



Designing for Children

- With focus on 'Play + Learn'

Learning environments:

Absorption or Mere Adsorption

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Abstract: This paper looks at a city from the perspective of a child. How a child is the neglected inhabitant of the city. It talks about few instances which state how today's cities lack the space where a child finds her own recognition and identity at every scale, from the macro to the micro. The paper concludes with guidelines putting together the relevant ways to address 'child and city' conflict in our culture, with focus on studying influence and importance of inclusive and experiential learning environment on a child's development in early childhood. The research paper investigates and talks about such practices found in our own society which set an example for the learning environment at all scales from the macro to the micro, cherishing authorship as well as ownership of the child. It presents the perspective of designers and the end users, and progress towards a 'just city'. The method of investigation included is literature review, interviews and observation.

Key words: *Just city, Identity, Recognition, Freedom, First-hand experience, Learning environments, Macro scale, Micro scale, Child and the city, Authorship and ownership of place*

1. Introduction

The paper aims to look at a city from the perspective of a child. Rapidly growing cities lack the cohesive learning environments that associate a child's life with the universe where playful neighbourhoods emerge as a pivotal concept.

The paper focuses on the relation between a child and her learning environments, by understanding the innate nature and behaviour of a child and the influences of the environment, in adding endurance to the child's learning, and hence development. Closer attention is given to a child's environment at home and at school, while it is neglected at

neighbourhood level, which limits the learning of the child to these isolated environments. The author finds this disconnect of utmost importance hence through this paper she targets to study the conflict between a child and the city, complementing a child's learning and the society of tomorrow through open playgrounds in the city. The paper concludes with recommendations on a child friendly city - a 'just city', derived from the discussion on the recorded results for catering to the holistic development of a child by looking closely at her environment at all scales from macro to micro level; especially at the city scale.

2. Learning Environments

2.1 The Relation between a Child and her Learning Environments

If childhood is a journey, let us see to it that the child does not travel by night (Eyck et al., 2008). A child is a learning animal by nature; free to explore and make sense of a culture in her way (John Holt, 1973). A child has no pre-conceived notions but, 'a Tabula Rasa' and is always curious as her subconscious mind is always active and thriving to learn, through the joy of discovering without any discrimination. Development of the child is driven by two factors one is the inheritance of anatomical and physical characteristics which is through her parents and another is the effect of the environment upon the child from conception of the multitudinous influences (Lester and Alice Crow, 1962). Just like a cell, if one observes the growth of any organism, one finds that the maturation process determines the rate and amount of growth or modification - that is possible for any specific organism and an environment plays an evident role which either helps or hinders the growth. Children are becoming alienated from nature, resulting in 'nature-deficit disorder' (Louy, 2005). We often see a child struggling through the disconnection between what she does and what she is taught; but holistic learning happens when both go hand in hand. Experiential learning depends upon an individual's involvement and understanding of what she has encountered and learned (Merriam et al. 2007). This style of learning should be a natural process of absorption than mere adsorption.

2.2 Learning Environments at the City Scale

Often we see this attitude in our society where children are 'to be seen but not heard' (Crow and Crow, 1969). The city is also a playground. The child uses everything there, everything built, and everything it can crawl through and climb over. Looking at a city from the perspective of movements, human movement is suppressed by mechanical movement. If we cater to the pedestrian we cater to 'the child and city' and then a child's

movement will no longer be hindered. To allow a child to discover the city, the city will have to discover the child (Eyck et al., 2008).

Play is very important to optimal child development that has been recognised by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights as a right of every child (Burdette, MD, MS and Whitaker, MD, MPH, 2005). Encouraging unstructured play over passive entertainment is one important strategy in the resolution of the obesity epidemic (Active Healthy Living: Prevention of Childhood Obesity through Increased Physical Activity, 2006). Recently UNICEF conducted a research in 22 industrial nations across the world to track down the ill effects of lack of outdoor play and the results were not very encouraging. Children all over the world are spending less time playing in the open.

Play has the potential to improve all aspects of children's wellbeing: physical, emotional, social and cognitive (Burdette, MD, MS and Whitaker, MD, MPH, 2005), as dynamic citizens of tomorrow's society. The citizen has forsaken her identity. She has become an onlooker instead of a participant, an isolated soul amid millions of isolated souls. But the child withdraws from this paradox. She discovers her identity against all odds (Eyck et al., 2008).

3. Rediscovering Child in the City

Public spaces which are open to all communities and designed with child as a key user for the place are reducing in numbers, which results in cramped and distorted spaces to play for a child. This is because the typical urban phenomena has been on a rise in a race to maximise profits, and utilise every square inch of available space, leaving children with almost no free space to indulge in themselves. The lives of children today are more structured and supervised, with few opportunities for free play. Also streets have gone barren because of the typologies in modern cities; what Jane Jacobs was afraid for America in 1961 is now the situation in the context of India. Old street games which involved the environment are losing their existence, and modern cities have played a major role in making children isolated and introvert.

The changing urban spaces of the modern cities - multi storey apartment culture, which is 'the modern enemy of children and mankind', has to be combated with innovative and comprehensive solutions, to attain the way our ancestors lived in sublime nature. The designated area for children - enclosed play gardens are structured and bounded, driving away the real nature of free and active play.

This research study is a qualitative outcome of projects which I have closely studied or have been part of my architectural exploration in the last 5 years: De Pijp; Design Studio; Design Workshop; a Slum Initiative and Protocol for a School. The investigation on this topic is largely based on interviews and observations. Addressing the learning environments at the scale of the city, the author recorded the results of situations in the immediate environment.

3.1 De Pijp Movement

The De Pijp movement initiated by a child for the demand of open playgrounds in the city is an example of how an authorship about their play spaces comes to a child. In 1972, Ronald Dam, a child from Govert Flinckstraat in Pijp representing other children, worried about the densely populated neighbourhood he lived in. He compared his neighbourhood with houses on the outskirts questioning why it didn't have similar playgrounds. At school with other kids from the neighbourhood, he enlisted ways to change it. They wrote an essay: 'The State of Pijp - The Cars'; which talked about cars and pedestrians' safety. So they built a play street and occupied the street to showcase the urge of playing on the street with the hope that the city would follow. They asked for opinions from residents in the neighbourhood and the response was not in their favour. So they started a campaign to keep cars outside the neighbourhood and make it pedestrian and child-friendly. This sparked the "Stop de Kindermoord" (Stop the Child Murders) campaign which grew into a city protest. The children approached the Mayor and gained support from the Dutch government. As a result of it, changes were made in their neighbourhood by narrowing down the carriageways and creating more room for play streets and pedestrians.



Figure.1 Newspaper article about yet another protest for a better neighbourhood with fewer cars in De Pijp. December 1972 under the umbrella of the organisation "Stop de Kindermoord".

(Source: <https://bicycledutch.wordpress.com/2013/12/12/amsterdam-children-fighting-cars-in-1972/>)

3.2 Rebel Bodies - Rebel Cities: Designing Sensitive Urban Devices in Contested Spaces

This was a design studio for the Bachelor of Urban Design Department at CEPT University, Ahmedabad in 2018. The studio was about uncovering hidden spatialities drawn away from capital accumulation, market logistics, and rational politics revealing the rebel, subaltern, and subversive actions to challenge the immovable territorial of the status quo. The Site selected was Bhadra Fort Precinct in the walled city of Ahmedabad.

The first stage was to study how the child was neglected in the precinct. Due to lack of open spaces and encroachments in the old city, overtaken by vendors, buyers and vehicular movements where the child is forgotten. It is surprising to see how children adapt and rehabilitate these spaces by adding a playful character to the most mundane elements, out of their curious and uninfluenced nature.



Figure.2 Restrictive play: Children adding playful character to the most mundane elements.
(Source: author)

At the second stage, the studio discussion was led to see what happens if these 'Rebel Bodies' are at the centre of the design decision. These discussions were followed by activating few pockets for children by physical manifestation, with minimal intervention in the public plaza. Following are few examples showcasing the participation of the end user - a child.



Figure.3 Activating the voids for children’s active participation. (Source: author)

And at the third stage, in the design exercise students were asked to identify pockets which could be formless islands left by road engineers and demolition workers, and other wastelands which could be redesigned to better suit children activities. Following proposals were developed by students to cater to the particular needs, aesthetics, and behaviour of the inhabitants.

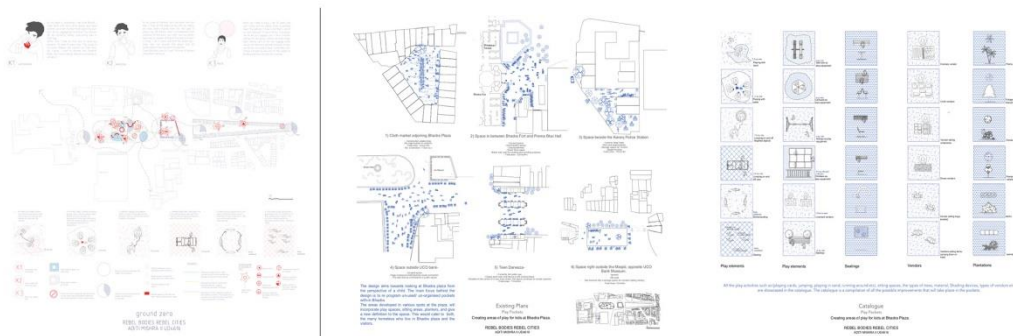


Figure.4 Designing urban devices. (Source: author’s student)

One can conclude that just as one places a bench because one wants to sit, a lamp-post because one wants to light the street, a newsstand because one wants to buy reading materials, it is also important to provide playgrounds because children want to play. At the city level, unlike enclosed play gardens with an assigned method of playing, open playgrounds are lacking as an integral part of the city, where a child can experience the freedom to explore and discover her own moment.

3.3 Developing People's Places - Momentary City in Time and Space

This workshop was a part of Archiprix International 2017 organised in cooperation with CEPT University, Ahmedabad. This workshop was to engage people of the neighbourhood to collaborate on processes of designing for their common shared space.

Out of ten days of the workshop a major part was used for meeting the communities, visiting villages and internal discussions because the true core of the whole operation was the dialogue and its manifestations.

We started by asking children to draw the image of their village to know more about the community. All the drawings were collectively converted into graffiti. They then drew a version of the village which puts together the diverse visions of designers, villagers and most importantly children, and by doing this the authorship to the place was established.



Figure.5 Images explaining the process behind the mural. (Source: Author)

Later we started looking for a site for community gathering. We found a micro-wasteland which was then to be made adaptive for everyone in the community. The participants proposed an elaborate design but a simple open playground with a blanket of soft sand in the middle was all the children wanted, which evolved in a few hours. And hence it was a people's place - with an open playground for children to play and for adults to sit under the canopy of trees.

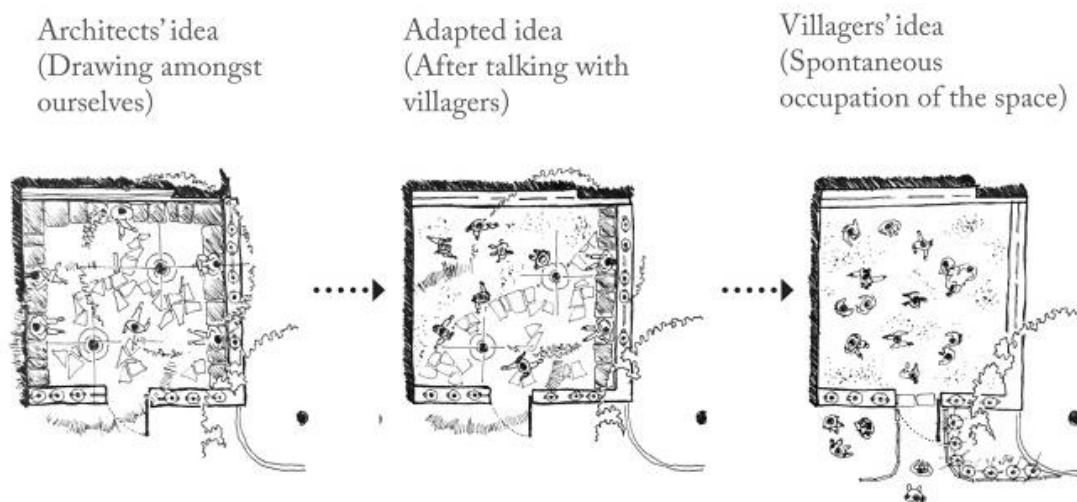


Figure.6 Images explaining the process behind the playground. (Source: Author)



Figure.7 Images explaining the process behind the revitalising of the wasteland. (Source: Author)



Figure.8 Open playground in action. (Source: Author)

This was an attempt to execute the open playground for children's own territoriality. By making the process participatory it gave them the faith that they could do such initiatives themselves whenever needed. At the city scale designers need to initiate action, advocate for change, facilitate discussion and introduce ideas for the community.

3.4 *Patangiyu*

Patangiyu is a resilient and unique learning environment formed around 2013 and run by the slum children and is an initiative by Anjali Desai, an educator. She used to walk past this slum area in Ahmedabad daily and would interact with inhabitants, who would relate incidents of difficult childhoods of the slum children with stories of child marriages and crime. These interactions would impact her and always made her wonder what could be done. Through many such interactions, the idea of the formation of *Patangiyu* emerged.

Needing a space to set up *Patangiyu*, they approached the community head, who gave them a garbage yard for their activity. Her vision of building it together, gave them a sense of ownership for the place. Children who would be a part of this initiative were often victims of home violence or demotivated because of their living conditions. So they made sure this place had to be of a cheerful nature. The techniques and activities conducted here were so engaging and inviting that kids became disciplined and punctual. They

started taking ownership of the place and often she found that without any guidance or instructions they would take care of it. Being children from the same closely knit community they started encouraging each other to live a better life with values. This strengthened the community and improved their standard of living. This case study is more about the transformation of the slum children and the impact that the learning environment had on their lives.

3.5 Sanjeevani

Sanjeevani is a protocol developed by the Centre for Environmental Education (CEE), Ahmedabad with an aim to create an environment conducive for young students to learn to live in harmony and reconnect with their roots, traditions, nature, lives, and livelihoods. Officially a Biodiversity Conservation Resource Area (BCRA), *Sanjeevani* links conservation and education while extending experiential learning at the community level. This project provides the much needed real-life association and holistic learning opportunities for students, teachers, and community. The project has been streamlined through Post Basic Schools (PBS) in certain regions of Gujarat for panoramic development. This collective programme has strengthened both their livelihood and rich bio diversity which was on the verge of extinction by documenting and transferring this invaluable knowledge to a young age group from local communities. Places were developed considering regional, cultural and social traditions through the development of design typology and modifying the same to suit the local condition of each school. For all schools, accompanying details were developed to a level of execution with alterations possible depending on the school, its context and available technical skills. *Sanjeevani* is an excellent case study to understand learning environment which nourishes child development through experiential learning from their local culture and connects back to their livelihood.

4. Recommendations

The city needs to look at a child as an artist; the child is pushed back to the periphery from the collective attention of society. A child in the city is objectified by society and that kills the very nature of a child because the place where she should actually belong is at the centre. This issue if dealt with today through conscious efforts will lead to healthy children of tomorrow.

In a big city like Ahmedabad one cannot find innumerable places that are big enough to set up an enclosed playground but one can always find few pockets which can be refurbished to make it suitable for a child to play in each neighbourhood. For inviting the

child to play outdoors, identifying such pockets as done in Rebel Bodies - Rebel Cities and Archiprix which are playgrounds at the core but also an extension of the door step would be essential, where a child can say, 'That's mine'.

While designing these environments one should understand that children's outdoor play is different from time spent indoors. The sensory experiences have to be different.

One should keep in mind the sensory stimuli that could be created in these spaces which will give unique experiences of touch, smell, feel etc. to a child. It allows children to use their creativity while developing their imagination, analytical and emotional strengths. Play ensures that proper interaction of children happens with the world around them. They overcome fear, and can develop confidence of working in a group. Such environment helps children to create their own recognition and identity that cultivates independence and freedom in them.

Pockets need to be identified in a manner that they get absorbed well by the city - pockets that are still free and have no great commercial value. A series of forgotten spots, left over because a road takes a particular route, triangular squares lying lifelessly or a huge void below flyovers. These pockets can gradually form a close-knit network that injects new life into the urban fabric and which the children could identify as their own territory - places where children find due recognition as inhabitants of the city.

So thought needs to be given to these voids in the city which could breathe new life, as an integrating constituent, to which we can now give this special purpose. A playground has to be attractive as a meeting place for everyone, including adults, if its existence is to be justified. Even in absence of children's commotion, the elementary tectonic forms of the playground, constitute the distinct urban character of the city.

Children of cities like Ahmedabad are deprived of play due to heavy vehicular traffic and we find children enjoying themselves at odd night hours under street lights, or after the shops shut down, so the implementation of activating voids here becomes vital. Due to restricted available spaces in the city, each space should be designed for multiple uses. For example few streets could be turned into no entry zones for a few hours of the day based on the needs of play hours.

While designing and developing these environments across all scales, few measures need to be taken which are 1) Designers should respect all children without any kind of discrimination, 2) The design should be in the best interest of children assuring the care and protection necessary for their well-being and safety, 3) The designed learning

environment should empower their inherent right to life, survival and development and 4) Children should have equal participation in design decisions that affect them. By following these measures I aim to see Ahmedabad recognised as the first child friendly city of India. For fulfilling this aim of creating the child friendly city, one will have to work at a multidisciplinary level with other professionals: architects, urban planners, designers, economists, lawyers, sociologists, health experts, social workers; everyone working together to formulate these policies. We all together need to demand, engage and associate spatial justice to democratisation and participation with the concept of 'right to the city.' Building a child friendly city that children can equally contribute to - would be a 'Just City'.

Learning environments should be to nurture a child who will be self-directed with confidence in her abilities and will make a powerful decision maker, thinker or leader. The intention of this paper is to reintroduce the child as an essential constituent of society. Children should no longer have to adjust themselves to the circumstances and compromise their free spirit of learning.

5. Future Research

Possibilities for executing this proposal are frugal in nature, and we will find that none of these are very difficult to implement. What is needed is a conscious effort to look at this problem that confronts modern Indian cities. The public playground, the way we make it, is actually a gift from the city to society. If we create a playground well, we create a world in which human beings rediscover what is essential. We must not ask the child to discover the city, but let the city rediscover the child.

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