Teen Geography
by John Stilgoe

Just at the moment when parents and psychologists know that children begin needing their friends especially strongly, at the critical moment when sexual maturing combines with ability to use the intellectual skills learned in grade school and backyard, children find themselves wrenched from their friends at the end of every school day, and often kept far distant from them on weekends and school vacations.

Neighborhood friendships break down when children meet new friends in junior high, and church friendships grow strained when children begin to make new friends, even of the same denomination. Friendships in neighborhood-based Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops begin to fray as members forge new links with county-wide members at the start of junior high school. What worked as a happy, stimulating environment the summer after sixth grade, what worked perhaps especially well when sixth graders nervous about junior high sought comfort in familiar scenes, often bores by the end of October. Nothing changes but perception.

Few scholars study the tremendous impact of junior high school busing on children's perception of space. On the one hand, it remains an emotion charged topic, one that reinvokes old arguments concerning neighborhood schools accidentally or deliberately segregated by race or income or religion, one that stirs up controversy about a national curriculum modeled on those of Europe. But on the other, it raises intractable issues of late-childhood spatial mobility and perception.

Even mounted on fifteen-speed bicycles, young teenagers cannot get from home to their friends’ homes and back after school, sometimes even on whole Saturdays. In many large-scale suburban areas, dense automobile traffic makes bicycling dangerous, and automobile-only arterial roads force bicyclists onto meandering, time-consuming routes. No wonder so many high-school freshmen long for a car of their own, and seek jobs to earn money for one. The beat-up car offers access everywhere in a built fabric intended for cars, offers freedom from bus routes that usually converge on downtown (almost never on high schools, especially on Saturdays), offers a near magical way of bringing friends together.

Teenagers also learn that until they get a license and access to some car, either their parents’ or their own, they must shop haphazardly. At some moment parents of junior high school students learn that the kids want to be dropped off at the local mega-mall, mostly to wander about and meet friends, maybe to see a movie and have some ice cream or a hot dog in the “food court,” maybe to buy a pair of jeans in a chain store advertising élan along with clothing. To adults malls are prosaic, often too big for quick-stop shopping, but to young teenagers they are a whole retail world, a place of maturation and socialization as well as shopping.

And to some, they become the world of part-time work. Planners often ignore retail areas as areas of employment, let alone as areas educating very young people in adult behavior and responsibility. The fast-food strip along a state highway and the shopping mall are both extremely structured environments, unlike the small-town main
street and second-street of the 1950s, where retail businesses mixed not only with government and professional offices, but with industrial operations ranging from auto repair shops to newspaper publishers to the countless small firms still loosely designated as “light manufacturing.”

Most young people see the Taco Bell or Limited first as a place to shop as an adult, then as a place to work as an adult. They often know absolutely nothing about the industrial park on the edge of town, the steel and concrete-block buildings strung out along the bypass, the red-brick mills down by the river and railroad. Asked to draw a map of their home towns, their small cities, their rural counties, many college undergraduates ignore all industrial buildings. But they can map their local mall with precision.

Planning commissioners might simply and forcefully suggest to school-board members that the diminishing emphasis on geography, particularly on local geography, since the 1960s has not only diminished public understanding of spatial planning, but crippled children’s understanding of their home towns and counties.

Local school systems might require children to study their school districts, from first grade onward, as microcosms, as the small worlds that are the world to their students, the worlds that Edith Cobb analyzes in her marvelous The Ecology of the Imagination in Childhood (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1977).

They might start first graders on mapping the school yard, require fourth graders to map their route from home to school, and might ask junior high school students to interpret their districts on United States topographic maps.

They might require every high school student to figure out something of the larger natural ecosystem bounded by the high-school district, and locate every single business in the yellow pages on a hand-drawn or computer-based map.

They might expect high school seniors to know something of the development of their school-district road pattern, if only to appreciate the startling ability of police officers and firefighters to respond instantly to any address.

They might require high school students to master one of the most sensible, brilliantly written, brief geography books imaginable, a sort of planning commissioner’s primer: United States Army Field Manual #21-26, Map Reading and Land Navigation (available at army/navy surplus stores).

If school systems emphasized even a little local geography, they would ground their students in the fundamentals of knowing the larger world, and would dramatically stimulate the entire planning process.

The sixth grader who cannot draw a map of his school bus route from home to school is likely to become the high-school student who is unable to visualize entire parts of towns, to spend a lifetime worried about getting off at “the wrong exit,” to see no need to support planning efforts, to be unable, unwilling, or even scared to read a map, to never use a map to analyze any sort of problem, to give planning commissioners and planners very little help.

Sometime between the late 1960s and the late 1970s, the American tradition of the Sunday drive vanished along with required geography courses. Children lost the firsthand knowledge of their regions, and lost formal instruction in geography. They are now voters who scoff at planning efforts, or make no effort to understand and implement them.

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