

Place for children

The importance of including children in the urban design process

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1 Urban Shelter Design Development

1.1 Introduction

Children are seldom heard when issues that affect their lives are discussed. Their views are seldom taken seriously when their surrounding environments is being planned and built. We need to learn more about how children are affected by urban growth¹, especially in countries of de developing world where the urban tissue is rapidly expanding and ever changing changing.

It is important to obtain an understanding of how children interact with their physical and social environment. Only then is it possible to make policies for planning that are aimed at making towns better places for children²

With this paper I will search to understand the role of the youth of the Philippines and the impact they have in deciding over the developpement of their

¹ Åkrantz, Marcus
2004, *In the eye of the beholder*, Lund Institute of Technology

² Åkrantz, Marcus
2004, *In the eye of the beholder*, Lund Institute of Technology

environment and also to show for the importance to make real spaces for children in urban planning by discussing examples from Sweden.

That the surrounding environment have large impact on the quality of children's lives is recognized by Habitat and in the *Global report on human settlements, 2001* they write: "A key message is that disposable household income and the way it is spent are not the sole or even most important determinants of the health of the urban children, which is affected significantly by their wider social and physical environment."³

1.2 The importance of public space

Social interaction is a hugely important part of our wellbeing, considering that the human is a social being. The meeting with "the other" is an important part of our mental and physical wellness. It is also a vital part of the development of a child to interact and learn the unwritten social rules of society.

A home is so much more than the object; the vehicle that full fills one sole function. Housing areas where open, unbuilt public places are just leftover space will not succeed in achieving that notion of *home* that a good urban plan will have. Access to safe and healthy shelter and basic services is essential to a person's physical, psychological, social and economic well-being.⁴

Still the question is, do we have enough space for public space and space for children, especially in the cities of the developing world, can we afford to leave space un-built if we want decent housing for all?

The urban space is the place where all can come together, it is the meeting point that unifies and that does not discriminate. The major factor of the public space is that it functions as a meeting place for everyone. The public space is where we can meet and interact with those of different values, cultural background, age and social status. People we do not meet with in our daily journeys.

³ *The Habitat Agenda Goals and Principles, Commitments and the Global Plan of Action.*
United Nations

⁴ *The Habitat Agenda Goals and Principles, Commitments and the Global Plan of Action.*
United Nations

In the city we can meet a multitude of people. And it is through these meetings with different people and different values that we learn to appreciate diversity and also the possibilities this brings. The variation of people in the urban space is one of the conditions for achieving a tolerant city, and a tolerant city is the main condition in achieving a democratic city, where everyone can participate in the urban life.⁵

1.3 Childhood and culture

The idea of childhood has differed over time and it differs between cultures. Perhaps some wrong judgements could be avoided by trying to understand some of the preconceived ideas that lie underneath, deeply embedded in our own culture and society when we make value judgements about things.⁶

In the preamble of *The Convention on the Rights of the child* it is stated “that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding” (UNICEF).

2 Factors Shaping Urban Shelter Design

2.1 Challenges for Children in the Philippines

Access to and quality of basic services in education and health are major challenges for children in the Philippines. With eight of 10 children unable to access early childhood services, many Filipino first-graders enter school without the skills they need to learn. In Metro Manila, overcrowded schools result in teachers holding classes in two or three shifts a day. In contrast, rural schools have fewer students but suffer from a lack of basic resources, such as books, teaching

⁵ Gehl, Jan and Lars Gemzoe 2001 *New City Spaces*.

⁶ Åkrantz, Marcus 2004, *In the eye of the beholder*, Lund Institute of Technology

supplies, or even teachers. The public education system's inability to catch up with rapid growth in the student population has led to a serious decline in the quality of instruction and student achievement.⁷

Important numbers:

- The population of the Philippines is 91 million.
- One in three children under age 5 are underweight; among school children, one in five are underweight.
- Only one in five children, ages 3-5, have access to day care or preschool services.
- On average, only 43 percent of the required English, Science and Math competencies are mastered by Filipino students.
- The infant mortality rate is 22 per 1,000 births.

2.2 Youth development framework in the Philippines

2.1.1 Background

The environment for Filipino youth is defined by enabling laws, policies, plans, programmes and organizations that promote the development and welfare of youth, as well as their participation in development efforts.⁸ The number and diversity of enabling instruments developed in recent years points to a widening avenue for youth participation in development processes

2.1.2 Responsible agencies

The overall coordination for youth policy in the Philippines rests with the National Youth Commission (NYC). This coordination is done in conjunction

⁷ <http://www.savethechildren.org>

⁸ *YOUTH IN THE PHILIPPINES: A Review of the Youth Situation and National Policies and Programmes*, United Nations

with the various national coordinating organizations (NCO), ministries and NGOs that serve youth. The NYC is an Office of the President. The Republic Act No. 8044, otherwise known as the Youth in Nation-Building Act, defines the structure of the NYC. It consists of a Chair, a Vice-chair, six Commissioners and one Ex-officio Commissioner.⁹

3 The Role of Architects

3.1 Playing with the rules

The debate about children's place in our cities and in our society is not a new problem, nonetheless very little development have occurred in the way we see the part children have in the urban fabric and in the space we let them take up in the city.

In an article from White Architects the author argues for a vision of our time on the children in the city of a controversial text entitled "Tear down the playground!" Charlotte Raw Land, the author of the article writes:

*"In an age obsessed with neatness and status-filled expressions, we need to emphasize the value of unfinished places in the city. In an age where fear of accidents often becomes the overriding issue at the playground planning, we argue for a balance between risk and challenge. "*¹⁰

What would our cities look like without these places that we assign to the children? These playgrounds which assures us of the safety of our children. Today's playground has become a forced conventional need for many urban planners. Standardized playgrounds, controlled by lack of space, fear and convention. According to Charlotte Raw Land, it is time to integrate playing in

⁹ *YOUTH IN THE PHILIPPINES: A Review of the Youth Situation and National Policies and Programmes*, United Nations

¹⁰ *Riv lekplatsen!* Charlotta Råsmark, 6 maj 2008

the city by creating a child structure instead of small children reserves. Yet she believes that the child's perspective and good play environment has long been a recognized and important issue in the planning context.

How is it then that today we find ourselves in a situation where children's play is still not integrated into the rest of the city life, but is found scattered as small islands reserves? Charlotta Mark Slack believes that planning, particularly for environments suitable for children, even today suffer from "paralyzing traditionalism" and that "while the game is wild and creative playground planning often get stuck as coward, norm-driven and lazy".

An important point to think about when planning facilities for children is how we as adults really value the game and the importance of play:

"Imagine if we would refer more from this wonderful concept: the game, apart from its indisputable utility aspects, has a mysterious self-worth. To permit playing is a way for people, not just the child, to let him/herself go and his/her place in life. Then it becomes quite obvious that the conform configurations of playground equipment will be quite disappointing. Getting deeper dimensions of play in earnest requires empathy and willingness to change radically. Play is a force that cannot be planned, but from what we can benefit. " ¹¹

But how are we in today's increasingly densifying cities to make room for the sense of open, free and unconventional playgrounds, when the nature of play is to flow freely over open surfaces? Of course, this vision of a city that truly meets the needs of children is easier to realize in a sparser urban structure, but that does not mean that it is impossible in a dense urban environment. Charlotta Råsmark believes that what is needed is more creativity to meet the child's perspective.

"The playground in the dense city does not meet the needs for play and movement - there is simply no place to fold so large areas that would be needed for play only. Instead, we must seriously dare to integrate game in the town again, creating a child structure instead of small children reserves spread out here and there. " ¹²

¹¹ Riv lekplatsen! Charlotta Råsmark, 6 maj 2008

¹² Riv lekplatsen! Charlotta Råsmark, 6 maj 2008

With the proper integration of children and play in urban planning we can build fully functional cities.

But if we give more freedom to play in our cities, the security issue will come up, mainly from a traffic security perspective. The author of this article does not believe in a strict traffic separation, but more on a prioritisation of places placed close to each other to facilitate communication, as a "string of places" which connects the city and "makes available those parts of the operated urban structure, which by necessity must be a part of the playing environment."

If we manage to integrate this structure in the cities, then the freedom and independence of children will increase. White Architects believe that this structure can be later "filled with more or less prepared sites with different features and characters."

3.2 The playable city - examples in reality

A city where playing is accessible to all, is this really something that can be accepted by all city residents and institutions? The answer probably lies in just how and in what way we let it take up space in our cities. The following examples show how different types of playgrounds create very different reactions, both from the city's inhabitants and its management.

Artist duo and brothers Barsky were selected to search for what the game can be in the city. They made several small installations in central Stockholm. These installations were quite simple swings the Barsky brothers made of lumber and rope. The swings were appreciated by the inhabitants but not by the city administration who thought that they interfered in the city and were picked down faster than Akay and Peter Barsky could set up new ones.

Maybe nothing is to block the streets and squares which stops people going into the stores, says the authors of the installations.¹³

¹³ *Med staden som lekplats och gatan som parlament*, Fria Tidningen, 15 december 2006



The Swings of the Barsky brother's in Stockholm

The swings in Stockholm were an installation the artists set up at their own initiative and also even though they had the support of the residents, the city chose to remove them.

This takes us back to the issue of how we look at playing in cities and this behaviour from the city administration clearly shows that the game is something taken very seriously, but also that the city requires involvement in the planning of play in the city. ¹⁴

Another result can be achieved when it is the city that chooses to integrate play in their planning and order installations dealing with playing in the city. For this example, it is about Monica Made play sculptures, called Jimmy. Monica Goras's glowing play sculptures are gaining in popularity in urban planning, and they are now found in cities as Växjö and Malmö.¹⁵



Monica Gora's glowing sculptures in Malmö and Växjö

¹⁴ *Med staden som lekplats och gatan som parlament*, Fria Tidningen, 15 december 2006

¹⁵ [http:// www.gora.se](http://www.gora.se)

In this case, the sculptures were ordered by the city to enhance the standard in the environment.

But it is questionable whether these sculptures are really used for play or if they remain static elements in the city that the residents just pass by instead of actually experiencing them.

For some residents, these items are considered more as art, something you notice at a certain distance, rather than an interactive installation.

The difference between the Barsky brothers and Monica Goras installations is perhaps the material used in the installation. The Barsky Brothers use basic materials: lumber and miscellaneous junk to their ephemeral installations, while Monica Goras "Jimmy" are solid, hard points in the landscape, and made of noble materials such as glass or concrete. Jimmy also has no definable shape, while a swing is something that almost everyone can relate to and understand how it is used.

4 Conclusion

The housing issue in the developing world is not only a question of the house itself or the lack of it. It is a question of *space* and how well we manage and plan it. A well planned urban structure should have space for public places where the inhabitants can interact and participate in the urban and communal life.

Development of new urban areas cannot be about developers and contractors trying to fit as many units as possible in to a restraint area.

Taking in to consideration the children and the youth of these new areas, and also the existing ones is maybe one of the more sustainable ways of planning housing areas. If we can assure a sense of security and wellbeing for all of the inhabitants of these areas, especially the most exposed and vulnerable ones the longevity and prosperity of these areas will also be assured.

The housing problem in the developing countries cannot be a quick fix, sorted out uniquely by planting row after row of houses. It is a more complex issue that demands greater efforts and a greater imagination.

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