Designing
with
Children

Streetspace (Growing Up in Cities)

Growing Up in Cities (GUIC) is an international research and action programme that has supported children in low-income urban neighborhoods across the world. It originates in the participatory planning movement of the 1970s, influenced by the ideas of urban planner Kevin Lynch who first launched it in 1970 in collaboration with UNESCO. In the 1990s it was relaunched under Louise Chawla's coordination, funded by UNICEF. The GUIC core sites were in Australia, Argentina, England, India, Norway, Poland, South Africa and the United States. Work continues to build directly on, or be inspired by, this programme internationally. Although the work is – in a design and construction sense – speculative, it has led to physical changes to the environment, informed planning decisions and policies and in some cases it has directly informed specific spatial design decision-making.

The example from Australia here illustrated, 'Streetspace', is one of the many projects that exemplifies the spillover effect of the groundbreaking programme since its conception in the 1970s. More specifically, in 1997 Growing Up in Cities returned to Braybrook, a suburb of Melbourne (Australia), 25 years after the project was first carried out in 1972, in order to compare young people's perceptions of neighbourhood. This environmental research and design project was undertaken by Karen Malone and Linsday Hasluck in conjunction with the city council, a local secondary school and the Braybrook community.

What
Ash Reserve Public Youth Space

Where
Braybrook, Melbourne, Australia

Age
10-15

Group Size
44 (Braybrook 1997) and 20 (Braybrook 1972)

Project Stage
Brief, Concept

Children's Roles
Advocates for Change, Expert Consultants

Timescale
2 years from 1997 (building on GUIC 1970)

Partners
Kevin Lynch (GUIC initiator 1970)
Louise Chawla (GUIC initiator 1997)
Peter Downtown (Braybrook 1972 researcher, coordinator)
Karen Malone and Linsday Hasluck (Streetspace, Braybrook 1997, researchers, coordinators)
Local young people from Braybrook (Participants)

Motivation

The aim of the programme is to enable children to assess their local environments and work with officials to improve them. The key driver for its initiation has been the overriding concern to give voice to children and adolescents largely marginalised from public space due to heavy traffic conditions, hazardous surroundings, violence, inadequate transportation and

absence of public space facilities, as well as the general lack of interest in children's access, security and inclusion. In this light, some of the key questions that GUIC addresses are the following:

– what does the process of urbanization mean in the lives of young people;

– from young people's own perspectives, what makes an urban environment a good place in which to grow up; and

– can cities be positive places for young people? Can they be places that support and nurture their development as constructive, contributing members of a civic society?

In this light, the action research project implemented in Braybrook in 1997, which is here examined, aimed to provide a forum where young people would initiate shared dialogues and make contact with other members of the community. 'Streetspace' thus celebrated the ideal of inclusive communities and highlighted young people's skills and expertise as participatory planners.

Children's involvement

Each project usually involves the implementation of workshops for municipal architects, planners, researchers, urban professionals and child advocates and provides opportunities for engaging children and adolescents in actively evaluating their local environments, setting priorities for improvement and developing designs to put their ideas and priorities into action. Action research methods are also used to better understand children's and adolescents' perspectives on the places where they live, their concerns, proposals for change, as well as the effects of participatory processes implemented.

The project in Australia, for example, was first conducted over a six-month period in 1972 by Peter Downtown, an Architecture Masters student from the University of Melbourne under the name 'Children's Perceptions of Space'. Braybrook was chosen as a low-density suburb of Melbourne, which was indicative of its low socio-economic status in comparison to higher-density inner city communities. At that time, Downtown's research revealed young people's sense of boredom with the social, physical and educational environment in the area. Again a GUIC site in 1997, Braybrook was revisited with the aim to replicate data-collection methods and put into practice participatory research methods involving young people in neighbourhood urban renewal.

In the original study by Downtown there were twenty 14 year-old participants (11 girls, 9 boys), all students in their third year of secondary schooling (Year 9). Downtown used multiple methods to capture their voices, following Lynch's research guidelines: from objective measures of the economic, demographic and environmental features of the community to observations of young people's use of the area and records of their perceptions of their communities and their priorities. Twenty five years later, some of the data were not directly compatible for rigorous analysis. In this process a group of 44 young people were invited to participate. During the two-year research, however, over 100 young people aged 10-15 took part in various phases of the study.

The planning process in both cases followed the original GUIC guidelines and included the following key steps: (a) identifying the issues; (b) planning for change; (c) taking action and; (d) monitoring and reflection. 'Streetspace' activities involved neighbourhood drawings,

behaviour maps, spatial map design, community surveys, neighbourhood tours, photogrid of the neighbourhood, city tour, site visits and excursions, guest speakers' presentations, brainstorming sessions, 2D designs and 3D model making activities. The 'Streetspace' team also created a video of young people's outdoor places and activities that included footage from Downton's similar film from the 1970s.

Outputs and outcomes

The results from the 1972 and 1997 project were not dissimilar: young people often felt excluded and marginalised in their communities and complained about boredom and nothing to do. Their desire to experience their neighbourhoods as equal members of the community shone through the findings; even when given opportunities to create separate youth spaces, they wanted to have these integrated into community life. The physical features of the community also remained largely unchanged. Young people in the 1990s, however, spoke about their fear of the streets and drugs, and the hostility that they faced from adults who were afraid of their presence in public places. The population also showed a new cultural diversity. In 1997, the young people interviewed were born in Somalia, Vietnam, New Zealand and Argentina as well as Australia.

When 'Streetspace' began, the plan was to design a pathway through the neighbourhood. Instead, the City Council decided to engage the young people involved in the design of Ash Reserve, a space designed specifically for youth. Designs included elements such as barbeques, eating areas, play equipment and garden beds. Each of these elements was based on the 3D models that the students made, which, in turn, enhanced their skills in understanding their environment and making judgments about the designs' visibility. This programme of activities culminated in the final presentation in 1998 to members of the City Council and Youth Services and found the young participants excited, enthusiastic and proud of their work.

The Growing Up in Cities project has been thereafter embedded as part of the local curriculum, engaging secondary school students in urban open space planning and design. In 1998, Braybrook Secondary School took forward the project with designs for a Recreational Trail Network Plan for the neighborhood in collaboration with the environmental designer Maggie Fooke. Growing Up in Cities-Australia is available in a CD-Rom for teachers, police workers, social workers, planners and other professionals interested in participatory research with young people. Other project sites have been introduced in the cities of Abbotsford and Frankston, Victoria.

An international research network for collaboration has sprung out of the GUIC programme for comparative investigations worldwide. A manual of principles and methods works as a training tool and field guide for interested individuals and organisations, while a book entitled 'Growing Up in an Urbanizing World' documents the case studies. National reports, videos and exhibits are available from specific project sites.

Quotes

'*You have a look at nature's way of living. You see more and discover things. I like to touch, feel, and smell all the things. I like to feel different leaves and twigs and discover animals that camouflage*' (Frankston, age 7, Australia).

'*Our local area desperately needs more facilities for young people. Streetspace allowed us*

the opportunity to design spaces for the youth of Braybrook. We only hope that the Council will now seriously think over our ideas and allow us to have more facilities and useable space' (Emma, age 14, Australia).

'A good city is one in which children can grow and develop to the extent of their powers; where they can build their confidence and become actively engaged in the world; yet be autonomous and capable of managing their own affairs' (Kevin Lynch, Growing Up in Cities, 1977).

Resources

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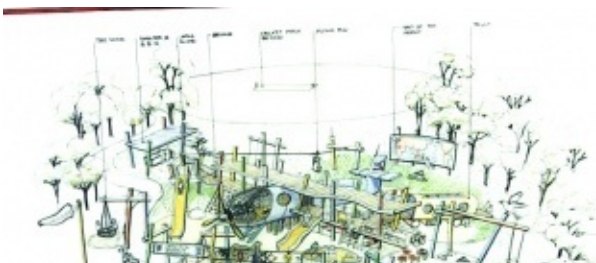
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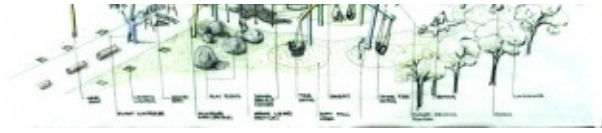
Young people's model of proposed youthspace in the ASH reserve. (Courtesy: Karen Malone)

Adventure Playground, Braybrook (Courtesy: Karen Malone)

Braybrook Playground design. (Courtesy: Karen Malone)

Adventure Playground, Braybrook (Courtesy: Karen Malone)