

# URBAN NEIGHBOURHOODS

## – A CHILD'S EYE VIEW

– an introduction

This is an introduction to a number of articles in this volume of *Nordic Journal of Architectural Research*, dealing with children and the urban environment. The articles are different in their goals and set up. They represent a small part of the considerable number of research projects on this theme, which have come up in the Nordic countries during the last 10–15 years. This paper – apart from introducing the theme – also gives references to some of the research projects and environments in Scandinavia.

Children are citizens of our cities, and they are frequent users of urban space. This is hardly reflected in the overall city planning, however, for children are seldom seen as a relevant political group or given opportunities to participate in planning processes.

On the local scale, design of housing areas and green spaces has often reflected planners' and architects' conceptions of child-friendly environments. But does it reflect children's needs? Scientifically based knowledge about children's preferences and use of urban spaces and neighbourhoods seems too seldom to be part of the background for planning decisions about new urban structures or renovation of older ones.

Planners' conceptions of child-friendly environments might be based on the planners' own childhood experiences. But children's lives have changed rapidly and thoroughly over the past thirty years, not least in the Nordic welfare states:

The frequency of mothers with young children being full time employed on the labour market has grown considerably, which means that as much as 90% of Danish children between 3 and 5 years of age spend most of their day in day-care institutions. 80% of the 6–9 years old children spend their

non-school time in day-care institutions for school children (Danmarks Statistik, 2002).

A well known trend in Western countries is the growth in the number of children being brought in car to and from school, activities, and friends' houses by their parents, thus literally being insulated from the urban environment by the parental transportation from one insula of activity to the other (O'Brian et. al. 2000; Zeiher 2001, Rasmusson 1998).

And the still better housing standards, better opportunities for TV-watching at alle times of the day and the computer games industry means that children use considerable amounts of time indoors<sup>1</sup>.

Does this mean that children do not use urban spaces much – or do they use them in new ways? What is children's understanding of their surroundings? What do they value and what do they resent? Can children's views be integrated in planning and redevelopment decisions? Can children participate in decisions regarding their environments, and how?

Within the last ten years a number of studies have arisen in the Nordic countries, which have been devoted to answering these questions. They were inspired by international studies of children and environment (such as Chawla 2002, Hart 1979, and Lynch 1977), and have had some common features in focus and methods. First and foremost they have taken a "child's eye view" on the city: They have tried to grasp the city from the viewpoint of the child, not only the playground or schoolyard, but the entire neighbourhood or city. They have taken the child's perspective seriously by asking children – not asking parents or schoolteachers about the children. And while doing this, they have developed (or re-developed) qualitative methods for data collection and data analysis, suitable for working with children: walking interviews, analysis of photos, drawings, essays etc.

The researchers undertaking these projects are spread over a number of universities of which none seem to have adopted this field of research as a major spearhead. Thus they depend more on networks between than inside research environments.

An exception is the Landscape Planning Department at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences in Alnarp and Ultuna, where a number of studies on children's use of urban spaces have been carried through – in particular on use of green spaces, school yards, and playgrounds. Some have had focus on health aspects (Grahn 1996, Grahn et. al. 1997, Grahn et. al. 2000, Söderström et. al. 2002), but also general welfare and use of environment has been stressed, for instance in Lindholms and Kylin's works (Lindholm 1995, Kylin & Lieberg 2001). The article in this volume, *Drömmar och verklighet i stadens utkant – att växa upp i en Östeuropeisk storstad* (Dreams and Reality in the Periphery – Growing up in an East European City) by Ulla Berglund, is part of this research tradition, but applies it on a larger scale in a suburb of Riga in Latvia, also broadening the age spectrum to include youth.

At Stockholms Institute of Education, Pia Björklid has for many years researched children's outdoor environments, often stressing the transport perspective and the different views of parents and children on traffic environments (Björklid 1982, 1992 and 2002). At The Department of Human Geography at Stockholm University, Maria Nordström studies children's perception and use of urban environment, also with a starting point in environmental psychology (Nordström & Mårtensson 2001, Nordström 2001, Nordström 2001a).

In Norway, Hanne Wilhjelm has done her doctoral degree on children's perception of city environment as opposed to professionals' view on children in cities. She has earlier been partner in the international project "Growing up in cities II" (Wilhjelm 2002). Through the combination of children's studies with studies of professionals, she has taken a step towards making results of children-environment studies applicable in a planning and design context. Her thesis (Wilhjelm, 2002a) is reviewed in this volume.

In Denmark, a study of children in cities has been carried out over the last five years: The neighbourhood as a setting for children's everyday life. This is a comparative case study of children's perceptions and use of the outdoor environment in four "typical" housing areas in the Greater Copenhagen Area. The study was described in an early phase in Jensen & Jørgensen (2001) and later in Guldager and Carstensen (2002) and Rasmussen & Smidt (2003). The goal was to establish a knowledge base for urban planning and redevelopment in respect for children's needs, and it was – in line with several contemporary studies of children and the city – carried out within an understanding of children as individual decisionmakers independently using and influencing the urban environment. The study was carried through with children as the only interviewees and with use of purely qualitative data collection methods. The study was moreover carried out by a multidisciplinary group of researchers. Two articles in this volume, *Rum til Børn – legeområder som børns steder* by Trine Agervig Carstensen and *Børns fortællinger om kvarteret – et bidrag til kvarterets identitet* by Kim Rasmussen have their basis in this project.

Also studies which are not directly related to the urban structure can, of course, give valuable input to this field. The article *Børn og Biler – et kritisk studie af børnefamiliers hverdagsliv* by Trine N. Fotel is an example of such an analysis.

One thing is how to think of children's needs in the planning process – another is to let children participate in the planning process. This is an everlasting research and practical question, which has been studied, among others, at the Finnish University of Technology, Centre for Urban and Regional Studies, where Liisa Horelli has developed methodological approaches to collaborative planning, especially with regard to children (fx Horelli 2001). Also the Danish study mentioned above has an angle of children's participation

(Esbjørn 2002). This study is orientated towards practise and therefore carried out in collaboration with the Danish Town Planning Institute and local communities – ending up in 2004 with guidelines for children’s participation in planning of their urban environment.

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### Note

1. Bonke (2002) states that of young families, between 80 and 90% owns a computer, and use the internet between 2 and 4 hours a week. Andersen (1995) states that almost all children in 1993 watched TV every day, and that the 10–12 years old did it two hours a day on average .

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