

INTRODUCTION : THE URBAN CHILD

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The theme "Children and the city" brought the contributors of this collection of articles together for the 2nd Monte Verità Colloquium organized by Architecture & Behaviour. The articles have been written after the Colloquium and are ordered thematically for this publication. In this first section we introduce some psychological considerations about research work on children in the city. With these introductory remarks, we want to challenge the view that children are fundamentally at odds with city life. We wish to provoke debate on the subject. The question is a real one because the urban child is a continually increasing reality.

Expectations about the Colloquium

What could be expected from a meeting on "Children and the City", in comparison with other numerous meetings that take place on similar if not on the same subject? Many researchers are confronted with the tricky issue of the relation between research and practical intervention. It might be as consultants because their published articles or reports have been used as resources for the realisation of projects involving environments for children. Experiences are manifold in this respect, leaving those exposed to them with a variety of impressions. The issues involved are complex and themselves indicate no clear-cut answer.

The status of research particularly in environmental psychology, with respect to practical interventions in the environment, was already discussed at length at the previous Monte Verità colloquium (Chapin & Saegert, 1993; Noschis, 1993). It appeared that when research involves users and questions related to the improvement of environments, the researcher in several cases somehow becomes involved in "empowering" users. The researchers find themselves including 'place' and 'means' in the research agenda for transmitting knowledge and skills so the research results are directed to the advantage of people who are the object of the research. Discussions showed that many have entered this particular field of investigation with the hidden agenda of reaching a better understanding of improving the conditions that relate behaviour to the built environment. Two major obstacles must be dealt with: (1.) to have the "empowering" phase accepted by research funding agencies,

and (2.) to make the people who are the object of research - dwellers or users - aware of the fact that they may be able to use their potential power. There are several cases where both issues have been productively tackled (e.g. Schneekloth & Shibley, 1993). Thus there is evidence that articulating research with practical interventions can also be dealt with in a most constructive manner. Some contributions to the following collection of articles confirm this finding with respect to children (see for instance Hart & Iltus; Horelli; Coulomb).

The concept of participation is an organizing perspective for viewing research about modifications in the environment, with particular reference to children. The ladder of participation - as discussed for instance by Hart (1992) - goes from one extreme, of children as victims, of "manipulation under the guise of participation" to the other extreme, where adults are able to accept "child initiated and directed decisions".

This is not to say, however, that a common line should be defined for all research in this field. Some research endeavours will by definition be more oriented towards usefulness and application, while others will be more concerned with understanding a situation.

Difficulties when we think about 'children in the city'

When adults do research on children it is important to clarify their inner representations of 'the child'. This is reflected in the attitude one adopts to children in cities and it can influence if not guide (or 'mis-guide') research.

The psychological relationship that Western adults, as inheritors of the Christian tradition, have with cities is in general a problematic one. The image of Babel is somewhere in the background. Cities are the evidence of man's defiance of God. There is a deeply rooted conviction in Western man that the city is a place of danger and temptation. At the same time cities are attractive, it is onto cities that dreams of success are projected. Money, power and status as opposed to a good crop. In the city relations between people (the social world) are transformed, as opposed to transforming nature (agriculture). City is man, specifically man defying God, while nature is God.

In the Western cultural tradition there is also an opposition between body and spirit. Body in the Christian tradition is closely associated with sin. Elevation towards God, is elevation from the body towards the spirit. In the city the concerns are with the mundane, whereas in nature they are with the spiritual. This can be summarized in tabular form which illustrates these psychological dimensions when discussing cities (see Table 1).

Environment

			NATURE	CULTURE		
M A N	/	W O M A N	BODY	GARDEN OF EDEN	BABYLON	EARTH
			SPIRIT	PARADISE	JERUSALEM IN HEAVEN	HEAVEN
			CHILD	ADULT		

Table 1. The Christian Heritage

Psychologically Western culture perpetuates a difficult relationship between man and the city. Introducing children into this scheme generates additional difficulties.

In his vivid study, Boas (1966) shows convincingly how representations of childhood in Western culture have evolved through history into what today may be called "the cult of childhood" (see also the article by Bassand in this collection mentioning the "enfant roi").

After Greek and Roman indifference to childhood there followed centuries of authoritarian "drilling". The child had to be educated, guided out of its animal state towards that of the reasoning adult. The thinking was: to reason is to be able to take command of the body, of human beings' animal nature. Starting with the Middle Ages young children's faces make their appearance as Angels in paintings. These images testify to the purity and innocence of childhood, however only insofar as children are considered without their animal bodies.

For Pascal (1623-1662) the child is still close to the animal and must be drilled out of this state. It is Rousseau's *Emile* (1762) that really changed the debate on education. From here on another view of the child began to affirm itself. The child is born not only innocent and pure but also good. The body is no longer a burden.

The problem is simply one of education, which, however, goes against children's natural aptitudes. Rousseau pleads against forcing the child to be like an adult, something foreign to the child's nature and natural developmental state. Lacking reason he cannot profit from sermons. Sermons must be replaced by an educative experience (Boas, 1966).

Boas claims a parallel between primitive men ("le bon sauvage") and children that reinforces this view of childhood. Primitives are closer to nature than civilized people. Both Rousseau and Pestalozzi, another major Swiss educator (1746-1827), attribute to nature a tremendous importance. To be a child is good because it is to be as nature is.

As can be seen from the table (see Table 1 above), the child, to the extent that he is associated with nature, is in opposition to the city. Western cities appear to have been built according to this "credo". There is no place for children because cities are simply not for children. (Children are more on the side of nature, and thus with God).

The influence of a myth of childhood is evident. Many if not most of the modifications discussed and even made to the urban environment today to provide a more child-compatible environment are about giving more place to nature in town, creating or re-creating natural areas for children in cities.

Rousseau's view of children although extremely influential, has not completely obscured the view of children as animals, even within the Christian perspective. Puritanism sees children first of all as "Adam's and Eve's descendants" that is as sinners. From this perspective education would be aimed at freeing children from this unfortunate condition by spiritual elevation through access to reason. From a Puritan perspective the city is a magnet for sin, so the table (table 1 above) might also be considered relevant and children viewed in opposition to cities. Nature with its reference to the Garden of Eden is a better place than Babylon, named by John in his Gospel as the Great Prostitute.

Acknowledging the urban child

"Over half of the world's population will live in large cities within the next ten years. Their population currently grows by one million a week". This report is from a recent newspaper (*Le Nouveau Quotidien*, 21 Sept. 1994, 2,15). An article from the same paper says "the urban population in African cities has grown from 12,5 millions in 1960 to over 78 millions in 1990. It is expected that by 2015 over 200 million people in Africa will live in cities". These figures stress the importance of the urban phenomenon all over the world, whatever the cultural references.

Notwithstanding what is said above on the Western attitude to children and cities, we have to accept that the city will be the "natural environment" for more and more children. Natural in this context means the environment in which children are born, grow up and learn. It might be high time to question the myth of childhood and "le bon sauvage" and specifically the association of children with nature.

Yet, reality of urban children is not a recent phenomenon. With the nineteenth century industrialisation of Europe, massive migration from the land into the cities became the norm. Thousands of often abandoned children would wander about in the streets of large cities such as London and Paris. Today this reality has moved from Europe to other continents but is an increasing reality. Paradoxically it might be interpreted as further evidence against having children living in cities.

Can we, as researchers, listen to children without unwittingly be reinforcing a view of childhood that considers them as fundamentally in opposition to urban life? Jane Jacobs (1961) has done a lot for the recognition of the value of urban life for children. In her influential book, she makes the fundamental point that city life can be viewed as something highly stimulating for children. That children have a lot to learn from streetlife and can enjoy it.

Some research and practical initiatives have endorsed this view (see Hart,1992). They bring us back the theme of empowerment.

Involving children themselves in research and action for change fosters their sense of social responsibility and competence to participate in urban life, while enhancing their respect for their urban environment.

Following from the remarks above, there might be even more at stake. If adults could view children positively as city-dwellers - in the same way that we today carry an image of children that are happy in nature - then, in turn, it could help free adults from the equation Babel = City. The corollary would be that cities are places where God or perhaps Gods can be looked for. The argument, that accidentally is also an apology for urban polytheism, stands in sharp contradiction to today's values. They remain attached in the first place to Nature. That is for instance what ecology addresses. But in turn, as long as we are not capable of recognizing urban values positively we might not see cities as the right places for children either.

To sum up, adult conceptualisations about cities and of children in cities influence studies on and our work with children. It's a crucial issue, we should remain acutely conscious of it.

The Colloquium papers

Papers presented at the Colloquium and reworked for this publication are grouped into six themes, addressing children and the city from different perspectives. Together they give a comprehensive picture of important issues being tackled by researchers today.

Children and participation

Two articles discuss participation of children in urban design. Horelli relates an experience in a small Finnish town where children became actively involved in proposing improvements for their neighbourhood. Extending childrens' participation as a planning resource could introduce radical changes into urban planning priorities, to the mutual profit of children and adults. Hart & Ittus develop a solid argument for participation of children in urban design and specifically re-design. Their experience in decayed parts of New York show positive consequences that go far beyond participation as such. The whole neighbourhood life is affected and thus the impact is extended to children's general development.

Urban traffic

Cities today are designed more for cars than for pedestrians. Together with elderly and physically handicapped people, children are the most vulnerable users of the city as long as cars have priority.

The theme of city traffic dangers is extremely important to address as it has far reaching consequences for childrens' life in cities. As long as parents and educators in general stress the dangers of traffic for children and try to have them avoid city-traffic, cities can hardly become a place where children can move around freely, that is with parents' approval.

Cities could be rich learning environments. Normal daily commercial activities offer exciting models for imitation and other forms of play, if children had possibilities for observing and/or experiencing them. Lee and Rowe address the issue of dangers for children, particularly traffic dangers, in an enquiry comparing adults and childrens' perception. Not surprisingly traffic accidents are ranked as dangerous by parents, but much less so by their ten-year old children. Interestingly this can be interpreted as meaning that when children have to face urban traffic, they take the opportunity to explore the urban environment without experiencing traffic as the most dangerous factor confronting them.

This, however, does not mean that traffic is not dangerous for children as Bonanomi shows in her article. Crossing the street is a serious problem. Ninety percent of all accidents involving pedestrians and cars happen in this context.

Children between 5 to 9 years are overwhelmingly the group that is most exposed to this danger. Bonanomi's conclusions imply that education of parents, children and drivers can only be of limited impact as long as cars can continue to run at or beyond present speed-limits. This consideration is in line with Lee's and Rowe's results on discrepancies between childrens' and parents' perception of traffic dangers: education alone cannot solve the problem. Björklid's study shows that fear of traffic can expand into a general anxiety about childrens' life in urban environments. Environmental stress might be the general theme that has to be addressed when discussing the relation of users - parents as well as children - with the city.

Designing for children

Design issues necessarily involve children as a user-group with specific needs and requirements. Scales for the description and evaluation of key aspects of physical environments might here play an important role. Moore discusses efforts to develop such a scale for child care centres, facilities for which there is an increased need in today's urban life. More generally Pressman discusses user-friendly design features in urban space. He does it with particular reference to the often neglected climatic factor showing how specific design options have a clear impact on the comfort and usability of public spaces and play areas. Simple design solutions could have a major influence on the possible extended seasonal use and improved 'sociability' of outdoor spaces.

Nature in the city

As if to counterbalance the perspective suggested above freeing urban children from a necessary association with nature, three authors address the importance of nature in childhood. They discuss children who have experiences of nature and who are strongly affected by them.

Skantze studied a recently built suburb of Stockholm and reports interviews and written essays from a group of children aged 10 to 12. When nature is accessible it is a privileged partner in several of the child's developmental tasks, such as acquiring

growing independence through encounters with new places, situations and conditions. Children might also want such experiences in urban settings, but they might not be as readily available in the neighbourhood. Skantze discusses this in terms of a lack of "transition activities" from childhood to adulthood.

Chawla takes direct issue with the separation of city from nature. Her study shows how elder and younger people in a Kentucky community value parks, trees and green places in urban environments and generally look for a union of city and nature. From this perspective nature becomes instrumental in assuring the transition from childhood to adulthood as it can be a bridge between generations. What happens if there is no reference to nature in one's life - as increasingly is the case for urban children? Chawla suggests that such situations might not meet the basic characteristics of livable communities. Nordström argues that not only satisfaction with one's housing conditions but also creativity implies a connection with our surroundings linked emotionally to our involvement with the physical environment when we were children. This is related to early phases of a life-long struggle to differentiate ourselves from the nonhuman environment. The process begins with the child's strong emotional investment in the nonhuman environment surrounding him. Nordström's examples seem to indicate that the most positive results are when the investment is in relation to nature.

Research approaches

The Colloquium was also an occasion for researchers to question their approaches to studying children and the city. Rasmusson and Krantz provide an overview of work on this subject in Sweden during the last 30 years, showing that the theme has known times of more and of less favour and militancy. In his article, Gaster examines the use in research on children of the specific concept "home range" - children's access to their neighbourhood. The study shows that the concept got its meaning inside a broader theoretical context that also depended on research fashions. It might also be of intercultural interest to remind ourselves that "home range" has hardly any equivalent in French. The two articles together make a point about the relativity of research in this field. They stress from yet another perspective the usefulness of clarifying researchers' own theoretical options and involvement in the field when doing research on children and the city.

Theoretical frameworks

As if to stress differences in cultural concerns, three of the contributions in French but none in English address the theoretical question of how to situate children as one user group among others within the urban scene.

Bassand's article, from a sociological perspective, looks at cities - or at the urban phenomenon, as he prefers to say - in connection with the idea of the new "programmed society" that we live in today. He asks how are we to find a place for children as actors within this frame? Germanos shows some of the contradictions and difficulties that children are caught in when viewed as a group of users in the city.

Yet, the city remains a rich learning environment and in this respect might be worth of being integrated into pedagogical programmes with children, as suggested by Germanos. Tsoukala proposes a theoretical frame for analysing children living in cities and also for defining the environment in terms related to childrens' activities. While the interactionist approach referred to by authors in this publication has a lot going for it in terms of comprehensiveness it might be more difficult to use concretely in describing childrens activities in cities.

The Caen experience

As a practical contrast to these more theoretical approaches, Annie Coulomb was guest-speaker at the Colloquium. She has worked for over 20 years in the town of Caen (Normandy, France) on improving adults' consideration of children in the city. Today, following her valuable work, children have easier access to the city of Caen, there is more consideration of children as city residents, parents are more confident about their children living in the city, and children themselves have more interest in their city. The remarkable achievements of this practical work involving children, parents, public transportation employees, policemen, shopkeepers and politicians is a challenging point of reference for other research on the theme. Other examples of such involvement and practical achievements exist. Sharing and dissemination of knowledge is a hoped for follow-up to the Monte Verità Colloquium.

For the future

The articles represent a cross-section of 'the state of the art' of research on children and the city today. The results show we must maintain a critical awareness of all the factors influencing us as parents, consultants and researchers in this field. We very much thank the authors for this set of creative contributions.

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