

15/8/80

Children under the motorway

THE most positive and hopeful place I have seen for a long time is right underneath the motorway going west out of London.

In an area of North Kensington where tower blocks dominate the densely-packed streets of council-built developments between tall, crumbling terraced houses space hardly exists. People are crammed together, race relations are fraught, natural communities have been broken down, and terror rampages in the blocks of flats where "problem" families have social workers at their wits' end.

Through all this, some ten years ago, crashed the Westway, the overhead motorway carrying traffic between London and Oxford. It disrupted the area, but it was also the cause of a wide, barren space at ground level while cars and lorries thundered along at roof-top.

As some sort of recompense the local community demanded that the land under the motorway should become theirs, available for community use. A local group of social and community workers, parents, teachers, journalists, play-group workers and members of the women's movement, all concerned about the local environment in which small children were growing up and the strains put on young—often single—parents, formed themselves into the Westway Nursery Association.

Their aim was to provide a more flexible means of meeting the needs of young mothers and children by catering for both together in the pre-school years in a way that the ordinary play-groups and local-authority nursery schools could not offer. They decided to establish not just a nursery

school for under-fives and a day nursery for babies, but a parents' centre as well—to cater for all the children, and the lonely mothers, from the immediate area.

To build a nursery school under a motorway immediately raised questions about lead pollution, and two years of tests followed while the other negotiations went on. Surprising though it may seem, there is less lead in the atmosphere from swift-moving traffic on a motorway than in the ordinary congested streets around; and the pollution under the motorway was found to be within safe limits.

The funding of the centre was complicated, for part of the pioneer work was to show what could be done with statutory funds. Both the borough council and the Inner London Education Authority were involved; but the parents' centre—the building and the running costs—had to be paid for by grants from trust funds and individuals. From the first conception of the scheme to the opening of the Maxilla Nursery Centre in 1978 was five years of hard work.

In two years the Centre has already made its impact on the neighbourhood and on several scores of individual lives. In an oddly-shaped complex of buildings between the piers of the motorway are two large, bright nursery classrooms with twenty-five three-to-five-year-olds in each; there is a playroom for twenty-five toddlers, and a baby unit taking eight infants from six weeks to eighteen months old.

There is also the parents' centre where mothers (and an occasional father) can drop in at any time to sit and chat, take part in workshops and classes, buy tea or coffee, or cook themselves snacks in a specially-provided kitchen. There is also an outside play area, part paving, part grass, with sand-pit and climbing frames and landscaped banks and trees where children, most of whom have no garden or play-space of their own, can climb and clamber.

What makes the Maxilla Centre so special is its flexibility. It is open from eight in the morning until six

at night, and parents can bring their children as long as they like and vary the hours as they need. Charges are very low, and can be adjusted for those in financial difficulty.

The decision was taken not to be like a borough nursery school, taking priority cases only, but to have a small catchment area so that any child from that neighbourhood had a chance of a place in the nursery.

It seems to me - -

by Margaret Duggan

This means a healthy mix of children. Though many of them are from families with more than their share of problems, many are from normal homes, some from professional families.

About half are of white English origin, the other half from a dozen or more ethnic backgrounds. This mixture of children, matched by the mixture of parents—who play a positive role in the policy-making of the centre—is of growing importance in breaking down barriers in the local community.

I have not space to record the differences the centre has already made, like the dramatic reduction in the number of children from the area in local-authority care; but any person of imagination can guess what such an institution has meant to the lonely, depressed or deserted mothers of the neighbourhood, as well as to the deprived children. The Parable of Judgement in Matthew xxv does not specifically mention nursery schools; but that is only because Jesus did not then know about the needs of North Kensington.

