

# CHILDREN AS URBAN PLANNERS

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## **Résumé**

Une expérience finlandaise avec des enfants comme planificateurs urbains à Kitee indique que les enfants de 8 à 12 ans sont une ressource de valeur pour l'aménagement urbain. Ils sont capables d'enrichir le contenu de la planification non seulement par rapport aux cours d'école mais par rapport au quartier tout entier. Les enfants-planificateurs de Kitee ont mis en route un dialogue local, national et même international qui remet en question le paradigme traditionnel de planification urbaine, le contenu et l'organisation de l'éducation environnementale et le rôle des enfants comme citoyens.

## **Summary**

A Finnish experiment with children as urban planners in Kitee indicates that children aged 8 - 12 are a valuable resource in urban policy. They are capable of enriching the content of planning not only with respect to their school grounds, but the neighbourhood as a whole. The children-planners of Kitee have initiated a local, national and even an international dialogue, which questions the traditional paradigm of urban planning, the content and organization of environmental education and the role of children as citizens.

## **Introduction**

My research in Finland confirms the culturally and politically subordinate status of children and the young. The framework of these studies consisted of an explanatory theory in which the transactional approach has been integrated with psychoanalytical interpretation (Horelli, 1993). The conceptual model of the Scandinavian New Everyday Life-project has served as a normative theory (Horelli and Vepsä, 1994). The theoretical and methodological approach is elaborated in a forthcoming paper.

This paper, children as urban planners, discusses an experiment with 8 - 12 year old Finnish children as urban planners and its local, national and international consequences.

A review of the literature dealing with children and design reveals that 'children and participation' was a popular theme in the 1970s, as for instance The Childhood City of the EDRA-meetings. The Washington Environmental Yard was also widely discussed and visited, serving as an example for involving both children and adults in design from a child's perspective (Moore, 1978).

In the 1980's guidelines for various children's facilities and spaces were developed (Moore et al. 1979-1981), but there were few instances of direct participation by children (Hart, 1987; Baldassari et al. 1987). The 1990s seem to have rediscovered 'children as planners'. Roger Hart (1992) surveyed children's participation in both Western and Eastern countries. He argues that children have a secondary role as citizens. It is only in the third world countries that they sometimes take their fate into their own hands.

### **The Kitee story**

Kitee is a small rural town in northeastern Finland. When it was officially conferred city status two years ago, the local council decided "to do something for the children". The heads of the school and welfare departments suggested that children might participate in the improvement of a problem neighbourhood with 2,000 residents around their school. Planning started in the Autumn of 1992 in the form of a special club led by two teachers twice a week after school. The Ministries of Environment and of Social Welfare and Health supported the project. An architect and an environmental psychologist were hired as researchers to animate the planning and to evaluate the outcomes.

Various participatory or enabling techniques were applied in the planning process (Kukkonen, 1984; Horelli, 1992; Burnette, 1994). A "future workshop" for both children and local residents helped in formulating the different goals of planning. The children also used expressive methods to bring out their visions and ideas, such as drawing, writing, photography and model building. During the spring term, some twenty children were actively involved in the club and the rest of the school participated on special theme days dedicated to environmental issues. The spring of 1993 culminated in a colourful exhibition of the children's work held at the municipal centre. The proposals were discussed by a panel on which the children, local politicians, residents and teachers were represented.

Parallel to the children's involvement, some women residents who had participated in the future workshop continued to mobilize other residents in the area, and thus succeeded in founding a residents' association. In the autumn of 1993 the children's ideas were made into specific project cards for future implementation. One class took up traffic safety in the area, presenting its findings together with the residents at the meeting of the local council. The proposal evolved into an official citizen initiative for which public funds were allocated.

In the Spring of 1994 "the Kitee story" was displayed at the Museum of Architecture in Helsinki. The exhibition and a debate arranged between the children and

government officials received nationwide publicity.

The project is still in progress. The development work has proceeded from the stage of identifying needs and problems and searching for new solutions to the stage of translating them into practice (Engeström, 1987). It will take several years for change process to run its course and for new modes of practice to become established.

### Children as urban planners

The children proved to have a surprisingly good grasp of scale. **The planning of the school grounds** took place by drawing and modelling. 146 children, 52% of them boys, produced drawings in 75 groups. The 150 drawings of the school grounds were analysed in terms of their structural elements and their facilities, i.e. the activities that they tend to support (Kyttä, 1994). The plans of the children were compared with those drawn up by the architect who had been hired to renovate the school before the project began. Table 1 shows differences in the elements chosen by boys, girls and the architect. The architect's plans contain more routes and greenery, but fewer building structures than those drawn up by the children. Moreover, the children tended to opt for greater structural variety (i.e. more categories in each element) than the architect.

Table 1. Plan elements produced by boys, girls and the architect.

<i>Elements</i>	<i>Boys</i>		<i>Girls</i>		<i>Total</i>		<i>Architect</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Nature</i>	895	(69)	1034	(63)	1928	(66)	87	(70)
<i>Structures</i>	305	(23)	513	(31)	817	(28)	29	(23)
<i>Routes</i>	102	(8)	88	(5)	190	(6)	9	(7)

The Super base computer program enabled the drawings to be analyzed in terms of the space allocated per element. It reveals the different approaches to the allocation of space adopted by the children and the architect (cf. Figure 1; Kyttä, 1994).

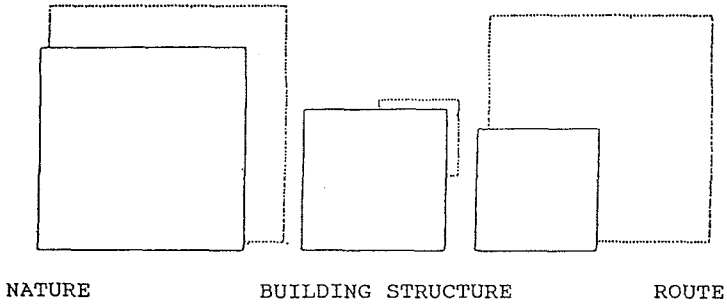


Fig. 1 : The spatial proportions of the elements in the plans of the school yard by children (the unbroken line) and the architect (the dotted line).

The activities that the elements supported were classed into categories of action, such as intensive movement, sports, quiet play, and social games. Boys preferred intensive movement, whereas girls liked calmer games. The children's plans contained a greater number of and more detailed facilities than those of the architect. This can also be seen in the different allocation of space for various activities (Figure 2; Kytä, 1994).

The plans of the children and those of the architect have different spatial, behavioural and experiential consequences. The hidden curriculum in the children's plans was the facilitation of diverse type of encounters and exchanges between peers and between children and adults. This is an essential part of social learning.

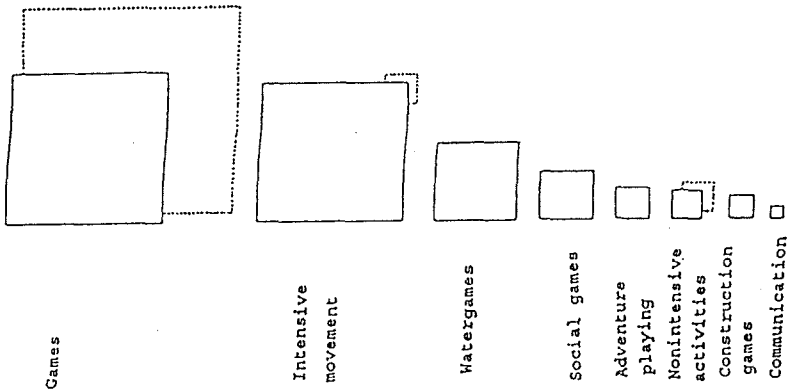


Fig. 2 : The spatial proportions of activities in the children's plans (the unbroken line) and those of the architect (the dotted line).

**The planning of the neighbourhood** took place in ten mixed groups of 5 to 7 children. Perhaps the most surprising result of the children's neighbourhood planning was their ability to deal with a great variety of issues and with the residential area as a whole. The content of the plans was broken down into structural elements, routes, greenery or nature, and the social environment (Table 2).

Table 2. The elements of the plans in relation to the environmental scale

	<i>Structures</i>	<i>Routes</i>	<i>Nature</i>	<i>Soc.env.</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>The neighbourhood</i>	119	25	40	40	229
<i>Apartment blocks</i>	32	6	9	4	51
<i>The school</i>	9	4	13		
	160	31	58	44	293

The plans made provision for the improvement of the surroundings and yards of the apartment blocks, the currently inaccessible lakefront, the creation of meeting places for different generations and, of course, activities for the young.

The nature of participation is critical for the role of children as citizens. The traffic solutions, which were worked into a real proposition under implementation made the children's participation in the Finnish experiment climb the "ladder of participation" to the third level, that of cooperation and decision making between children and adults (Figure 3; Arnstein, 1969; Hart, 1992). The highest level on this ladder, where the adults act as children's assistants, is more or less utopian and can be applied in small scale contexts, such as adventure playgrounds.

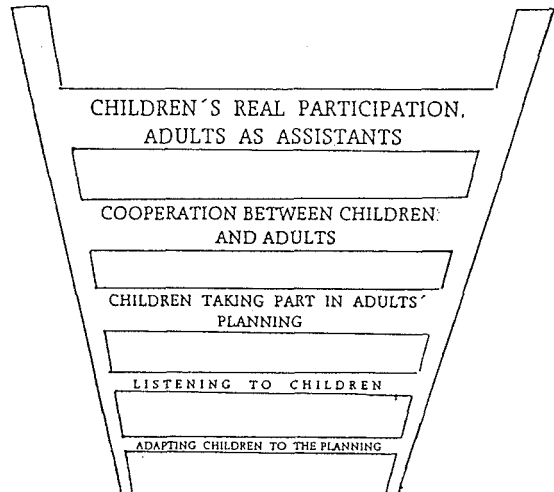


Fig. 3: The ladder of children's participation.

### **The local, national and international consequences of children's planning**

The freedom for children to participate is highly context dependent. The Nordic welfare states tend to hold a rigid control of the planning procedures, where as the situation is the opposite, for instance in the United States (see Iltus & Hart in this volume). The children's contribution to the planning was made possible in Kitee by a political decision of the local council and by the efforts of a few key people (Figure 4).

The children's planning produced pressure at **the local level**. The town of Kitee began to broaden the content of urban planning to cover ecological and social issues. There is currently a demand for the planning process to include groups like children, young people, the elderly, and women. There is also an impetus to broaden the scope of environmental education in the school curriculum to include social and cultural dimensions alongside ecological ones. Discussion has been initiated on how the school could be transformed not only into a "three dimensional textbook" but into the town's general learning and development centre (Adams, 1993; Nelson et al. 1993). This would mark a vital step in the implementation of the most important sub-project - "The ecosocial development of Kitee". As a consequence, there is also increasing pressure on the town to desectorize and network its hierarchic organization.

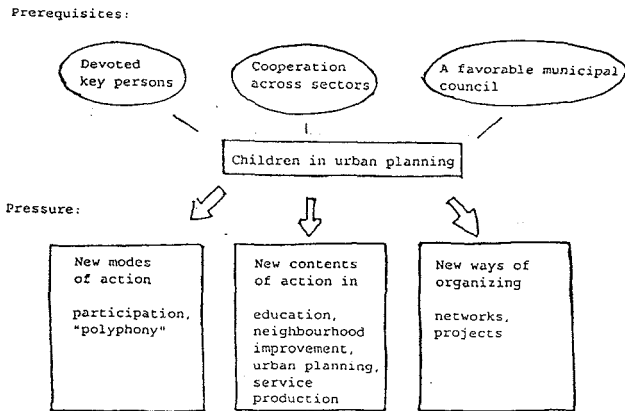


Fig. 4 : Prerequisites and consequences of children's planning.

Since this case study was supported by three ministries - the Ministry of the Environment, the Ministry of Social Welfare and Health, and the Ministry of Education - it has enhanced closer cooperation between them in areas of urban planning, environmental education and health promotion. This has had some effect on **the national level**, i.e. on the national report on Finland's recent ratification of the UN declaration of children's rights. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child contains the combination of the so-called "3Ps": provision, protection and participation (Sgritta, 1992). There is growing awareness that the first two rights have received acceptance, but the third - participation - which is one of the most important dimensions of citizenship, has been largely ignored in our country. The success of the "urban planners" of Kitee assists in gaining wider acceptance for children's participation.

The experiment with the Finnish children stimulated a dialogue at **the international level**. Swiss schoolchildren from Locarno have used the same planning methods and the three dimensional model for thinking about improvements to their school and neighbourhood. The experiment will continue via Swizerland, in Northern Italy, and will be taken up in Rouen and in Amsterdam, in Spring 1995.

These efforts can be regarded as the construction of important new social networks and a more viable role for children in postindustrial society (cf. Latour, 1991). A vigorous environmental dialogue at the international level may help to resolve one of the questions raised by the project: "Why are modern, well-educated children an ignored resource?" Adults can no longer ignore the environmental competence of children. Perhaps in future the institutions of childhood - day care centres and schools - will start paving the way for a more meaningful role for children in society. These are, of course, vital issues for future research.

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