

CHANGING PERSPECTIVES AND APPROACHES : SWEDISH RESEARCH ON CHILDREN AND THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

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Résumé

Une revue des trois dernières décennies de recherche en Suède sur l'enfant et l'environnement urbain, sur ses caractéristiques et sa pertinence montre des différences entre périodes en termes de quantité de publications. La recherche a touché son sommet pendant les années 70. Pendant les années 80 il y a eu peu de travaux. On peut ainsi se demander: Les enfants sont-ils passés de mode dans la recherche ? Trois approches pour ce qui est de la recherche sur les relations des enfants à l'environnement construit sont identifiées: une approche quantitative de bienveillance, une approche normative et une approche phénoménologique qui a cours aujourd'hui. Le point de vue de l'enfant est important pour l'approche phénoménologique; nous devons identifier et interpréter les idées des enfants eux-mêmes ainsi que leurs expériences de leur point de vue.

Summary

A review of the last three decades of Swedish research on children and the urban environment, about characteristics and relevance of research, shows differences between periods in terms of quantity of research publications. Research reached its peak in the seventies. During the 1980's little research is reported. Thus it can be asked: Are children out of fashion?

Three approaches with respect to research on children's relations to the built environment are identified:(1) a quantitative approach of benignity, (2) a normative approach and (3) a current phenomenological approach. The concept of the child's perspective is important for the phenomenological approach; we have to identify and interpret children's ideas and experiences from their point of view. Some important research issues for the future are also mentioned.

Introduction

Are children out of fashion? This question surfaced after a quick journey back into the Swedish research literature on children and the urban environment. The idea was to distinguish some of the main characteristics of the research from the last thirty years, to identify some important perspectives and approaches that could be applied in a new situation, and to see if substantial knowledge was still usable.

In the literature we found a remarkable difference in the amount of publications between the three decades. We have found a concentration of research reports and books published during the 1970's. After 1980, the list is sparse. We found publications by three authors¹ represented in this volume!

The interest in children in the 1970's was not only expressed in research documents. The Swedish government appointed several committees on children and the outdoor environment; one report in 1970, was called "Children's outdoors", and another in 1975 was entitled "Children and the physical environment". Political interest resulted in building codes and planning legislation, focusing traffic separation measures, as well as design regulations and recommendations for children's outdoor play. A possible explanation for the massive interest in child planning issues at this time was the growing criticism of the new large-scale residential areas and their poor environmental conditions. The 'cause' of children was included in the general critique.

Children's play and traffic security

In Sweden during the 1950's, the increase in traffic began to be appreciated as a real menace for the cities, as was the case in other European countries. Planners and architects were seriously affected and competitions for housing developments had to devise plans based on traffic-separation principles.

In this situation, one psychologist, a woman, and a young male architect established a research collaboration to design dimension principles for children's playgrounds and traffic security in neighbourhoods. One of the new reports (Sandels & Wohlin 1960) dealt with the play pattern of pre-school children in modern residential areas. They investigated the role of the immediate environment, and particularly the role of the entrance area of the house, the children's activity area, and choice of play places. The authors described their research in this way:

"Adults think that small children perceive and behave like themselves, and town and traffic planning is almost without exception based on the measures, habits and capacities of adult people".

Experimental research on the traffic capability of children of different ages evidenced that a child of 12 years or less was cognitively not able to understand

1 Björklid, 1992; Nordström, 1990; and Skantze, 1989.

traffic rules and complicated traffic design layout. This made a deep impression on the contemporary generation of planners and architects.

The quantitative approach of benignity

In Sweden there is a strong positivist tradition in sociology and the behavioural sciences, including people-built environment studies. Scientific approaches and methods were borrowed from the natural sciences. Initially, however, many of the problems that arose seemed to be of a quantitative nature. There was little documentation on the use of the environment, and basic knowledge had to be established.

Many early endeavours involved simply observing and counting. Children were counted in a number of ways: in certain spaces, time and climate. They were classified according to age group, sex, and home address. They were checked in the way they moved away from the house, what kind of activities they did, together with whom, etc. One study used an automatic camera placed for several weeks in a courtyard, producing an infinite number of pictures. The study showed definitively that children's play was affected negatively by bad weather!

Another series of studies used survey methodology, structured interviews with closed-ended questions, most frequently addressing the parents (i.e. the mothers) to find out where the children played, when and how, and to evaluate the design of the play equipment. One set of questions, that today seems especially relevant was the set of questions on mothers' anxiety about having their kids out to play alone. This problem can be generally regarded as indicating neighbourhood adequacy for children.

In retrospect we can call the quantitative approach described here an approach of benignity. From own experiences we can witness that it was applied with the best of intentions. Even if the results contributed to some environmental improvements, they did not deepen the understanding of the child's experience of the city. Such an understanding must be based on a conviction that children cannot be looked upon and treated as objects; they are actors of their own. We have to listen to their voices (instead of for example the voices of their mothers). This will be specifically discussed below.

The normative approach or the reform perspective

Research during the 1970's showed a reformist ambition taking over the scientific approach. We find examples of studies where, with only a crude assessment, the researchers, in a benign if patronising attitude to social improvements, had made conclusions beforehand. This reformist attitude, however, must be understood in the spirit of the age; the strong leftist trend made even researchers sensitive to equality and equity among human beings. Segregation vs integration was one of the most discussed topics (between/and) among housing politicians, planners, and environmental researchers.

In a study of children's growing-up environment in a modern suburb of single-family housing, titled *The Low-Density Children* (Dahlén 1977), the author concludes: the kind of physical and social environment that detached and row houses create has clear disadvantages for children.

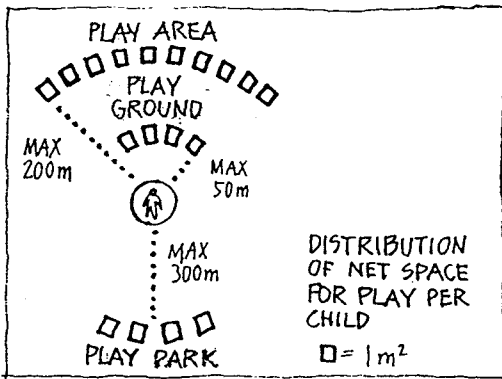
This stands in substantial contrast to the conventional wisdom about the approach to this type of housing: easy outdoor contacts, fewer concrete and asphalt surfaces, closeness to nature, less anonymity. All these qualities may constitute a certain kind of child-friendly environment. The negative features, according to the study, were defined as few adult outdoor contacts for the children and limited experiences of "the other", *i.e.* working-class children and children from immigrant families.

The normative, or call it a reformist, approach with the above characteristics has however one important significance valid for us today: the conditions of children in the city ought to be analyzed on different levels. We have to understand relations between structural phenomena and qualities in the immediate environment, as well as mechanisms that work on a collective and an individual level and how these relate.

These perspectives were applied in the big official inquiry on children's total life situation that started in 1973. The background was a need to coordinate a series of legislative measures, but the inspiration was an intensively-discussed official mapping of the living conditions of the whole Swedish population. The inquiries also contributed to the following procedures to establish special consideration of children in planning legislation. The first regulations for children's playgrounds appeared in 1972: "... on the site there must be enough free area for play and outdoor use if this is possible cost-wise." More detailed rules date from the mid-1970's, regarding play areas in terms of accessibility for handicapped persons, traffic security, sun on the playgrounds, location of playgrounds within the entrance area, the immediate environment and the neighbourhood as an entity. To the regulations and design recommendations was added an organization, the "Swedish Council of Children's Play," introduced by the government for the purpose of supervision of the interests of the children in planning and environment management. Governmental subsidies were also provided for improvement of outdoor standards (to a great extent the play arrangements) in residential areas from the 1960's and 1970's.

A current disappointment is that all regulations for outdoor areas are eliminated in legislation - an effect of a general policy to deregulate physical planning and construction activities. Here it is appropriate to repeat our introductory question: *Are children out of fashion?*¹

1 The broad interest in children's life-conditions during the late 1970's might have a connection to The International Year of the Child, held in 1979.



The graph shows the hierarchy of the types of play areas and their dimensions in the immediate environment. These guide-lines were issued in 1972 by the Swedish planning authority.

The phenomenological approach

The 1980's were characterized by efforts influenced by the phenomenological approach. Research during the last fifteen years is meagre, as mentioned before, especially considering the background of general growth in Sweden of people-environment research. But instead we can say: Something has happened! We find a growing interest among researchers in children's own perspectives and their own culture and in the importance of play and peer groups.

A good illustration is the work published in 1981, a study of "children's own culture". The findings describe children (8-9 years old) in two quite different, sociocultural and environmental settings, suburbs in Stockholm, one a working class area and one bourgeois. The first had multifamily housing, the second was built with single family houses. The author (Bjurman, 1981) does not deny the social problems the working class children encountered, sometimes brutal outdoor behaviour, vandalism, poorly equipped playgrounds, one-parent family constraints, etc. But her description of these groups of children in their playing activities is quite fascinating. These children could really play. They were masters of cultural heritage of collective plays, some of them based on oral tradition, some developed by themselves. The middle-class group of children showed a very different play pattern - less outdoor time (but more qualified indoor activities), a more restricted time-schedule, greater parental organization. Play was more individualized and the collective play was more often practised at children's parties.

The message was very clear at that time: the kind of children's environment that the large-scale, problem-struck housing areas offered had to be changed, but we (researchers, architects, planners) should respect the way of life that develops in a context we know very little about.

During the period treated here (1960-1990) but including earlier research, many took their point of departure from psychological theories about children's development. This knowledge provides a foundation for understanding children's ways of expressing themselves, thinking and acting: insights that successively contributed to increasing respect for and understanding of children. Applying psychological knowledge, however, does not guarantee that the best interests of children are

safeguarded, or that their point of view is taken into account. The pedagogical-psychological child research has not sufficiently borne in mind the great changes that have taken place in the conditions of children during the last decades. Behavioural and social sciences derived their methods from the natural sciences, which explains why research about children to a large extent was carried out in laboratories under experiment-like forms. Science made children into objects. In accordance with this view, children were long regarded as unreliable sources of information by the scientific establishment. Interviews with children were considered unscientific and invalid. Now, informal interviews, participant observations and other qualitative methods have gradually come to be accepted by researchers as scientific methods and are being used more and more in research about children.

The concept of the child's perspective

These changing attitudes give the concept 'child's perspective' great topical value. The concept, however, has many meanings and is vague, and there is a risk that it might become a fashionable term with no true substance behind it.

The 'child's perspective' is, on the one hand, about adults' views of children, and, on the other hand, children's views of and opinion about their own conditions and those of grown-ups. In order to identify the children's perspective, we adults must try to see the world through the eyes of children. Children transmit their feelings, thoughts, wishes, needs and knowledge to the adult world, with adults as interpreters.

Anne Trine Kjoerholt (1991), a Norwegian researcher, claims that the 'child's perspective' has been constructed by adults, whose perspectives, research methods, and own cultural and personal conditions will affect what they see and be decisive for which child perspective one will find. She observes that there is not **one** child perspective, but several and that the meaning of the concept is changeable in the same way as the categories child and childhood are defined in different ways depending on cultural, historical, and social conditions in society.

In order to act in the children's best interests, we must bear in mind how the world appears to children and how they will see our actions. The Norwegian researcher Per Olav Tiller (1991) has given the definition as follows:

"To do research from a child perspective means entering into the children's world, trying to look at the world through the children's eyes. The child perspective is about what the world looks like from a child's point of view - what they see, hear, experience and feel".

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) decrees that what is best for the child should be a fundamental principle in all actions that affect the child. It is however, not possible to decide what is best without conflict. Knowledge about children and their conditions is interpreted and applied by adults from different viewpoints, norms and valuations. A reasonable question to ask would be: How do we identify and how do we interpret children's own views on different phenomena, in relation to the complex conflicts in opinions and interests of the adult world? How do

we as parents and professionals handle these?

Problems of the 1990's and research issues for the future

A general comment based on this retrospective review is that research knowledge is context dependent. Looking back, it becomes obvious that there is very little accumulation in the applied sciences. We have to accept that we must continuously begin anew. Contexts change, in some periods more than others.

What are the main problems and questions of the 1990's? Rasmusson (1993) has examined children issues dealt with in research and official reports, and found significant knowledge gaps. What is lacking is the description and critical analysis of children's everyday life in different types of housing environment. For example:

- There is a documented growing alarm about children's mental health. The new poverty in the big cities in combination with governmental cuts will probably affect children. We know very little about these phenomena.
- Densification and reduced city management resources, *i.e.* less space for leisure activities and maintenance of green areas will have a negative effect on children. Play areas are already in a bad state.
- The increase of car traffic during the 1990's is a severe menace. There is an increased risk of more accidents, air pollution, noise, and restrictions to children's freedom of action, with pressure on the parents for more control over their children.
- Another problem concerns the deregulation of the building codes, brought into effect during the 1990's. The effect of changing standards for land use and detailed physical planning should require further evaluation of how they impact on children's outdoor situations.
- As a consequence of the growing interest in children's viewpoints we have to ask how children's participation in planning can be encouraged and stimulated. What do the mechanisms and processes for empowering and disempowering children look like?

In any potential research task, we can apply the 'child's perspective'. Further exploration of the meaning of child perspective in research and in different activities aimed at children should therefore be an urgent subject of future research.

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