

On Foot in the City of Children

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Recent years have shown a remarkable increase in the interest in children's interaction with the physical environment and, also, how children can be included in research and planning processes. This article is concerned with how to approach children's everyday experience of place. It focuses on eight- and eleven-year-old children and how they interact with the everyday urban landscape. The knowledge gained during walks conducted with children in central Stockholm are used to exemplify how children experience their environment and how they communicate their experiences. The article explores how walks provide opportunities for approaching children's hidden knowledge of their everyday environment.

The perception of children as regards their everyday environment is like the universe for adults. It is there and we know vaguely what is in it, but we cannot grasp it, nor can we easily get children to explain their realities to us, since they often assume that adults perceive the world in the same way as they do. It is important to remember that, as argued by Harden et al (2000), the

fact that all adults were once children does not make us experts on their realities, experiences or perceptions.¹

Within the social sciences it has become more and more popular to combine different methods in order to understand different phenomena, and in particular, to be able to bring together different perspectives on complex issues. This is an approach, which is useful when working with urban space, since so much of the experience of a physical environment is connected to our everyday interaction with it. This knowledge is at the inner core of how an environment will be used and valued, but since it is knowledge, which is often, unspoken, being so well recognised and assumed by individuals, that it is rarely reflected upon, it is very difficult to bring it to light.

The process of drawing from multiple methods for gaining knowledge on a subject is called *triangulation*. This approach is becoming increasingly popular within the social sciences and can be seen as a way of trying to bring together several different perspectives on the same subject in an attempt to maximise the understanding of the research question. The material gained from each technique does not necessarily reinforce or validate that produced by the others, but it

does, in fact often reveal contradictory findings. This may result in problems during interpretation, but it also proves that triangulation is often a satisfying way of capturing the complexity of a problem and pointing to the contradictions within human behaviour and everyday life.² The decision to use triangulation in this study was based on previous experiences of the difficulties in working with children, both as an adult to try and understand children's complex realities, and also because children often have difficulties, due to their psychological development, in expressing their views.³

The main interest of the research project within which this article is written is children's experience of their everyday environment in a dense inner city area. The field area that was chosen was the inner city area of Norrmalm in central Stockholm. The area is characterized by a grid-iron street pattern and is densely built with relatively few green areas, however with parks such as Vasaparken and Observatorielunden. Most of the buildings originate from the late 19th century with five floor buildings and homogeneous facades in soft colours.⁴ Most houses have some sort of enclosed courtyards that the residents can access, even if these are of varying quality. A noticeable amount of the courtyards belonging to the houses where the children of this project live have the character of gardens with trees, plants, seating and in some cases also play equipment. There are some major roads in the area with heavy traffic but also smaller and relatively calm roads. Most roads have zebra crossings or are controlled by lights. There is some noticeable topography making long flights of stairs and walls necessary. The area is as many contemporary inner city areas in Sweden rather wealthy and have few immigrants.

A total of 44 children were engaged in the research, half of the children were eight-year-olds and the other half eleven-year-olds. There was an equal amount of boys and girls. The children were approached through two schools in the area. Approaching children through schools is a relatively common approach within children's studies but it is an approach which can be criticised. In school the children are used to being led and dominated by adults and there may be a risk that they perceive their participation in a research project as another school task where their answers will be judged. It is therefore a problem that the children may try to produce answers that they believe the teacher or researcher

want to hear and not what they really experience themselves. In this study this problem was primarily met by approaching issues from many different angles, by being continually reflexive and by allowing the children to be out interacting with the environment that they were supposed to be reflecting on.

The children were initially asked to mark out their school routes on a map and then to produce a drawing, which included both the 'good' and 'bad' things that they encountered on the way.

These drawings were then used as starting points for informal interviews, which were held in small groups. After the interviews the children were taken out for walks so that they could describe their everyday environment as they encountered it. A digital camera was used during the walk and the children were asked to say what they wanted documented and for what reason. The children were also photographed in action during the walks so that it would be possible to document their interaction with the environment and with other city-dwellers.

The teachers were given an active role in instructing the children on how and when to perform the tasks, so that it would be possible to integrate them with their teaching. The children's parents were informed through parental meetings and by written communication, in which they were also asked for consent regarding their children's participation in having their photographs taken.

Although a combination of several different methods were used and the interpretation of all these methods will add up to the result of the study, this article focus on the experiences gained from the walks regarding the method itself as well as how the children's experience of place was communicated during the walks.

Walking in the city

Experience of place can be difficult to communicate both for children and adults. The main reason for this is that these experiences are reactions to sensuous experiences and memories triggered by place itself.⁷ When a person is physically present in a place his or her reactions, memories and thoughts will be continuous reactions to objects, people and place itself. A method which allows respondents to interact with an environment will therefore maximise the possibility to also include these very personal experiences of the research

subjects. While moving together with the subjects in the researched landscape, such as during a walk, the walk itself and also the surrounding landscape triggers conversations which probably never would occur otherwise.⁸ It can be argued that the landscape we experience is constructed not only by what we see, but rather that the landscape also is constructed by memories and feelings connected to the landscape through experience or narratives as well as what we perceive through our senses when interacting with it. This can be said to be true for all humans, both children and adults. However, in this case it is possible to claim that what is true for adults is even more true for children. If adults have difficulties in communicating their experiences to other adults, it will be ever more difficult to establish a communication between a child and an adult. This will come from the fact that children and adults may have difficulties in understanding each other but also that a child might not even bother to try and bridge these differences since they are not recognised or judged as important.

Walks have been used in several other studies⁹, even if it is not possible to claim that it is a generally wide-spread or accepted method within the social sciences at this point in time. However, it is an expanding field of methodology and research.

The walks were performed in groups of three to four children just after that group-interviews had been held. The focus of the walks was the children's school routes since I considered that this would include much of the children's everyday environment. I had gained the information that most of the children lived close to the school and that they were allowed to walk to school with their parents, friends, siblings or by themselves. I had divided the children into groups after their home addresses, but was also helped by the teachers to form suitable groups in which the walks were to be performed. There was a varying degree of boys and girls in the groups, even if the total amount of boys and girl was equal.

The walks were laid out so that they included the children's homes, school and all the roads and places that the children in a particular group passed on their way to school. The children were told that the aim of the walk was for them to indicate and reveal their environment and to describe and talk about the things that they particularly liked and disliked about it. The children were instructed on how to behave in

traffic and in public spaces, but they were also allowed to act independently so that it would be possible to observe their spontaneous behaviour.

The walks can vaguely be described as interviews performed during interaction with the studied environment. Conversation is a central part of the walks; a functioning, social interaction between me and the children was an important factor during the walks. Had we not felt at ease with each other, the walks would not have been successful. A distinguishing factor between walks and interviews is that the former can never be performed in a predisposed and structured way. The actual route can, as in this case, be decided in advance, but the children should also be allowed to alter this route if they want to show particular places. The conversation during the walks must be allowed to evolve naturally as it is triggered by experiences and associations made whilst interacting with the environment. It is important to have clear ideas of what the research is concerned with and what the aim of the study is. However, in view of the fact that so many human perceptions, associations and experiences are illogical, abstract and spontaneous, it is also important to retain an open mind in order to allow the children's views to be fully reflected in the material.

Documentation

A digital camera was brought on the walks and the children were asked to point out the things or objects that they, for some reason, wanted to be photographed. These could be anything from dangerous road-crossings, odoriferous bins, beautiful trees, people, or whatever caught their attention. The camera was also used to take pictures of the children and the way in which they used and related to their environment during the walks. The fact that a digital camera, rather than a traditional camera, was used proved successful since the children were able to see the pictures immediately and approve or disapprove of them at the time of the event. Using photography as a method made it possible to observe, not only how the children used their environment, but also to notice and interpret the objects that the children had found interesting.⁵

A tape recorder was not used and neither were any notes taken during the walks. The photographs were the only direct documentation carried out. This lack of documentation during the walks may be open to criticism. However, it

would not have been appropriate to use a tape recorder since it would only have documented sound, and any form of annotation would have made the walks much too formal. Instead, the walks were conducted with all senses present and receptive, with the aim of understanding the environment and how the children connected and interacted with it. On completion of a walk I wrote down all my impressions and experiences. The writing was instantaneous and personal, with the aim of capturing the physical and sensuous experience of the environment. This meant that the writing spontaneously reflected a wide spectrum of information concerning visual objects, sounds, speech, smell, feelings and how the children dealt with their environment. This approach made it possible to gather and acquire a good deal of unique information, which would otherwise have been very difficult to record. Since my individual perceptions and physical experiences were used as a complement to the material produced by the children, it became possible to reach a level of understanding of the area and the children which would have been difficult, perhaps even impossible, otherwise. The information gained in this way produced a very diverse picture of the investigated area and the children's use and perception of it.

The active engagement with, and the closeness to, the subjects, did not, as may sometimes have been suggested, make academic analysis more difficult. It did, in fact, present an understanding from which an even deeper analysis could be drawn. The process of reflecting on experiences through a creative process, such as writing, without any restrictions on its form or focus, made it possible to capture images, objects or impressions that would probably have escaped the camera or tape recorder. This documentation is not at all unproblematic since it is highly dependent on the researcher's personality, creativity and his/her ability to capture sensuous experiences on paper and connect it to the research subject. However, when researching people's, and, in particular, children's experiences of a physical environment, it is important that the knowledge, which is difficult to put to words, is also somehow included and understood.⁶

This raises the question of the objectivity and the role of the researcher, which is the main critique regarding the use of qualitative methodologies. Concepts of representation and reliability become highly problematic but, without ignoring the question, perhaps they, in fact, need to be. All research

with children is problematic in respect of this issue. Since the perceptions of adults and children differ so much, the most suitable and appropriate method for an adult to try and understand and relate to the experiences of children, must be to aim to get as close as possible to the children, and how they use, relate to, and reflect over phenomena, in action. Punch (2002) has pointed out that a 'critically reflexive' approach is important when studying children. Reflexivity should be a central part of the research process, not only in respect of the researcher's role and assumptions, but also with respect to the choice of methods and their application. Baxter and Eyles (1997) have pointed out that, when using qualitative methods, it should be considered important to document and display the subjectivity which frames the study, as clearly and 'objectively' as possible, so that it will be possible to understand the results.

Children in an urban structure

The walks almost immediately proved to present a valuable insight into children's worlds and their everyday life in the city. It became obvious that children continuously deal with their environment on several different levels simultaneously and within a physical, social and cultural context. Therefore it may be difficult to distinguish between these different contexts when working with children. However, a common feature which was revealed during the walks was the children's ability, almost disregarding the context, to redefine objects that they encountered, both those made for children by adults and objects primarily intended for adults. This aspect of children's perception of their surroundings is one of the reasons why it is not unusual or surprising that children often are in conflict with adults regarding those objects and arenas used by both parties, as also have been discussed by Rasmussen and Smidt (2003). This further emphasise that there can be methodological difficulties when doing research with children, as they, in some cases, have no intentions of revealing some of their unwanted or 'forbidden' behaviour, and are in many cases, accustomed to concealing this from adults.

The walks revealed how children see physical objects within the environment as multi-functional. An object in the environment will be used in many different ways and certainly not only according to the designer's ideas. The intended use of an object is quickly recognised by the child,

but it is not necessarily seen as exclusive. Instead objects are re-defined over and over again and their value and use differ on each 'new' occasion. Many objects of great value for the children during the walks were ordinary everyday things such as a flight of stairs, a wall, an entrance to a house, a statue, a tree, a sign or a lamppost. This multi-use of everyday objects seems to have its origin in a mixture of imaginary worlds, dealing with personal experiences, physical activities, play, competition and curiosity.

Since walks to a relatively high degree include observation of children's behaviour, it may be discussed whether or not the walks are a form of participant observation. However, it has been questioned, for instance by Punch (2001) if participant observations are at all possible for adults researching children since there are obvious differences between children and adults which are difficult to ignore¹⁰. During the walks the children were aware that I was walking with them, but they were so engaged in describing their environment and showing them their places that they did not seem to reflect on how they were behaving. This meant that it was possible to observe and be close to the children without actually disturbing them. In this way my influence on their behaviour could be minimised. One of the absolutely clear advantages of the walks was that it was possible to distinguish between what the children said and what they did. Body language and the handling of different objects revealed a lot of previous experiences related to the place. The observations were not only concerned with the children's interaction with the physical environment, but also that of the other city-dwellers, in terms of their reactions and behaviour towards the children. At a psychological level much of the body language and facial expressions were unconscious and, therefore, unintentional, which, consequently, made them particularly interesting to observe.¹¹

A diverse environment

The design of public space and the objects within the city pre-determines the framework for how children can actually use their environment. This is something that is difficult to discuss directly with children since much of their use of the environment is in the form of apparently unconscious acts, which are consequently carried out without much self-reflection.

It seems that a design, which allows and encourages the children to interact with it at a physical level, is the most stimulating for them. It was possible to detect several examples of this during the walks. Walls and fences of different sorts, both high and low, were very attractive for the children, it seems for, two reasons; a wall and fence represent a border between something, most commonly the private or semi-private and the public, but also the border or division between school and the outside world. These borders seem loaded with meaning for children since they present an easy way to play with what is allowed and what is not. Jumping over a low fence between a private front garden and a sidewalk and then quickly back again is a way of acting out something forbidden – to access private property without permission – and then to quickly seek shelter again in the public sphere. Often these acts are performed by children walking in a group, where one child jumps over the fence and then back again with the cheering support of the others. The possibility of being caught seems to add to the thrill of the act. During the course of the consultation it seemed almost impossible for the children to pass by walls, high and low, without climbing or balancing on them. With low walls this is something that the children did without considering the act. These walls almost seem to have been 'created' for the children as a substitute to walking on the pavement. When the wall started the children moved from the pavement up onto the wall, and when it ended, the children almost 'floated' back down to the pavement.

Everyday objects such as parking meters, flags outside shops, recessed entrances, sunken basement windows, and other objects they discovered, provided the children with continuous stimulus during the walks. Parking meters may contain money, and they also have buttons which can be pressed. Many children ran towards the meters and pretended to put money in them, pressed the buttons and then waited for the pretend parking ticket before checking for change, just like an adult would do. Recessed spaces such as entrances, windows and corners made excellent hiding places, flags and hanging signs out of reach seemed to be there just for jumping up to and trying to touch them.

Some of the entrances to the houses that the children passed on their way to school have safety gates to stop people from entering the residence. The gates usually consist of vertical metal bars, which are impossible for an adult to get through

when locked. The children saw these gates as challenges and demonstrated during the walks how they like to play with the gates. Holding their stomachs in and trying to squeeze themselves through the bars of the gates was a particularly popular activity with the girls. They were aware of the risk of getting stuck and of being caught by adults as well as my anxiety, but this just seemed to add to the thrill.

The children seemed to continuously scan their environment for objects to include in play. This seemed to be quite an unconscious act. Loose objects lying on the street were immediately detected and judged whether or not they are worth picking up. The boys, particularly, in this project, found objects such as sticks, rubber bands, bolts and screws, which they immediately picked up and included in different forms of play. They invariably did this whilst simultaneously talking to the researchers or their friends. Many children also remembered objects that they had noticed earlier, but had not picked up and they wanted to go back and see if they could find them again. Popular visiting places for some of the boys were recycling stations, where the over-filled receptacles often contained objects, which might be possible to play with.

Registration plates on cars provided a lot of pleasure for many of the children, especially the girls. By combining the different letters on the plates they very quickly formed words in an almost compulsory way, interrupting both themselves and others during conversation to tell the others what word they had made up. This game was something that many of the children brought forward as an activity which was good because it was possible to do it both alone and with others. It rarely got boring because the flow of cars always provided different combinations of letters.

Sensing the city

The walks clearly showed that children's perspectives and experience of place differ from that of adults. A remarkable amount of features, which adults use for direction¹² in the area were not mentioned or commented on by the children in any way. Major features such as a supermarket, subway station or buildings of particular importance were not mentioned or reflected on. Instead, features such as a bakery, a building site and a fish store, all with very distinct smells or sounds, were mentioned by almost all children, even those who did not pass right by them. It became obvious that

children perceive and experience their environment, to a high degree, through the use of sensors and their own bodies, as has been argued by Rasmussen and Smidt, (2003). The findings in this project emphasise and confirm this since it was possible, by comparing with studies undertaken by the City council, to see how adults refer to the same area. The children's descriptions were, to a very noticeable degree, more focused on sound, smell, touch and feelings than any of the adults' descriptions. The children's perceptions also often seemed to be less general than those of adults.

The children seemed to focus on objects with which they, in one way or another, have a relationship, and to which they, therefore, can connect some sort of experience. These could be both positive and negative aspects such as beauty, smell, sounds and feelings, such as fear, comfort or secrecy, created by people, animal or physical objects. The relationship, hence, does not have to be 'direct' but can just as well be something that the child has seen or felt in connection to an object or a place.

Some of the children made it very clear that the mood they were in had a great influence on their preferred type of environment. Several children pointed out that they have different routes that they use for getting to school depending on how they feel, what they want to experience, and if they want to meet up with someone or prefer to walk on their own. The variations in these routes seemed to have just as much connection with the physical environment as the social context.

In a social context

The social context in which the children live and act has, perhaps not surprisingly, a major impact on how they act within their environment. The framework set by parents and teachers through their rules and knowledge forms an interaction with the children's own experiences, psychological and physiological development, a platform from which they can meet their realities.

During the walks the children clearly revealed what kind of environmental education they had been given by people in their surrounding. This was reflected by children saying that their parents had told them that they needed to take great care at certain crossings, or by the obvious taught way, in which they acted in certain places. At this age all children seemed to care a great deal about what their parents or

other grown-ups told them. Unknown grown-ups telling children off did not earn much respect, but seemed to make some children angry and hurt, whilst others just ignored these adults and made it their own personal mission to do exactly what the adults disliked. A common factor in these reactions was the feeling of not being wanted and reacting to that.

The children showed great knowledge and awareness of the social context surrounding them. Much of this information was triggered by events, or recalled as a response to certain places encountered during the walks. Several children made no difference between the physical and social environment but referred to them as one. Someone they met everyday on their way to school was as much a part of their environment as a building or a street. The daily, but also less frequent passing-by of certain people, was also, in some cases, used as an aide to memory or for direction. Some children referred to places as 'where we usually meet the smoking man,' or 'where the woman with the brown dog lives'. The children revealed a surprisingly extensive knowledge of the people living and working in their neighbourhood. They knew where many of, for them, 'unknown' people lived, worked or socialized. The regularity of school schedules and people's habits and work patterns meant that the children often met or observed the same people over and over again. Obviously people that look or act somewhat differently are more easily remembered than others.

Almost all children reacted strongly towards behaviour that they knew were wrong or illegal. Groups of older children making a noise and not leaving space for others, bullying and vandalising behaviour, stealing, littering or the painting of graffiti, made the children very upset. Graffiti, especially, upset the children a lot, although some of the more figurative graffiti was considered beautiful and therefore positive.

The children seemed very aware that adults often find children disturbing and 'naughty' and were concerned by this. Many children found it difficult to understand why children should be 'blamed' when adults, in fact, behave badly more often. Statements such as 'adults get drunk, are impolite, rude and drive too fast', were common observations on adult behaviour. Two boys described how they had been holding open a door to an underground entrance and counting how many adults passed by without thanking

them. According to the boys, who were very upset: 'a hundred people passed by, and maybe only two said thank you'. Whether or not the actual number is correct, it reveals that the children are very aware of the fact that adults do not behave in the way in which they expect children to.

Some children, especially three girls, had, as their special mission and major pleasure en route to school, to find ways of annoying adults. Their prime target was an architect's office with large windows facing the street, through which they could see an open plan office area. The girls described, and also demonstrated, during the walk, how they sometimes annoyed the people working there by knocking on the windows and making funny faces until someone tried to chase them away. The reason for this being so amusing was that the office looked 'so important,' and it was exciting to make people angry even if they knew that it was not a nice thing to do. It may be possible to describe similar behaviour, in that children are always trying to establish and discover the limits of acceptable behaviour in order to learn how to interact with their surroundings.¹³

Children's interaction with their peers is a very important aspect in respect of their valuing the physical environment. A poorly designed environment, which is filled with intense and positive social relations, can without doubt, be regarded as more positive than a well-designed environment, where a child feels lonely or experiences negative social contacts.¹⁴ Quite obviously children engage with a place as a simultaneously social and physical location, and do not make sharp distinctions between the physical and social. Children's interaction with their neighbourhood is, therefore, dictated, both by the physical design and the urban life that evolves within this. Children's mobility is decided, as often as not, by the physical layout of the area, as well as by the existence of known and unknown adults.¹⁵

A thrill of excitement and a perception of fear

The perception of fear seems to be complicated with children. When asked, all children supplied the 'right' answers from an adult perspective regarding what is dangerous in their environment. Major roads with heavy traffic, dangerous crossings, homeless people and alcoholics were all raised by the children as dangerous aspects. Some children seemed to have actually understood the danger whilst others merely reflect what they have been told by adults. All children

participating in the study seem to know how to handle the danger that they meet in their everyday environment, considering what can be asked from them in terms of their age.

The walks turned out to be an interesting way of finding out about fears and anxiety related to the urban environment. It soon became obvious that it was much easier for children to show how they physically and practically dealt with a frightening situation, than to express this with words during an interview conducted indoors. It seemed that to verbally express their anxiety would further emphasise the children's vulnerable situation during an interview. The walks, however, provided the children with the opportunity to instruct both me and the other children on how to deal with the situation in question. This could be the best way to cross a dangerous road, or how to avoid alcoholics or bullies. By explaining this, and at the same time, physically demonstrating how or where to walk or to look, the children's fears were revealed, but in such a way that they were not made to feel or appear weak.

Traffic obviously restricts children's mobility in such an urban environment as central Stockholm. The major roads were seen as negative by the children with regard to traffic, sound, smell and also the amount of space they take up. One of the major roads has broad pavements with trees planted along it. This road was not considered negative, in itself, since the children have space to walk freely alongside it, and also to play to a certain extent on the pavements. The traffic crossings, however, were seen as negative. Many crossings were controlled by lights but the children still experienced that cars were speeding and driving through red lights. Some children found it very stressful that the green intervals on the traffic signals were so short that it made crossing the road safely, and in time, difficult to manage.

The aforementioned dangers such as traffic, homeless people and alcoholics were seen as dangerous, but they did not represent a completely negative element in the environment. Many children got excited by the thrill of fear and thought it was 'fun' to see how they would manage to cross roads or walk past homeless people. Several children used to pass by a recently closed shelter for homeless people on their way to school. This place was missed by many children even if they also expressed relief. Several children described how they used to secretly watch homeless people, alcoholics and drug addicts. The enjoyment of watching adults stagger,

fight or just being different was mixed with the fear of being spoken to. If this happened the children never spoke back but ran away as fast as they could. The shelter seemed to represent something forbidden for many children. They were aware that adults did not want them to hang around there, and doing so might expose them to danger. However, the homeless people represented something different and a life situation and style that the children could not fully understand. Therefore, it was both exciting and frightening for the children to observe this phenomenon. Some children also acted out situations during the walks and altered between pretending to be a homeless person, an alcoholic or a child dealing with the situation.

Playgrounds and school grounds

During the walks none of the children mentioned or emphasised the issue of playgrounds. This might, partly, be the result of investigating school routes, but this reason is not entirely convincing since many other aspects, with no connection to the school route, were brought up. During the walks, playgrounds were used by two of the groups. One of the groups consisted of eight-year-olds, who needed a break during the walk, and were allowed to run and play in a playground for a while before continuing the tour. The playground represented an area where the children could run free without having to impose the self-control on themselves that is needed in many urban environments. This particular playground is large and has a lot of play equipment, and open spaces covered with sand, grass and tarmac. The possibility of being able to run between the different groups of play equipment seemed to be an important aspect for the children. The variation in ground-cover materials and the presence of a slope also seemed to contribute a great deal to the experience. The children obviously needed a place for getting rid of excess energy and shook, rocked, climbed and physically conquered objects in the playground, not only those meant for play but also gates, bins and lamp posts. Objects, which, in some way, by their design or structure, challenged the children by being slightly frightening, involved risk-taking or forced the children to, in one way or another, stretch their limits were definitely the most popular. Climbing up and enjoying the view and the high position, rocking and swinging in different ways and collecting different things were popular activities, as were chasing and teasing each other.

The other group, which showed interest in a playground, was the eleven-year-olds with whom we passed a playground in a park, where the children, without first discussing this action with each other, sat down for a chat on the swings. The role of the playground for these older children was primarily a social one, where conversation was more important than the physical and mental activity of playing.

The school grounds were treated much as the playgrounds were during the consultation. No child brought the subject up spontaneously and the school grounds did not gain much credit from the children when they were asked about them. Both the participating schools have school grounds that consist of medium-sized tarmac areas without much play equipment and few trees. The schoolyard, which was judged most negatively, was the one consisting of an enclosed courtyard leaving very little space for creative and imaginative play. This schoolyard seemed to be used for football and for sitting on the benches chatting. The other schoolyard was more open and the school located at the top of an incline which made it necessary to have flights of stairs with low walls leading up to the school. Grass slopes led down toward the pavements. This schoolyard also had more trees than the other one. It was possible to observe, and the children also mentioned this, that it was the presence of the walls, the grass slopes, the stairs and the trees which were the main qualities of this schoolyard. These objects were not intended for play, and were also, in some cases, not allowed to be used for play, but were still the objects with most play qualities for the children. They were used for climbing, balancing, running around or simply just for socialising on, or nearby. The rest of the school ground was mainly used for football.

Since the children did not, themselves, mention playgrounds I asked them about these. The overall opinion was that playgrounds were 'good' for a short period of time. The children play there for a short time and then loose interest, probably because the activity to be performed there is often already pre-set by the particular design of the playground, leaving little space for imagination. A good playground brings qualities to an area, but this does not mean that an area with a high quality playground equals a child-friendly area. The majority of the children seem to use playgrounds for hanging out with their friends rather than 'playing' there. The act of playing, as it seems to be understood by many children, is for 'babies' and not for children as 'old' as

they are. This underlines that it is important to use the word 'play' in a careful manner when talking to children. It seems as if children label their activities differently from the way in which adults label them.

So what is the significance of the fact that the children do not spontaneously mention the playgrounds? The reasons might be multiple. It has been suggested¹⁶ that empty and ignored playgrounds are lacking in imagination and do not appeal to the children because they do not appeal to their senses. Another problem might be that playgrounds are designed on the assumption that play is an identifiable and purposeful activity, easily possible to separate from other activities.¹⁷ Play can, on some occasions, be a formalized activity, such as with certain games, but children play all the time as a way of dealing with the world. Play is a child's way of interacting with others and with their surroundings, and it is also the way in which they learn about the world. Children further their development by imitating and interacting with adults, and acting out adult situations. In doing so they also begin to understand the context in which they live.

Even if the playgrounds was not mentioned, per se, some of the children used them during the walks, as described above. For the younger children it was the play equipment in itself and the physical activity which attracted them. Some of the older children also used play equipment but in their case the playground represented a place to socialize in, rather than 'playing'. The older children emphasised that they were too old for the playground by using body language and showing each other that they were too tall for the play equipment.

Urban greenery and aesthetics

One of the most obvious aspects of the environment that almost all children reflected upon during the walks, were trees. Trees were seen as important for several reasons. They obviously helped the children with orientation and they were also an important phenomenon as regards the character of certain places. Some of the children mentioned that they looked at certain trees when they walked to school because they found them beautiful. The most popular activity, without question, in respect of the trees, was climbing them. The children's knowledge regarding the various good climbing trees in the area was quite impressive. Climbing trees seemed

popular for two main reasons. The first one is to do with the physical activity of actually climbing, balancing and swinging in the tree. The second reason is to do with the opportunity and the ability to climb up high and sit alone in the tree to think about different things. In one of my earlier studies¹⁸ many children emphasised the importance of the trees in the courtyards of their houses. Several children had one particular or favourite tree, which they thought was particularly important for them.

Trees and plants were seen as something that is as much a part of the urban environment as streets and houses. Many of the children expressed a wish for more parks and green places, particularly with trees good for climbing and grass that could be used for sunbathing, playing and sport. A majority of the climbing trees that the children used on their courtyards were old, knotty, lilac trees. The children easily recognised this particular type of tree even if they were not in bloom, and always chose them to climb in if they could.

One of the most important aspects of the presence of urban greenery seems to be that it can provide a sense of season for the children. Almost everything the children mentioned about trees, shrubs and flowers had something to do with the seasons and the way they are reflected in the greenery around them. Many of the children reflected on the maple trees that are planted along side the road by the school, and their experience when the trees change colours in the autumn. The leaves that have fallen are fun to wade through, to role around in and jump in and to throw at each other.

Flowering plants and trees were seen as something positive, but were not mentioned as much as trees were. However, during the walks many children wanted photographs taken of different types of flowers. It soon became quite apparent, especially with the eleven-year-olds, that they wanted to emphasise that they found flowers beautiful, but that as this was not seen as particularly 'cool', they were not keen to let their friends find out. The younger children did not find it embarrassing and wanted to touch and also be photographed with flowers on many occasions. This may have been with flowering shrubs on a street corner, with spring bulbs in a park or simply outside a flower shop. A group of boys picked a bouquet of the first dandelions growing in cracks in the pavement. They picked the flowers as a sign that summer was on its way and wanted to be photographed holding the bouquet.

Smell was seen as a very positive property with plants, flowers and trees. Many flowers smell good and several children remembered that some trees (lime trees) smell nice during the summer. Another positive aspect of parks that was raised is the fact that they help to keep the bad smell of traffic at bay.

The children did not talk about beauty as a general concept so spontaneously. Some of the children mentioned single things as being beautiful, such as the colour of a tree against the colour of a façade, flowers, cars, commercial posters and statues. Even if beauty was not mentioned, *per se*, the children clearly reflected, by their physical behaviour, that they found certain things beautiful and worthy of respect. Most of them moved in a careful way, stood still to look and lowered their voices when they saw something beautiful. The impression was that things could be beautiful both because of the way they looked and for what they represented. Something that represents a positive thing for the child can be seen as beautiful since it is 'good' and has a positive meaning. 'Cool' things such as certain cars and film and record posters were also considered beautiful.

Parks, courtyards and green places definitely provide the children with much valued space for play, but also for peace and contemplation. However, adult interference with the children's use of these places is significant. The children reflected an obvious awareness that adults believe that they will destroy beautiful places and harm plants and trees. It was quite apparent during the walks that as soon as the children entered a park or courtyard, supervision from adults visiting or just passing by the place increased to a noticeable degree even though I was walking with them. On some occasions adults told the children off for no obvious reason other than the fact that they were simply there in that place. This kind of adult behaviour certainly limits and affects children's sense of belonging, and also their use of green spaces. Certainly children's play can sometimes be noisy and they need spaces that are not too sensitive, but they also seem capable of adapting their behaviour to the kind of place they are in. However, they must be taught how to do this, and be allowed access even to sensitive places. All the children were careful with plants and trees and seemed to enjoy moving slowly sometimes and with obvious respect for sensitive environments, when they were allowed to do so.

Difficulties with walks

The experience from this study is that the use of walks as a method is very valuable when researching children's experience of the environment. Having said so, there are many difficulties attached to the method which make it complex to use. Some aspects, evident in many qualitative methods but perhaps even more so in the use of walks, regard subjectivity, validity and reliability. I will, as a researcher, be very present not only in forming questions and doing an analysis, but also throughout the whole process. I will be a part of the process and there is no denying that this will affect the outcome. The result of a walk will not only be material provided to me by respondents, but it is instead the whole process in itself that will be analysed. These are important issues and they highlight the fact that since the process is dynamic and depending on the participating individuals, as well as the specific time and place. A specific walk will never be possible to repeat in order to verify a result. However, if the respondents hold strong views about something this information will probably be possible to gain if a walk were to be repeated. Further on, not only the documentation but also the analysis will be formed not only through the participants reactions but also my experiences during the walks, which in some cases may be difficult to separate from the children's views. Having pointed out these weaknesses and difficulties it may also be valuable to mention that it is exactly these aspects of the method which makes it so valuable since it enables a deep insight in the participants experiences.

Finally, some words have to be mentioned regarding the practicalities involved in taking a group of children out on city streets. It is a constant struggle to find the right balance between keeping the children safe and within the 'rules of social behaviour' and not influencing their behaviour. The children, in this study, were so excited to be allowed out on a school day that they played and interacted with the environment and each other at a remarkable speed. It is not right to assume that the children behave this way constantly, their behaviour is more likely to do with the excitement of showing me and their friends their environment.

In this study I chose to use walks as one of many methods which, all brought together will add up to an understanding of children's experience of their urban landscape. By using triangulation the methods will enhance each other and many misunderstandings will immediately be solved by

comparing the material gained from the different methods. The strength of the walk is that it is a simultaneously physical and mental activity and that it provided both me and the children with sensuous experiences. However, combining the walk with informal interviews, drawing sessions and photography was very useful since it provided a framework for the walk, and not least minimised the marginal of error, since knowledge was collected in more than one way.

Conclusions

When I decided to use walks as a method my initial hope was that this would facilitate communication, and make it possible for the children to express themselves in other ways than just by oral communication. Indeed, the walks did not only provide verbal knowledge of the environment, but they did also provide an opportunity to observe the children whilst they were interacting with their everyday environment. The walks, hence, turned out to become an invaluable contribution to the study since children often do not fully realise how they use their environment, and cannot picture this when sitting indoors, or simply do not want to share their information. During the walks the children found renewed energy, were much more relaxed, and spoke more freely than they had done indoors during interviews.

Walking around and experiencing the studied environment at a physical level with the children made it easier for all involved parties to reflect about the environment as it was encountered. The walks produced a combination of interviews, observation studies and knowledge, gained from and through the children's continuous associations. Such a mix is probably very difficult to capture using any other method. The walks also simplified the complexity of how children and adults define and label behaviour and objects in different ways. When the children referred to 'walking to school' they also meant that they climbed, played and socialised on their way. This was not clear from the way they used their language, but it became clear during the walks.

It became obvious during the walks that children interpret their surroundings through an intricate net of physical, social and emotional realities, and their interpretation intertwines with continuous attempts to define and re-define themselves within the context of adult structures.

The social life within the city interacts with the physical environment and creates an overall impression of place.

The children put great emphasis on other city-dwellers during the walks, both human and animal, and had a great deal of knowledge about where they both lived, or in terms of the humans, worked. The relationship between the children and these people was of great importance in respect of the children's perception of their environment. This knowledge was revealed entirely as a result of the associations made during the walks. The walks made it possible for the children to describe things that were of no particular importance to them at that time, but since the association was triggered by the place itself, and the fact that the situation was informal, it was revealed.

Moving about in the city with children made it obvious that children act within an environment that, for most part, is not planned, designed or created for them, and which, therefore, provides them with both opportunities and constraints. The children dealt with these opportunities and constraints by sometimes rejecting them and sometimes adapting them to suit their specific needs. In comparison to adults, the children continually conquered their surrounding environment by being physically active and play in various ways most of the time they are outdoors. By climbing, balancing, jumping and testing the

limits for what various objects can be used for, children set their own rules as to how the environment can be used. Children's perception is active through the use of sensors and their own bodies. Sounds, smells, feelings, social interactions and physical structures make up the framework of the city. The use of colours in the environment, the smell of a bakery, the texture of the pavement, the sound of trees or traffic, the splashing of water, and the mixture of fear and excitement when dealing with dangerous places, were all important phenomena, not only for the identity of a place, but also for orientation and a sense of home.

The fact that children's experience of place is so dependent on their direct physical interaction with the environment emphasises why walks can present such an effective way for children to communicate. The physical and social experience of an environment is, to a high degree, formed by abstract, unconscious and sometimes also illogical associations, as well as clear and focused views. The walks and the ability to interact with the environment directly with the children make it possible to try and capture, not only the knowledge, which is possible to put into words, but also the more subjective and abstract factors.



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Notes

1. See also Sebba, 1991; Fine and Sandstrom, 1988.
2. Valentine, 2001.
3. Cele, 2005.
4. Andersson, 1998
5. Cele, 2005. See also Damisch 1980, Banks 2001 and Rasmussen and Smidt 2003
6. Cele, 2005.
7. Nordström, 2002: 25
8. Wästfelt, 2004:79
9. For example in Ward, 1978; Hart, 1979; Moore, 1986; De Laval, 1997; Percy-Smith 2002, O'Brien, 2003; Wästfeldt, 2004
10. Punch, 2001; Opie, 1993; Cele, 2005.
11. Morris, 2002.
12. Klasander, 2003
13. Lawson, 2001.
14. Cele 2001 and O'Brien 2003
15. Jones, 2000.
16. Rasmussen and Smidt, 2003. See also Negt 1984, Holm 1998 and Grahn et al 1997.
17. Lawson, 2001.
18. Cele, 2001.

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