

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

Growing Up in Cities [EDRA / Places Awards, 2001-2002 -- Research]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4qv825qq>

Journal

Places, 15(1)

ISSN

0731-0455

Author

Moffat, David

Publication Date

2002-10-01

Peer reviewed

Growing Up in Cities

Growing Up in Cities is a broad-based international research initiative that revisits and extends a project, conceived in 1970, that examined the ways in which children use and perceive the environments that shape their lives.

The original project, directed by urban designer Kevin Lynch and funded by UNESCO, involved research in four countries and resulted in *Growing Up in Cities*, a classic in child-environment literature for both its methods and findings. Lynch found remarkable agreement among children, across cultures and urban contexts, as to what constituted a superior environment. Children were most satisfied when their worlds were defined by strong and inclusive cultural frameworks, and when they were free to explore the physical environment without fear of physical harm.

In 1994 environmental psychologist Louise Chawla, a professor at Kentucky State University, proposed revisiting Lynch's work in order to address two of its unfulfilled goals: improving urban design through participatory projects with children and informing local and national policy with regard to the needs of children in cities. By May 2002, again with primary sponsorship from UNESCO, the revived Growing Up in Cities project had studied urban quality and children's priorities for change in more than a dozen countries.

In most respects, it found that Lynch's conclusions remained remarkably valid. However, a key feature of the effort this time around has been to try to use the very activity of research to build participatory social networks and political coalitions to bring the needs of children to more popular attention. In presenting a research award to Growing up in Cities, jurors were particularly excited by its ability to move beyond the accomplishments of the earlier effort.

An International Commitment

The revived initiative has produced a considerable volume of material drawn from fourteen research sites around the world. Much of this now appears in two books. *Growing Up in an Urbanising World*, edited by Chawla, the project coordinator, provides an overview of goals and philosophy and presents research findings from eight of the sites.¹ *Creating Better Cities with Children and Youth*, by planner David Driskell, serves more as a "how-to" manual, outlining procedures and practices to seek out and integrate the views of children into participatory planning projects.² Jill Swart-Kruger, an anthropologist based in South Africa, has produced a video, *The Children of Thula Mntwana*, that illustrates the project's approach. There is also an extensive Web site, www.unesco.org/most/growing.htm.

In general terms, Growing up in Cities owes its name to worldwide economic and demographic trends which today see ever more children being raised in urban areas. As Chawla writes:

[T]he realities of most urban areas are that traffic dominates the streets; waste places and public open spaces are often barren or dangerous; children's hunger for trees does not appear to be shared by most developers and city officials; communities still have to fight to maintain their heritage and identity in the face of development pressures; most children have narrowly limited ranges of movement; and research with children and attention to their needs are emphatically not part of most urban policy planning and design and management practices.³

Despite this gloomy picture, project researchers believe several promising events have occurred since Lynch's time. Primary among these was the United Nations' adoption in 1989 of the International Convention of the Rights of the Child. That agreement contained provisions that call on member states to recognize the right of children to participate in design decisions affecting their lives.

Recognition of the value of input from children has also been incorporated into several international sustainable-development and environmental-protection compacts. The thinking is that environments will improve for everyone when they become more supportive of the needs of young people.

A Common Methodology

In their comments on the project, jurors praised the rigorous research methodology. Armed with a common set of guidelines, Growing Up in Cities researchers work separately while sharing their findings broadly. Most of their projects have required little or no capital investment.

As with many such studies, much of the work is based on observation, mapping and interviews. After a period of initial informal observation, researchers move to more formal techniques, including objective strategies as behavioral mapping, documentary photography and background data-gathering. But more important are efforts to have children relate their own points of view. Techniques included participatory design projects or having children produce their own neighborhood maps, take photographs or lead explanatory walks. Formal interviews, community workshops and focus groups were also employed.

In general, researchers found there were strikingly similar characteristics of place that cause children to feel either sustained or marginalized, and that these seemed directly related to the quality of culture surrounding them (see accompanying chart).

A key finding, though, is that beyond a generally



acceptable level of health and welfare, increased material prosperity does not seem to affect children's sense of satisfaction with their environments. Out of the eight case studies Chawla's book presents, children's sense of satisfaction was greatest in Sathyanagar, a self-built settlement on the periphery of Bangalore, India; and in Boca-Barracas, a working-class district of Buenos Aires. In both places, children were accepted participants in a vibrant cultural framework. They were also relatively free to move around within a protected space.

By contrast, a sense of alienation was prevalent among children in research sites in the U.S., Britain and Australia. Children in those places complained of boredom, lack of safe unstructured play space and general marginalization within the arena of public life.

Photo by Karen Malone

Such findings led Chawla to conclude that the current development model of increased industrialization and integration into a free market may not be adequate to children's needs. Equal concern should go to preserving "social capital," she argues. By this she means such things as maintaining a valued role for children, increasing the importance of rituals of cultural identity and supporting community self-help efforts.

From Research to Political Action

One of the most important aspects of *Growing up in Cities* is that it is not another expert study of child-friendly practices for city planning. Accordingly, it manages to steer clear of the pitfalls, however well-intentioned, of design-based environmental determinism.

Instead, the backbone of the research is a belief that research itself may create opportunities for political

engagement. The very act of seeking input from children can make an entire community more aware of and responsive to the needs of a minority population in its midst.

Such was the case in the South African project, where the mayor of Johannesburg met with a group of children in an effort to understand their point of view. In India, although many desired practical outcomes were subverted by local politicians, several new organizations were founded and important public health issues were given prominence.

Even more importantly, the experience of participation is extremely positive for children. At the age of ten to fifteen years old, many are beginning to develop a sense of their own identity. This is precisely when increased interaction with the world may be reinforcing feelings that their particular awareness of place will always be disregarded. By contrast, participation in environmental decision-making fosters self-esteem and self-efficacy, and may lead to a greater appreciation of democratic values.

There are many pitfalls to such a participatory approach to child welfare. For instance, Chawla writes, “much that passes for participation in government, non-governmental organizations, and planning practice . . . falls under tokenism, decoration and manipulation.”⁴

Not only did researchers have to deal with those who claimed to already know what children wanted, but, Chawla notes, “they also had to contend with well-intended but misguided officials who believed that they had achieved participation if children sang a song at a ceremony. Other politicians were quick to co-opt the GUIC process by having publicity pictures taken with children, although they never followed up on anything that the children proposed.”⁵

Still, an appeal for basic public services will always be stronger if it is backed by the voices of children. According to Chawla, “Few mayors or other officials will overtly oppose the reasonable requests of a group of children who want to cooperate to improve their environment.”⁶

—David Moffat

Notes

1. Louise Chawla, ed., *Growing Up in an Urbanising World* (London: UNESCO and Earthscan, Ltd., 2002).
2. David Driskell, *Creating Better Cities with Children and Youth* (London: UNESCO and Earthscan, Ltd., 2002).
3. Chawla, 25.
4. Chawla
5. Chawla
6. Chawla

Jury Comments

Brown: I love this project. To me it's incredibly socially relevant. It is a terrific and rare example of social scientists learning from their mistakes. The earlier research had gone out and looked at conditions of how children grow up around the world and described them, and hoped that would motivate people to design better cities for children. But it didn't. So this round is going back and making the difficult collaborative relationships between researchers and policymakers that have the potential for making real change. It's wonderful action research. There are not a whole lot of social scientists who collect data the way these people do.

Rahaim: What was the methodology?

Brown: They do a range of things. They have kids draw pictures of where they live. They have them draw ideal houses. They interview the kids to find out what kids are fearful of, what would change the qualities of their lives, how far they have to walk to the water spigot. So it's an in-depth description of the conditions of their lives. But this time they are getting the mayors, people who can make a change, involved at the beginning.

Quigley: What you are saying is that there is a real sophistication about the implementation, about getting things actually achieved. That's what is rarely seen with research like this. It's always isolated in an academic situation and doesn't get used correctly.

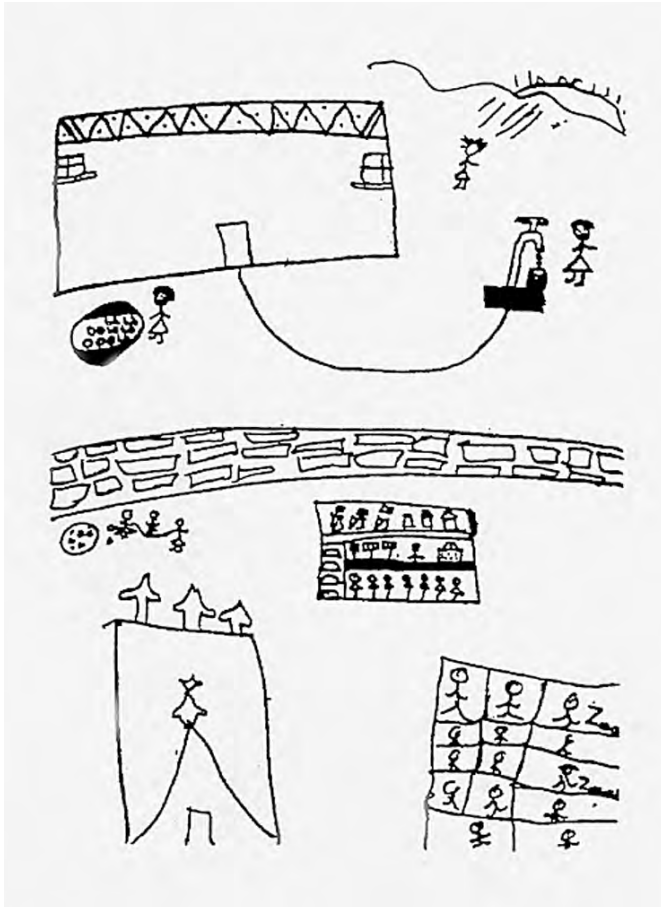
Mozingo: I thought it was especially good because it gave examples from places that are much more difficult and that you don't always hear about, like a south Indian slum. Most of these types of books about children are Northern European or North American.

Brown: But even then I thought they made some interesting points. Such as kids in the Australian suburbs are more bored than those in South Africa.

Mozingo: The conclusion chapter contained some new ideas. Such as security of tenure. And boredom. They talk more about boredom than I've heard in a long time.

Calthorpe: I would lend my vote to this because I worry about the other projects being too anecdotal. This clearly has a broad base of research and then maybe even a broader applicability, so its importance would be higher.

Fraker: The whole topic of youth and cities is an area of research that is extremely important. Something like half the world's children are in or at the edge of poverty. Any research that can understand how to strategically intervene is extremely important.



Left: A child's drawing of the places she encounters on a daily basis. Photo courtesy HSRC/UNESCO.

Above right: A rich diversity of natural settings in the settlement of Sathyangar, on the periphery of Bangalore, India, provided young people with a refuge and supported highly valued play experiences. Photo by S. R. Prakash.

Below right: Indicators of environmental quality from the perspective of children in study sites. Graphic by Dean Driskell.

Growing up in Cities

Project team (1995-present): Louise Chawla (international coordinator); Nilda Cosco, Robin Moore (Argentina); Karen Malone, Lindsay Hasluck, Beau Beza (Australia); Barry Percy Smith (England); Kanchan Bannerjee, David Driskell (India); Ed Salem, Nilda Cosco, Robin Moore (Jordan); Irene Arbadji, Ahmad Jradi (Lebanon); Hanne Wilhjelm (Norway); Karen Malone, Lindsay Hasluck, Haraka Gaudi (Papua New Guinea); Piotr Olaf Zyliz, Krystyna Skarzynska (Poland); Jill Swart, Peter Rich, Dev Griesel, Shaun Cameron (South Africa); Lisa Sundell, Maj-Britt Olsbo, Ing-Marie Larsson (Sweden); Ilaria Salvadori (United States); Maria Angelica Sepulveda, G. Lopez, Y. Guairnaro (Venezuela); Yung Le, Ms. Huong, Sarika Seki Husey (Vietnam).

UNESCO support team: Nadia Auriat, Brigitte Colin, Gillian Whitcomb

Book designer: Dean Driskell.