

The Inner Child and the City

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Summary

Does the child have a place in today's city? It appears that it does. But who is this child? It is the child-like side of adults that enjoys the city - driving through a down-town area, rushing from one appointment to another, buying the many colourful objects displayed in the shop-windows. On the other hand, real children cannot walk through town without risking being knocked over by a car; they have been isolated in *ad hoc* spaces. Cities no longer provide opportunities for adults and children to meet. This article presents a reflexion on the inner child - the child in the adult. It elaborates on the conditions that would make it possible for the city to be appropriated by real children and real grown-up, in such a way that a dialogue could be restored.

1. The inner child

As a way of introducing the inner child, I would like to quote part of a psycho-analytical session with a 40-year old woman who lives alone. She said to me:¹

"There is the child and there is the adult, and they both live inside me. Because of the child, I cannot move on fast.

In fact, I feel as if I was a house and it's the child who built the house and I live in the house with the child. If I think about my life, I have the impression of having traveled a long way, to faraway places. The child had left the earth as the earth was hostile towards her. I feel that I have been everywhere in order to find her again. I even believed at times that the sea would swallow me, I also felt that I was under the earth and there, as well, I thought that I would never make it. There was even the risk that the two of us never meet. Incredible. Today I have the impression that we live together, the two of us in the same home. It's not too bad. Sometimes I would like the home to be larger, I would like more life inside my home. A child is also difficult, but I am pleased. The child makes noise, it jumps. For too long I have lived with death close to me. This child is new for me, I have to domesticate her. At times I have the impression of a fire inside me, it's too strong."

This account provides a vivid example of the presence of the inner child in the adult. The story also confirms the importance of this presence. The person who is talking uses images of rare intensity, because it is a story that puts into words some-

¹ I am grateful to this analysand for allowing me to quote her.

thing that has been deeply felt and lived by her: her search for spontaneity, for life, but also the danger of the child becoming like an inner fire.

I would thus say - relying not only on this example but on my whole experience as a psychoanalyst - that, if the child does not live inside us, if it has no chance of growing, then we are cut off from - or even dead to - life. The child embodies our curiosity, our spontaneity, our urge to do, to understand and to know.

This is actually a very contemporary theme: publications and discussions on the inner child abound, especially in the United States (e.g. Abrams, 1989; Psychological Perspectives, 1989). It seems as if we are no longer able to dialogue with our inner child, although he or she continues to exist and to manifest inside us. We are thus confronted with an inner child whose development has come to a standstill, and has become stultified.

I will attempt to show that one rather dramatic consequence of this situation lies in the following paradox: it is precisely this inflexible child inside the adult who pushes away the real child and does not grant him or her space to live in the city. This brings us back to the beauty and sagacity of the story quoted above. This woman expresses her apprehension about living "with her child" and wonders how to manage this cohabitation now that she has found the child she had searched for throughout the world.

The words are those of a person going through psychoanalysis: a woman who has not known her father, and whose mother placed her in an institution when she was still a baby. She has missed out on her childhood: "I have not had parents nor a home", she says. Today, she fights in order to live, in order to feel that she might establish contact with other people without being afraid.

Shortly after this woman told me this story about her inner child, she also said that she hoped to develop new relationships with others, after years of loneliness and isolation, and - let me add - analysis. She said: "This child is new, I must domesticate her." In this connection, she also mentioned being in the process of developing contacts with neighbours. Yet, she had not yet mastered the situation and had frequent doubts about being able to overcome her difficulties.

Now, every adult carries a child inside him or herself, but are we aware of the necessity of maintaining a dialogue with this inner child? Is the remarkable consciousness that this woman showed in telling her story not precisely due to the fact that she had to go everywhere in order to find or rediscover the child? She had not had a childhood as such, or at least not with her parents - not a very common situation. But because of this, she realized how important her inner child was and understood her need to continue a dialogue with her.

Most real children are, at first, naturally fascinated by the city. This is so, despite the fact that the adults who make the today's city, do this mostly against real children. I suggest that this happens because the adult prefer their own inner child. That is, they give priority to an inflexible child instead of cultivating their child-like tendencies through dialogues with real children. Thus the two children - the inner one and the real one - have a different relation to the world outside.

The inner child of the adult is a rigid child that shows itself in the way we build cities and run cars through them. The real child has to pay the price for this and, for children, the city has become a series of dangers and an experience of isolation.²

2. The inflexible inner child in the adult

Let us summarize some of the characteristics tied to the evolution of our society. We have:

- within urban regions, a generalization of the separation between working and living spaces;
- a displacement of shopping and leisure towards large centres concentrated in the periphery or in the inner city;
- a general diffusion of private transportation means, individual cars and motorbikes - and consequently a lesser importance given to public transportation and pedestrians;
- a growing uniformization in the use of time (working hours, television at home, leisure time).

These characteristics are today considered corollaries of advanced industrial societies. Only few people would be ready to question these characteristics since they are now considered almost inevitable corollaries of an improved quality of life (that is comfortable equipments, working hours, food, etc.). Yet, due to these characteristics the inner child has become rigid and the dialogue between adults and real children has broken down. I believe that it is precisely because of the way our society has developed that the contact between adults and children has been cut.

We leave our home early in the morning and come back late in the evening, we spend our day in a place where we are in contact only with other adults, we move from one place to another, mostly by ourselves, inside private cars that isolate us from the sound and the smell of others - the urban neighbourhood loses its social or even sometimes familiar character, and there are practically no opportunities left for meeting real children. Adults will not pursue the dialogue with their inner child - except maybe if they have children, but even then communication with them often appears to be rather poor. The time spent in solitary travel from place to place is enormous. In the very regulated life that we lead, children often appear to disturb adults. Real children thus end up being "parked" somewhere.

Children no longer run around within the adults' environment; they are confined to special spaces such as playgrounds, centres for children or, where such places do not exist, they meet in residual spaces such as parking areas, house entrances, or no man's land. At home, children are often "parked" in front of the TV-set.

Psychologically, this may be formulated in the following terms. If we do not have the possibility of nourishing the dialogue with ourselves through projection - that is of transposing part of our feelings and of our questions on people or on objects around us - then the parts of ourselves that have been left out of this dialogue become rigid. These parts do not evolve psychologically. This is what happens to the inner child in adults who do not have the possibility of meeting real children in the outside world. Real children naturally provoke many questions in adults; by simply being,

² I am referring to Central-European cities.

they raise feelings and reactions that are not always pleasant, but that do, however, become a factor that brings a better balance into the psychological functioning of an adult. Whenever this confrontation is not there or becomes excessively rare, then the evolution of the adult's inner child remains blocked at the stage it had reached when the adult left childhood.³

When meeting with the real child becomes an exception instead of being the normal thing to do, then real children disturb us. Our inner child thus becomes blocked in the rigid position of a dissatisfied child. It will only manifest itself in a rigid form, resembling that of capricious children who demand that all their wishes be immediately satisfied.

As encounters with children become rare, and when the only real children that the adults meet are object of adulation, the relationship between the inner child and the real child becomes very fixated. The adult will then do everything in order to meet the demands of the real child and this in turn might render the real child capricious. Then, once again, the adult will lose the opportunity of developing a dialogue with his or her own inner child.

However, the main reason why the adult's inner child has become rigid is simply that in today's urban society most adults have few opportunities of meeting real children. Sixty years ago, the situation in cities was radically different. The four characteristics that I mentioned before were not generally found in large cities. Children were running in the streets, life in neighbourhoods was a tangible reality - and it was also the main attribute of large cities. I am certainly not going to paint a nostalgic picture of life in the big cities of that time, where a large sector of the population had trouble even surviving. But I do want to point out that exchanges between generations in everyday life had been the rule for centuries and that it is only in the last few decades that we have seen a stronger segregation of groups according to their age and abilities. As long as it was usual to live and work in the same neighbourhood, and that neighbourhood was the place where one would shop and spend a part of one's leisure time, contacts with people of all age groups could help nourish the different figures (child, old man/woman) within each individual.

There are three main consequences to the rigidity of the inner child in today's adults, i.e., three ways in which this child manifests him- or herself. Let us have a look at them.

2.1. The car as a toy for the adult's capricious inner child

The number of cars in cities and the space that they are given in terms of streets and parking lots, has grown in parallel with the enormous growth in the number of drivers and car-owners. While fundamentally intended to satisfy the need to transport goods and people from one place to another within town, this massive presence of cars has simultaneously displaced pedestrians from the streets and imposed the construction of street-networks from which they are excluded.

Historically, this phenomenon is not even a century old and it is only recently that its necessity and its consequences on the evolution of cities have been questioned.

³ A similar argument may be made about the rarity of contact with the elderly and thus about the poor opportunities provided by our society for dialoging with the (wise) old man (or woman) in us. This is equally valid for members of other marginalised groups.

With a priority given to cars, the stress is on pedestrians having to be careful about traffic - and not the other way around. This is another way in which the contact between the occupants of the cars and the pedestrians has been cut. They belong to two different worlds - they can see each other but there is no exchange or dialogue between them.

At this level, the car may be seen as a toy for the adult's capricious inner child and it thus becomes dangerous. Cars are frequently seen to suddenly accelerate, almost touching pedestrians and other city users; their horn or radio is at full volume, stressing the occupants' conviction that they belong to "a world apart". This reinforces the tendency for parents to control all moves made by children in cities. It compels children to be even more careful and to stay far away from cars. They will have to remain in spaces where cars have no access.

It is thus a paradox that the adult's capricious inner child has the possibility to manifest itself without restrictions within cities, whereas these very same cities could easily have created opportunities for encounters with real children that would have transformed this inner child into a less arrogant one and brought nourishment to the adults' life.

2.2. *Moving around cities - "lost time"?*

We tend to think of the time used for moving from one point to another as "lost time" - this is one of the key factors in explaining the lack of contacts between adults and children in everyday urban life. Whereas the move from one place to another corresponds psychologically to the passage from one world to another and thus to the opportunity to live this transition by getting out from one universe and preparing oneself to enter another, our urban society generally tends to suppress this transition by helping the "passenger" avoid a reality different from the one where he or she is immersed. In this respect, the individual car is ideal, but all other measures taken to segregate groups of users have the same effect.

The modern city dweller is able, when on the move, to avoid all occasions for a dialogue in which outer elements that may touch the person would have their place. In order to change this situation, it would be necessary to reconsider the notion according to which it is "time lost" to move from one place to another. The transitions would need to be understood as moments bringing rich experiences and nourishment to people, talking to different aspects of their personality before they again have to confront an univoqually defined reality. Once again, during these moments it is the adult's inner child who could find nourishment and an opportunity for growth, surrendering its fixed posture. But this opportunity may well be lost in today's city. Paradoxically the greater and the more frequent the "traffic jams" in cities, with cars *de facto* adding to the transition time instead of doing away with it, the more likely it is that we may eventually view these movements from a different angle.

2.3. *Cities are planned for the adult's capricious inner child*

The adult's inner child, whose development has been blocked, has lost the plural personality traits or the multimodality of the real child. When confronted with their inner child, adults will lack spontaneity, curiosity, inventiveness, enthusiasm and confidence to the extent that these are characteristics that have been established by the real child. Surprisingly, the attitude that has presided for several decades over the

development of cities seems to favour, or even to reenforce, the tendency to grant space to the capricious inner child of the adult.

Whenever axes of urban development are being defined, the optimalization of car traffic and the segregation of different user groups are always in the foreground. City planners evoke the importance of accessibility of shops, the necessity of protecting various user groups, etc. We must understand, however, that adults who have no contact with real children will be loath to become conscious of the capricious inner child that they are used to live with. Thus, even in their role as planners of urban development, these adults will have a tendency not to see that it could be useful to no longer segregate user groups and to reduce the presence of cars in cities.

3. The genuine dangers in cities

Today, the large city is, as a whole, perceived by parents as dangerous for their children, especially when these have to move about; on the other hand, the developing child needs an extending territory in which he can move around, and it needs places that he or she can appropriate. The dangers brought by traffic and the lack of mutual concern between inhabitants are felt to be the main obstacles to the appropriation of town by children.

3.1. *The dangers of traffic*

It is always difficult to measure objectively the dangers threatening children. However, the number of accidents makes the city appear as a place where cars are an important source of danger for children.⁴ But this does not explain the apparent paradox of the situation. Most parents or adults who are responsible for children do tell them that they should be scared of cars (here, the accident seems particularly present in the adult's mind) and at the same time they do not seem to pay too much attention when they are driving a car (in this case the child seems far away). Besides, adults tend to want to teach children to be careful, rather than attempting to limit the traffic. Wherever cars circulate freely, parents restrict the children's moves and they are the first ones to approve if children are confined in special spaces. The child then lives in an apartment and is taken to the school or to the playground. Once these children reach the age when they are able to move around alone, they do so only in order to go from one confined space to another.

⁴ Some figures on street-accidents may help understand why traffic is generally thought to be so dangerous for children. In 1990, in Switzerland 32 children in the age group 5-14 years were killed by cars while walking or using their bicycle. During the same year, 1700 children - pedestrians or cyclists - were injured by cars. These figures may not seem too alarming in themselves (they account for no more than 3,5% of the total deaths in car crashes in Switzerland during the same year, and for only 6,5% of injuries, whereas this age-group represents 11% of the global population) (BPA, 1991). But considering that the total number of children in this age group living in Switzerland was about 750'000, this means that one child out of 433 was knocked down. If we accept the hypothesis that every enlarged family (10 members) has about one child of that age, this means (667'000:1'730) that one family in 383 has had "his" or "her" child run over by a car. Assuming we each know about 20 families, this means that theoretically every 19th inhabitant of Switzerland personally knows a family in which a child was injured by traffic in 1990 - and we are still talking only of injured pedestrians or bikers in the age-group 5-14 years. Let us add one more statistical data: 170 of these accidents took place outside urban areas, whereas 1'530 occurred in urban areas. Although the traffic and the number of children are more important in towns (80% of the Swiss population lives in urban areas), these - however - are also the areas where most attempts are made to control traffic.

In the neighbourhoods where there are no playgrounds or open school yards, children will have to stay in front of the building where they live - perhaps with friends, but isolated from adult life, since adults are away for the day.

In general, all moves made by children in town will be considered from the point of view of their necessity for getting from one place to another. Only rarely will cities be seen by the parents as an environment for discovery, for exploration and for appropriation by the children during the day. Yet, cities are certainly a good place for awakening the children's abilities and for furthering their development - since they contain shops, artisans and workshops. The city could be a fascinating playground for children. It could also offer many opportunities for contact with the adult world. As we have seen, cars represent one obstacle to the cities themselves becoming playgrounds; another problem arises from the dimensions and the scale of the cities.

3.2. The lack of mutual concern

During their development, children spontaneously want to be able to circulate and appropriate places at their own pace. The child knows and expects that one day it will enter the world of adults. In order to do this, children have to make theirs the events in the adult world, that is they have to integrate things that they are spontaneously interested in but that, at first, seem quite puzzling and out of reach.

As play is their mode of appropriation, children will play and replay these events, on such a scale as gives them an individual sense: they need to feel that they have a hold about these new experiences. Now, the role of the environment is to offer such events, and in a city it does so very often. That is, if while moving around the environment close to their dwellings, children are able to see the artisans, shops, offices, cafés etc. that will form the frame and contents of their adult life, then they also have an opportunity to appropriate them and to get closer to their mystery. This requires that parents can trust that there is always someone to look after the child, who can intervene in case the situation becomes physically dangerous. In large cities where neighbourhood life has disappeared and inhabitants are not continuously near their home, only parents can take on this task - when they can.

In such conditions how will they not become alarmed when their children are not in a secure place or next to their dwellings? As long as neighbourhoods were clearly defined, transportation means rare and inhabitants lived in the same dwellings for long periods of time, neighbours would automatically look after one another's children, while the children's freedom of movement was, one could say, naturally limited. Adults occupying the street during the day, learned to know the children and to follow their comings and goings, as is shown in the famous study by Jane Jacobs (1961) on some neighbourhoods in New York.

But, as we said, these conditions have now disappeared or at least they are rarely found. Thus the question of what could eventually take their place becomes acute. The distances that the child has to cover have become longer and the limits of the neighbourhood explode rapidly with the organization of a day that usually brings the child to several different sport or playgrounds after school. I will mention two types of solutions to a problem becoming more and more obvious in today's large cities.

3.2.1. Rescaling the city

Despite everything, city dwellers continue to evoke a sense of "neighbourhood", even in the largest towns. This is even more true for children and people who spend most of their time in a perimeter close to their dwelling. Now, there would be new possibilities for neighbourhood 'lookout' if dwelling units with small shops and places for social activities were identified on the administrative level, thus creating the conditions for a comeback of neighbourhoods. The inhabitants of a neighbourhood could then look after each other's children.

Let me make a brief reference to my own experience. We live in a district with quite well defined geographical limits, in the centre of a Swiss town of 150'000 inhabitants. The few shopkeepers in the neighbourhood know the school children who walk to school past the front of their shops. The traffic is not very intense, after the neighbourhood took action to slow it down. The children have thus been able to develop a relation of trust with the city, along the "parcours" that takes them to school, although they are moving within a very urban area. I should add that, when children come and go to school, an important number of adults who are responsible for these children are also moving about and are thus able to look after other children.

Children aged 6-7 years begin making expeditions with friends through the neighbourhood gardens and courtyards, building their own network of walks and strengthening their own trust in their autonomy. When they are about 8-9 years old, the expeditions can be extended to the city centre.

3.2.2. Towards a new way of looking after one another's children

Once the physical danger represented by cars had been eliminated, it would certainly be possible to elaborate a new system, allowing children to move about without danger. The new technological tools at our disposal may help doing this.

Children could then confidently appropriate space within the city centre, even in larger cities. One could imagine that children would circulate with detectors indicating to their parents or other responsible adults where they are, or that they could communicate from certain places or everywhere with their parents' detector. I am not saying that parents should spy on children. But I believe that technical means are available that make it possible for parents not to be afraid that their child gets lost, even in a large town. Reciprocally, children would be able to maintain contact whenever they feel with the adults that they know.

4. Conclusion

I have stressed in several ways the importance, for the adult, of a dialogue with real children. I believe that more frequent encounters between adults and children could have important consequences for the priorities set when decisions are made as to town planning.

In order to reach this effect it would be necessary that neither cars nor the segregation of users remain as important as they still are today in our cities. A priority should be put on the different users meeting each other. These encounters would become an occasion for questions and exchanges that would nourish each person's personality.

On the other hand such a change would be of considerable importance for real children's everyday life and the relation that they elaborate with their town. Once adults, these children would certainly have a more tolerant and sympathetic view of the city, and they may well give up capriciously defending motorized traffic.

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