Sharing Space: An Examination of the Relationship Between Child-Constructed Spaces and Spatial Empowerment in a Selection of Children’s Picturebooks

by

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B.A., The University of British Columbia, 2015

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

(Children’s Literature)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

July 2018

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The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled:

Sharing Space: An Examination of the Relationship Between Child-Constructed Spaces and Spatial Empowerment in a Selection of Children’s Picturebooks

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Abstract

A common feature of playtime for children is the building and using of spaces. Whether it be a blanket draped over a table with stacks of books and toys underneath, a wardrobe filled with blankets and pillows, or a tree house furnished with various household objects, children enjoy claiming spaces of their own in which to retreat from a predominantly adult-structured world.

This thesis project looks closely at the process of childhood space-building through the lens of a selection of two children’s picturebooks: *Soft House*, written by Jane Yolen and illustrated by Wendy Anderson Halperin, and *The Fort That Jack Built*, written by Boni Ashburn and illustrated by Brett Helquist. I propose that the security and autonomy of children’s real-life constructed spaces are discoverable under the surface of picturebooks that depict this type of play behaviour, particularly when performed within adult-controlled domestic space. Drawing on scholar Jerry Griswold’s theory of “snugness” (*Feeling Like A Kid*), I perform close readings of the selected picturebooks utilizing the work of Lawrence Sipe (“Picturebooks as Aesthetic Objects”) and Denise E. Agosto (“Interdependent Storytelling”). The findings of this thesis suggest that although domestic space is depicted as belonging thoroughly and completely to adults, child-constructed spaces empower children to set spatial boundaries, cultivate feelings of safety and security, rehearse adult responsibilities, and engage in imaginative play. The thesis proposes that snugness and child spatial empowerment are intrinsically linked, and that a negotiation between adults and children must occur if these spaces are to be successfully created and used inside the domestic household.
Lay Summary

Many children build forts, playhouses, and other safe and special places during their play. This thesis looks at two children’s picturebooks that tell stories about this kind of activity: *Soft House*, written by Jane Yolen and illustrated by Wendy Anderson Halperin, and *The Fort That Jack Built*, written by Boni Ashburn and illustrated by Brett Helquist. Using picturebook analysis techniques proposed by Lawrence Sipe (“Picturebooks as Aesthetic Objects”) and Denise E. Agosto (“Interdependent Storytelling”), as well as Jerry Griswold’s concept of “snugness” (*Feeling Like a Kid*) as theoretical framework, I perform close reading of each picturebook with the intention of understanding how these spaces empower children at home. The findings suggest that child-constructed spaces like these allow children to experience spatial autonomy and ownership in a predominantly adult-controlled world, and that children’s picturebooks effectively communicate this empowerment through text and illustration.
Preface

This thesis is the original, unpublished, and independent work of the author, Emily Anctil, and is a partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Master of Arts in Children’s Literature program at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver.
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There are so many people to which I owe my gratitude for their unwavering support of this project.

Firstly, I would like to thank my academic team: my supervisor, Dr. Margot Filipenko, and my committee members, Dr. Rick Gooding and Dr. Kathie Shoemaker. Thank you for your commitment to this thesis and your invaluable advice, feedback, and expertise throughout the development of this project.

Next, I would like to thank the lifelong friends I have made in my MACL cohort. In no particular order: Caitlin Boyle, Leïla Matte-Kaci, Lauren Maguire, and Valerie Thiboutot. Thank you for seeing me through.

Thank you as well to MACL friends who came before me and MACL friends new to the program. I’ve been so lucky to have your friendship throughout this process.

Outside the world of academia, I would like to thank the friends I have leaned on for support and love over the course of this experience. My deepest gratitude and love to Eric Magnusson, Rebecca Taylor, Ariana Pasin, Diana Sadat, and Lauren Hyde. Thank you to Lauren for the kind words and support; thank you to Rebecca, Ariana, and Diana for the forever friendship and brunch therapy; and thank you to Eric for always being there, no matter what.

Finally, I would like to thank my incredible family as well as my partner, Bennett. Mom, Dad, and Wendy, I could not have done this without you. Thank you for everything, past and future. Kate, thank you for being my closest friend and for always looking after me. Bennett, you tirelessly supported me throughout this process and always made me laugh in the midst of stress. Thank you.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my sister, Kate, and to all the secret and safe spaces we built together as children.

Mom, Dad, and Wendy, thank you for always making room for me to grow.
Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Motivation for the Study and Origins of Interest

Children’s literature and illustrated materials have long been of personal interest to me. I read illustrated books, comics, and manga avidly as a child and relished spending plenty of time looking at the pictures in each text, trying to tease out clues or secrets. Although I thought about it in different terms, I grew up with a penchant for something like close reading; I would happily spend my time mining illustrations and peritext for hidden meaning. I was also an enthusiastic comics artist as a child and spent hours secretly (and rather rebelliously) drawing comics in the calendar portions of my Catholic school agendas. This interest would carry me into high school, where I drew comics for my friends in lieu of cards for them on their birthdays.

I continued to engage with multimodal storytelling as I entered my undergraduate degree, and eventually I cultivated a strong interest in the intersections between literature, film, and other forms of graphic storytelling. Coming across picturebook scholarship for the first time was genuinely exciting to me. Here was a form that incorporated both words and illustrations, offering a distinct literary experience at the intersection between textual time and visual space—something Lawrence Sipe describes as being akin to other hybrid art forms like film (“How Picture Books Work” 100). Once I started reading picturebooks in earnest, I began to understand that they are intricate, coded, and precise literary artifacts that stand at the center of multiple modalities and literacies. I learned that there are numerous worlds to explore within the pages of a picturebook and that doing so could illuminate societal beliefs about childhood, adulthood, and the spaces in-between. I immediately felt that this was a world I could dive into.

My interest in the relationships between children and their self-governed and constructed spaces has its origins partially in my own experiences with secret spaces and refuges growing up.
My parents divorced when I was very young and as a result I spent my formative years in an unusual relationship with the two houses I split my time between. My routine was to stay one week at my dad’s house followed by one week at my mom’s house, a practice that resulted in my feeling like a visitor to each space rather than a true occupant. Returning to either house after a week away, I would notice small things that had changed while I was gone, and the fact that I had been absent for a time would become very apparent to me. Despite housing my two amazing families who were (and continue to be) my true homes, neither physical space allowed me to easily access the sense of spatial permanence or spatial “knowing” that Yi-Fu Tuan suggests children seek out as they grow up (29).

Looking back now, I can interpret that as a child I took measures to address this. I developed an ongoing passion for attempting to carve out both permanent and impermanent spaces for myself, spaces in which I could experience ownership and control. I spent many afternoons in the backyard of my dad’s house clearing out a space in an overgrown part of the yard in an attempt to make a “secret base” that only my little sister and I would have access to. Inside the house, I would drape blankets over stacks of pillows and our living room couch and hide out underneath with a flashlight and my favorite toys or books. My most memorable self-governed space was the closet in my bedroom; I carefully cleaned it out and furnished it with a tiny folding table, a chair, and a number of books. I would sit inside and read or draw comics, often after bedtime, while the rest of the house was sleeping. It is this space that I think of every time I consider my motivation to understand the relationships between children and the self-owned and controlled spaces to which they retreat. The empowerment I felt making use of such a space has stuck with me, and I have since been interested to discover that not only do most children make and use spaces such as these (Sobel 47-8; Sturm et al. 83-4), but that this is, in
fact, such a common occurrence that spaces reflecting children’s real-life constructed playspaces are abundant in children’s literature of all kinds (Griswold 5-6; Sturm et al. 85).

My interest in this topic also emerges out of a long-held fascination with the significance of house and home in literature for youth. I knew for some time before starting this project that I would be interested in pursuing a paper on how domestic space relates to child identity in picturebooks. I initially wanted to look at dark picturebooks dealing with nighttime fears, with an emphasis on how the tension between safety and danger in domestic space affected the portrayal of child protagonists. Although I ultimately decided to pursue the topic of children’s self-constructed spaces instead, my initial research led me to ideas that became the starting points for the development of this project as you see it now. In particular, my reading brought me to two foundational scholarly works on space and place: The Poetics of Space by philosopher Gaston Bachelard and Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience by geographer Yi-Fu Tuan.

Both Bachelard and Tuan emphasize that space and place are tremendously important in terms of a child’s developing understanding of the world. Domestic space is a particularly formative environment for children. Bachelard suggests that “our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word” (4). He refers to the house as a “cradle” (7) and argues that houses have the capacity to hold an integration of thoughts, memories, and dreams (6). According to Bachelard, it is possible to “read” a house or a room and transpose our own memories and experiences onto it (14). Tuan discusses space in more concrete terms, suggesting that children seek out a kind of “knowing” of space through their efforts to learn the names of objects in their environments (29). This is a search for a sense of spatial permanence and a process of making things “real” (31) that often occurs inside the home.
In terms of children’s literature, many scholars recognize the critical value of domestic space when analyzing books for youth. In fact, setting as a whole is considered to be crucial to the understanding of children’s texts. Joyce Thomas emphasizes the importance of setting in her work on fairy tales: “It is … so integral to most, if not all, of the classic works of children’s literature, that it is impossible to imagine them without first conjuring their respective settings” (126). Peter Hunt puts it simply when he observes that “places mean” (11) in English fantasy books for youth. The landscapes and geographies of children’s literature have the capacity to carry meaning and influence how a narrative is received; it would not be unusual to suggest that it is crucial to explore fictional representations of spaces many children are familiar with in the real world. Doing so could lead us to a better understanding of how authors, artists, parents, and other adults believe children factor into common real-world spaces like the home.

Much has been written about the symbol of the house as it is used in children’s texts. I say “used” here to reflect the fact that some representations of domestic space ultimately act as tools of socialization, in which adult authors and artists influence child readers in some way. Scholars such as Ann Alston and Jackie E. Stallcup suggest that domestic space is closely connected—and at times analogous—to the adult world that exists at all times around children. Alston argues that the house is primarily an adult-controlled space in which children experience little spatial ownership or power, and as a consequence of this, children struggle with the constraints of their home environments and have trouble truly belonging to the space—something that is discoverable under the surface of children’s literature that portrays kids at home (15). According to Alston, children are often illustrated occupying liminal spaces in the home as a result of having no real control, empowerment, or sense of belonging in the more prominent parts of the adult-controlled house (27). Similarly, Jackie E. Stallcup argues that
adults socialize children into remaining obedient through portrayals of adult-controlled domestic space in fear alleviating picturebooks (139). She is critical of books that attempt to alleviate fear in children by depicting the house as a haven from the thoroughly dangerous world outside, arguing that such a portrayal can discourage children from exploring their autonomy and learning to cope with frightening situations away from the adult-controlled home (Stallcup 141).

Reading these works by Alston and Stallcup, I was struck by the seemingly dual nature of domestic space. In one sense, the house seems to perform the function one would initially expect: it offers a sense of security, stability, and consistency to child and family. Bachelard’s idea of the house as a kind of “cradle” (7) comes to mind: “Life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house” (7). However, there is also this undercurrent of power and control in which the spatial politics within the house act as a barrier to a child’s exploration of individuality and autonomy. I knew that if I chose to write about children at home, I would likely be writing against the backdrop of a primarily adult-controlled space in which children often find themselves disempowered. As a lover of kids’ books that empower child protagonists and readers, I found this rather frustrating. Adult control over space is of course not a negative thing; ensuring children’s safety is a crucial part of being an adult member of society. Yet I felt frustrated on behalf of the children in these stories who were depicted as essentially powerless to take charge of their own environments.

It is perhaps because of this frustration that it became increasingly compelling to me to write about circumstances in which it is possible for children to find power and autonomy within the home. My own experience with self-constructed spaces taught me that empowerment could come from the creation and use of forts and playhouses, and as soon as I started investigating this phenomenon through the lens of children’s literature, I became enthralled. I feel that undertaking
this research has allowed me to better understand not only how picturebooks communicate issues of adult power and control, but also how the fictional children in these books can (and do) assert themselves in spaces of powerlessness. It is wonderful to see their boldness, creativity, and individuality shine through in each text.

1.2 Research Focus and Questions

In this thesis, I analyze a selection of two picturebooks with the intention of exploring how child-constructed spaces such as forts and playhouses affect the depiction of child empowerment within adult-controlled domestic space. I will utilize Jerry Griswold’s concept of the “snug place” (5) as a lens through which to better understand how child-owned and controlled spaces are presented in these books, and will perform a close reading of each work with the intention of exploring how “snugness” (Griswold 1) is conveyed through text, image, and peritext. The picturebook analysis techniques put forward by Lawrence R. Sipe (“Picturebooks as Aesthetic Objects”) and Denise E. Agosto (“One and Inseparable”) provide the tools with which I will carry out the analysis.

Key questions guiding the research include:

1. How do the selected picturebooks demonstrate and interpret snugness through their portrayals of children building and/or using their own spaces?

2. How is adult-controlled domestic space portrayed as a factor in the creation and use of these spaces?

3. To what extent do these child-governed spaces affect the protagonist’s empowerment or disempowerment in the adult-controlled home?
1.3 Significance of the Study

The pool of existing scholarship on child-governed spaces is relatively small, especially in terms of literary portrayals of children building and using spaces inside the home. Much of the children’s literature scholarship that I have encountered while researching for this thesis interprets child-governed space more broadly than I have endeavored to in this work. A discussion of Sue Misheff’s article “Beneath the Web and Over the Stream: The Search for Safe Places in *Charlotte’s Web* and *Bridge to Terabithia*” and Sturm et al.’s study “Windows and Mirrors: Secret Spaces in Children’s Literature” will take place in the Literature Review section of this paper. Despite the fact that these papers deal with safe spaces built and/or used by children or childlike characters, neither focuses specifically on the portrayal of children in domestic space. The authors treat child-owned spaces more broadly, discussing real and fantastical spaces both found and constructed by children.

Outside the academic sphere of children’s literature, there are numerous published studies that endeavor to explain why and how real children build and use forts, playhouses, and clubhouses. Although these works reside primarily in psychology and sociology, their findings and arguments are valuable to the understanding of Griswold’s concept of snugness (5). As such, I will be discussing papers such as Carie Green’s “A Place of My Own: Exploring Preschool Children’s Special Places in the Home Environment” and Colwell et al.’s “Space, Place, and Privacy: Preschool Children's Secret Hiding Places” in the Literature Review section. I have not encountered the direct use of these ideas in conjunction with picturebooks in scholarship outside of Griswold’s work on snugness; this is an important facet of many children’s experiences that has gone hitherto unexplored through the lens of the picturebook.
To my knowledge, this thesis is the only focused study on picturebooks that depict children creating and using their own spaces inside the home. It is my hope that this project will not only address an important gap in scholarship, but will also contribute to an academic conversation about child empowerment in space and place.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

As stated in the previous chapter, this project constitutes a close reading of a selection of two picturebooks that depict the relationship between child empowerment and child-constructed space within the home environment. In the following Literature Review, I endeavor to examine scholarship that works closely with the multiple concepts at play in this work.

I begin the review with a discussion of the picturebook form, focusing on the relationship between text and image. This provides an introduction to the concept of the picturebook as a hybrid art form, an idea that I will be utilizing in my analysis through the use of Lawrence R. Sipe’s concept of synergy (“How Picture Books Work” 98) and Denise E. Agosto’s concept of interdependent storytelling (267).

Next, I consider scholarship surrounding the real-life play behaviors of children. I have included this section in order to provide some background for the concept of child-constructed spaces and their connections to child empowerment, as well as to provide context for Griswold’s concept of snugness (1). The findings of the research reviewed in this section are crucial to my understanding of how child-constructed spaces operate within the worlds of the selected picturebooks.

In the final section of the Literature Review, I provide an overview of secret and safe spaces as presented specifically in children’s literature scholarship. First, I briefly describe how child-owned and controlled spaces can be approached in a purely metaphorical sense, such as in Sue Misheff’s work on safe spaces as carriers of Romantic ideals (131-132). Next, I discuss how child-constructed spaces can be seen more literally as reflections of children’s real-life play
behaviors (Sturm et al. 99). Finally, I conclude the section with a detailed review of Griswold’s idea of snugness (5), a concept that ties together many of the findings previously discussed.

2.2 Picturebooks and the Text-Image Relationship

The formal properties of picturebooks and their particular elements have been up for some debate among scholars of children’s literature, particularly since picturebooks were first taken seriously as an academic subject in the 1980s (Lewis xiii). This is partially because the picturebook is a relatively new form; only about 140 years have passed since images began to take on the distinctive roles that we recognize in picturebooks today (Salisbury and Styles 7). It is also to do with the nature of the form itself and the complex text-image relationship it presents (Lewis xiii). Scholars generally agree that picturebooks are a hybrid art form made up of text and image, and that both modes of representation are important to understanding the picturebook as a whole (Lewis xiii). However, some confusion exists as to the nature of the relationship between text and image in picturebooks, and whether illustration is secondary to text or vice versa (Lewis xiii).

Perry Nodelman’s seminal text *Words About Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children’s Picture Books* was one of the first academic works to investigate the text-image relationship in picturebooks at length (Lewis xiii). Nodelman argues that because words and pictures are such different modes of communication, they inevitably change and “limit” (220) each other when they are put into a relationship. He suggests that “each speaks about matters on which the other is silent” (221) and argues that text and image are essentially opposites that complete each other (221). As a result of this relationship, picturebooks are more than just a sum of their parts (199); looking at the text or the illustrations alone would result in an incomplete reading experience
(193). This conceptualization of the text-image relationship challenges traditional ideas of the picturebook as a simple “stepping stone” (Salisbury and Styles 7) to more mature, text-based forms of literature for children such as novels or chapter books. Although picturebooks certainly can play the role of a stepping stone in a child’s early literacy development (Salisbury and Styles 7), models like Nodelman’s suggest that illustration is far more important than implied by traditional ideas of the picturebook.

Nodelman’s work underpins many later explorations of the text-image relationship in picturebooks, although theorists tend to use different terminology for the nature of the interaction between words and pictures. For example, Lawrence R. Sipe calls the interaction between text and image “synergy” (“How Picture Books Work” 98) and suggests, like Nodelman, that the words and pictures of a picturebook would be incomplete in isolation (98). He argues that synergy depends on the merging of text and image as well as the interactions between them (98-99), and he locates his analysis in semiotics through the suggestion that reading picturebooks facilitates a constant movement between sign systems (102). This produces a sequence that continuously creates new meanings and interpretations, allowing readers to gain knew knowledge of the picturebook every time it is read and reread (106). Here the text-image relationship is less about “limiting” (Nodelman 220) and more about a productive “oscillating” (Sipe 102) movement between the textual and visual.

Sipe builds on his own suggestions that picturebooks are semiotically framed in a later work entitled “Picturebooks as Aesthetic Objects”. Here Sipe provides descriptions of the physical characteristics of picturebooks such as size and shape (24), endpapers (26), and binding (27), and discusses how each element can function as a sign that has potential to add meaning to the reading experience (24). This allows for an analysis of the text-image relationship in
connection with peritext, or the various elements of a picturebook surrounding the main content. Sipe also compiles multiple ways in which illustration can be analyzed in terms of the traditional elements of design such as color, line, and shape (28). It is important to note that Sipe is not the first scholar to suggest analyzing picturebook illustrations this way—he builds upon ideas expounded by Molly Bang (*Picture This*) and William Moebius (“Introduction to Picturebook Codes”). Using these ideas, Sipe treats each element of illustration with significance and lends credibility to his own view that text and image both contribute to story construction in a relationship of synergy (“How Picture Books Work” 98).

In her work “One and Inseparable: Interdependent Storytelling in Picture Storybooks”, Denise E. Agosto expands on Sipe’s idea of “synergy” (“How Picture Books Work” 98) and names a number of categories that emerge when looking at books in which words and pictures have synergistic relationships. She begins by distinguishing interdependent storytelling from what she calls “parallel storytelling” (267), or storytelling in which the text and illustration tell the same story without expanding or contradicting each other. Interdependent storytelling, unlike parallel storytelling, requires the reader to comprehend both the text and illustration in a relationship of synergy, wherein neither text or image is complete without the other (267). According to Agosto, there are two major types of interdependent storytelling: augmentation and contradiction (269). Augmentation refers to storytelling in which text and image “amplify, extend, and complete” (270) each other. In contrast, contradiction refers to picturebooks in which text and image “present conflicting information, such as the words describing a sunny day where the corresponding pictures show a rainstorm” (275). Both augmentation and contradiction have subcategories including irony and humor (269) that rely on a synergistic text-image relationship.
Picturebook scholar David Lewis presents an understanding of text and image that is different still. Unlike Nodelman, Sipe, and Agosto, Lewis suggests that the picturebook should be approached as an “ecology” (48) wherein multiple different relationships between text and image exist (49). In his model, a blanket statement for one single type of text-image relationship across all picturebooks is reductive (47). Lewis argues that understanding each picturebook as a kind of ecosystem or organism allows for increased flexibility (48) and complexity (52), and gives readers the opportunity to see text and image in a reciprocal relationship: “… each one becom[es] the environment within which the other lives and thrives” (54). His assertion that picturebooks should be treated as complex organisms that are different from one another comes partially as a reaction against models such as Agosto’s, which attempt to categorize whole books without taking multiple effects inside those books into consideration (41). Lewis also proposes that the construction of the story in picturebooks becomes possible through what he calls a “reading event” (55), in which the reader enters into a reciprocal relationship with the text and gives their attention and knowledge over to the book in exchange for the text’s content for observation (57). According to Lewis, an acknowledgement of this process allows theorists to take children’s readings of picturebooks more seriously, as children bring special knowledge to the reading process that adults may not possess (59).

Although picturebook scholars such as Nodelman, Sipe, Agosto, and Lewis have different vocabularies and ideas for expressing how the relationship between text and illustration works, a commonality between them is the recognition of illustration as an important element of the reading experience. Even though text has often been viewed as more important to storytelling than illustration (Salisbury and Styles 7), these theorists all work to show that instead of merely being side effects of looking at picturebooks, visual components and visual literacy are on equal
footing with text when it comes to meaning-making and story construction. The hybrid nature and potential of the picturebook is evident.

2.3 Self-Constructed Spaces in the Play Behavior of Children

I would like now to shift away from the formal aspects of picturebooks to begin a discussion of the play behaviors of children. Studies have shown that children frequently build and/or use spaces in which they can experience spatial ownership during their play and social time (Colwell et al. 412). As they grow to have less dependence on their parents for daily activities, researchers have suggested that children psychologically develop the desire for a separate space of their own (Sobel 61). This manifests in their use of blanket forts, small spaces like wardrobes or closets, and outdoor special spaces like tree houses (Sobel 61). Many researchers have agreed that this play behavior is linked to a child’s desire to experience feelings of autonomy, control, and safety (Colwell et al. 420; Green, “A Place of My Own” 128; Sobel 74), especially when it takes place within environments constantly governed and structured by adults (Green, “Because We Like To” 333). Although scholars may discuss these spaces in slightly different terms—for example, Colwell et al.’s use of the term “secret place” (412) versus Carie Green’s “special place” (“A Place of My Own” 119) and Griswold’s “snug place” (5)—they generally agree that children wish to experience feelings of empowerment and autonomy through the construction and use of self-owned spaces.

Researchers such as David Sobel and Carie Green have supported the idea that children should be allowed the opportunity to engage with space-building of this kind. Sobel advocates for the benefits of child-constructed spaces in his book *Children’s Special Places: Exploring the Role of Forts, Dens, and Bush Houses in Middle Childhood*. He documents his experiences
working with the children of Devon, England and the children of Carriacou, West Indies, and utilizes a comparative analysis to support his hypothesis that child-constructed spaces are international phenomena that cross cultural boundaries (47). His findings suggested that there are both similarities and differences between the child-constructed spaces of England and the West Indies. For example, Carriacouan children demonstrated a stronger interest in gendered spaces than the children of Devon, with more boys interested in bush houses and more girls interested in playhouses and playshops (Sobel 34). Carriacouan children also used their self-owned spaces for more social play than the children of Devon (Sobel 34-35). Although these differences are significant, Sobel notes that all of the children he worked with referenced a desire for privacy and “separateness” (47) from the adults surrounding them. This was a commonality regardless of culture or background (47). Based on this discovery, Sobel asserts that children use self-constructed places as a vehicle for discovering a sense of self, a process that requires the protection of privacy and secrecy (70). He ultimately calls for parents, teachers, and other adults to recognize space-building and privacy as important parts of a child’s development: “We need to recognize and respect children’s need to find a place of their own as a step toward becoming their own persons” (74).

Carie Green’s research echoes Sobel’s suggestion that children create spaces as a way to garner privacy and autonomy away from their parents. Green investigates this idea through a focus on children’s space-building activities within the home environment, a space that offers children very little opportunity for control or ownership (“Because We Like To” 333). Her articles “A Place of My Own: Exploring Preschool Children’s Special Places in the Home Environment” and “‘Because We Like To’: Young Children’s Experiences Hiding in Their
Home Environment” constitute some of the first research undertaken on child-constructed spaces within the adult-controlled home (Green “A Place of My Own” 122).

Green’s first article focuses primarily on what she calls “special places” (“A Place of My Own” 119), which she defines as “space[s] that children carve out in the world and claim as their very own” (199). The method of this study included informal and semi-structured interviews with preschool-aged children and their parents, as well as home visits in which the researcher directly toured and observed children’s special places (122). Interestingly, the first phase of Green’s method involved using a children’s book in the classroom to initiate conversation with children about their special places (122). Green could locate no suitable book from the pool of published children’s literature on children’s self-owned spaces, so she created her own—entitled My Own Special Place—as a data collection instrument (123). She found that the children mentioned more indoor spaces than outdoor spaces during the discussion following the reading (127). In fact, the majority of children described special places located within the home (127), emphasizing the importance of control and ownership within domestic space. Moreover, Green asserts that the children displayed a sense of autonomy and empowerment during the tours of their special places (124). She states: “During the tours, the children seemed to feel empowered by having a visitor who was interested in learning about their personal lives” (124). This emphasizes the connection between child empowerment and spatial ownership.

Green’s second exploration of children’s spaces inside the home environment focuses specifically on children’s experiences with hiding (“Because We Like To”). Similar to her previous research, Green’s method included a classroom discussion of children’s hiding places initiated by a puppet show and the use of her book My Own Special Place, as well as drawing activities (329). Green then conducted home visits in which she was given tours of various
hiding places and collected data from informal interviews with both the children and their parents (329). Green found that the children had multiple hiding places they visited within their homes, and that they appreciated the social facets of hiding, such as hiding with friends or playing hide-and-seek (330). Her findings also suggested that the children were inclined to protect the privacy of their hiding places: “Throughout each of the children’s place tours, it was apparent that children did not want, nor invite, parents or other adults (including the researcher) to enter into their hiding places” (333). Green further emphasizes that the children chose hiding places that functioned as retreats from uncomfortable situations; a sense of protection proved itself to be crucial to the children’s selection of a hiding place (334). It is clear that hiding, secrecy, and privacy are significant facets of child-constructed spaces, and that they are of special importance within the adult-controlled home. Like Sobel, Green suggests that educators be aware of the importance of child-constructed and owned spaces: “Children need to be able to claim their own places, for it is within these special spaces in an adult-structured world that children gain control and construct their own place identity” (335).

Like Green, Malinda Colwell et al. focus on hiding in their study entitled “Space, Place, and Privacy: Preschool Children's Secret Hiding Places”. Colwell et al. reiterate the conclusions presented by both Sobel and Green, asserting that “children have a world they wish to keep separate from others” (412). However, Colwell et al. focus more prominently on the construction of these spaces than both Sobel and Green, and ultimately go on to interrogate the title of “secret” so often attached to child-constructed spaces (412). They suggest that although many previous studies assert that spaces like forts and playhouses are child-constructed, “it is not clear …whether or not children’s discussions of secret hiding places represent what children actually do in terms of creating such a space” (413). Colwell et al.’s method therefore included a
discussion of secret spaces and classroom art activities as well as an opportunity for the children to make their own classroom secret spaces using various materials offered by the researchers (414-15). The findings suggested that children prefer to use materials that can be used for multiple purposes and have a certain degree of flexibility and comfort (418). For example, cardboard tubes and blankets were utilized while books, a plastic tree, and an expandable tunnel were declined by the children (416). Colwell et al. also discovered that the children continuously referenced the importance of being observed by adults: “… children consistently allude to the importance of being seen by adults for seemingly safety reasons, even if they preclude them from actually participating in those spaces” (419). The researchers suggest that, interestingly, the feeling of safety that comes from the use of a “secret” space actually involves “being seen by adults but in a way that children control” (419). In other words, even though the children were in plain sight of adults, they played and spoke as if they were invisible to them (417); the “secret” space is only secret in the world of play, and this allows the children a sense of security. Like Green and Sobel, Colwell et al. touch on the benefits of allowing children to engage in this kind of activity: “… providing materials and time to create secret spaces may enhance children’s sense of control over their classroom environment. The child-created secret spaces can allow children a designated space to retreat to in times of stress, tiredness, or for privacy” (419).

The findings of these works align in multiple ways. Sobel, Green, and Colwell et al. all emphasize the importance of childhood self-controlled privacy and spatial ownership, and point to the construction of children’s self-owned spaces as a reflection of those sought-after feelings of autonomy, independence, and safety. Perhaps the most important overarching characteristic of these spaces is that they are controlled by the child in almost every sense. Colwell et al.’s suggestion that children wish to control their own sense of safety by only pretending to be
invisible to adults (419) strengthens this idea. Child-constructed spaces are wholly controlled by
the child even when it comes to the more imaginative elements of their play and the extent to
which adult presence is necessary. As the following discussion will suggest, control is also a
recurring theme in literary depictions of child-constructed and owned spaces.

2.4 Child-Constructed Spaces, Safe Spaces, and the Snug Place in Children’s

Literature

Reflecting on the abundance of secret spaces and hiding places in the lives of children, it
is perhaps unsurprising that spaces with similar characteristics are common in children’s
literature. Child-controlled spaces can serve a number of different functions within literature for
youth, including as devices for character development (Sturm et al. 85) and as reflections of the
desire for an ordered, safe world (Misheff 131-32; Griswold 29). Picturebooks, illustrated books,
 Novels, and other forms of children’s literature are all possible vehicles for stories about spaces
in which protagonists can experience some facet of control. Jerry Griswold has pointed to
Badger’s underground home in The Wind in the Willows (6), the stockade from Treasure Island
(13), and Max’s play fort in Where the Wild Things Are (8) as reflections of children’s real-life
owned and controlled spaces; this is clearly a theme that crosses forms and genres of literature
for youth. As mentioned above, gaining control over one’s world proves to be the crucial
element of these literary spaces, no matter what form the story occupies.

Although many scholars working to understand child-owned space in children’s literature
tie their findings back to the play behaviors of real-life children, some researchers work with safe
and special places in an entirely literary sense. It is telling that even though safe spaces can be
approached metaphorically, empowered security and safety in one’s own space remains an
important theme. For example, Sue Misheff argues that safe spaces in children’s books can be read as a reflection of the paradisal, pastoral ideals of Romanticism (131-32). Misheff analyzes E.B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web* and Katherine Paterson’s *Bridge to Terabithia*, performing close reading with the intention of investigating the meaning of safe places. According to Misheff, both Charlotte’s spider web and the imagined space of Terabithia constitute safe places created by the female characters, Charlotte and Leslie (132). These spaces function as transformative locales that ultimately “save” (133) Wilbur and Jess, the male characters of the stories. Misheff argues that both Charlotte and Leslie fit into the Romantic ideals of the female character: they are both mentors, and both die powerful deaths that allow for the rebirth of the male characters (134-35). The safe spaces in these books, being so tied to the female characters, therefore reflect both the natural lifecycle of the Earth and the Romantic idea of eternity (138); this is a way of ordering the world. According to Misheff, safe spaces like these eventually bring characters maturity and balance: “Both Leslie and Charlotte … lead the redeemed males into a place of balance, away from the unreflected life and into a life governed by both the imagination and reason” (140). Thus, the safe space becomes a reaction to a dangerous and disordered world—a world in which Jess and Wilbur may come to harm—and represents the desire for reason, balance, and harmony between magic and reality (140). This is the desire for a world that is predictable, lies closer to nature, and offers a perception of control.

Here Misheff approaches the safe space as literary metaphor. Other scholars move away from metaphorical readings and look at fictional children’s safe spaces as products of real-life circumstances and contexts. For their research, Brian Sturm et al. engaged in a latent content analysis of eighteen books with the intention of defining and describing the functions of fictional secret places (86). The method of the study involved three researchers working through the
selection of books and individually compiling quotes that they felt related to secret and child-owned spaces (86-7). These quotes were then examined for trends across all of the books, and categories that emerged were described and discussed (87). Findings suggested that the primary reason fictional children interact with secret spaces is to transform their chaotic worlds into manageable, controllable microcosms (87). Sturm et al. assert that child characters use secret spaces to retreat from uncomfortable situations they cannot control, such as feelings of loneliness and incidents of bullying (87). This reflects Carie Green’s suggestion that children seek out hiding spaces that will allow them to escape from uncomfortable situations in the home (“Because We Like To” 334). Also like Green, Sturm et al. argue that fictional children retreat to gain a sense of empowerment within the larger world of adult rules and governance (Sturm et al. 88; Green “Because We Like To” 333). According to Sturm et al., fictional children express control over their spaces in three ways: they are responsible for the construction of the space, they define the rules and rituals that are enforced in the space, and they control who is able to access the space (89). Additionally, children are able to furnish their spaces and/or alter the physical environment, emphasizing ownership and creativity (89). These findings align with Sobel, Green, and Colwell et al.’s conclusions that children wish to garner privacy so that they can order their world in a way they understand (Colwell et al. 419; Green, “Because We Like To” 333; Sobel 70).

Distinct characteristics of self-owned spaces in children’s literature emerge from Sturm et al.’s content analysis. First, the spaces are separated from the children’s everyday lives in terms of adult control and influence (93). Interestingly, the researchers found that although older characters tended to build or use spaces farther away from the home, physical distance from adults did not seem to matter as much as the feeling of distance (93). This echoes Colwell et al.’s
suggestion that children tend to maintain control of their spaces through what is only an imaginary separation from adults (419). Secondly, Sturm et al. argue that secret spaces in children’s literature also feature some kind of threshold between real and imaginary (94), an element that is interrelated with fantastic narrative or play (95). As a result of this, child characters generally experience an altered state of consciousness within their secret spaces (96). This allows for the spaces to be transformative. The child characters gain self-awareness and change their relationships with the larger world (98), an idea that recalls Misheff’s suggestion that safe spaces are locales of transformation (140). Ultimately, Sturm et al. argue that based on the available scholarship and the findings of the content analysis, children’s literature accurately reflects the real-life play behaviors and space-building activities of children (99).

It is clear that the inclinations of real children who engage in space-building can provide some insight into fictional child-constructed spaces. Jerry Griswold works with this idea in his study of fictional “snug places” (5) in his work *Feeling Like a Kid: Childhood and Children’s Literature*. As mentioned previously, Griswold utilizes the term “snugness” (5) to refer to the multi-faceted qualities of autonomy and wellbeing that can emerge in connection with child-constructed spaces in children’s literature. Griswold’s concept of snugness ties together many ideas put forward by other scholars; autonomy, comfort, security, safety, empowerment, and control are all part of the snugness that is experienced in fictional child-constructed and owned spaces (9-14). Like the other researchers reviewed in this chapter, Griswold suggests that children endeavor to keep secrets and separate themselves from adults in an effort to experience control (14). This effort is closely connected to the building and using of snug places (14).

Similar to Sturm et al., Griswold sets out to identify specific features of child-constructed and owned spaces (9). In his work, he outlines eleven features of the snug place: enclosed, tight,
small, simple, well designed, remote, safe, guarded, self-sufficient, owned, and hidden (9-14). According to Griswold, these characteristics suggest that children use these spaces as an attempt to “recapture the security of the womb” (14) as well as to experience individuality and independence (15). Snug places are therefore locales of both familiarity and assertiveness, a quality that Griswold refers to as “a womb of one’s own” (15). His suggestion that children wish to experience both comfort and autonomy aligns with the arguments of other researchers like Malinda Colwell et al. and Carie Green, who emphasize the importance of allowing children to claim special places in familiar environments like the home or the classroom (Colwell et al. 419; Green 335). Griswold’s “a womb of one’s own” (15) also implies that control is a key factor in defining the snug place; it cannot simply reflect a safe and comfortable womb, but must expressly be a “womb of one’s own”, or a place over which one has control and ownership.

Griswold further outlines his concept of snugness by looking at time as an important factor in the creation of a snug place. He suggests that just as there are certain spaces that encourage snugness, there are certain times in stories that are more likely to evoke snugness than others (15). For example, snugness is more likely to arise during times of inclement weather due to the strong contrast between the unpleasant, uncontrollable outside world and the cozy, comfortable snug place (15). It is also more likely to arise during winter—snowfall encourages a strong contrast between inside and outside—and during the holiday season (16). In terms of the day-to-day, snugness can also manifest strongly at nighttime and bedtime (20). According to Griswold, sleep is intrinsically related to a feeling of snugness: “Restful sleep … requires conditions of ease and security, a comfort absent of potential threats, a wellbeing in which one is able to relax. … And these conditions for sleep—serenity, safety, agreeableness—amount to a description of snugness” (20).
It is important to note that senses of relaxation and comfort also bring snugness in close connection with daydreaming. Expanding on the ideas of Gaston Bachelard, Griswold asserts that, like the house, the snug place is a “shelter for daydreaming” (25). The controlled, secure conditions necessary for sleep are also required for moments where children can safely engage in imaginative play: “… the young need secure and cozy locales in which they can create and enact make-believe stories that meet their needs and make their lives understandable” (25). Snug places therefore provide the perfect atmosphere for exercising the imagination through daydreaming, an activity that, Griswold suggests, can help children order their world (25). This assertion recalls the idea posited by Sturm et al. that fictional children enter an altered state of consciousness within their self-owned and controlled spaces, and that crossing this threshold is required for the space to become beneficially transformative (96-98).

When considering these positive effects of snugness, it is important to note that some focalizers experience small, tight places not as snug and cozy but as stifling and claustrophobic. Griswold observes that some child characters find comfort in large spaces and open air rather than enclosed spaces (26). He suggests that a child’s positive or negative experience of a snug place is wholly dependent on their feelings of security and control: “A child’s sense of security determines whether enclosed space is perceived as reassuring and desirable or confining and abhorrent” (26-7). Snugness is encouraged when (and only when) a child feels safe and secure inside of a snug place.

This sense of spatial security is exceedingly important and is at the crux of Griswold’s argument here. A lack of security, for Griswold, indicates a lack of trust in the world to be safe, predictable, and manageable (27). The drive to experience snugness arises in response to a lack of this security in the lives of children: “Properly understood, snugness is a remedy sought for
the existential discomfort with expansiveness” (29). The snug place, according to Griswold, is therefore “an enclosed locale where … vulnerability is exchanged for feelings of comfort and security” (29). Like Misheff’s ideas regarding the safe places of Charlotte’s web and Leslie’s Terabithia (131-32), Griswold believes the snug place to be a reaction to the perceived unpredictability and danger of the outside world (29). In this way, to experience snugness in children’s literature is to experience wellbeing, healing, and empowerment (29).

### 2.5 Conclusion

As can be seen from the analysis above, the study of child-constructed spaces in both children’s literature and real play behaviors has much to do with understanding children’s desire for control over their own environments. It also has much to do with the investigation of power relationships. Dichotomies between child and adult, child-owned space and adult-controlled home, comfort and discomfort, and a child’s imaginary world and the world of reality all come into play when looking at the effects of child-constructed spaces. At their most essential, snug spaces both fictional and real provide children with the power to negotiate these dichotomies—to claim and control their own space within the larger, adult-governed world. It is in these spaces that children can rehearse being adults; they can feel independence, ownership, and individuality while also experiencing safety, comfort, and wellbeing. The scholars featured in this chapter, although they use different terminology for spaces and their effects, are almost fully in agreement that not only do children engage in space-building, but that such activities are beneficial for children’s wellbeing and development. The study of these spaces through the lens of children’s literature opens up the possibility of understanding the negotiation of spatial control further through the act of analyzing childhood space-building against the adult world outside.
The study of picturebooks also constitutes an exploration into relationships on a technical level. As a hybrid art form, picturebooks present a complex relationship between text and image that has proved to be difficult to fully describe. However, it is apparent that text and image are in a relationship, each component in conversation with the other as part of a gesture of storytelling. Knowing this, my research will employ close reading of text, image, and peritext to try and better understand how the constructed spaces of childhood negotiate the power relationships inherent in spatial control and ownership.
Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The theoretical framework guiding this research is informed by the studies of Lawrence R. Sipe and Denise E. Agosto, who both introduce theoretical models based on the idea that the relationship between text and image constitutes a synergy that can be decoded and analyzed (Agosto 269; Sipe “How Picture Books Work” 98; Sipe “Picturebooks as Aesthetic Objects” 24). My theoretical framework is also informed by Jerry Griswold’s concept of snugness and the assertion that the qualities of real child-constructed spaces are discoverable through the close reading of literary snug places (5-6).

I begin this Methodology chapter by outlining in detail my primary text selection process. In the previous Literature Review chapter, I discussed the idea that child-constructed spaces have specific and identifiable features (Griswold 9-14; Sturm et al. 92-96). In order to select productively comparable picturebooks and to analyze them to the best of my ability, I was very specific during the selection process in terms of outlining the characteristics of child-constructed spaces, domestic space, and the narratives of the books themselves. My goal was to emerge with a selection of books that were similar enough to be compared, but diverse enough to allow for interesting and productive analysis. A strong rationale for selection was crucial for this process. In this section I also detail changes that were made to the selection as the project progressed, specifically my decision to analyze two picturebooks rather than my initial selection of four.

In the second section, I outline my method for the close reading of each picturebook, detailing the structure of the project and the manner in which I will answer my research questions. I also address the grounds on which I have chosen to use the works of Sipe and Agosto as my guides for analysis.
I conclude the chapter with a list of definitions for significant terms.

3.2 Rationale for Text Selection

Picturebooks depicting children creating and/or using forts, playhouses, and clubhouses make up a relatively small corpus of books. As was discussed in the Literature Review, many children’s texts deal with child-governed secret spaces both imaginary and physical. However, I wanted to choose picturebooks that depict children creating and using their own self-governed spaces directly. Books like these have the dual benefit of being more likely to portray children inside their home environments while also allowing for a sense of realism—I wanted to steer away from the fantastical as best I could in order to get a more realistic sense of how child-constructed space fits into the adult-controlled world of the home. Having done some research and writing on what eventually became my thesis topic in one of my MA classes, I knew going into the process that I wanted to work with Soft House, written by Jane Yolen and illustrated by Wendy Anderson Halperin, and The Fort That Jack Built, written by Boni Ashburn and illustrated by Brett Helquist. Although very different in their execution, Soft House and The Fort That Jack Built both feature child protagonists building forts out of household materials within their home environments. Having already selected these two texts, I began a process of elimination with my small corpus of books in an effort to find any comparable works.

My goal at the outset of the thesis was to include a total of four picturebooks in my selection. Unfortunately, as the project progressed I found that I was unable to accommodate the analysis of four picturebooks—there simply was not enough space in the project to allow for it. I have included my process of selection here nevertheless because I believe it sheds light on my reasons for choosing to proceed with Soft House and The Fort That Jack Built. It also acts as a
guide for upcoming research should the study of child-constructed spaces in picturebooks be undertaken hereafter. See the Limitations of the Study and Possibilities for Future Research section in Chapter Six for a more detailed discussion of how this work could be expanded upon and continued in the future.

I began my selection process at the outset of this project with a general timeline upon which each book in my corpus was published. The earliest texts I had noted were *Andrew Henry’s Meadow* by Doris Burn (published in 1965) and *Christina Katerina & the Box* written by Patricia Lee Gauch and illustrated by Doris Burn (published in 1971). The two books I had already selected were at the other end of the timeline, both published later than 2000. Knowing that the fifty or so years on my timeline amounted to a large portion of the history of the picturebook (Salisbury and Styles 7), I decided to restrict my selection to books published between the years 2000 and 2016. Despite the fact that both *Andrew Henry’s Meadow* and *Christina Katerina & the Box* have qualities that fit into the theme of the project, socially constructed assumptions about the adult-child relationship have changed a great deal over time (Salisbury and Styles 113). Authors and artists consequently approach literature for children differently today than they did in the 1960s; the scope of this project would likely not allow for the historical nuance that analyzing a book like *Christina Katerina & the Box* against *The Fort That Jack Built* and *Soft House* would require. This is not to imply that the way society views childhood has not shifted between 2000 and 2016—nor that different ideas do not exist over such a diverse area as North America, where all the books in the selection are published—but instead it is indicative of my effort to narrow the scope of the research to a selection of books that are more productively comparable. This effort is, inevitably, imperfect; see the Limitations section for a discussion of the scope of the project and possible future evolutions.
I also wished to have consistency across the selection in terms of form. Picturebooks are diverse artifacts that make use of many differing components. Art style, typography, topography, peritext, and physical shape are just some qualities of picturebooks that can differ from one to the other. I do not see these differences as doing a disservice to the research; rather, I would argue they enrich the analysis. As I have discussed the previous chapter, each part of a picturebook has the capacity to carry meaning, whether it be text, image, or peritext. However, when looking through my corpus, I discovered a book that formally differed from the rest of the selection: a moveable book called Box, written by Min Flyte and illustrated by Rosalind Beardshaw. The book includes a series of movable folds and flaps, all under the theme of what imaginative spaces children can create with a cardboard box. Movable books such as Box are hybrid artifacts that exist as part book, part game or toy (Reid-Walsh 2), and although scholars are beginning to study movable books as a subset of the picturebook (Reid-Walsh 5), texts such as these are distinctly interactive and quite different from the selection I had already decided upon. I felt that a moveable book like Box was not exactly what I was looking for in terms of my project.

Box was also the first of many box-themed picturebooks in my corpus that had non-linear narratives. These books offer imaginative ideas of what constructed spaces can be made out of a box, but do not tell a story in which children can be read against the adult-controlled world around them. Some of these titles include: What To Do With a Box written by Jane Yolen and illustrated by Chris Sheban; Not a Box by Antoinette Portis; The Birthday Box by Leslie Patricelli; and A Box Story by Kenneth Kit Lamug. Although these books deal with children making use of constructed spaces in a way that emphasizes their imagination and play behavior, the absence of a narrative arc makes it difficult to perform the story-based close reading that I
wanted to conduct for the project. In fact, although many of these books imply a setting within
the home, almost none of them make this explicit. The adult world likely cannot be analyzed at
length against the self-governed space of the child in these texts. Consequently, I chose to restrict
my selection to picturebooks that tell stories with narrative arcs.

As discussed above, I have made the effort to focus on stories that take place in the home
environment with a sense of realism. Part of the reason I wanted to avoid looking too much at the
fantastical is that narratives that take the child protagonist out of the real world and into their
own imagination amount to something close to a portal narrative—instead of staying all the time
in their own constructed space, children enter what is basically a new, fantastical space tangential
to the real world. This disrupts the space-within-a-space narrative I endeavor to unpack with my
analysis. As such, I have decided to exclude books such as: *The Nowhere Box* by Sam Zuppardi;
*If I Built a House* by Chris Van Dusen; and *The Box* by Axel Janssens. I am not suggesting that
the books I have chosen for my selection have no elements of the fantastic—*The Fort That Jack
Built* does have portions that deal with Jack’s imagination. However, the action going on in
Jack’s imagination exists as a direct result of what is going on in the real world, and reality is
always privileged over fantasy.

The final step of my process was to reflect on whether I wanted to include books that
feature tree houses as child-governed spaces. Sturm et al. include tree houses in their discussion
of secret spaces in children’s literature (83), and I would argue that even though children do not
often construct tree houses themselves, these spaces can still be used in the same way as indoor
forts and playhouses. Both can be refuges from the adult-controlled world outside. Moreover,
tree houses inside the boundaries of the yard surrounding the house can still fall into the region
of domestic space. In *The Domestic Space Reader*, Catherine Alexander suggests that gardens
and yards are ordered in a front-to-back structure that reflects the spatial divisions of the house (269). In other words, the outdoor space of the garden is transformed to mirror the indoor space of the home. This is a gesture of spatial ownership that I would argue reinforces yard space as an extension of domestic space.

It is important to note, however, that even though the yard may be an extension of the house, it can provide a different set of rules for children’s play. Alexander emphasizes that the garden can be a place of disorder: “... for children, play in the garden has an element of permissible exuberance, excess, and uncontainment” (271). Imaginative play in the garden can be messier and more chaotic than play inside the house. In terms of this project, I see this “uncontainment” (271) as manifesting in the fact that tree houses are often much more permanent than other child-constructed spaces. Forts and playhouses created indoors almost always have to be dismantled to maintain the order of the house; tree houses, on the other hand, can be permanent or semi-permanent fixtures.

Despite these differences between indoor forts and outdoor tree houses, I ultimately decided to consider books that depict children engaging with outdoor spaces. I would argue that their similarities far outweigh their differences, and a book that depicts a child playing inside of a tree house can still be analyzed for a better understanding of how children can be empowered or disempowered in adult-controlled space. Mirroring the process described above, I worked to sift from my corpus tree house books that have non-linear narratives, take place away from domestic space—often in a park or forest—or deal with a child entering an imaginary world. These included: *Secret Tree Fort* by Brianne Farley; *The Treehouse That Jack Built* written by Bonnie Verburg and illustrated by Mark Teague; and *Freddy & Frito and the Clubhouse Rules* by Alison Friend. Although all of these books feature child protagonists making use of self-owned and
controlled spaces, I did not feel that the books focused enough on domestic space to be included in the selection.

Ultimately, my search took me to *Audrey’s Tree House*, written by Jenny Hughes and illustrated by Jonathan Bentley, and *In The Tree House*, written by Andrew Larson and illustrated by Dušan Petričić. I knew as soon as I had looked closely at these books that they would fit into my analysis, and they became the two books that I set out to analyze with *Soft House* and *The Fort That Jack Built*. Although I was ultimately unable to include them in the project, I would suggest that they would provide an excellent foundation for future research on how tree houses operate as child-constructed spaces within domestic space. Like the children in *Soft House* and *The Fort That Jack Built*, the protagonists of *Audrey’s Tree House* and *In The Tree House* stay firmly rooted in reality when they make use of their tree houses in imaginative ways—the opportunity for analysis of the protagonist’s play against the larger world outside is abundant here.

At the conclusion of this section I would like to briefly address my reasoning for analyzing two fort books rather than one fort book and one tree house book. I have argued that the similarities between forts and tree houses far outweigh their differences when looking at child-constructed spaces within the home environment. Despite this, I have found that looking at just one indoor space and one outdoor space would not allow for the analysis of either to reach its full potential within the confines of this project. By proceeding with two books that tell stories of indoor spaces, I have been able to use the space I have in this project to look closely at the operation of indoor forts within the adult-structured household. I believe that if I had included one fort book and one tree house book instead, my analysis would have shifted too heavily towards the comparison of indoor and outdoor spaces, and I would not have had the room needed
in the project for sufficient close reading. *Soft House* and *The Fort That Jack Built* have enough similarities to be productively comparable, but also have fundamental differences that allow the research to look at indoor child-constructed spaces in new and innovative ways. Put simply, although they both look at indoor spaces, these two books cover enough ground to provide the foundation for what could become a generous branch of children’s literature scholarship.

### 3.3 Method for the Analysis of Primary Texts

This project involves the close reading and analysis of two picturebooks: *Soft House* and *The Fort That Jack Built*. I will be performing close reading of the full stories (text and image) as well as peritext (cover, binding, endpapers, size and shape, topography, etc.) according to analysis techniques put forward by Lawrence R. Sipe and Denise E. Agosto.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Sipe expands on the idea of the picturebook as hybrid art form in his work “Picturebooks as Aesthetic Objects”. He emphasizes that both peritext and illustration are important to meaning-making and story construction (24). I have looked to this work in my own analysis for the tools with which to “read” the illustrations and the physical characteristics of my selected picturebooks. I consider Sipe’s concept of synergy to be appropriate in terms of this project, as I will be working with all elements of the picturebook as potential meaning-makers. I also find the work of Denise E. Agosto to be useful here; she provides the terminology for the effects of the text-image relationship I will analyze throughout this research (269).

It must be noted that although I will be primarily using Sipe and Agosto, Lewis’ concept of the picturebook as ecology heavily influences the manner in which I approach these books. Like Lewis, I will endeavor to honor the complexity of each picturebook in the selection by
resisting the impulse to apply a blanket statement to the text-image relationship in each (41). Instead, I endeavor to unpack the multiple relationships in each book, using Agosto and Sipe’s terminology and tools for analysis, to get as closely as possible to the workings of each story. In other words, I will not be approaching the books in the selection as representatives of one kind of text-image interaction; instead, I will treat them as complex organisms that contain multiple instances of parallel and interdependent storytelling.

In order to best perform the thorough close reading that this project requires, I have structured the thesis so that I can focus closely on each primary text. To that end, I have dedicated one chapter to each book in the selection. I have ordered the chapters in accordance to what I will refer to as the “life cycle” of an indoor child-owned and controlled space. *Soft House* depicts the *creation* of a child-constructed space, and thus will be analyzed first in Chapter Four. *The Fort That Jack Built* focuses heavily on the last part of the life cycle—the *destruction* of the child-constructed space. It will therefore be analyzed subsequent to *Soft House*, in Chapter Five. Within the individual chapters, the research questions will be applied to each book separately. This I do with the intention of providing a more thorough close reading than if single questions were to be applied sequentially.

3.4 Significant Terms

**Domestic Space:** The term “domestic space” refers to the combined space of the house and yard. For my purposes, domestic space involves both physical space as well as the practices, beliefs, and feelings associated with it. Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei differentiate between “house” and “home” in *The Domestic Space Reader*, asserting that “house” is generally understood as “a physical built dwelling for people in a fixed location” (5), while “home” refers to “a space, a
feeling, an idea” (5). The term “domestic space”, according to Briganti and Mezei, can signify both (3). They describe it as “the material, psychological, spiritual, gendered, social, cultural, and political aspects of house, home, and garden in the context of the everyday and of human relationships within and beyond the house” (3). Thus, the protagonists featured in the picturebooks I have selected for this project interact with domestic space both as a physical space and as an environment imbued with social and psychological context.

**Snugness:** According to Jerry Griswold, snugness manifests in writing for youth as a reflection of cozy, safe, guarded places associated with childhood (5). I approach snugness as a feeling of safety, empowerment, and comfort that is experienced in connection with space and time. In this project, I suggest that snugness is evoked through the creation of the protagonists’ self-owned space, and that the qualities of snugness are discoverable through the analysis of text and image.

**Snug Place:** The place in which snugness is evoked and experienced (Griswold 5). I approach child-constructed spaces as snug places that function as refuges and spaces of autonomy within the larger, adult-controlled world of domestic space.

**Child-Constructed Space:** Child-constructed space is a term I use throughout this thesis to refer to the forts built and/or used by the protagonists in the selection. In *Soft House* and *The Fort That Jack Built*, the child characters construct a fort space independently of their parents, taking on the responsibility of designing as well as building. These spaces are, by definition, child-constructed. Occasionally throughout the project I also refer to tree houses and other outdoor spaces not physically constructed by children as child-constructed spaces. Although these spaces might not seem to deserve the name “child-constructed space”, I have specifically used the word “construct” to indicate both physical assembly and the formation of an idea or plan. Despite the fact that children do not physically construct these spaces, they have control and responsibility
over how the space is used, who enters and exits the space, and what it might look like inside. I
would argue that these are facets of ownership that allow outdoor locations like tree houses to fit
the definition of child-constructed spaces.

**Picturebook:** As noted above, the particulars of how picturebooks work have been up for some
debate in academia. This includes the spelling of the word “picturebook” itself. David Lewis
notes that children’s literature scholars have used variations such as “picture book”, “picture-
book”, and “picturebook” (xiv) in their works. Lewis himself uses “picturebook” to reflect the
compound nature of the form (xiv). Like Lewis, I will be considering these texts as complex
wholes made up of a number of significant elements; therefore, I have chosen to adopt the
“picturebook” spelling for this project.

**Picturebook Maker(s):** A term utilized by Martin Salisbury and Morag Styles to indicate the
creator or creators of a picturebook (7). The term “maker” or “makers” can encapsulate both
author and illustrator, and I have used it in this project as part of my intention to avoid
privileging text over image by using the term “author(s)” to reference an author-illustrator or an
author-illustrator team.

**Opening:** Many picturebooks are not paginated. To compensate for this, I utilize the term
“opening” along with a numerical qualifier to indicate the page or pages of a picturebook I am
discussing. For example, the “third opening” of a picturebook refers to the pages revealed after
the reader turns the pages three times from the beginning, including the cover and endpapers.

**Verso:** Reading left-to-right, “verso” refers to the first page of an opening (the page on the
reader’s left).

**Recto:** Reading left-to-right, “recto” refers to the second page of an opening (the page on the
reader’s right).
**Full Bleed:** An illustration that covers the entire page.

**Double-Page Spread:** Verso and recto treated as one full spread as opposed to two separate pages of content.

**Peritext:** Physical characteristics and textual elements that surround the main content of a book. This includes physical size and shape, type of paper used, endpapers, cover, spine, dust jacket, and front or back matter. Each part of a picturebook functions as a sign and contributes to meaning-making (Sipe, “Picture Books as Aesthetic Objects” 24), making peritext crucial to investigate when looking at picturebooks.
Chapter 4: Findings: Soft House

4.1 Introduction

The analysis portion of this project will begin with a discussion of Soft House, a narrative picturebook written by Jane Yolen and illustrated by Wendy Anderson Halperin. As stated in the Methodology chapter, I will apply my three research questions to each picturebook in the selection individually in order to achieve a careful close reading of each text. Each research question will therefore be applied to Soft House in individual sections of this chapter.

Prior to these sections I have provided a summary of the story as well as a brief description of the text-image relationships to be found according to the definitions provided by Denise E. Agosto (“Interdependent Storytelling”). I have included these short summaries as part of my effort to effectively examine Soft House as thoroughly as possible, while paying attention to the book as a whole in addition to the analysis of details.

In this chapter, I argue that Soft House effectively follows the process of the creation of a child-constructed space, and that the qualities of snugness as described by Jerry Griswold (9-14) can be observed to increase in strength and power as the story continues. I also argue that although the domestic space depicted in Soft House is unmistakably and perpetually controlled by adults, the child protagonists successfully cultivate their own self-governed space within this environment and are able to rehearse the responsibilities and security of adulthood privately and in an empowered way.

4.2 Story Summary

Soft House is a gently-paced narrative that follows two siblings, Alison and Davey, who cannot find anything to do on a rainy day. Together they decide to play a game they call “Soft
House”, in which they construct a large, domed blanket fort utilizing various soft and comfortable materials from around the house. As the children go about collecting their building materials, they must face their fear of the upstairs. Together they conclude that they shouldn’t be afraid when they have a friend to take care of. Once Soft House is built, Alison and Davey crawl inside with their favorite toys, the family cat (named Mr. Cat), and a plate of cookies from their mother. At the conclusion of the story, they play happily inside Soft House by the beam of a flashlight and Mr. Cat curls up and relaxes contentedly.

Yolen’s text and Halperin’s illustrations interact almost exclusively in instances of parallel storytelling, or storytelling that involves both text and image depicting the same scene or event (Agosto 267). I will therefore argue that the illustrations visually encourage snug feelings of warmth, comfort, and playfulness while the words shape the story and allow for qualities of snugness to come through in the narrative.

**4.3 Snugness in Soft House**

*Soft House* provides an excellent introduction to the qualities of snugness and the ways in which comfort and security can be encouraged through the creation of a child-constructed space. As indicated by its title, the primary motif that emerges throughout *Soft House* is comfort. Griswold suggests that child-constructed snug places are refuges, safe places where the occupants will be shielded from threats to their comfort and wellbeing (12). Such threats can include unpleasant weather, other people, and day-to-day worries (12). In this section, I suggest that the depiction of Alison and Davey’s process of designing and using Soft House encourages feelings of security, stability, and contentment in the way that Griswold describes. Throughout *Soft House*, Yolen’s use of comforting language synthesizes with Halperin’s use of symmetrical,
vibrant, and detailed illustrations to communicate qualities of snugness. At the crux of my argument in this section is the suggestion that these feelings of comfort, wellbeing, and safety associated with snugness grow increasingly powerful as the story of *Soft House* progresses through Alison and Davey’s construction process. The atmosphere depicted in the book becomes more and more snug and comfortable as Soft House is built, finally culminating in the story’s strongest image of snugness—Alison and Davey’s pet cat curling up and closing his eyes contentedly (Yolen n.p.).

### 4.3.1 Peritext

I will begin the analysis by describing the peritext of *Soft House* and discussing how it reflects the qualities of snugness.

Upon picking up the physical book of *Soft House*, the reader can observe that the book is taller than it is wide, bound in hardcover, and printed on matte paper. The front cover illustration shows Alison and Mr. Cat about to enter Soft House, while the back cover illustration shows Davey inside Soft House, looking out at the reader and holding his stuffed animals. The illustrations on the dust jacket and the hardcover of the book are the same, and the endpapers are a solid pastel orange.

Arguably the first thing that a reader will notice when looking at the peritext of *Soft House* is the fact that the book is taller than it is wide. According to Lawrence Sipe, a picturebook with this physical shape can encourage the reader to expect an intimate story with strong identification to characters (“Picturebooks as Aesthetic Objects” 25). The fact that *Soft House* is shaped in this way suggests a focus on Alison and Davey’s feelings and inner thoughts—a focus that can aid in the communication of snugness. In particular, the qualities of snugness most emphasized throughout the story—feelings of safety (Griswold 12), guardianship
(13), and ownership (13)—are all qualities that rely on a thorough knowledge of the protagonist’s feelings to come through. An intimate and immersive story allows for readers to experience snugness along with Alison and Davey, ultimately spotlighting the wellbeing and security that can come with the creation of a child-constructed space.

The use of matte paper for the book also encourages an immersion of the reader into the story. Sipe suggests that matte paper can invite reader interaction and put emphasis on the tactile elements of the objects depicted in the illustrations (“Picturebooks as Aesthetic Objects” 27). Throughout *Soft House*, Alison and Davey collect and interact with many soft, cushiony, and pleasant-feeling objects. The comfort inherent in the use of these items is strengthened by the matte paper used for the book, as readers are able to focus more readily on the imagined feel of these objects and thus be pulled more closely into the snugness conveyed in the story. Colwell et al.’s findings that children prefer to use flexible and comfortable objects in the creation of their secret spaces also comes to mind (418); Alison and Davey’s choice of building materials certainly keeps in line with this suggestion.

In addition to the immersive qualities of the physical aspects of the book, snugness is implied in the front and back cover illustrations of *Soft House*. The front cover of the book shows Alison facing to the right and holding a flashlight, kneeling at the entrance of Soft House with Mr. Cat. This image recalls an illustration inside the book on the fourteenth opening, where Alison can be seen entering Soft House. The fact that this scene was chosen for the front cover is meaningful. As Alison is about to enter Soft House on the cover, the reader is given the feeling that by opening the book they are entering with her; in a sense, the book itself is a kind of snug place, and the reader steps over the threshold by continuing the story. Alison herself is facing the
edge of the cover that the reader will grasp when opening the book. Her posturing encourages the reader to flip open the book and continue the forward momentum of the narrative.

![Figure 1 (Halperin, Wendy Anderson. Front and back covers of Soft House. Candlewick, Somerville, 2005)](image)


The back cover of the book also reflects the idea that Soft House is a type of narrative snug place. While the illustration on the front cover is presented in something close to a full bleed—taking into account the thin orange frame surrounding the image—the illustration on the back cover is contained in a small frame, showing Davey inside Soft House playing with his stuffed animals. This change in the illustration’s framing represents the journey that the reader
takes with Alison and Davey as the narrative goes on. On the front cover, the reader’s point of view is stationed outside Soft House. On the back, the reader’s point of view is sitting inside Soft House with Davey, contained in a small space much cozier than the space outside. In other words, the reader begins the story outside of the snug place and ends the journey firmly within Soft House, a transition that is reflected in the shrinking framing of the cover illustrations.

4.3.2 Story Content

Having discussed the physical dimensions and peritext of Soft House, I will now move into an analysis of the story content of the book. Upon opening Soft House and flipping past the endpapers and title page, the reader is immediately met with the unpleasant atmosphere of the rainy day that encourages Alison and Davey to create a snug place. The fourth opening of the book—the first page of the story content—shows an establishing image of the outside of Alison and Davey’s home on recto, with the reader’s point of view looking from across the yard into a window set on the right side of Alison and Davey’s house. Halperin illustrates the yard in muted colors and creates the effect of rain with sharp, diagonal lines, imbuing the image with a feeling of cold darkness and general inclemency. Alison and Davey’s outdoor toys—a soccer ball and tricycle—sit ignored on the grass, visually strengthening the notion that the weather is far too unpleasant to be outside. The children themselves are seen looking through the window towards the reader, backlit by the bright, white light coming from inside their house. Their expressions are of dismay at the gloomy day in front of them. It is worth noting that their figures appear small compared to the rest of the image; Alison and Davey standing side-by-side make up less than half of the tall window. This encourages a feeling of vulnerability—the children are powerless to do anything about the rainy expanse in front of them. The text on this page further emphasizes the implications of the weather: “It’s raining. I watch the drops slide down the
window, leaving trails for my fingers to follow. Davey makes a face. … ‘I hate rain,’ says Davey. ‘There’s nothing to do’” (Yolen n.p.).

As mentioned in the Literature Review section, snugness is a quality associated with time as well as with space. Griswold suggests that snugness is encouraged during times of inclement weather: “Meteorologically speaking, the best condition for an evocation of snugness is stormy weather. Horrific storms … demarcate even more dramatically the hostility of the universe in contrast to the snugness of the shelter” (15). Although the storm depicted in Soft House is not horrific or life-threatening, the contrast between the rainy day outside and the warm, snug place of Alison and Davey’s house is observable in Halperin’s illustrations. The image of the rainy yard on the fourth opening of the book is immediately contrasted with the illustration on the fifth opening, a brightly colored double-page spread of Davey lying on the sofa indoors, his face pressed into two large cushions. Sipe suggests that most picturebook makers use color according to the feelings they evoke (“Picturebooks as Aesthetic Objects” 28). In Soft House, the feelings of cold and gloom evoked on the fourth opening by the muted colors of the rainy day are immediately dissipated by the friendly warmth of the vivid colors inside Alison and Davey’s home. Moreover, the muted, cold colors of the fourth opening do not return at any point throughout the rest of the book; every other part of Soft House takes place in the brightly-lit indoors. Both Yolen and Halperin thus utilize the rainy day as a tool through which Alison and Davey’s house can be seen as a snug shelter.

Comfort and warmth are increasingly emphasized in this way throughout the story as Alison and Davey go about creating their constructed space. As the children construct their fort over the course of the narrative, Halperin’s illustrations become increasingly detailed and vibrant, displaying the numerous colorful patterns of the soft materials Alison and Davey use to
create Soft House. The sixteenth opening, a double-page spread of Alison and Davey sitting inside Soft House, is vividly colored and makes use of multiple patterns. This strengthens the warmth of the image while having the secondary effect of making the space inside Soft House seem smaller and cozier. The artistic techniques Halperin uses at the beginning of the book to strengthen the snugness present indoors are thus used to an even higher degree at the end of the story. Soft House is smaller and cozier than the rest of the already-comfortable house and snugness is most powerful in the child-constructed space.

In addition to the snugness encouraged by color and pattern in the illustrations, both Yolen and Halperin put a focus on the safety and security of playtime within Soft House. Security is at the heart of snugness, and the comfort inherent in the snug place implies stability and the confidence that no harm will come to its occupants (Griswold 12). Yolen imbues the story with a feeling of safety through the continuous use of comforting language. Alison, the book’s narrator, refers to her “silky blanket, Macarina, who lives under [her] pillow” and the “big snuggle chair” on the twelfth and thirteenth openings respectively (Yolen n.p.). Items of comfort and familiarity help Soft House to feel safe and secure. Textual imagery used when the children are inside Soft House on the seventeenth opening also strengthens the fort as a safe, comforting place: “Inside Soft House, the little flashlight sun makes lovely round shadows. The shadows dance all over the inside of Soft House …” (Yolen n.p.). Adjectives such as “lovely” and the descriptive imagery of shadows dancing emphasize the friendly atmosphere of the snug place and assure the reader that no harm will come to Alison and Davey in this space.

Yolen’s reference to “round” shadows on the seventeenth opening ties into an artistic technique used in the images to further represent safety and security. In his work on picturebooks, Sipe echoes illustrator Molly Bang’s suggestion that pointed shapes create fear or
anxiety while curved and rounded shapes evoke feelings of comfort and security (Sipe, “Picturebooks as Aesthetic Objects” 29). In *Soft House*, there is an abundance of curved and rounded shapes and a noticeable absence of pointed and sharp shapes. Alison and Davey’s house is filled with round furniture, the curves of blankets, and squishy pillows. For example, on the seventh opening, a double-page spread of the living room displays a number of chairs with rounded backs, a domed roof, circular tabletop, and round coving where the walls meet the ceiling. Additionally, the configuration of *Soft House* itself is a dome, as seen from the outside on the fourteenth opening and the inside on the sixteenth opening. The blankets and pillows used to make *Soft House* bend and curve with gravity, giving the fort a friendly, non-threatening atmosphere. Alison’s narration reflects the comfort inherent in the round shape of *Soft House*: “It’s dark inside, but not a scary dark. Upstairs is scary because it’s a long dark. This is a round dark” (Yolen n.p.).

It is interesting to note that sharp, pointed shapes are prominent in the illustration only on the ninth and tenth openings, when Davey must face his fear of the upstairs in order to gather the blankets they need for *Soft House*. On the ninth opening, the pointed shapes of the stairs and the railing create an instance of parallel storytelling (Agosto 267) where the illustration echoes Alison’s worry that Davey has come to harm upstairs: “At first I’m happy Davey has gone upstairs. But he takes a long time. Much too long for just a few blankets. … I go to the foot of the stairs and call his name” (Yolen n.p.). The reader’s point of view is looking down upon Alison from the top of the stairs in this image. The pointy corners of each step, stacked horizontally from the bottom of recto, seem threatening as they lead into the darkness above. These shapes both reflect and strengthen the feeling of anxiety created with Alison’s words, an
effect that is particularly noticeable considering there have been few sharp shapes in the illustrations up until this point in the book.

Alison’s fear that Davey has come to harm upstairs is immediately dissolved on the eleventh opening, where she goes upstairs herself and sees that Davey is standing there in the hallway. Here a double-page spread shows Alison at the top of the stairs on verso, looking to the right at Davey, who is standing on recto next to a pile of blankets. The sharp line of the railing on verso is contrasted against the round lines of the blankets surrounding Davey in a mirror image; by the time the reader’s eyes move from verso to recto, any tension created by the events of the last two pages has been dissolved. The anxiety-inducing stairs flow gently into the image on recto displaying the soft, comfy materials now familiar to the reader of Soft House.

This particular opening of the book also provides a good example of another technique Halperin utilizes to create feelings of safety and security. In addition to the use of round, soft shapes to create and restore comfort, Halperin uses symmetry to anchor the illustrations and create a sense of visual stability and fortification on each page. Almost every opening of the book constitutes a horizontal mirror image across the spine of the book, with verso and recto reflecting each other. This is especially notable on double-page spreads such as the eleventh opening, where Alison stands at the top of the stairs looking across at Davey. Both children are facing towards the spine of the book with their arms outstretched in front of them, creating mirror images of one another. An additional clear example of symmetry is the seventh opening, wherein a view of Alison and Davey’s living room shows that each piece of furniture seen on verso has a counterpart on recto, making each side of the spread a virtual reflection of the other.
Double-page spreads like these make up eleven of the nineteen openings in the book, but symmetry is recognizable on almost every opening regardless of whether verso and recto are part of the same image. For example, although it is not a double-page spread, the sixth opening of the book holds symmetry in the small frames lining the bottom of the pages. Here the top two-thirds of verso and recto are made up of images of Alison and Davey conversing with each other at the end of the living room sofa. The bottom thirds of the two pages are segmented into smaller images that are set in a symmetrical fashion—the text on each page is set in a box at the outside corner, and images of the characters and sofa are placed between these boxes. Thus, although
verso and recto are not perfect reflections of each other on this page, the layout of the page helps to maintain the stability and strength of symmetry.

In addition to symmetry within the images, Halperin frames each illustration with a pastel-colored border, either splitting up verso and recto or bordering the whole of a double-page spread. Sipe argues that frames like these create the feeling of looking through a window, an effect that can emotionally separate readers and characters (“Picturebooks as Aesthetic Objects” 33). I would resist this interpretation in the case of Soft House; despite the fact that the borders can create the effect of looking through a window, the reader is continually invited to immerse themselves into the scenes on the page through Halperin’s emphasis on tactile materials and the reader’s point of view, which is often situated close to the characters. I would argue instead that the bordering of the illustrations has the more-powerful effect of “setting” the image on each of the pages, furthering the sense of fortification and strength created by the symmetrical images displayed throughout Soft House.

The instances of small frames occurring within larger illustrations also contributes to a sense of stability, security, and coziness throughout the book. The final double-page spread of Soft House—the seventeenth opening—shows Alison and Davey playing inside Soft House in a number of panels that create a grid across verso and recto. Each panel is small and rectangular, creating the sense of a cozy, stable scene. The layout of this opening represents the strongest use of symmetry and security in the book; although the images inside the panels do not reflect each other, the grid itself creates a strong, stable mirror image.

It is appropriate that the effects of Halperin’s use of color, pattern, symmetry, and layout should be the most powerful in this opening, when Alison and Davey are inside Soft House. This child-constructed space is where the qualities of snugness are encouraged most strongly. Each
panel reflects the safety of the space, with the children playing in a carefree and unselfconscious way. Many panels feature a soft material that Alison and Davey interact with, whether it be a blanket wrapped around Davey’s shoulders or a cloth set up under the plate of cookies. The numerous colors and patterns of Soft House liven up the space, making it seem smaller and cozier while bringing warmth to the overall image. A tower of building blocks in one of the centre images on recto reflects the layout of the page—a tall, stable shape. It is an interesting parallel that, like the tower of blocks, Soft House is a temporary fixture, made up of amalgamated materials that will eventually have to be separated again.

Lastly, the eighteenth and final opening of the book depicts the physical effects of snugness evoked on the previous pages. The illustration shows Alison and Davey’s pet cat, Mr. Cat, curled up on a pillow with the beam of the flashlight shining over him. Mr. Cat’s contented expression compliments the final text of the book: “Mr. Cat closes his eyes and purrs” (Yolen n.p.). The feelings of wellbeing, security, safety, and general comfort encouraged at an increasing degree throughout the book come together in this strong gesture of ease and serenity. This is especially powerful considering that Mr. Cat is arguably the most active and energetic of all the characters in the book; the eighth opening of the book features Mr. Cat in many of his activities, including hunting in the grass and climbing trees. That he should be so relaxed on the final opening of the book is a testament to the comfort and snugness generated inside Soft House.

4.4 Adult-Controlled Domestic Space in Soft House

I have argued that snugness is encouraged at an increasing degree throughout the narrative of Soft House, beginning with the rainy day and culminating in Alison and Davey’s
playtime inside their constructed space. Throughout the book, Alison and Davey’s home is depicted as a large space filled with colorful furniture and household objects. Although the space is imbued with a degree of comfort and safety—due in large part to the qualities of snugness being evoked—the fact that it constitutes adult-controlled space in which the children have very little spatial ownership is clearly communicated through both text and image. At least one of Alison and Davey’s parents is present in the house at the time of the story; their mother appears in the story twice, pictured cooking and providing food. Although she is not always with the children, the presence of her parental authority is observable both in the children’s interaction with the space around them as well as in the presence of objects associated with motherhood. In this section I will detail the ways in which the domestic space of Alison and Davey’s home is shown to belong to the adults rather than the children, who are subjected to parental authority at all times.

As discussed in the previous section, Soft House opens with an outside view of Alison and Davey’s home on the fourth opening, then shifts indoors on the fifth opening to an image of Davey laying on the sofa. In this latter opening, Davey is located in the centre of the double-page spread and occupies the most powerful position in the illustration; Sipe suggests that characters up close to the reader’s point of view are easier to empathize and identify with (“Picturebooks as Aesthetic Objects” 32). There is a similar effect on the following opening, where Alison and Davey are pictured talking to each other over the side of the sofa on both verso and recto. On the seventh opening, however, the reader’s point of view pulls away from the children to the opposite end of the room, and it is revealed that Alison and Davey are actually on the very edges of a large space. Here the reader is able to see that Alison and Davey are in fact occupying one of the liminal spaces that Ann Alston refers to in her work on adult-controlled domestic space: “…
child characters often occupy liminal spaces within [their] homes. Not only are children often confined to their bedrooms, but they are regularly illustrated on the boundaries of rooms as they search for a place in which to belong” (26). Alison and Davey seem to be occupying the smallest space possible next to the expanse of the living room. Their figures are small compared to the furniture in the image, echoing the sense of vulnerability created on the fourth opening when they are looking out of the window at the rainy day. The children are also sitting in the far background of the illustration, arguably a space of less ownership and power than the foreground, where the reader’s identification with them would be more powerful (Sipe, (“Picturebooks as Aesthetic Objects” 32).

Alison and Davey’s reluctance to take ownership of the space within their house continues throughout the book. They are depicted again on the boundary of a room on the ninth opening, a double-page spread that shows Davey going up the stairs with Mr. Cat to collect blankets. Alston suggests that staircases, like the boundaries of rooms, are liminal spaces that children occupy in illustration because they have no space in the house that truly belongs to them (27). Davey is shown here to be standing on the staircase while Alison watches from around the corner. Alison’s positioning here is interesting. Although she is arguably the most powerful of the two children at this moment—on the seventh opening she convinced Davey to go upstairs so she could avoid going herself—she is pictured in another room, half-obscured by the corner of the hallway. It might be difficult for a reader to tell that Alison is controlling this situation if it were not for the text on the seventh opening: “I like everything except for the upstairs part … I don’t like to go up alone. I think hard. There must be some way to convince [Davey]” (Yolen n.p.). Furthermore, roughly three quarters of the double-page spread on the ninth opening is made up of the space of the room adjacent to the staircase. This is empty space that is
conspicuously unoccupied by either of the children. It gives the page a similar feeling to the seventh opening where Alison and Davey are pictured at the very edge of the living room. They are not empowered enough in this room to take ownership of the entire space, so they keep to the margins of it.

Figure 3 (Halperin, Wendy Anderson. Ninth opening of Soft House. Candlewick, Somerville, 2005)


It is important to note that the only shape that occupies this empty space on the ninth opening is a broom that leans against the wall at the far right of recto. Next to the broom, a doorway leads into another room with grey walls and checked tile—presumably the kitchen, judging by the similar wall color displayed inside the kitchen on the sixth opening. The broom
standing against the wall in the empty space next to the stairs is suggestive of the presence of Alison and Davey’s mother, who is likely still in the kitchen cooking. The fact that the children are situated at the boundary of the room while an object that belongs to their parent stands noticeably in the large empty space implies the spatial ownership and presence of Alison and Davey’s mother, despite the fact that the children are the active characters in the scene depicted.

Adult presence inside of Alison and Davey’s home is continuously implied through objects in this way. The children’s mother has spatial presence in the appearance of various items associated with stereotypic roles of motherhood. Along with the broom standing against the wall on the ninth opening, brooms are additionally present on the seventh opening near the fireplace and the sixteenth opening propping up a corner of Soft House. The plate of cookies Alison and Davey’s mother offers also stands as a symbol of her presence. The cookies appear on the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth openings of the book, all openings in which Alison and Davey are inside their fort. It is interesting that both the broom and the cookies should be depicted inside the constructed space. This association of motherhood with specific objects inside Soft House ensures that in spite of the fact that the children have spatial ownership within their constructed space, the existence of parental guardianship is not forgotten.

Apart from her presence being implied through objects, Alison and Davey’s mother appears in person twice throughout Soft House. On the sixth opening she is seen cooking in the kitchen in a small framed illustration, and on the fifteenth opening she appears in a large illustration to give Alison the plate of cookies to take inside the newly-built Soft House. When looking at these instances together, it can be observed that both of these openings experience some degree of upset in their symmetry. Although both openings are still framed with the pastel-
colored border and maintain some degree of stability through mirror image, these illustrations do not contain the thorough symmetry that others in the book do.

On the sixth opening, Alison and Davey’s mother is pictured on verso in one of the small frames lined at the bottom of the page. The text on recto reads: “Mama calls from the kitchen. ‘Alison Isabelle, what are you doing to your little brother?’” (Yolen n.p.). It is clear from the illustration that Alison and Davey’s mother is calling to them from another room; the wallpaper behind her is grey with a strawberry pattern, starkly different from the bright yellow stripes of the sofa Alison and Davey are occupying. This appearance of an illustration from another room imbalances the symmetry of the opening through this color contrast. There is no illustration on recto that mirrors the colors of the kitchen illustration on verso. The frame containing Alison and Davey’s mother stands out amongst the rest of the image and is noticeably darker than its surroundings.

The second appearance of Alison and Davey’s mother is on the fifteenth opening, where she is seen reaching out a plate of cookies outside Soft House on verso. The illustration on recto is markedly different: it puts the reader’s point of view inside Soft House, with the reader’s focus on the plate of cookies spotlighted by the hanging flashlight above. Interestingly, this opening is one of the only openings in the book that has almost no symmetry at all. The children’s mother is pictured on verso, facing left, while the illustration on recto simply shows the plate of cookies in the centre of the image surrounded by various toys. There are no examples of mirror images here, save for the vertical shapes of Alison on verso and the flashlight on recto. Aside from these vaguely mirrored shapes, verso and recto are markedly different in a way that is unique to the whole of Soft House.
It is as if the appearance of Alison and Davey’s mother shifts the balance of the illustrations away from the symmetrical mirror images that have become familiar to the reader over the course of the story. I do not wish to imply that her appearance negatively impacts the story or the children in any way. Rather, the rhythm of the story is softly altered by the physical presence of an adult in the room. The snugness that is encouraged inside of domestic space by the construction of Soft House is affected by the presence of someone that has full control over the space at all times; Alison and Davey’s ownership of domestic space is limited and unstable. Although they may experience ownership to a higher degree inside of their constructed space—and although the illustrations reflect their steady retreat into their own space through an increasing sense of snugness—their mother’s guardianship is ever-present and never fully escapable.

4.5 Child Spatial Empowerment in Soft House

In the two previous sections I have argued for the existence of two elements of Soft House that come through in text and illustration. First, I have shown that snugness is encouraged in an increasing fashion throughout the book, and that this is observable through Halperin’s use of color, symmetry, and framing as well as Yolen’s use of comforting language. Second, I have suggested that Alison and Davey’s mother continuously controls the domestic space depicted in the book, and that the communication of this is accomplished through the depiction of Alison and Davey’s interaction with space as well as through the reoccurrence of objects that symbolize parental presence. In this section I conclude my analysis of Soft House by looking at snugness and adult-controlled domestic space in conjunction with each other. I will argue that in spite of the perpetual control Alison and Davey’s mother has over domestic space, the children are
empowered to rehearse ownership of the space around them through the creation and use of Soft House. Their mother’s spatial power is slowly and eventually pushed into the background as the book tightens its focus on Alison and Davey’s empowerment. It is important to remember, however, that although snugness and the children’s spatial empowerment appear to be more powerful than adult presence inside Soft House, they never replace adult guardianship—they only come to the forefront.

Alison and Davey are increasingly empowered as agents of creation and guardians of space as Soft House is constructed. They are shown to be powerful during the assembly and use of the snug place through a number of literary and artistic techniques. In the previous sections I have discussed the ninth, tenth, and eleventh openings, wherein Davey journeys upstairs to retrieve materials for Soft House. This portion of the book represents a tipping point after which the construction of Soft House begins and the children start to take more control over the space around them. Halperin conveys this in the illustrations partially through the positioning of Alison and Davey upon the page. As soon as Alison and Davey commence construction of Soft House with their gathered materials, they begin to move away from liminal spaces and start to occupy more powerful positions. The eleventh opening shows Alison arriving at the top of the stairs and seeing that Davey has gathered various blankets. As discussed above, this double-page spread features Alison on verso and Davey on recto, facing each other. Halperin illustrates each character large on the page and in the centre of the room or hallway they are occupying. Here Alison and Davey take more control of the space—although not complete control, as evidenced by the pictures of watchful adults hung up above them. By the time Alison and Davey are pictured inside Soft House on the sixteenth opening, they are sitting in the direct centre of the double-page spread, their forms large against the small space of Soft House. Sipe suggests that
objects and characters of importance to a scene are positioned in the centre of the illustration (“Picturebooks as Aesthetic Objects” 30). Alison and Davey are therefore the most powerful focus of the image and the most empowered actors in the scene.

It is also notable that Alison and Davey make numerous demands on the reader, looking straight through the fourth wall and encouraging the reader’s attention. This is a gesture of empowerment that, according to David Lewis, grounds the characters and strengthens their influence over the scene and the reader (156). Alison and Davey look directly at the reader on multiple occasions, including the fifth, sixth, tenth, twelfth, and seventeenth openings. Like the increase in powerful positioning, Alison and Davey’s demands become more frequent and more powerful as the book progresses. The children seem to watch the reader watching them (Lewis 156) more intently near the last parts of the story, when Soft House is being constructed and used.

The children’s posturing whilst looking through the fourth wall is also relevant, and it is interesting to see how Alison in particular begins to become more and more comfortable with taking up space as Soft House is constructed. As mentioned in the previous section, on the ninth opening she is pictured obscured by the corner of the hallway leading into the room with the staircase; she occupies the boundary of the room, not taking up much space. On the twelfth opening, however, where Alison and Davey are in the process of building Soft House, Alison is illustrated on recto with her arms outstretched while making a direct demand on the reader. She welcomes the reader’s gaze and stands in a powerful and energetic way, taking up as much space as possible. Her sense of spatial empowerment has changed markedly from the previous openings, where she seems to take up as little space as she can manage. In other words, Alison
steps further into an empowered role as the story goes on, making her seem more responsible for the space around her.

This sense of responsibility reflects the fact that as Alison is more empowered to take hold of space, she begins to rehearse adult guardianship. In particular, Alison’s rehearsal of adult roles extends to the protectiveness she feels for her little brother. When Davey does not return from upstairs with the blankets he was supposed to collect, Alison travels upstairs herself to rescue him on the eleventh opening. She remarks to Davey that he is very brave, and he responds: “I know. … Besides, Mama says you can’t be scared when you have a friend to take care of. Like Mr. Cat” (Yolen n.p.). At this, Alison expresses her protective feelings for Davey: “I nod. Or a little brother, I think” (Yolen n.p.). In enacting guardianship over her little brother, Alison steps into a parental role, rehearsing adult responsibilities in an empowered way. This is not to suggest that she only feels protective of Davey whilst constructing her own space; rather, I suggest that the expression of her sense of guardianship is encouraged by the creation of Soft House. This is reflected in her reiteration of her responsibility over Davey when they are both inside the fort: “Upstairs is scary because it’s a long dark. This is a round dark. Besides, Davey is here, and you can’t be scared when you have a little brother to take care of” (Yolen n.p.).

Alison also steps into various leadership roles throughout the book. On the fifth opening, when Alison and Davey are trying to decide what to play, Alison suggests that they could play school. Davey responds: “You’re always the teacher” (Yolen n.p.). Additionally, Alison asserts on the twelfth opening that it’s her job to make Soft House (Yolen n.p.) and, on the following opening, that she usually doesn’t let Davey help with the Soft House construction process (Yolen n.p.). Alison is clearly taking on roles of adult-like independence and self-reliance throughout she and Davey’s playtime. The fact that this story is told in first person from Alison’s point of
view is significant. She is the sibling with the most authority and experience, and therefore she is the most empowered in terms of asserting her own space. She looks after Davey and steps into the role of protector and guardian, a practice of adult responsibilities that emphasizes self-sufficiency, another important aspect of the empowerment that comes with snugness (Griswold 13).

Alison is able to take these roles by virtue of the fact that even though the presence of adults is continuously returned to throughout *Soft House*, the presence of Alison and Davey’s parents is minimally intrusive to the children’s playtime. For example, Alison and Davey’s father is absent from the book entirely. He is either away from the house or preoccupied with something else in another room. The manifestation of his authority is limited to an influence over Alison’s judgement of Davey’s tantrum on the sixth opening: “[Davey] smiles. What a big faker. Dad calls those his crocodile tears” (Yolen n.p.). Although the spatial ownership of parental figures is implied continuously throughout the narrative, their father does not factor into the story almost at all; if he would impact Alison and Davey’s playtime in any way, he is not given the chance.

It is possible that the objects discussed above as symbolic of Alison and Davey’s mother—primarily the broom—could also be related to their father. Due to the book’s adherence to traditional parental gender roles, however, the broom is more likely to belong to the mother; she is limited to cooking and providing food throughout the narrative, and the broom appears next to the kitchen. When considering gender roles, it is interesting to note that Alison and Davey do not seem to prescribe to stereotypic gender roles during their play. Alison embraces the more traditionally masculine roles in their playtime, namely being the sole player that constructs Soft House. Davey takes the role of the follower, going upstairs when Alison suggests
he do so and only participating in the physical construction of Soft House when asked. This is, of course, partially due to the apparent age difference between them—Alison refers to Davey as her little brother multiple times throughout the narrative—but it is clear that Alison considers herself to be a leader in every respect.

I would like again to touch on the presence of objects that belong to Alison and Davey’s mother as symbols of parental authority. The implicit ownership of these items belongs to the parents, but it is crucial to note that, nevertheless, Alison and Davey are allowed to collect materials for Soft House that do not belong to them. Alison mentions that Davey has retrieved one of their mother’s blankets for the construction of the fort: “I take the blankets from Davey. The big yellow one from Mama’s bed. The blue one from Davey’s. The green one from my own bed” (Yolen n.p.). Additionally, the broom from the hallway appears inside Soft House on the sixteenth opening, conspicuously propping up the corner of the fort on verso. The fact that the children are given the opportunity to collect their parents’ items for Soft House strengthens their rehearsal of ownership; although Alison and Davey’s parents have ownership and guardianship over domestic space, they give the children the opportunity to experiment with spatial authority in a way that emphasizes empowerment. The children are allowed to use the objects as if they were their own, strengthening their roles as powerful figures in the story.

To conclude this section, I will briefly discuss the object that is perhaps most clearly related to Alison and Davey’s empowerment inside their child-constructed space: the flashlight that the children bring into their fort as a light source. Firstly, the flashlight’s importance to the story is reflected in the fact that it is the sole object on the title page of the book. Here the flashlight is illustrated hanging vertically from the top of the page, casting a beam of light downwards over the title. It lends emphasis to whatever it shines light upon, an idea that is also
expressed on the cover of the book, in which it appears in Alison’s hands, illuminating the entrance to Soft House and guiding Alison’s way inside. The brightness that the beam of light lends to the illustration draws the reader’s eye into the entrance of the fort and strengthens Alison’s air of purposeful intention; she directs the beam of the flashlight exactly where she wants to go.

Figure 4 (Halperin, Wendy Anderson. Seventeenth opening of Soft House. Candlewick, Somerville, 2005)

Alison is also the primary director of the flashlight beam on the seventeenth opening shown above, wherein Alison and Davey are illustrated playing inside Soft House in a grid of small frames. In most of the small illustrations seen on this opening, the light from the flashlight
originates outside of the frame of the illustration. In other words, we cannot discern who is holding and directing the flashlight, except in instances where it is clear that Alison and Davey have attached the flashlight to the ceiling of Soft House. In two frames, however, we can see Alison directing the flashlight herself, once at the wall of Soft House and once up to her face. It is telling that, in comparison, Davey is not illustrated directing the flashlight; instead he is the subject of many of the images, with the beam of light shining over him playing with toys, reading, and wearing a cape. Alison is clearly the sole manipulator of light inside Soft House, another responsibility that empowers her to take control of the space around her. While Davey is depicted experiencing the freedom of imaginative play that Soft House provides—an experience encouraged and afforded by snugness (Griswold 25)—Alison accepts the role of guardian and leader.

Finally, the empowerment of Alison and Davey inside Soft House is epitomized on the seventeenth opening in the small framed illustration at the bottom right of recto. The image depicts Alison and Davey together, huddled inside the comfort of numerous blankets and pillows, Alison’s arm protectively around Davey’s shoulders and the beam of the flashlight shining over them both from above. This is a clear depiction of the experience that the snugness of the child-constructed space provides: the coziness of the soft materials surrounding the protagonists; the responsibility of guardianship over the space and its occupants; the safety, security, and feelings of freedom that such a space can afford; and lastly, but perhaps most importantly, the contentment and ease that comes from occupying a space that belongs to you.
4.6 Conclusion

*Soft House* is, at its heart, a story about the construction of a child-governed space. Yolen and Halperin follow the process of this play behavior from Alison and Davey’s decision to create the fort through to their empowered use of their space. I have argued that snugness is encouraged at an increasing degree as the narrative of the book continues, and that the perpetually adult-controlled space of the house is eventually eclipsed by the snug place of Soft House. It is important to note, however, that this book does not cover the entire process of the creation and use of a child-constructed space from beginning to end. *Soft House* does not depict what happens after the children are finished playing inside Soft House and must dismantle the child-constructed space, returning to normalcy. Yolen’s decision to end the story inside of Soft House is significant. It is possible that the depiction of Alison and Davey’s eventual destruction of Soft House would undo the snug atmosphere that the rest of the book endeavored to create. Concluding *Soft House* on feelings of snugness and empowerment helps to maintain the note of comfort built throughout the story.

In the next chapter, I will shift my focus to the final half of the chronological arc of playtime in child-constructed spaces with an analysis of *The Fort That Jack Built.*
Chapter 5: Findings: The Fort That Jack Built

5.1 Introduction

The Fort That Jack Built, written by Boni Ashburn and illustrated by Brett Helquist, is a narrative picturebook that details the construction and subsequent destruction of a child-constructed space. In this chapter, I will apply my research questions to the book in order, dedicating a separate section to each. In an effort to put The Fort That Jack Built into perspective for this project, I have included a brief story summary and a description of the text-image relationships discoverable within the book according to the work of Denise E. Agosto (“Interdependent Storytelling”). In addition to this, I will endeavor to put The Fort That Jack Built into conversation with Soft House as much as I can. This I do as part of my effort to shine light on the characteristics of both of these books as thoroughly as possible.

In this chapter, I argue that The Fort That Jack Built focuses on the impermanence of the indoor child-constructed space, and that although snugness is encouraged in the first part of the book, it is systematically dismantled as the story progresses. Despite the fact that Jack is empowered in his creation and defence of his space—activities that express and evoke the qualities of snugness—he is subject at all times to adult control and ownership of the space in which he operates. I argue that Jack’s powerlessness in the face of adult spatial control ultimately sheds light on the negotiation between adult and child that must occur during the creation of a child-owned and controlled space.

5.2 Story Summary

The Fort That Jack Built is an energetic rhyming picturebook that tells the story of a young boy named Jack and the fort he builds in his family’s living room. At the beginning of the
story, Jack collects various items from around the house to use in the construction of his fort. Jack’s playtime is short-lived, however; once the fort is constructed, Jack’s family members come up one-by-one and retrieve various pieces of the fort that belong to them. Despite Jack’s ongoing effort to keep the objects—an effort represented in Jack’s imagination as a defence against a medieval castle siege—the fort is slowly dismantled until there is almost nothing left of it at all. The story concludes with Jack’s Grandma coming to retrieve the final piece of the fort: her quilt. Seeing that Jack is very sad, she drapes the quilt over the coffee table and together she and Jack crawl underneath and read together. The book ends on a lesson about sharing space.

Ashburn’s text and Helquist’s illustrations interact in a number of examples of interdependent and parallel storytelling. Like Soft House, many pages of The Fort That Jack Built use parallel storytelling, in which the words and the images describe the same event or scene (Agosto 267). There are, however, multiple examples of fantastic representation as well, in which the words and the images divide in terms of depicting reality and fantasy (Agosto 272). Jack’s imagined castle comes through solely in the images—and, occasionally, in the typography—while the events of these pages are firmly located in reality through the text. Throughout the whole of the book, Ashburn’s rhythmic text sets the pace of the story and Helquist’s illustrations round out the narrative with a sense of urgency and defensive energy.

**5.3 Snugness in The Fort That Jack Built**

According to Jerry Griswold, snugness is not only associated with feelings of comfort, security, and safety, but also feelings of guardianship and the drive to defend one’s space from outsiders (13). Where Soft House primarily explores the senses of ease and contentment that come with a child-constructed space, The Fort That Jack Built explores the other side of
snugness—that of the child character having to enforce the boundaries of the snug place and attempt to protect it from intruders. Throughout *The Fort That Jack Built*, Jack is continuously described and pictured on the defensive, an idea that is strengthened by the fact that Jack imagines himself as a knight defending his castle from a siege. Jack’s constructed space is less about feeling comfortable and safe than it is about Jack getting the opportunity to create and defend a space that is his and his alone. In this section, I will detail how this focus on the protective energy of snugness is conveyed in Ashburn’s fast-paced and rhythmic text as well as in Helquist’s bold and vivid illustration. The cadence of the narrative, the lively energy of the illustrations, and the visual juxtaposition between fantasy and reality all contribute to a communication of Jack’s feelings of urgency and defensiveness over his fort. In the analysis that follows, I will argue that snugness in *The Fort That Jack Built* is strongest at the very beginning of the book, from the peritext to the moments when Jack’s family begin to assert their ownership of domestic space and dismantle his fort piece by piece. Unlike *Soft House*, the text and illustration of *The Fort That Jack Built* shifts away from feelings of calm and ease in order to focus on dynamism, energy, and anticipation—all elements that communicate the defensive and active qualities of snugness.

### 5.3.1 Peritext

I will begin the analysis with an investigation of how snugness and Jack’s feelings of guardianship and protectiveness over his space are communicated strongly through peritext and the physical shape of *The Fort That Jack Built*.

Upon picking up *The Fort That Jack Built*, the reader can observe that the book’s shape is a vertical rectangle, taller than it is wide. The book is bound in hardcover and printed on matte paper. The front dust jacket illustration shows Jack and his dog, Milo, looking out from inside
the fort. The back dust jacket illustration is an extension of the front cover, showing the shower
curtain Jack has set up to act as a wall for his fort. The illustrations on the hardcover of the book
differ from that of the dust jacket; the front shows Jack behind the parapet of a castle, dressed as
a knight and brandishing a sword and shield, and the back shows an arrow flying upwards
towards him. The endpapers are patterned with quilt-like patches at the front of the book and a
brick pattern at the back of the book.

The first thing I will discuss in this section is the physical shape of the book. As
discussed in the previous chapter, vertically shaped books encourage the reader to empathize and
identify with the characters depicted in the illustration (Sipe, “Picturebooks as Aesthetic
Objects” 25). Much like Soft House, The Fort That Jack Built puts emphasis on the reader’s
identification with Jack, a technique that allows the qualities of snugness to come through in
Jack’s feelings. Moreover, the vertical shape of the book is further highlighted by the cover
illustration, which brings focus to tall, vertically-shaped objects in Jack’s fort. The illustration
shows Jack and his dog, Milo, nestled inside the fort, their faces framed by various objects Jack
has used as building material—a tall barstool to the right, a hanging shower curtain to the left,
the title of the book emblazoned on a flag above, and a defensive wall of books below. This
arrangement of objects emphasizes the tall, vertical shape of the book; the barstool and shower
curtain stretch long against the sides of the book while the flag and the stack of books occupy
less space in the illustration. Sipe suggests that a focus on vertical shapes like these creates
excitement and energy while a focus on horizontal shapes gives a sense of security and calm
(“Picturebooks as Aesthetic Objects” 29). Helquist thus creates a sense of excitement in the front
cover illustration by drawing attention to the tall nature of the physical book through these
illustrated vertical objects. The effect is one of suspense and anticipation as Jack sits inside the stronghold that he must actively protect.

Helquist also makes use of diagonal lines and objects to create energy and anticipation in the dust jacket illustration. The front cover illustration described above extends over the spine of the book onto the back cover of the dust jacket, so that when the reader opens the book and looks at the two covers together, they show one large full-bleed image. The shower curtain hanging on the front cover extends over the back cover in a diagonal line upwards towards the left, creating a line that the reader’s eye can follow directly to Jack’s face when “reading” the image left-to-right. Echoing Molly Bang in her work *Picture This*, Sipe suggests that diagonal shapes create a sense of dynamic motion or tension in illustration (“Picturebooks as Aesthetic Objects” 29). The large diagonal shape of the shower curtain gives the impression of left-to-right motion and encourages the reader to continue the momentum by flipping open the picturebook from the front cover. The diagonal line created by the shower curtain also supports the hanging flag above Jack and Milo on the front cover, another example of a strong diagonally-oriented shape that immediately draws the reader’s eye towards the opening of the book. This dynamism inherent in the dust jacket illustration thus contributes visually to feelings of anticipation and energy.

Helquist utilizes a number of additional artistic techniques to make Jack’s fort seem snug and defensible in the cover illustration. Griswold suggests that along with being safe and secure, snug spaces are enclosed and tight (9), two qualities that are visually communicated in the cover illustration of *The Fort That Jack Built*. According to Griswold, enclosed spaces encourage snugness by enforcing a dialectic of inside and outside, and tight spaces reflect the small, womblike locations children seek to occupy in real life play behavior (9). Helquist expresses these qualities of snugness in the cover illustration of *The Fort That Jack Built* through the
framing of Jack and Milo’s faces. The small, square, window-like space Jack and Milo look through in the illustration is both enclosed and tightly structured, recalling the small locations Griswold refers to in his work (9). Further, the dialectic between inside and outside is spotlighted through Jack’s expression. He is seen looking boldly and warily outside of the fort, his expression strikingly determined; his brows are furrowed, his eyes are cast to the side, and the whole of his facial expression is set with confidence. It is clear that he is the guardian of this space and that no one should try to enter the fort without his permission.

It is important to note that the illustration on the dust jacket of *The Fort That Jack Built* is different from the image on the hardcover of the book. Underneath the dust jacket, the hardcover illustration shows Jack and Milo as they are pictured in Jack’s imagination. On the front hardcover Jack stands behind a parapet on his imagined castle with Milo, dressed in chainmail and brandishing a sword and shield. On the back hardcover an arrow comes flying upwards towards Jack’s face. This juxtaposition between the dust jacket illustration, showing Jack in reality, and the hardcover illustration, showing Jack in his imagination, mirrors the layering of reality and fantasy that occurs continuously throughout the book. Griswold suggests that the snug place is a “shelter for daydreaming” (22), a space where occupants can exercise their imagination safely and securely (25). In the layering between reality and fantasy that occurs in *The Fort That Jack Built*, the fort’s status as this kind of “dreamhouse” (Griswold 35) is emphasized. For the reader, Jack’s imagination provides important insight into his inner feelings, and his imagined castle siege lends depth and urgency to the story. This interplay between imagination and reality against the backdrop of snugness is thus reflected in the layering of the dust jacket and hardcover. The living room and the fort appear on the surface—the dust jacket—while the hardcover hidden underneath explores Jack’s inner feelings and thoughts.
Snugness, Jack’s imagination, and the interaction between reality and fantasy are also expressed in the endpapers of the book. The first opening of *The Fort That Jack Built* displays endpapers with a quilted pattern in brown and white. This pattern recalls the quilt Jack uses to help make his fort, an object that appears consistently throughout the whole of the narrative. The front endpapers show various patches of the quilt in stripes, polka dots, and solid fills, all presented in shades of brown. This coloring is an interesting artistic choice considering that when the quilt appears in illustrations, it is shown to be quite colorful and varied. I would suggest that Helquist’s use of brown here relates the quilt to building materials such as brick or
wood. It simultaneously evokes a sense of quilt-like softness and brick-like stability with the patches that are suggestive of building blocks. A similar effect is achieved on the seventeenth opening of *Soft House*, where Halperin depicts Alison and Davey inside Soft House through small frames stacked in a stable-looking grid. In the front endpapers of *The Fort That Jack Built*, the softness of the quilt material provides comfort while the strength of the grid-like patches gives a sense of stability.

It is important to note that these beginning endpapers differ from the endpapers at the conclusion of the story. When looking at the two sets of endpapers together, the reader can see that the quilt pattern is juxtaposed with a brick pattern rendered in the same brown color on the back endpapers of the book. The brick pattern is a reference to the castle Jack imagines his fort to be, and when taken together, the two sets of endpapers reflect Jack’s fort in its different states, real and imaginary. This contrast references the layering between imagination and reality that exists throughout the book. Moreover, the bricks act as a visual communication of the fact that although Jack’s fort is destroyed at the end of the story, he can rebuild it again. The physical fort may have been dismantled, but the castle in Jack’s imagination—symbolized by the bricks—remains.

The peritext of *The Fort That Jack Built* thus allows for a strong communication of the defensive qualities of snugness, the suspense and anticipation that come with defending one’s own space, and the imagination inherent in child-constructed spaces. It is fitting that snugness should be so strongly encouraged in the peritext of this book, as Jack’s fort exists as a snug place most powerfully right at the beginning of the story. When the reader picks up the book, they get the sense that Jack’s fort is strong and defensible. This precedent set by the peritext is then used
as a foundation for the events that follow, as Jack’s fort and the snugness that comes with it are dissolved and dismantled.

5.3.2 Story Content

I will now shift away from my discussion of peritext and begin an analysis of the content of The Fort That Jack Built. The liveliness and energy communicated in the peritext of the book is continued to a greater degree at the beginning of the story, when Jack builds his constructed space. The rhythm of Ashburn’s text sets a quick and spirited pace for the story, a consistent momentum that is complimented by Helquist’s colorful and dynamic illustrations. Jack’s construction process stretches from the fifth to the eighth opening of the book, over which the text reads: “This is a table. And two comfy chairs. A big stack of pillows that came from upstairs. / A breakfast-bar stool. An armload of books. / A green shower curtain with twelve purple hooks. / A dog leash. Striped sheets. And a huge patchwork quilt. And … / This is the FORT that JACK BUILT!” (Ashburn n.p.). Ashburn’s bold use of rhyme and rhythm encourages a dynamic reading and reflects Jack’s confidence in his assertion of ownership over space. The use of capital letters for emphasis in the line “[t]his is the FORT that JACK BUILT” (Ashburn n.p.) also contributes to the book’s bold atmosphere. The words in all capitals spotlight the setting of the child-constructed space and, perhaps most importantly, the fact that Jack built it all by himself.

Helquist’s illustrations compliment this dynamism and boldness in the text. The images are vibrantly colored and outlined heavily in black, an artistic feature that differs greatly from the lightly-outlined images in Soft House. Sipe suggests that line is a powerful tool for expression in picturebooks and that light outlining gives the impression of being “feathery” and “airy” (“Picturebooks As Aesthetic Objects” 29). The thin black outlining Halperin utilizes in Soft
House certainly lightens the illustration, expressing effectively the book’s atmosphere of comfort and ease. The opposite is true in The Fort That Jack Built; the outlining is heavy, giving the overall image a bold and weighty feel. This contributes to the energy and confidence of the rhythmic text and expresses strongly the defensive qualities of snugness. The heavy outlining gives the reader the impression that the characters, objects, and locations depicted in the illustrations are not easily moved or manipulated; everything Helquist illustrates here looks heavy, strong, and withstanding.

It is important to note, however, that although guardianship and ownership are privileged in The Fort That Jack Built, Ashburn and Helquist still incorporate elements of comfort and softness into Jack’s building process. On the fifth opening, Ashburn refers to the “two comfy chairs” (n.p.) and the “big stack of pillows” (n.p.) Jack uses to create his fort. Attention to the comfort of these two building materials recalls the comforting language used in Soft House to add to an atmosphere of snugness. Other important objects in the construction of Jack’s fort are the shower curtain, the striped sheets, and the quilt, which Ashburn describes as “huge” (n.p.) on the seventh opening. These items are all fabric-based items that help to emphasize the fort as a potentially soft, comfortable place. In fact, when the fort is first seen in its entirety on the eighth opening, soft items are spotlighted in the illustration; the shower curtain makes up the largest portion of the image, while the quilt, striped sheets, pillows, and comfy chairs make up most of the rest of the fort. Jack himself is hiding behind the stack of books and the barstool, the two solid items that provide the best defense. Softness is therefore present in the illustrations despite the fact that Helquist’s use of color and line bolsters the objects and makes them seem strong and fortified.
Perhaps the element of *The Fort That Jack Built* that most strongly encourages snugness is the fantastical knight and castle scene Jack imagines during his play and how it is represented in the story. As I have expressed above, Jack’s imaginary knights and castle are of great importance to how snugness is understood within the narrative. The fantastical elements present in the illustrations directly communicate the defensive qualities of snugness that Griswold describes: guarded, self-sufficient, and owned (13). Indeed, the other qualities of snugness such as safe (12) and hidden (14) are only guaranteed if the occupants of the space take defensive steps to make them so. By point of comparison, I would suggest that these defensive qualities of snugness are not as strong in *Soft House* because Alison and Davey’s mother, although present, does not pose a threat to the construction and use of the fort. In Jack’s story, however, Jack envisions the space he creates to be under constant threat from those around him, and this feeling is epitomized in the imaginary castle siege. Therefore, I will look to the interaction of fantasy and reality—and how Ashburn and Helquist portray it in instances of fantastic representation (Agosto 272)—as an important factor to the communication of snugness in *The Fort That Jack Built*.

The first page of the story content of the book is the fourth opening, which displays a double-page, full bleed illustration of Jack and his dog Milo on the living room sofa, surrounded by toy knights, horses, and a castle. Jack is sitting backwards, brandishing a wooden sword and shield, half-obscured by the back of the sofa. This image mirrors the illustration of Jack standing at the top of the imaginary castle on the hardcover of the book. This castle image appears on the dedications page, as well—the third opening immediately before the story begins. This directly juxtaposes Jack pictured in the knight and castle scenario with the illustration of Jack in a similar position on the sofa, reflecting the layering of fantasy and reality that I have discussed above.
Elements of the castle image on the third opening carry over to the illustration on the fourth opening; the sword and shield, Jack and Milo’s gestures, and the fact that the characters are positioned behind the parapet/sofa are all elements that mirror each other.

This is a trend that continues throughout the whole of the book. Elements from reality and fantasy overlap, giving the reader a sense of where Jack’s imagined knights and castle originate while also allowing the imaginary parts of the book to be grounded in reality. Returning to the fourth opening, the numerous toy castles and knights that surround Jack and Milo are direct references to Jack’s imagination, as well as Jack’s wooden sword and shield. These toys appear throughout the narrative, often illuminating Jack’s feelings towards what is going on in the scene. For example, a toy knight is seen boldly standing guard atop the tall barstool Jack uses to bolster the fort on the eighth opening, and another toy knight is seen defensively pointing an arrow at Jack’s mother and grandmother on the fifteenth and seventeenth openings respectively.

In addition to Jack’s toys, there is a framed picture of a knight’s horse hanging on the wall of Jack’s living room. This picture appears on the eighth, tenth, and thirteenth openings, providing a real-world example of inspiration for Jack’s imaginary world. Finally, when Jack and his grandmother read together at the end of the story on the seventeenth and eighteenth openings, they look at a book with a castle on the cover and pictures of knights inside. These recurring physical objects help to bridge the gap between what is happening in Jack’s living room and what is going on in Jack’s imaginative play, emphasizing the snug place as a “dreamhouse” (Griswold 35) and a “shelter for daydreaming” (Griswold 22). Jack thus uses his fort as a tool for imagination and the expression of his inner feelings towards his assertion of spatial ownership.

When Jack is finished building his fort, he is illustrated sitting half-hidden behind his defensive wall of books, toy sword raised, his expression one of determination and watchfulness.
This illustration on the eighth opening of the book represents the story’s strongest depiction of snugness in regard to Jack’s child-constructed space. Not only is Jack nestled into the small, framed space seen on the cover illustration, but he has also hung signs around his space that strongly enforce the dialectic of inside and outside: “JACK’S FORT”, “KEEP OUT”, and skull and crossbones. It is clear that Jack is asserting his own space through electing himself the sole guardian and owner of his fort—no other unauthorized people or things are allowed. It is clear through both text and illustration that such an attitude both perpetuates snugness and opens the opportunity for feelings of safety and security in one’s own space.

5.4 Adult-Controlled Domestic Space in *The Fort That Jack Built*

In the previous section, I argued that snugness in *The Fort That Jack Built* is most strongly encouraged at the beginning of Jack’s story through the communication of defensive energy and anticipation in both the book’s parttext and the first part of the narrative content. Jack and Milo are indeed the focus of every illustration from the beginning of the book to the eighth opening, when Jack’s fort is complete. The presence of Jack’s parents, however, is explicitly referred to through Helquist’s illustrations in this first part of the story. Although Jack is seen confidently and energetically creating his fort during the first eight openings, the authority of his parents is always in the background. Moreover, after this portion of the book, narrative emphasis shifts away from Jack and towards the actions of his family, which have a direct impact on Jack’s experience of the fort he builds. As Jack’s family comes up one by one to retrieve items Jack has taken in order to build his fort, the snugness encouraged at the beginning of the story is slowly dissolved; it becomes clear that Jack is powerless against his family when it comes to taking control of space. In this way, *The Fort That Jack Built* provides a strong contrast to *Soft*
House; instead of snugness becoming stronger, Jack’s family’s control over space moves increasingly to the forefront as the story continues to its conclusion. In this section, I will detail the ways in which Ashburn and Helquist utilize text and image to communicate Jack’s family’s powerful hold over the space in which Jack operates.

I will begin the analysis with a discussion of the presence of Jack’s parents at the beginning of The Fort That Jack Built. Although snugness and Jack’s feelings of confidence in the building of his fort are the focus in the beginning pages of the story, the fact that Jack’s parents are present in the house is made clear through Helquist’s illustrations. On the fifth opening of the book, Jack is shown descending a staircase with a teetering pile of pillows in his arms. The staircase occupies the right side of recto, with Jack moving downwards on the page towards the left. On the right side of recto, an arched doorway leads into another room, where Jack’s mother can be seen with her back to the reader. She is using a tall broom to sweep the floor next to a countertop. It is likely that this room is the kitchen, as a bowl holding colorful, round objects that look like fruit is seen sitting on the countertop. The presence of Jack’s mother in this image grounds these initial events of the story in reality; although the narrative focus is on Jack and his assembly of the fort, the presence of parents and other family members in the house is inevitable and unmistakable.

The fact that Jack’s mother is pictured sweeping in the kitchen is an interesting tie to Alison and Davey’s mother in Soft House, who is repeatedly symbolized by a broom and is shown to be occupying the kitchen. In her work on spatial politics and adult-controlled domestic space in children’s literature, Ann Alston notes that the kitchen is often depicted as a mother’s space: “The use of space in children’s literature shows that homes are often places that serve to separate individuals, with the father in his study, the mother in the kitchen, and the child in their
bedroom” (15). The mothers in both *Soft House* and *The Fort That Jack Built* reinforce this idea and reflect stereotypic gender roles. *The Fort That Jack Built* especially bolsters gender stereotypes; the items that Jack’s parents retrieve from his fort are intrinsically connected to gendered spatial divisions. On the thirteenth opening, Jack’s mother comes to collect the pillows and sheets Jack has collected. The text reads: “This is Jack’s mother—‘I’m making beds, Jack’—who needs the striped sheets and the pillow-stack back!” (Ashburn n.p.). In keeping with stereotypic expectations of motherhood, Jack’s mother is seen cleaning, organizing, and tidying. In contrast to his mother, Jack’s father comes to collect the big comfy chair on the fourteenth opening: “This is Jack’s dad—‘I need my chair, Jack! And your fort … I can’t see. I can’t see the TV!’” (Ashburn n.p.). Here Jack’s father asserts ownership of the living room in which Jack has built his fort. Jack’s father’s dialogue indicates that the living room is a space of leisure in which to relax and watch television, activities that are in line with stereotypical domestic roles related to fatherhood. Ashburn and Helquist thus reinforce traditional spatial divisions in the domestic household, a gesture that, according to Alston, diminishes the spatial belonging and ownership of the child (15).

The effects of this diminished spatial ownership are clear in the way Jack interacts with the space around him and how he is positioned on the page. In the previous chapter, I discussed the idea that in *Soft House*, Alison and Davey are continuously pictured as occupying liminal and powerless spaces within the home. The same is true in *The Fort That Jack Built*. On the fifth opening, wherein Jack walks down the stairs carrying the large stack of pillows, Jack is pictured occupying space on the staircase—space that Alston has pointed to as liminal and on the boundaries of domestic space (27). Moreover, Jack’s mother’s presence on this same page reflects the spatial ownership of adults in more powerful and prominent areas of the house.
Jack’s mother is seen taking charge of an entire room while Jack is pushed to the transitional and liminal space of the staircase.

Furthermore, Jack is pictured occupying liminal space even in his own imagination. As I have previously discussed, the events of reality are repeatedly juxtaposed with what is happening in Jack’s knight and castle fantasy throughout the construction and destruction of Jack’s fort. On the second opening of the book, Jack’s imaginary castle is pictured in full for the first time. Jack is seen standing behind a parapet at the top of the castle’s side, waving his sword in the air. This is the same scene depicted on the hardcover and third opening of the book, with Jack standing on the castle brandishing a sword and shield, but Helquist has placed the reader’s point of view farther away, so that the entire castle and the army of knights attempting to overtake it are within the image. Here Jack is occupying the centre of the castle, a powerful position and a vantage point from which he can assert ownership of the whole space (Sipe, “Picturebooks As Aesthetic Objects” 30). Inside the book, however, Jack’s position on the castle has changed. On the ninth opening, when Milo barks and wags his tail enthusiastically and almost collapses Jack’s fort, Jack’s imaginary castle can be seen on recto. The upper part of the castle is shown, but Jack and Milo are now standing up in a turret on the top left of the page. The space he was seen occupying on the second opening—the centre of the castle wall behind a parapet—is now occupied by his parents and grandmother. This displacement reflects the idea that Jack is pushed to the margins of space by the adults in his family, and that throughout the imaginary castle siege he has to retreat closer and closer to the boundaries of his space in order to accommodate the spatial control his parents assert.
It is interesting to note that the attacking knights seen on the title page I have described above are never again pictured in Jack’s imagined knight and castle scenario. Their place seems to have been taken by Jack’s family, who are all dressed in medieval garb and looking up at Jack from their places around the castle. They are each postured differently: Jack’s siblings have their arms lifted away from their sides, expressions of suspicion, surprise, and watchfulness on their faces; Jack’s parents are looking sternly up at Jack, his father with his arms folded and his mother with one arm extended; lastly, Jack’s grandmother is watching him thoughtfully with an
open book held in her hands. Each character is focused intently on Jack, spotlighting his rebellion amongst the other members of the family. Although their presence is not as openly aggressive as an army of attacking knights, their positioning reflects the slow overtaking of Jack’s constructed space.

Until this point in my analysis I have acknowledged Jack’s siblings only as members of the larger group of Jack’s family that encroaches on his space. Throughout the narrative Jack’s siblings do function in the same way that his parents do—they come up to Jack’s fort and retrieve items that belong to them, leaving Jack’s fort in worse and worse disrepair. However, these characters are children and youth themselves; if the spatial division of domestic space is to be properly understood as adult-controlled, Jack’s siblings should experience the same or similar spatial boundaries as Jack. Helquist illustrates this idea clearly through Jack’s imagined knight and castle scenario, particularly the scene that I have described above. On the ninth opening Jack is indeed confined to a turret on the left side of the castle illustration on recto, but it is important to note that all three of Jack’s siblings are also confined to turrets. Jack’s brother appears below Jack on the same turret, and his two sisters appear on the opposite turret at the right side of the page. The overall impression of the image is that Jack’s parents own and occupy the centre of the castle—the largest and most important space—while Jack and his siblings are pushed to both the liminal areas of the castle and the margins of the page. The fact that the children are at the margins of the page is emphasized by Helquist’s design of the castle itself; the open space at the centre of the castle is clearly demarcated by near-perfectly straight lines that give the impression of a border. Jack and his siblings are clearly pushed outside of this border, while their parents and grandmother own and occupy the space inside.
5.5 Child Spatial Empowerment in *The Fort That Jack Built*

In the two previous sections of this chapter, I have argued that the text and illustrations of *The Fort That Jack Built* work to both create and dismantle snugness as the book continues through to the conclusion of the story. Not only does the construction of Jack’s fort briefly allow Jack to cultivate ownership over space, but it also allows him to boldly demarcate and defend the boundaries of that space. This activity is short-lived, however, as Jack’s parents’ control over space ultimately comes to overtake Jack’s attempts at spatial control and privacy. As I have discussed above, snugness is dismantled along with Jack’s fort, spotlighting Jack’s powerlessness in the face of his family’s control over domestic space. In this section, I will expand on Ashburn and Helquist’s communication of this powerlessness through an analysis of both the construction and destruction of Jack’s self-governed snug place. I will undertake a detailed discussion of how Jack is empowered and subsequently disempowered throughout the story as his owned space is manipulated by the adults around him. Although Jack is empowered through the creation of his fort—much like Alison and Davey in *Soft House*—he is ultimately disempowered throughout the fort’s destruction. This is made clear through Jack’s resistance of the forward motion of the story, the powerful focus and gesturing of the adults and other family members, and finally the story’s conclusion, wherein Jack must essentially make a compromise with his grandmother in regard to spatial ownership.

I will begin this section with a discussion of Jack’s spatial empowerment throughout the first eight openings of *The Fort That Jack Built*. As Jack builds his fort, his ability to take charge of the space around him is highlighted through both typography and illustration. Although incidents of varying typography are seen only twice throughout the book, the lettering carries important meaning in terms of Jack’s interaction with space. Most of the text in the book appears
in a standard, evenly spaced, and easy-to-read font. The fourth opening, however, begins the book with Helquist’s hand-lettering as opposed to typed text. The first words of the story are: “THIS IS JACK” (Ashburn n.p.). The words appear on verso in capital letters and they are the only hand-lettered words in the narrative of the book. Helquist’s lettering is large, bold, and rough, making the words appear to be loud and forceful. It is important to note that this style of letter is again seen on the eighth opening inside the illustration, when Jack’s fort is first seen in its entirety. As I have previously described, this illustration shows that Jack has hung signs around the entrance to his fort: “JACK’S FORT”, “KEEP OUT”, and skull and crossbones. The lettering used for these signs—Jack’s handwriting—matches the lettering Helquist uses on the first opening of the story. When taking these two instances of typography together, it can be observed that on the fourth opening it is almost like Jack is introducing himself to the reader. In an extremely empowered and bold move, Jack asserts his presence through self-acknowledgement: “THIS IS JACK” (Ashburn n.p.). His stance in the illustration complements this boldness; he is waving the wooden sword with his hand high in the air, unafraid to take up space.

The second instance of varying typography in The Fort That Jack Built also relates to Jack’s assertion of spatial empowerment. On the eighth opening discussed above, there is a double-page, full bleed illustration of Jack inside his newly built fort. The corresponding text reads: “This is the FORT that JACK BUILT!” (Ashburn n.p.). The words appear in a font reminiscent of Old English, a reference to Jack’s medieval knight and castle fantasy. The title of the book also appears in this font on the dust jacket and on the title page. An appearance of Old English-style typography on the eighth opening bolsters Jack’s fort as a place where he is able to imagine and dream (Griswold 25). Moreover, Jack is able to defend the boundaries of his space
in an empowered way through the use of his fort; Jack’s imagined status as a knight allows him to express his boldness and bravery in demarcating a space of his own inside the adult-controlled home.

Jack’s strength, boldness, and empowerment are further expressed in the first part of the story through Jack’s positioning and the way he interacts with his building materials. The fifth, sixth, and seventh openings of the book show Jack gathering the materials he will need for his fort against a plain white background; the rest of the house around Jack has entirely disappeared. By spotlighting Jack in such a way on these pages, Helquist is able to put visual focus entirely on how Jack is moving during the collection of his materials. This technique also allows Jack to

![Image of Jack gathering materials](image.png)

Figure 7 (Helquist, Brett. Sixth opening of The Fort That Jack Built. Abrams, New York, 2013)

THE FORT THAT JACK BUILT. Illustrations copyright © 2013 Brett Helquist. Reproduced by permission of the illustrator.
seem strong and large, as his smallness in comparison with his surroundings is apparent in illustrations where he is shown against the backdrop of his house.

Jack’s movement in these illustrations emphasizes his control over the space around him. On verso of the fifth opening, Jack is seen pushing a large table and dragging a chair to the right. On the sixth opening, verso and recto show Jack engaging similarly with various objects. He is seen hoisting a large barstool over his head, carrying a large stack of books, hanging the shower curtain on a lampshade, and finally donning his sword and bow. Many of the objects that Jack interacts with in these images are larger than him, but he is pictured as capably manipulating and carrying them in the direction of his fort. This kind of confidence and capability strengthens Jack’s empowered presence in domestic space; although these materials are not technically designed for use by children, Jack is able to take control and appropriate them to meet his needs.

As discussed in the previous chapter, illustrations in which a character makes a direct demand on the reader constitute gestures of empowerment (Lewis 156). It is notable that Jack makes two visual demands on the reader during the construction of his fort. One at the beginning of the story on the fourth opening, and another on the sixth opening when he is lifting the barstool over his head. In both illustrations Jack is seen boldly looking through the fourth wall, inviting the reader’s gaze and watching the reader watching him (Lewis 156). This is a marked attitude of boldness and empowerment that does not last into the next parts of the story. Jack ceases to make demands on the reader as soon as his fort begins to be dismantled by his family—a reflection of the fact that Jack moves from a space of empowerment to a space of disempowerment as the story continues.

The last element of Jack’s empowerment I will discuss in this section is the direction of Jack’s movement. While Jack is collecting and accumulating the various objects that he uses to
construct his fort, Jack is consistently moving towards the right of the page, mimicking the forward motion and momentum of the story. When Jack is empowered to take control of the scene, he visually moves forward with the narrative and allows the left-to-right rhythm of the story to continue unobstructed. Sipe echoes the work of William Moebius in his assertion that characters positioned on the right side of the page in picturebooks are seen to be moving into a space of adventure and risk (“Picturebooks As Aesthetic Objects” 30). Jack is thus occupying a space of energy, anticipation, and opportunity in these beginning pages.

Sipe also suggests that characters seen on the left side of a page are more secure and confined than those on the right side (30). This emphasis on confinement is important in terms of Jack’s positioning on the page. As soon as Jack’s sister comes to take her chair on the tenth opening—she is the first of Jack’s family to appear and take an object from the fort—Jack changes position and begins to occupy the left side of the page. Jack can be seen on the left-hand side of the illustration on the tenth, eleventh, twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth openings, all scenes where Jack is desperately trying to resist his family’s efforts to take back their belongings. He is often seen in motion, pulling the object in question towards the left. For example, on the tenth opening he is illustrated playing a kind of tug-of-war with his sister, pulling the chair towards the left while she pulls to the right. The fourteenth opening shows a similar image: Jack pulls a pillow towards the left while his mother drags it upwards towards the right on recto. These illustrations are in stark contrast to the images on the first eight openings of the book. Instead of moving with the forward momentum of the story, Jack now actively resists it, not only occupying the left side of the page but dynamically pulling backwards away from the right. This positioning reflects Jack’s struggle to enforce the boundaries of his space as well as his powerlessness in the face of his family’s wishes.
It is crucial to note that the fifteenth opening is an exception to this. On this opening a double-page spread shows Jack’s mother collecting the barstool so she can sit down after making the beds. Jack is pictured looking downwards dejectedly on recto while his mother holds the barstool and a coffee mug on verso. The text on the page reads: “She slips out the stool and says, ‘See? It’s still fine!’ / *It isn’t*, thinks Jack, *but at least it’s still mine!*” (Ashburn n.p.). Ashburn’s text and Helquist’s illustrations work together here to convey Jack’s conflicting feelings. His fort is almost totally dismantled, yet he still feels responsible for the space he has made—a glimpse of the spatial empowerment he felt before. His placement on the right side of recto reflects this.

Figure 8 (Helquist, Brett. Fifteenth opening of *The Fort That Jack Built*. Abrams, New York, 2013)

THE FORT THAT JACK BUILT. Illustrations copyright © 2013 Brett Helquist. Reproduced by permission of the illustrator.
The final and most powerful expression of Jack’s spatial disempowerment in *The Fort That Jack Built* is the scene that takes place over the last three openings of the story. Jack’s grandmother comes to collect her quilt on the sixteenth opening, and Jack, feeling guilty, hands it over: “That does it. Poor Jack—he can’t take the guilt. / He takes down the last of his fort: Grandma’s quilt” (Ashburn n.p.). On the seventeenth opening, Jack is sitting sadly on the coffee table while his grandmother wraps herself in the quilt and looks at Jack in the foreground of verso. Finally, on the eighteenth opening and last page of the book, Jack, his grandmother, and Milo are illustrated huddled next to the coffee table with the quilt draped over them. The text that runs over the seventeenth and eighteenth openings reads: “If you’re something like Jack / and you use people’s things that they’ll likely want back, / they might be more willing (or at least might not care) / if you use all their things but are willing … / … to share” (Ashburn n.p.).

Jack’s grudging willingness to share this new space with his grandmother essentially constitutes a compromise. The events of the book have shown that he is not empowered enough in domestic space to enforce the boundaries of a snug place that belongs solely to him; he must allow parental authority to dictate what objects he uses and what space he occupies, symbolized here by the presence of the grandmother in the new fort. It is interesting that the moral of the story, explicitly stated by Ashburn on the seventeenth and eighteenth openings, is less about the ownership of objects than it is the ownership of space. It is true that Jack uses his family’s objects without permission, and by virtue of this fact, Jack’s family has good motivation for taking back their belongings. A close reading of the moral of the story, however, reveals that it actually has almost nothing to do with Jack using his family’s belongings without permission. Instead, readers are encouraged to “use all their things but [be] willing to share” (Ashburn n.p.). This is not a reference to the sharing of objects; it is a direct expression of the willingness to
share space with adults and other family members. Jack’s empowered assertion of spatial boundaries through constructed space is therefore completely overpowered by the spatial authority of his parents and guardians. In this way, The Fort That Jack Built ends on a bittersweet note that is ultimately critical of Jack’s behavior. If Jack wants to experience empowered ownership, guardianship, responsibility, and the other qualities of snugness, he must be willing to accommodate the perpetual control of adults over his space.

![Image of The Fort That Jack Built](image_url)

**Figure 9** (Helquist, Brett. Eighteenth opening of *The Fort That Jack Built*. Abrams, New York, 2013)

THE FORT THAT JACK BUILT. Illustrations copyright © 2013 Brett Helquist. Reproduced by permission of the illustrator.
5.6 Conclusion

In the analysis above, I have argued that Ashburn and Helquist use a number of techniques in *The Fort That Jack Built* to encourage a sense of empowered snugness in the first eight openings of the book, and then subsequently shift their focus to Jack’s disempowerment as his fort is dismantled piece by piece in the last two thirds of the story. In this way, Ashburn and Helquist have covered the full “life cycle” of a child-constructed and governed space—through construction and use of the space to eventual disassembly. The impermanence of child-constructed spaces like Jack’s fort reflect the fact that spaces like these are subject at all times to adult wishes, and that the domestic household is an environment over which children have very little spatial ownership. *The Fort That Jack Built* is a clear depiction of the adult spatial politics that control the creation and use of child-constructed spaces like these. In *Soft House*, Alison and Davey are given full opportunity to build their space and rehearse adult responsibilities within; this is, however, accomplished with the acknowledgement that although Alison and Davey feel ownership over Soft House, their mother is still present and remains the spatial authority in the house. In comparison with Alison and Davey, Jack attempts to take on too much of an adult role—he claims his family’s belongings as his own and, perhaps most importantly, attempts to keep adult authority entirely out of his space. Until the end of the story, Jack proves himself unwilling “to share” (Ashburn n.p.). In this way, Jack’s experience with the fort bolsters the idea that the construction of a child-governed space within the domestic household is essentially a negotiation between child and adult.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Discussion of Research Questions

Having completed my close reading and analysis of *Soft House* and *The Fort That Jack Built*, I will revisit my research questions to discuss their relevance in light of the findings of the previous two chapters.

6.1.1 Snugness

1) How do the selected picturebooks demonstrate and interpret snugness through their portrayals of children building and/or using their own spaces?

Jerry Griswold’s concept of snugness and the snug place (9) guided my analysis of the visual characteristics, atmospheric qualities, and physical elements of Alison, Davey, and Jack’s self-constructed spaces. I utilized Griswold’s eleven qualities of the snug place (9-14) to discuss how snugness is both visually and textually communicated in the selected picturebooks. Despite the fact that *Soft House* and *The Fort That Jack Built* put emphasis on differing qualities of snugness according to their narrative characteristics, both books demonstrate and interpret snugness as a whole through visual and textual meaning-making.

Snug places, according to Griswold, are transformative locations of safety and security: “The snug place … is a bastion of security and a safe anchorage where the soul’s calmness can be restored and well-being enclosed. More importantly, from this safe center the feelings of basic trust and well-being can be extended to the world at large” (30). My analysis supported this interpretation of child-constructed spaces. Griswold suggests that a benefit of experiencing snugness is the opportunity for feelings of wellbeing and empowerment to be applied to the larger world outside the snug place (30). Davey’s bravery and Alison’s rehearsal of adult responsibilities could contribute to their growth and preparedness to experience these feelings in
the world outside Soft House. Jack’s guardianship over his fort could perhaps bolster the setting of future spatial boundaries both within and outside his house. Whether or not it is reasonable to extrapolate these qualities of character based on the snugness experienced and communicated in these works, it is clear that the snug places portrayed here are in some sense transformative in the way that Griswold describes. Alison, Davey, and Jack all step into roles that change and reorganize as snugness is encouraged or discouraged. Alison and Davey take on roles of responsibility and become their own providers of comfort and security; Jack strongly enforces the borders of his space and, consequently, must become its sole protector. The snug place is, as Griswold suggests, a “safe center” (30) through which privacy, autonomy, and separation from the structured world of adults can be obtained and rehearsed. The distinct feelings that come through as a result of this are encouraged, communicated, and perpetuated through both visual and textual storytelling in these books.

6.1.2 Adult-Controlled Domestic Space

2) How is adult-controlled domestic space portrayed as a factor in the creation and use of these spaces?

*Soft House* and *The Fort That Jack Built* both take place entirely within the home environment. All three of the child protagonists are located firmly within the watchful attention of their parents’ eyes and ears. Knowing this, it was crucial for me to acknowledge the power structures inherent in the environment if domestic space in my analysis. Focusing on the spatial politics communicated through illustration, I discussed how Alison, Davey, and Jack interact with the space around them and analyzed the presence (or absence) of their parents, who are either physically present or have an implied presence through objects associated with parenthood. Ann Alston’s suggestion that fictional children have difficulty belonging and feeling
ownership of space in the home environment (15) was useful to me here; although snugness allows for feelings of control and responsibility over space, Alison, Davey, and Jack are at all times subject to the spatial authority of their parents. The children are often illustrated at the boundaries of rooms, on staircases, or otherwise taking up as little space as possible on the page, a visual expression of the fact that adults are in charge of the central, most important spaces in the household.

These findings bolster the idea that the clearly demarcated rules of domestic space dictate how child-constructed spaces are built and used. Alison and Davey are allowed to peacefully build and use Soft House with materials from around their home not because they have the power to decide for themselves, but because their mother permits them, and, most importantly, does not stop them. Jack does not get permission to make a fort using items from around the house or claim the living room space as his own; as a consequence, his fort is swiftly destroyed by his family. The events of these stories thus occur in direct conjunction with the thoughts, ideas, and feelings of adults. The children’s parents are the holders of overarching power and influence, a fact that is clearly communicated through the picturebook makers’ emphasis on the presence of parental authority and the children’s often apprehensive use of domestic space.

6.1.3 Child Spatial Empowerment

3) To what extent do these child-governed spaces affect the protagonist’s empowerment or disempowerment in the adult-controlled home?

My final research question looked at the effects of the interaction between snugness and adult-controlled domestic space to discern how Alison, Davey, and Jack are empowered or disempowered in the construction and use of their forts. The characters’ readiness to take up space, level of responsibility in the scene, and independence were shown to be indicators of
empowerment or disempowerment. As snugness is encouraged in the books, Alison, Davey, and
Jack are increasingly empowered to take control of their surroundings. They become more
central and important in the images and assert themselves using body language and posture. In
*Soft House*, Alison and Davey lean into the comfort, relaxation, and freedom their space provides
while taking responsibility over each other. Jack builds his space and strongly enforces the
dialectic between inside and outside, guarding and defending his fort in a powerful expression of
ownership. *The Fort That Jack Built* also offers another insight into the connection between
child-constructed spaces and spatial empowerment; when there is no agreement between child
and adult in terms of the sharing of space, snugness is as easily dismantled as Jack’s fort made of
tables, chairs, and blankets.

The connection between a child building a space in the home and child spatial
empowerment in domestic space is a close one. *Soft House* and *The Fort That Jack Built* both
shed light on how children experience their self-owned and controlled spaces, and how adult
authority and protection play into the spatial politics of the domestic household. What appears
when looking closely at these books together is a powerful yet delicate negotiation. The children
in these stories create their own constructed spaces possibly as a reaction to a predominantly
adult-structured environment and a need for privacy, but they also exhibit—or learn to exhibit, in
the case of Jack—an acknowledgment and accommodation of adult spatial control. Alison and
Davey keep their playtime within the bounds they have discovered they are allowed, and they
accept their mother’s offer of cookies to take into Soft House with them. Jack, on the other hand,
has to go through the experience of his fort being dismantled piece by piece in order to come to
an agreement with his parents and grandmother on the sharing of their space. A negotiation
between child and adult is thus crucial to child spatial empowerment in these books.
6.2 Limitations of the Study and Possibilities for Future Research

During the book selection and analysis process for this project I endeavored to select and discuss primary sources that provide thorough representations of children building and using spaces within their home environments. There are, however, limitations to this research that may be addressed in future scholarship.

The initial corpus for this project predominantly featured representations of North American children within Western cultural contexts. As such, the practices, values, and beliefs of the protagonists in the selection do not fully reflect the diversity of cultural customs that exist surrounding domestic space. To my knowledge, picturebooks published in North America involving children making use of self-governed spaces in diverse home settings are scarce; the majority of picturebooks I found depicted Caucasian children within nuclear families. Alison, Davey, and Jack are all rooted firmly in Western beliefs and practices.

In addition to the lack of cultural diversity, I found that most of the picturebooks in the initial corpus featured children from a similar socioeconomic class. Each protagonist in the selection has a large, spacious living environment filled with various objects that can be used in the building of the self-governed space. *Soft House* directly depicts a house with a yard and Jack is illustrated building his fort in front of a large television in *The Fort That Jack Built*. Thus, in addition to being part of the same cultural context, the children depicted here can all be interpreted as being members of middle to upper middle-class households.

An important limitation of this work is therefore the absence of much diversity across the available books. As more picturebooks featuring children’s play behaviors at home are produced, it is my hope that future evolutions of this work could look more closely at culturally and
economically diverse domestic space practices. This is essential to a more thorough understanding of how children’s literature reflects real-life spatial divisions across cultural and socioeconomic experiences.

The second important limitation of this work involves my decision to focus on two picturebooks rather than four. The scope of this project would not allow for the analysis of more than two picturebooks, and therefore I believe there is much more to be said in terms of how child-constructed spaces operate within the home environment. It is my hope that this limitation might be addressed in future scholarship that could bring tree house books such as Audrey’s Tree House and In the Tree House into the conversation and focus more closely on how outdoor spaces contribute to child spatial empowerment and disempowerment.

6.3 Concluding Remarks

To conclude this project, I would like to briefly reflect on child-constructed spaces in the domestic environment and the negotiation between child and adult that must be present for these spaces to exist. The two picturebooks I have analyzed here depict child characters acting out their desire for spatial control by building their own spaces and using them for imaginative play and rehearsal of adult roles and responsibilities. I have argued that they are acting partially in response to their relative powerlessness in an adult-controlled household, and that the concept of snugness (Griswold 5) can be utilized to gain a better understanding of how child-constructed spaces operate inside of a larger domestic environment. I have written of Alison, Davey, and Jack’s necessary acknowledgement of adult authority and protection as one part of a crucial agreement that must occur between child and adult in order for these spaces to succeed. I have yet to touch on the fact that adults must also change their perception of owned space in order to
give children the chance to carry out this play behavior. In a sense, the adult acknowledgement of a child’s need to practise and experience spatial empowerment lies at the heart of *Soft House* and *The Fort That Jack Built*. Although the parents in these stories show different levels of understanding and accommodation towards their children’s actions, both books express the idea that space-building is a beneficial activity that should be allowed and encouraged by adults in the lives of children. The fact that this notion should be spotlighted by children’s literature like *Soft House* and *The Fort That Jack Built* strengthens the idea that space-building is a formative and important moment in the process of growing up. I would like to conclude this thesis with the suggestion that perhaps empowerment within domestic space is not meant to be held entirely by adults but is instead meant to be shared in this way. It is my hope that this notion of “making room” for children, as I have come to think of it, will continue to be explored and encouraged in children’s fiction and scholarship hereafter.
WORKS CITED


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