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CHAPTER V

URBAN RECREATION

The spontaneous joy, the clamor for pleasure, the desire of the young people to appear finer and better and altogether more lovely than they really are, the idealization not only of each other but of the whole earth which they regard but as a theatre for their noble exploits, the unworliday ambitions, the romantic hopes, the make-believe world in which they live if properly utilized, what might they not do to make our sordid cities more beautiful and companionable.

JANE ADDAMS, 1909

Few Americans have so glowingly described the hopes of the young as did Jane Addams. She taught other progressives to understand and appreciate youth's striving for pleasure. For her, youth's instinct for enjoyment as expressed in play was a great vital social force that could conquer materialism and work for social righteousness. Miss Addams suffused young people's impulses toward pleasure and play with a high idealism. She believed that play contained the seeds of true culture and true democracy.

Miss Addams' understanding of play had various sources. The Rockford emphasis on physical education has already been described. Some of the literary figures that she read at the seminary also put special emphasis on physical education. In Ruskin's model school the laws of health were the first thing to be learned, along with exercise both indoors and out. "Riding, running, all the honest personal exercises of offense and defense, and music should be the primal heads of this bodily exercise." Perhaps Jane Addams also absorbed the emphasis of phrenologists on healthful exercise and on the laws of physiology and health.¹ She noticed the inclusion of sport in the Toynbee Hall conception of culture,

¹. John A. Hobson quotes this from Ruskin's Time and Tide in his John Ruskin, Social Reformer (Boston, 1898), p. 172; Davies, Phrenology, Fad and Science, see Chapter VI, "Phrenology and Education."
and she was anxious to include play and social pleasure in the activities at Hull House.

This emphasis on social pleasure was part of the genius of the settlement movement. Jane Addams recalled the "eager interest" with which those at the first settlement conference in 1893 discussed Lester Ward's *Psychic Factors in Civilization*. Ward wrote that "there may be a positive moral progress in the increase of pleasure, the heightening of enjoyment, and the broadening and deepening of human happiness." This progress depended, according to Ward, on "the emancipation of social energy... by perfecting the social mechanism." Settlement workers used recreational activities in order to build whole personalities and organize urban social life. They sponsored musical and theatrical entertainments, receptions, dances and cotillions, games, drills, and athletics. Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr were unusually resourceful in organizing these activities, and they found that their Hull House neighbors responded to the recreational opportunities with immediate and continuing enthusiasm. Their response led Miss Addams to reflect on the nature, sources, and uses of play and social pleasure, and on the relation of play to culture.

Jane Addams' emphasis on joy and recreation ran counter to the ideas of some other reformers. The amusement, the sociability, embodied in saloon and dance hall was in itself "a good and legitimate object," she told the ladies of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. The good fellowship and social life that her neighbors found in these places needed to be transferred to other neighborhood institutions rather than prohibited. Hull House activities were designed, at least in part, to do just that; the social activities of Hull House had simple fellowship and social pleasure as their aims. Boys' and girls' clubs constantly held dances, theatricals, debates, and parties of one sort or another. "The public always asks of a Hull House club what it is studying," wrote a resident. "The [Hull House] club is such a one as

hundreds of sociable people in Chicago join; Hull House offers it a pleasant room for its meetings, and a director who devises some things which its members could not devise for themselves."

The formal educational efforts included a spring social given by each class and a reception for all the students who had completed one of the college extension courses.

Jane Addams' ideas about play developed in the same fashion as her ideas on education. Based on her experiences at Hull House, she came to believe that play could inspire a higher and more democratic culture in American cities. She evolved a more pragmatic attitude toward the experiences of her neighbors and discovered what she believed to be primitive cultural resources among the immigrants.

She revealed her changing ideas about recreation most clearly in her writings about the theater. The stage provided training in "manners and personal refinement and courtesy" which could not be given by direct instruction and made these lessons more palatable by entertaining as well as instructing, she wrote in 1902. In later years, this original emphasis gradually gave way to a view of the theater as a pragmatic testing ground for social relations. Jane Addams derived her new ideas partly from her experience with the Hull House Players, a semiprofessional little-theater group, formed in October, 1901. Membership was limited, and so highly prized that members who moved from the Hull House neighborhood frequently made long trips back to continue to participate. The Hull House Players performed the works of dramatists such as Ibsen, Shaw, and Galsworthy. William Butler Yeats once lectured to them. Miss Addams noted that the stage was becoming the most popular teacher of public morals. For the playwrights, almost alone among moralists, had to "reduce their creeds to action... It would be a striking result if the teachings of the contemporaneous stage should at last afford the moral

platform...[for] social reform." Since ideals had to be reduced to action, Miss Addams wrote citing Aristotle, the stage offered a place where "things may be tested [vicariously], where society and the individual may find out the relation of settled methods and certain modes of living..." Miss Addams called attention to the drama coming out of the New York City ghetto, which carried forward speculation on the "readjustment of the industrial machine that the primitive sense of justice and righteousness may secure larger play in social organization." 

Jane Addams came to see the theater as a significant resource for the formation of a more democratic culture in America. The theater could unite men, she said, because it appealed to man's primitive emotions. She cited Simon Patten's remark that the theater was the only place in the city that offered "memory food." The stage represented the basic emotions of love, jealousy, revenge, and daring. Participation in these ancestral and primitive emotions, even though based on illusion, was valuable, she maintained. The theater was thus able to bring men together in a common mood and to unite them through a mutual interest in elemental experience.

The idea that the theater provided emotional participation which was both recreative and universally appealing suggested a whole new conception of play to Miss Addams. She explored more closely the relationship between play and culture. In 1907 she told how play embodied the experience of the race, especially the most primitive activities and experiences. "We have a multitude of games founded upon religious festivals, upon the manoeuvers of war, and of the chase, upon harvesting grain and treading the grapes, upon love making, upon trial by combat, upon the processes of primitive industry." Such games might provide a common cultural basis for all Americans. These games could be further

adapted toward the primitive customs upon which they were based, Miss Addams said, and the adaptation "would bring the game nearer the universal type and therefore make more valuable [the game's] recreative quality." 10

The Hull House neighbors provided an instructive example in the value of recreation. Even when on relief, and over the objection of the charity visitor, immigrant families spent money on amusements. Jane Addams justified such expenditure: "As the danger of giving no legitimate and organized pleasure to the child becomes clearer, we remember that primitive man had games long before he cared for a house or for regular means." 11 Immigrants realized this truth, she said, because the process of immigration stripped a person of all save the universal characteristics of man. The simple immigrant who embodied the most basic qualities of human personality connected play and culture quite easily and naturally.

From play's roots in primitive emotion and activity Jane Addams hoped a higher culture might evolve, a culture based on play. Time to play in youth, Miss Addams cited scientists as saying, was "the guarantee of adult culture. It is the most valuable instrument the race possesses to keep life from becoming mechanized." Especially for those whose later life would be one-sided and mechanistic, a full period of childhood should be guaranteed, so that "he may cultivate within himself the root of that culture which can alone give his later activity a meaning. . . . Unusual care must be taken to secure to the children their normal play period, that the art instinct may have some chance and that the producer himself may have enough coherence of character to avoid becoming a mere cog in the vast industrial machine." 12

Culture was not mere learning, Miss Addams remarked in 1905; culture was the power of enjoyment, the power to play with a fact, to get pleasure out of it. No one without this power, however learned, was cultivated. "Some of us see that in the crowded districts of our cities the one thing which stands for culture as

10. Jane Addams, "Public Recreation and Social Morality," p. 493. In a telling metaphor, Miss Addams compared primitive customs with the "unspecified cell" of evolutionary science.
against mere mechanical learning, the thing which will keep life from becoming commonplace and dead, is the constant play of little children with each other." "Aesthetic feelings originate from the play impulse," Miss Addams believed, and "the constant experimentation found in the commonest plays are to be looked upon as 'the principal sources of all kinds of art.'" 13 Children, through their play, overcame differences in language, religion, dress, and manner. And, as Miss Addams noted elsewhere, "the definition of the cultivated man must always be that of the man who is able to forget differences of dress and language, of manner and other superficial distinctions because he is able to perceive and grasp the underlying elements of identity and comradeship." 14

Jane Addams accompanied her theorizing about play with deeds that ultimately inspired Chicagoans to construct the finest park system in America.16 In 1892 Hull House opened a small playground on three-quarters of an acre of land leased to Miss Addams rent free by William Kent. "It was open to both children and youths," said the historian of the American play movement. "The sand garden type of apparatus, sand pile, swings, building blocks, and giant slide, was provided for the younger children, while the boys of adolescent age played handball and indoor baseball. An experienced kindergartner and a policeman supervised the play-


ground, the latter detailed by the city, usually umpired the indoor baseball game.” In 1893 Hull House built a gymnasium to replace the makeshift indoor play area—once used as a saloon—which was so popular with the neighbors. These privately supported efforts provided the model for subsequent, and grander, public efforts.16

Public support for play in Chicago came first through the school board, which in 1892 established the position of Supervisor of Physical Education and provided for the first gymnasium ever built in an American public school at North-West Division High School. In 1897 the board allowed the West Side District of the United Charities—the district that included Hull House—to use school grounds for a summer playground. That same year, the school board decided to add playgrounds and gymnasiums to schools that had been constructed without them. Two years later the school board opened the play areas of six schools for summer use under the direction of the Vacation Committee of the Chicago Woman’s Club. The Chicago Federation of Settlements urged the school board not only to allow school facilities to be used, but to take the initiative in establishing and supporting playgrounds and vacation schools.17

The most important public facilities for recreation in Chicago were created by various park districts. In 1895 the Illinois Legislature passed a general enabling act that permitted one hundred voters to petition a county judge to form a park district. Such districts had a locally elected board empowered to levy taxes and borrow against future taxes. In 1899 Mayor Carter Harrison formed a Special Chicago Park Commission which encouraged the formation of park districts in the city and the creation by these districts of small neighborhood parks. By 1910 Chicagoans had spent, or had committed themselves to spend, over ten million dollars for city parks. The landscaping and architecture for all the parks was done by Daniel H. Burnham and the Olmsted brothers, architects and planners of the 1893 Chicago World’s

16. Rainwater, Play Movement, p. 56; Zeublin, American Municipal Progress, p. 302. Indoor baseball was played out of doors with a large soft baseball which allowed the game to be confined to a smaller area.

17. For the report of the federation’s committee which lobbied for these purposes and of which Jane Addams was a leading member, see Commons, III (October, 1898), 11.
Fair, and the same men who were most active in the "city-beautiful" movement and in city planning. Theodore Roosevelt enthusiastically described Chicago's parks as "one of the most notable civic achievements of any American city." The settlements in Chicago provided much of the inspiration and experience on which the city's park system was built. Graham R. Taylor, son of the founder of a Chicago settlement and secretary of the Chicago Playground Association, was too modest when he said guardedly that for "some of the social and recreational lines [of the public parks] the work of the social settlement undoubtedly afforded in some degree a prototype." Edward B. DeGroot moved from his post as Hull House playground leader to Director of Gymnastics and Athletics for the South Park District. The Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy, created by local settlement people and led by Graham Taylor, was one of the few places where professional recreational training was available.

Settlement people also helped found the Playground Association of America in 1906 in order to spread their ideas of play and the example of the Chicago park system throughout the country. The association recognized Miss Addams' local leadership in Chicago by electing her vice-president. Professional recreation leaders, settlement residents, philanthropists, and municipal officers and reformers were present at the organizational meeting in Washington. Men and women active in city planning, municipal art programs, and other progressive municipal reforms identified themselves with the association and its agitation for city parks and playgrounds. The first national meeting of the association was held in Chicago. As an officer, familiar with the local playground movement, Miss Addams addressed the association on a practical topic: the uses of play.

18. The Burnham Plan, the most important city plan for Chicago, was completed in 1908. For a recent study of Burnham and F. L. Olmsted, and their relation to urban reform, see Ray Lubove, *The Progressives and the Slums, Tenement House Reform in New York City, 1890–1917* (Pittsburgh, 1962), pp. 217 ff.
Play or recreation—Jane Addams used the words interchangeably—had two main uses in the modern city. Play could unite isolated city dwellers through mutual social interest, and play was the method through which men could express their individuality. Thus provision for recreation could defeat the devices for keeping men ignorant of each other, with which the modern city was filled, and at the same time liberate city dwellers by revealing each individual’s unique character.

Miss Addams stressed that recreation allowed individuals to realize and develop their individuality. Scientists, she wrote, told how the imaginative powers—the sense that life possessed variety and color—were realized most easily in moments of pleasure and comradeship. It was then that individual differences and variations were disclosed. "Only in moments of recreation does . . . [our] sense of individuality expand; . . . [we] are then able to reveal, as at no other time, that hidden self which is so important to each of us." Playgrounds gave the opportunity "to express, as nowhere else, that sense of being unlike one’s fellows. . . ." This assertion of individuality was also the path of social progress. "The variation from the established type," wrote Jane Addams, "is at the root of all change, the only possible basis for progress, all that keeps life from growing unprofitably stale and repetitious." 22

She believed that urban culture—the civilization of the cities—depended on provision for recreation. The city offered rich cultural opportunities for varied social relationships, she wrote in 1912. But in order that each city dweller might avail himself of this great gift, the city had to organize and structure its social life, and this was where recreation could make a major contribution. Play was the antidote for the poisonous loneliness and solitude that filled the modern city. It was the "prime motive" uniting children and drawing them into a comradeship which discovered and revealed and respected human differences and human variation. "A true democratic relation and ease of acquaintance is found only among the children of a typical factory community because they readily overcome differences of languages, tradition and religion, which form insuperable barriers to adults." On city

playgrounds, according to Jane Addams, children could learn the techniques and methods of knowing each other, of revealing themselves to each other, in short, of consciously living together in the crowded human city.²³

These remarks show Jane Addams' identification of culture with the city. Indeed she idealized the city. It was the place, she said citing Aristotle, "where men live a common life for noble ends." The human city was a place of freedom and at the same time a place of "companionship in a larger measure than can be obtained elsewhere. . . . You exalt and intensify your own self-consciousness as you see it revealed in like-minded people who are living in this vast concourse [of the city] but who could not be found at all if the concourse were smaller." Jessie Binford, long-time Hull House resident, relates that many of the residents in the years before 1917 journeyed into the open countryside on Sundays, "just to be in the country—some wanted to paint, others to walk." The head resident did not accompany them. When they returned she would ask whether they had had a good time, and ask what they had managed to find to do all day—in the country. It "just did not appeal to her," Miss Binford says.²⁴

In 1907 Miss Addams wrote of the "dreariness of American farm life. . . ." Later, in 1913, she stressed the disadvantages of a rural upbringing. The country child had never learned to do things with other people; he was inclined to be set in his ways, to lack alertness and ability. Those who grew up in the country and moved to the city had great difficulty learning how to know other people and revealing themselves to others; they had great difficulty playing. To Miss Addams urban recreation was not, as Morton and Lucia White assert, a nostalgic "effort to recapture some of the natural, almost biological features of rural community living." Rather, play was the instrument for bringing about a purer democracy and a higher morality to the life of American cities.²⁵

Many members of the Playground Association of America inter-


²⁵. Jane Addams, Newer Ideals of Peace, pp. 66-7; Morton and Lucia White, The Intellectual Versus the City, from Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright
interpreted play as training in democratic morality. Miss Addams developed this theme on several occasions. More than once she explained how public games prepared young men for political democracy. Playground activities embodied ideals of fair play which were also the rules upon which democracy was founded. On the playground each boy had to accept rules that embodied a rude sort of justice. The relevance of such rules to democracy was especially important, Miss Addams noted, because modern patriotism had to be based "not upon a consciousness of homogeneity but upon a respect for variation, not upon inherited memory but upon trained imagination."

Miss Addams was quite specific about how play was related to more just human relations in politics. Corrupt politicians continued in power, Miss Addams wrote, perhaps recalling her campaigns against Alderman Powers, by utilizing those old human notions of personal affection, desire for favors, fear of ridicule, and loyalty to comrades. The leader of a gang of boys, just like a political boss, appealed to these motives. The playground could alter this pattern. A group of boys, Miss Addams assured readers in the *Ladies' Home Journal*, would not continue to play in the streets and alleys and poolrooms—with their illicit pleasures—
after they had discovered the "fascinating apparatus" of the playground. Once on the playground, the gang leader would find his special power of manipulation gone. For success on the playground went to the boy who could best meet competitive athletic standards, standards that depended on personal prowess alone. Boys on the playground, Miss Addams continued, learned to despise pleas for special treatment. Thus the rules of the playground were preparation for future political participation, "the basis for a new citizenship [that] in the end will overthrow the corrupt politician." 28 Team spirit, respect for rules and for the standards of athletic achievement—however absurd these specific rules and standards seemed to adults—were analogues to a higher social morality and a purer democracy for American cities.

In 1909 Jane Addams published a lyric to play, The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets. This book was her favorite among all those she wrote. It represents her mature ideas on the origins and psychology of play. The background for her inquiry into the origins of play was the work of academic scientists. Her friend William James listed the play instinct along with twenty-eight others in his Psychology. She probably knew of G. Stanley Hall’s analysis of play: "the motor habits and spirit of the past of the race persisting into the present..." 29 Miss Addams was also familiar with Karl Groos' book, The Play of Man, published in 1901, in which he interpreted play as the method by which crude childish faculties were prepared for adult tasks. She settled on none of these explanations, however. Rather she emphasized that play was self-expression and self-assertion of man’s nature, particularly man’s erotic nature. This original explanation of play was her most important contribution to the movement for urban recreation. It is certainly the most interesting aspect of her thought about play. 30

Jane Addams described how play revealed erotic and sensuous

30. When other members of the Playground Association of America used the idea that play was "a vicarious expression of the sex impulse," they cited Miss
elements of the human personality that were frequently hidden or disguised or repressed. She knew nothing of Freud's work, yet she understood the mechanism of repression. She explained a wide variety of deviant behavior as the consequence of repression of sexual drives for which the normal outlet was play. The city's irresponsibility about play ignored the fact, she wrote, that "amusement is stronger than vice and that [amusement] . . . alone can stifle the lust for [vice]. We see all about us much vice that is merely a love for pleasure 'gone wrong,' the illicit expression of what might have been not only normal and recreative pleasure, but an instrument in the advance of a higher morality." 31

She described in Spirit of Youth the difficulties the city boy found in expressing, either in his job or in his leisure, "the sudden and furious bursts of energy, his overmastering desire to do things 'without being bossed all the time. . . .'"

He discovers that in whatever really active pursuit he tries to engage, he is promptly suppressed by the police. After several futile attempts at self-expression, he returns to his street corner subdued and so far discouraged that when he has the next impulse to vigorous action he concludes that it is of no use, and sullenly settles back into inactivity. He thus learns to persuade himself that it is better to do nothing, or, as the psychologist would say, "to inhibit his motor impulses." 32

But Miss Addams was convinced that such inhibition was futile. In 1901 she had written—citing unnamed psychologists as authorities—that under the influence of strong emotions, such as fear, certain elements of self could be prevented from coming into action. But these elements were only stupified or drugged. Sooner or later they asserted themselves in all their old power. "All such inhibitive measures must in the end be futile," she concluded. On the same topic in Spirit of Youth Miss Addams wrote that


"the love of pleasure will not be denied, and when it has turned into all sorts of malignant and vicious appetites, then we, the middle aged, grow quite distracted and resort to all sorts of restrictive measures. We even try to dam up the sweet fountain itself because we are affrighted by these neglected streams. . . ." 33

Miss Addams reviewed the offenses for which young girls and boys had been brought before the Cook County Juvenile Court. Many of these offenses were crimes of great imagination, excitement, and adventure, characteristics that were "basic" to youth and that "will be evinced by each generation of city boys. . . ." Most of the fifteen thousand juvenile criminals in the court in 1908 "had broken the law in their blundering efforts to find adventure and in response to the old impulse for self-expression." An adult with the most rudimentary notion of prudence could not have imagined or committed these juvenile crimes, which were characterized by recklessness and bravado. "Only the utilization of that sudden burst of energy belonging partly to the future could have achieved them, only the capture of the imagination and of the deepest emotions of youth could have prevented them!" 34

The deepest emotions, Miss Addams suggested, were those that expressed man's sensual and erotic life. 35 The "fundamental sex susceptibility" suffused the world with its deepest beauty and meaning; it furnished the momentum toward all art. This was revealed most clearly by youth during puberty, that basic experience which had so many varied, remote, and indirect expressions. At puberty a boy's instincts urged him to action yet frightened him by their novelty and undefined power. Mastering these instincts was difficult because at the time of their arousal, youth's sense of self-control and discrimination was least educated. Young people's senses were singularly acute during early adolescence, Miss Addams wrote. Youth stood helplessly open to the world.

34. Jane Addams, Spirit of Youth, p. 70. On Cook County Juvenile Court, the first in America, championed by Hull House residents, see Herbert H. Lou, Juvenile Courts of the United States (Chapel Hill & London, 1927).
35. In trying to appeal to her neighbors after a day of sense-dulling labor, Miss Addams reported in 1897, only the highly sensuous could penetrate. "Only music with a real swing or a sensuous appeal" could arouse neighbors from their exhaustion. See Jane Addams, "Social Settlements," p. 341.
It was nothing short of cruel, she insisted, to overestimate the senses of the young and inexperienced as the modern city did. Youth's power to appreciate developed far ahead of his power to express himself, she declared.36

Mastering the erotic instincts was doubly hard for city youth because the modern city retarded the imagination while stimulating the senses. Thus the city brutalized and finally broke the connection between the sex impulse and increased human and social consciousness. Urban youth, Jane Addams noted, had developed no capacity for recreation demanding mental effort or muscular skill; nor had they the necessary discipline for any consecutive recreational effort. They were reduced to seeking that which depended on vagrant sight, sound, and taste; they interpreted the strong drives of puberty in purely selfish ways.37

The history of civilization, Miss Addams summarized in 1909, was the effort to substitute some sort of ideal for the driving force of blind appetite. "In failing to diffuse and utilize this fundamental instinct of sex through the imagination, we not only inadvertently foster vice and enervation, but we throw away one of the most precious instruments for ministering to life's highest needs." Unless the twentieth-century city tried to return to the hopelessly outmoded rural model—where community restraint and genuine social control existed—it had to go down the path of freedom for the young, freedom made safe by knowledge and habits of self-control.38

Play could provide the discipline, instruction, and guidance toward self-control, she maintained. Sound advice to young men in regard to the physical changes of adolescence "emphasizes a clean mind, exhorts an imagination kept free from sensuality and insists upon days filled with wholesome athletic interest." Play could also relate individual drives to the welfare of others. Miss Addams singled out the folk dances of her immigrant neighbors as ideal instruction in self-control: "These old forms of dancing which have been worked out in many lands and through long..."
experiences, safeguard unwary and dangerous expression and yet afford a vehicle through which the gaiety of youth may flow. Their forms are indeed those which lie as the basis of all good breeding, forms which at once express and restrain, urge forward and set limits.”

Jane Addams held the highest hopes for the transforming power of modern youth once they were adequately protected and provision had been made to secure their play. The children themselves would transform culture and politics, just as she hoped they would transform education. Playing children would bring a new righteousness to industry, would purify democracy, would, in short, invigorate and elevate American culture. Her hopes for this transformation lay not with professional recreation leaders, but with the children themselves. In the peroration of Spirit of Youth, she described her apocalyptic vision of the “august moral resources” contained in the new spirit of youth. These resources could bring order out of chaos, beauty out of confusion, justice and kindliness and mercy out of cruelty and inconsiderate pressure. Youth had a great power for direct action, an ability to stand free from fear, to break through life’s trammelings. Most of all, youth desired to improve the world. Young people impatiently insisted on strenuous and vital action to right the world’s wrongs and injustices. The modern city, Miss Addams mourned, had isolated these desires of youth. No effort had been made to channel and discipline them, to make them operative in the life of the city. Yet these desires were the only thing that could make democracy work. America had, she insisted, only one court of last appeal against the materialism of culture. This court was “the wonderful and inexplicable instinct for justice which resides in the hearts of men,—which is never so irresistible as when the heart is young. We may cultivate this most precious possession, or we may disregard it.” America could “either stand stupidly staring as [the divine fire of youth] sinks into a murky fire of crime and flares into the intermittent blaze of folly or we may tend it into a lambent flame with power to make clean and bright our dingy city streets.”
