

A commentary for the Journal of Community and Applied Psychology special issue on The Modern City as a Community, December 2001.

A COMPARISON OF CHILDREN'S AUTONOMOUS MOBILITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL PARTICIPATION IN NORTHERN AND SOUTHERN EUROPE - THE CASES OF FINLAND AND ITALY.

Liisa Horelli, PhD, Academy Research Fellow Helsinki University of Technology. Centre for Urban and Regional Studies. P.B. 9300, 02015 TKK, Finland. Liisa.Horelli@hut.fi

INTRODUCTION

The European Union countries alone comprise 376 million people, 90 million of whom are children and young people. Nearly half of the children live in urban settings which significantly frame and structure individual and communal development. Alarming results of how the modern city constrains children's everyday lives have been presented in the Italian articles of this issue (Prezza et al., 2001; Tonucci et al., 2001; Alparoni et al., 2001). Less than 40% of children between 11 and 12 generally go to and from school alone or with friends and fewer than 15% can play outside their home without supervision, in middle-class neighbourhoods of Rome. The Nordic countries seem like a haven, since 99% of the children still move around independently both to school and the majority of them can play outside their homes without adult supervision. Nevertheless, the negative consequences of globalisation are increasingly felt in the northern countries too.

Some European governments have gradually awoken to realize that the growing up in an urbanizing world comprises limited possibilities for children to discover the world outside their home. In a European Forum for Architectural Policies "Children – architecture - identity", which took place in Stockholm, in May 2001, the Swedish Minister of culture, Marita Ulvskog, displayed her vision of a good city. It was based on the application of the three Ps – Protection, Provision and Participation - of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Representatives of the French and Finnish Government stressed the importance of providing action programmes for architecture and cultural heritage for the appropriation by children and young people. The Italian Ministry of the Environment has launched a nation-wide project on sustainable cities for girls and boys. And in Norway, besides municipal ombudsmen for children, the Building Act requires registration of children's track maps (Almhjell, 2001) before zoning can take place.

Researchers who were present at the Forum were, however, critical towards the consequences of these political efforts. A parallel case can be found within the European women's movement in planning. Twenty-five years of women's involvement in local and regional development has brought about masses of "women and planning" policies, courses and initiatives but there is virtually no implementation and action. According to Clara Greed (2001, 7), "Much remains the same, and in many respects cities have become worse, not better – especially in matters of transport and the quality of life".

The aim of this commentary is to have a closer look at and compare some of the research on children's environmental opportunities and constraints in a southern and a northern European country, in Italy and Finland.

Examples of children's mobility and participation in Finland and Italy

Italian and Finnish research on children and their urban conditions share two issues of interest, namely children's independent mobility and participation in planning (cf. Table 1). Marketta Kyttä (1997) has conducted several years studies on environmental opportunities or affordances (cf. Gibson, 1979/1986) which are related to children's autonomous movement in varying environmental contexts in Finland and Belarus. Her results indicate that the "licence to move around" is greatest in rural environments and smallest in urban settings in which the social and traffic risks, interpreted by parents, limit children's independent mobility. Thus, the results on children's movement in urban settings are similar to those of Prezza et al. (2001), although Kyttä studied, in addition to mothers, children themselves. Also the methodology was slightly different. Kyttä also found that children's best opportunities for meaningful action took place in the courtyard which provides a "stepping stone" for entering the larger community. This corroborates the results of Prezza et al. (2001) who also make recommendations to take better advantage of the courtyards in Italy. It would be interesting to compare the amount and type of children's opportunities (affordances) in relation to varying conditions for independent mobility in Italy and in Finland. In addition, exploring the impact of children's mobility on their environmental competence would profit from a cross-cultural study, especially as the concept of environmental competence needs further development.

Table 1. A comparison of research in environmental issues on children and young people in Italy and Finland.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE	ITALY	FINLAND
Autonomous mobility	Influence of psychosocial and urban factors on independent mobility	Children's independent mobility in urban, small town and rural environments.
Participation in planning and development	Children's citizenship and participation models; participatory planning and children's councils. La Citta dei bambini.	Strategies and methods for involving children in local and regional development Youth councils "Porsgrunn model"
Success factors	Favourable legislation and funding	New Act on Land use, a viable methodology for involving children.
Future challenges	Implementation of children's ideas and assessment of child-friendly settings. Attitude changes among adult population.	Implementation of children's ideas and assessment of child-friendly settings. Impact of participation on environmental competence.

Like in Italy, a series of projects and experiments have been conducted on children's involvement in the neighbourhood development during the past decade in Finland (Horelli, 1997a, 1998, 2001). Finland has not had children's councils, like the ones in the Italian examples (Alparoni et al., 2001), but half of the 452 municipalities in Finland do have youth councils. The pattern of functioning of the youth councils is pretty much the same in both countries: the young people are chosen through elections at schools, they are allowed to be present at some of the adult council meetings, they receive a certain minor sum of money with which they can implement some ideas, and they are supported by a professional administrator, usually a youth worker. Those youth councils which have some power to influence planning decisions have proven to be quite successful, whereas the ones which the municipality has put up as a token, cause frustration among participants.

Helsinki city has not put up a traditional youth council but instead, it has applied the Norwegian Porsgunn-model. The latter aims at involving children and young people in both planning, decision making, and implementation by giving the student representatives of each school a certain amount of money to implement their ideas. In addition, the money has to be negotiated in a council meeting with the Mayor of the city.

The Italian articles by Alparoni et al. and Tonucci et al. (2001) tend to give a general picture of the state of the art of children's participation in planning. The Finnish experiments focus on how to make space for children's involvement by constructing a special methodology which allows them to communicate with the environment as well as with the adult world (Horelli et al., 1997). Some of the examples of participatory planning by children in Finland include the following:

- A central neighbourhood of Kitee, a small rural town in eastern Finland, was improved by 7 – 12 year olds. They succeeded in making a traffic plan for the area which was accepted by the local council and implemented by the municipality.
- The green areas of the Helsinki city centre, which has been debated for years, was the focus of a class of 10 year olds, who made an alternative design for the area with an island and recreational opportunities for all ages.
- The Pihlajisto suburb of Helsinki was the seat of experiments with 6 year olds who took part in guided walk-throughs and produced colourful models of their improvements for the environment, such as a canal and a jungle among colourful buildings. Later on, 11-12 year olds participated in the construction, testing and application of an internet design game for a near-by "adventure forest".
- The Ristinummi neighbourhood of Vaasa, a middle-sized town in western Finland in which 11 – 13 year old "ecoagents" made alternative plans for the neighbourhood centre and a new recreational area. Some of the children's ideas were later on implemented by the municipality which had organized the renovation of the area as a national architectural competition.
- The square of Joensuu town and the North-Karelia region were the objects of 15 – 19 year old young people, whose ideas for the square expanded into a proposal for real and virtual opportunity structures covering the whole region.

The young participants keep demonstrating that they are both able to criticise their environments and to produce new ideas for implementation. In spite of the relatively long time of young people's participation, the latter has not become part of an accepted child

policy, nor a praxis of the Finnish planning system. That's why a special focus has been put on the development of the methodology of participatory planning and its application with children (Horelli, 1998). Urban planning does not only concern the physical environment of places or localities, but it is deeply embedded in the social, cultural, economic, and political context. Therefore, an interdisciplinary framework, consisting of the perspectives of environmental psychology and environmental education, collaborative planning as well as of gendered urban and regional studies (Horelli, 1997b) has been constructed to guide the action research design of the case studies. *Participatory planning is defined here as a social, ethical, and political practice in which individuals or groups, assisted by a set of tools, take part in varying degrees, at the overlapping phases of the planning and decision-making cycle that may bring forth outcomes congruent with the participants' needs and interests* (Horelli, forthcoming).

The results indicate that children and young people do not have difficulties in applying diagnostic and expressive methods, such as walk-throughs or model building at the phases of analysis and planning. In fact, children apply the same enabling tools as adults. The difficulties arise, however, at the phase of implementation or in the achievement of decisions leading to the realization of children's ideas (except for the Porsgrunn-model which guarantees money for implementation). Implementation of ideas seems to require the application of creative organizational and political methods embedded in strategies which target many levels and sectors. Such strategies have been constructed within projects dealing with the mainstreaming of gender equality.

Although girls and boys have different needs and contexts from that of women and men, they might profit from a transformative strategy in which intergenerational equality is promoted on many levels and within many sectors of urban planning and development (Horelli, 2001). The purpose of this kind of multi-level and multi-dimensional strategy is to make space for children and young people so that they can appropriate their settings according to their needs.

Future challenges

On-going cultural transformation in terms of children as citizens has started in both Italy and in Finland. The gap is, however, huge between the young people's desires and the fortresses of the adult world. How to bridge the gap between competent young people and the resistance emerging from adults and their institutions, seems to be a shared Finno-Italian research problem. It is also a challenge for planning practitioners, administrators and politicians.

The challenge also means that many new questions should be resolved. How should children's requirements for a good living environment be interpreted and acted upon? What would be the path and supportive actor-network like that leads children and young people moderately easily through the phases of the planning cycle towards desirable environments? Should children's eco-social views be considered as "indicators" to be monitored and assessed in the national and municipal planning systems? What is the meaning of children's definition of environmental quality in the light of existing planning theories of substance or content? And last, but not least, how can community development processes encourage children to invest energy and hope in their urban futures?

References:

- Almhjell, E. (2001) *Young people are citizens, too*. A paper for the European Forum for Architectural Policies. Children – Identity – Architecture. 15-16 May 2001, Stockholm.
- Alparone, F. R. & Rissotto, A. (2001) Children's citizenship and participation models: Participatory Planning and Children's Councils. *Journal of Community and Applied Psychology*
- Chawla, L. (Ed.) (2001) *Growing up in an urbanizing world*. Paris: Earthscan and UNESCO.
- Greed, C. (2001) Women and Planning in Britain – 25 Years On: A Reflection. *Women + Environments*, 50/51, 7-10.
- Gibson, J.J. (1979/1986) *The Ecological Approach to Visual perception*. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Ass. (Originally published 1979)
- Horelli, L. (Forthcoming) A Methodology of participatory planning. In R. Bechtel and A. Churchman (Eds.), *Handbook of Environmental Psychology*. John Wiley..
- Horelli, L. (2001) Young people's participation, Lip service or serious business. In H. Helve and C. Wallace (Eds.) *Youth, Citizenship and Empowerment*, pp. 57-71. UK: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.
- Horelli, L. (1998) Creating Child-friendly Environments – Case studies on children's participation in three European countries. *Childhood*, 5(2), 225-239.
- Horelli, L. (1997a) A methodological approach to children's participation in urban planning. *Scandinavian Housing and Planning Research*, 14:105-115.
- Horelli, L. (1997b) Engendering evaluation of structural fund interventions. From a minuet to progressive dance. *Evaluation* 3(4), 435-450.
- Horelli, L. Kyttä, M. & Kaaja, M. (1997) Ympäristön ekoagentit. (*Children as ecoagents of the environment*). Espoo: Teknillinen korkeakoulu. Arkkitehtiosasto.
- Kyttä, M. (1997) Children's independent mobility in urban, small town and rural environments. In Camstra (Ed.) *Growing up in a changing urban landscape*. Assen: Van Gorcum.
- Prezza, M. Pilloni, S. Morabito, C. Sersante, C. Alparone, F.R. & Giuliani, V. (2001) The Influence of Psychosocial and Urban factors on Children's Independent Mobility and Relationship to Peer Frequentation. *Journal of Community and Applied Psychology*
- Tonucci, F. & Rissotto, A. (2001) Why do we need children's participation? *Journal of Community and Applied Psychology*