the fort is a humble analog: a folly built by children, converting raw nature into a scene of human life.

Wilderness to Landscape: The Fort as Place-Making

From the above reflections, we can conclude that children’s forest forts exemplify architecture as place-making. Place-making is the process by which an environment gains significance through human engagement, design, or narrative. In the European intellectual tradition, this often overlaps with the making of *landscape*. German sociologist Georg Simmel, in his 1913 essay *The Philosophy of Landscape*, argued that *landscape* is not merely a random piece of nature, but a portion of nature that is seen and composed through human sensibility – essentially, nature framed by meaning and unity.³¹ A chaotic wilderness only becomes a *landscape* when a perceiver (like a painter, poet, or crucially: an inhabitant) imparts form and connection to it. In a similar vein, when children build a fort and organize their play territory, they are acting as both *inhabitants and artists* of their environment, turning a patch of woods into their own coherent *landscape*.³²

²⁹ Tuan, 2002, p. 6

³⁰ cf. Ruf & Sieß, 2023

³¹ cf. Simmel, 2007, p. 22 (We cite the English translation of the original essay here, which was published as *Die Philosophie der Landschaft* in 1913.)

³² We see this in how children name and map their fort areas. They might give the fort a special name, designate a ‘front door’ and ‘back exit,’ perhaps create imaginary boundaries.



It is worth emphasizing the theoretical point that landscape is a cultural construct. The European Romantic tradition often celebrated the child's eye as one that sees nature with fresh wonder and imaginative unity.³³ The English Romantic poets portrayed childhood as a time of intimate communion with nature, when even a wild setting feels alive with story and meaning. A child building a hut in the woods is physically enacting what those poets described metaphorically – making the wild *their own*. In architecture, we speak of 'dwelling' in the Heideggerian sense, which means to truly inhabit a place in harmony with its essence. The child with a forest fort is *dwelling* in that bit of forest in a way much richer than a passing hiker. They have built a locus of dwelling. It calls to mind Heidegger's notion that dwelling involves a "staying with things"³⁴ and letting a place unfold. Here the child stays, lingers, returns to the same snug spot; the fort perhaps lasts days or weeks, weathering a bit, becoming part of the site (leaves start to gather on its roof, a little path is worn by small feet). The forest is no longer just background; it has a focal point and a story. In essence, the child's fort transforms wilderness into landscape by creating a place of human significance.

Reflections: Huts, Play, and Dwelling

The humble act of a child piling up sticks in a woodland glade resonates with deep philosophical themes in architecture. One such theme is the continuity between play and ritual construction. Johann Huizinga in *Homo Ludens* noted that play is a formative element of culture – although many cultural practices may originate in play-acts that gain significance, culture itself can be modeled as 'play'.³⁵ Building a fort is a

These acts are fundamentally the same as those of the first humans naming parts of their habitat, or villagers assigning roles to landmarks. Thereby, a subjective but real *landscape of the mind* as *imago mundi* (du Preez-Spaun, 2013, p. 64) emerges, layered on the physical forest. The wilderness is no longer endless and undefined; it is now landscape in the sense that it has centers, paths, edges, districts – all classic elements of human spatial cognition (Kevin Lynch's urban design principles (Lynch, 1992) apply in micro-scale here). Every architect or planner essentially does this kind of place-making deliberately; the children do it playfully and instinctively.

33 cf. Mead, 1919; Rudrum, 1973

34 Heidegger, 2008, p. 70

35 Huizinga, 1956, pp. 56–57

kind of *sacred play* wherein children unconsciously echo the archetypal human act of world-building. It has been observed that in traditional societies, building a new house or temple is often accompanied by ceremonies that symbolically reenact the creation of the cosmos.³⁶ The new structure is oriented in space and time to be a microcosm, connecting earth to sky, past to future. Now, while children likely don't perform cosmological rituals when making a den, there is a suggestive parallel: the fort is frequently treated as a special realm where ordinary rules bend ('this is our world; here we make the rules'). In that sense, the fort has a bit of what Michel Foucault would term *heterotopia*, an 'other space' set apart from everyday life with its own order and imagination³⁷ as an "home away from home."³⁸ Inside a child's 'den' the normal order of the 'real' home or classroom is suspended; time may be forgotten as fantasy takes over. This underscores that architecture, even at its most rudimentary, has the capacity to define a sphere of meaning distinct from mere nature.



Sociologically, we can reflect on what it means that this behavior is common to children without formal training. It suggests that architecture – the urge to shape space for human purposes – is not exclusively the domain of adult professionals but a basic human trait. The forts of children can thus be studied as a form of vernacular architecture or even *proto-architecture*. Just as vernacular cottages or huts built by non-architects reflect locally available materials and intuitive design responses, children's forts use what's at hand (sticks, cardboard, old blankets) and follow simple typologies (teepee cone, lean-to shelter, cave-like hideout). The design solutions children arrive at (a sloped roof of branches to shed rain, a low entrance for concealment, etc.) often mirror the solutions found in traditional folk architecture around the world.³⁹ It is insightful that Vitruvius himself pointed to "foreign tribes"⁴⁰ still constructing simple shelters in his time as evidence of how building began. In modern times, children unwittingly carry on this heritage each time they build a fort. This universality has implications: it blurs the line between *play* and *design*, suggesting that the act of designing shelter is a natural human language.

36 du Preez-Spaun, 2013; Tuan, 2002, p. 100

37 Foucault, 2005; Klass, 2020

38 Sobel, 2002, p. 99

39 Vitruvius, 1914, pp. 38–39

40 Vitruvius, 1914, p. 39



For architects and scholars, there is a gentle lesson here. The child's forest fort reminds us that at its heart, architecture is an affirmative act of world-making. It does not require grandiose materials or advanced techniques – it requires imagination, the will to project a bit of order onto chaos and to use the 'natural' materials found on site, be it mud, timber, clay or earth. The little fort is a testament to "man's demand for a place that is his own."⁴¹ The wilderness becomes hospitable when we build a hearth, however small. In European history, the narrative/mythic figure of the wanderer or pioneer making a hut in the wild (be it Virgil's rustic farmers, or Robinson Crusoe in literature) always symbolized the bridging of culture and nature.⁴² Children, in their innocent way, recapitulate this saga every time they turn the untamed thicket behind their house into a cozy den for the afternoon.

EXCURSUS: ON PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVES AND THE 'MUSEUMIFICATION' OF THE FOREST

The architectural structures built in the forest ultimately signify that humans are engaging with their environment. As constructed artefacts, they serve as an index indicating that the forest has not yet been transformed into a museum⁴³ or a professionally maintained park – otherwise, such structures would likely have been swiftly removed since they destroy the vista on the well-kept English lawn.

Although, as previously noted, one of the fundamental purposes of architecture lies in the transformation of nature into culture, where "cut itself free of nature and the earth"⁴⁴ the *primitive huts* found in the forest embody a paradoxical configuration. These constructions undoubtedly constitute architecture, yet at the same time, they function as a semiotic index of a cultural process that has not yet been fully completed. By simply being-there, they serve as a pointer that 'wilderness' is still happening, that this part of the forest is still (at least partly) nature and not a garden. It is precisely for this reason that we have chosen to write this essay: we aim to avoid adopting a pedagogical lens in our interpretation of these structures, a perspective that has already been employed by many authors before us.⁴⁵ These huts were erected by

⁴¹ Harries, 1984, p. 159

⁴² Heidegger, 2008

⁴³ Gobster, 2007, pp. 95–96

⁴⁴ Colman, 2001, p. 156

⁴⁵ see for instance: Chawla, 2015; Green, 2013; Gruenewald, 2003; Sobel, 2002

human hands; thus, they also warrant examination through the lenses of architectural theory and anthropology – approaches that, in our view, have thus far been largely neglected.

Conclusion

A necessary limitation must be acknowledged at this point: in this essay, we understand the concept of the primitive hut primarily as a theoretical construct. In contrast, Laugier, in his *Essay on Architecture*, presents a much more concrete interpretation, describing the original hut as consisting of four tree trunks driven vertically into the ground,⁴⁶ over which a pitched (A-frame) roof is constructed.⁴⁷ This configuration is clearly depicted in the frontispiece of the second edition (1755), which notably also includes a child.



Figure 1: Frontispiece of *Essai sur l'Architecture* etched by Charles Eisen. Image source: The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Art & Architecture Collection, The New York Public Library. (1755). *Essai sur l'architecture. (Frontispiece)* Retrieved from <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/b2065a93-b245-8366-e040-e00a18066908>

Upon reviewing our image archive, it became evident that none of the structures we identified fully adhere to this specific configuration. Nonetheless, engaging with the concept of the primitive hut reveals that architecture emerges from an interactive process between humans and nature – a dynamic that is also reflected in the forest shelters constructed by children.

In conclusion, the forts and camps that children construct in forests can indeed be considered a form of architecture, since they realize the core purpose of architecture: to mediate between human life and the environment by creating *place*.⁴⁸ These improvised huts echo the Vitruvian and Laugierian *primitive hut*, reaffirming that the essential principles of architecture are accessible even to a child with no training – *shelter, structure, enclosure, function* are intuitively grasped. By building forts, children transform space into place, and wilderness into a kind of landscape that bears human meaning. The forest with a fort is no longer purely wild; it has a corner of order,

⁴⁶ cf. Laugier, 1755, p. 11

⁴⁷ Freigang, 2020

⁴⁸ Chawla, 1992, pp. 63–64

however small and transient, and within that corner the child-dwellers experience what it is to inhabit, to belong, and to shape their surroundings.



From a European perspective, this phenomenon resonates with centuries of thought about nature, culture, and building. The European reverence for the primitive hut finds living expression in each child's den. The philosophical idea of dwelling (as explored by Heidegger, Bachelard, and others) is vividly enacted when a group of children declares 'this is our place' and embellishes a nook of woods into their sanctuary. The sociological understanding that space is socially constructed is borne out as children negotiate and agree on the usage and meaning of their fort space. In a very real sense, children's forts are *micro-architectures* that encapsulate the genesis of architecture itself: born from need and imagination, shaped by materials at hand, and ultimately giving form to a little world.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

The aim is to make the complete image archive available as a dataset. We are currently still in the selection process, during which the images will be labeled and, where applicable, geotagged. A first impression of the material can be found here: <https://andi-siess.de/kids-camp-architecture>

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