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Let's Play at Building the City: the Children for the Public Space

Viviana Petrucci

Associazione CantieriComuni
viv.petrucci@gmail.com
www.cantiericomuni.org

The touch is the sense most used by children; tactile education is of fundamental importance to recover a dimension of our daily experience that, while we grow, we risk losing. The touch is the only sense that contains an element of reciprocity, because you can't touch without being touched. Touch brings people close to each other and to the space, and offers a more profound and attentive perception.

The urban space should be imagined as a large tactile platform, able to surprise and intrigue children to offer them new opportunities to learn.

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Anything that has weight, or has the warm beat of life, has a bark, a garment, a skin, which is chipped, smooth or intact, all this can be always touched by the hand. It is an experience that the sight or the spirit by itself cannot realize. To own the world we need a kind of tactile smell. The sight slides across the universe. The action of the hand defines the vacuum of the space and the weight of things that occupy it.

Henri Focillon¹

The title of this article “Let's play at building the city: the children for the public space” refers to the title of my PhD thesis, a research-action aimed at investigating deeply the complex relationship between children and the city, and their role in defining planning choices.

Children need the city to live and realize environmental experiences, that are necessary for the full development of their autonomy, their sensory-motor intelligence, their cognitive processes and their relational capability. City needs the children to rediscover its self-confidence, its sense of solidarity and the sense of community and to re-conquer the functions described by H. Lefebvre as symbolic, recreational (playful) and informative.

A vast literature and scientific studies on the cognitive development of a child demonstrate that interactions with physical, social and cultural environment is very influent. The quality of stimuli and environmental exposure that the child experiences during the first few years, contribute to his personality and it is the base for all the learning, the knowledge-building and the skills that the child develops during his entire life.

The Austrian psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim² transfers to the city the concept of motherhood because it substitutes the maternal uterus: good or bad mother, good and bad at the same time, as every mother is (Bozzo, 1998; pg. 104). The first urban fragment that the child experience is the framework of what will be his emotional and perceptive heritage: very young children meet the environment through their parents and the urban experience depends on the way these persons live the city, with or without their children. From these consideration come the importance of the entire community in children's urban life and of the city's architectural quality for their growth.

American anthropologist Edward T. Hall in his book “The hidden dimension” in 1966 demonstrates how people are influenced by their experience of the space in every cultural aspect and in every action. The sense of space is a synthesis of many sensorial contributions: the human being perceives the environment through visions, sounds, tastes, smells, touches, but it is the whole constellation of stimuli that determines how he responds to it: it is the complexity that makes the physical contest in which human being lives and interacts for long period of time. Children interact with the environment in a synaesthetic way. The word synaesthesia comes from the Greek language *syn* “together” and *aisthánestai* “to perceive”, it means to perceive together; it indicates the process that, by stimulating at the same time different sensorial area, allows perceiving the environment in its complexity. This ability to stimulate at the same time more sensorial channels is preserved in the daily life language, for example the expression “velvety flavour” in which the lexical code of a tactile sensation to describe a taste is used to describe a perception we uses the lexical code of a tactile sensation.

1 The quote is in “Le mani guardano”, catalogo della mostra, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Roma 24-IX/ 2-XI-1980, Roma, De Luca Editore, 1980.

2 Bruno Bettelheim (Vienna, August 28th, 1903-Silver Spring County, Colorado March 13th, 1990) was an Austrian psychoanalyst, Hebrew by origin; refugee in USA, where he took the citizenship: He was childhood psychologist and in particular interest on autism.





Figure 1

The ability to recognise vivid sensorial perceptions decreases or it is completely lost in adulthood and with that the ability to think and discern the environment as a complex system, also because the structure of the modern city reduces sensorial perceptions to only two senses: sight and hearing.

Among all senses the most used by children is the touch; tactile education is of fundamental importance to recovery a dimension of our daily experience that, while we grow, we risk losing. The touch is the only sense that contain an element of reciprocity, because you can't touch without being touched. Touch brings people close to each other and to the space, and offers a more profound and attentive perception. According to Bruno Munari the tactile perception is a linear one: you feel sensation in succession, one after another. Touching forces us to slow down our pace, to feel, to take our time.

Tommaso Marinetti in "the Manifest on Tactilism" (Marinetti, 1925) in 1925 praises the tactile dimension of human experience referring not to the sense of touch but to the feeling of it. Marinetti stresses the importance of tactile education in order to "improve spiritual communication between human beings by means of the epidermis"

The urban space should be thought as a big tactile platform, similar to the one Marinetti used to furnish his home, with things that can convey different tactile values and different types of pleasure.

During some experimental studies with Dr Laura Moretti, we have investigated what kind of perceptions our city offers today, letting ourselves be guided by the children in some neighbourhoods of Rome to discover everything that exists in the space from the ground level up to 1 meter height. Adults, due to their height, are not aware of what happens under their eyes. We have asked children to experience the space using only one sense at a time, focusing/ on describing the different sensations. Children have also measured the space with their own body, using themselves as metric reference.

The aim of the studies was to identify planning proposals to improve the quality of our life environment and to choose some furniture elements to be built by our selves.

Playing with the senses is very important for planning, because it allows to eliminate stereotypes and to free creativity going back to feel the space in a complex way with our own body as we did when we were children. Children's proposals behold all sensorial perceptions; materials and shapes they choose corresponded to

the different senses.

In 1956 Australian architect Paul Ritter in Nottingham organized an exhibition entitled “The Child’s Eye View”, with the help of the students of the Architecture Faculty where he was teaching. The exhibition displayed a furnished room two and half times bigger than the normal size, in order to take back adults to the perception and the vision of the space from children’s point of view.

Let’s try to imagine what it means in a contemporary city to live in the portion of the urban space where children live, actually to live very close to the ground. At that level there is no right to beauty, to security and to recreation, therefore some of children’s fundamental rights ratified by the children’s chart³ are violated. Also adults don’t enjoy the rights but they don’t mind, because the urban space is rapidly crossed by them, because the way to reach different destinations of daily routine has lost its meaning.

Our city is dull, there are no colours, there is no care for details: the plans shared with children gives back to the urban space the attention to small things, the need of beauty in any place and at any scale, and the temporal dimension. To plan with children force us to pause and think, to give back the original meanings to the materials and to the creativity of the shapes: the city can be read through the touch as we like, we can establish tactile paths every time different, allowing to strengthen children’s link to the urban space, and vice versa, “to touch is at the same time to be touched by what it touches us”⁴.

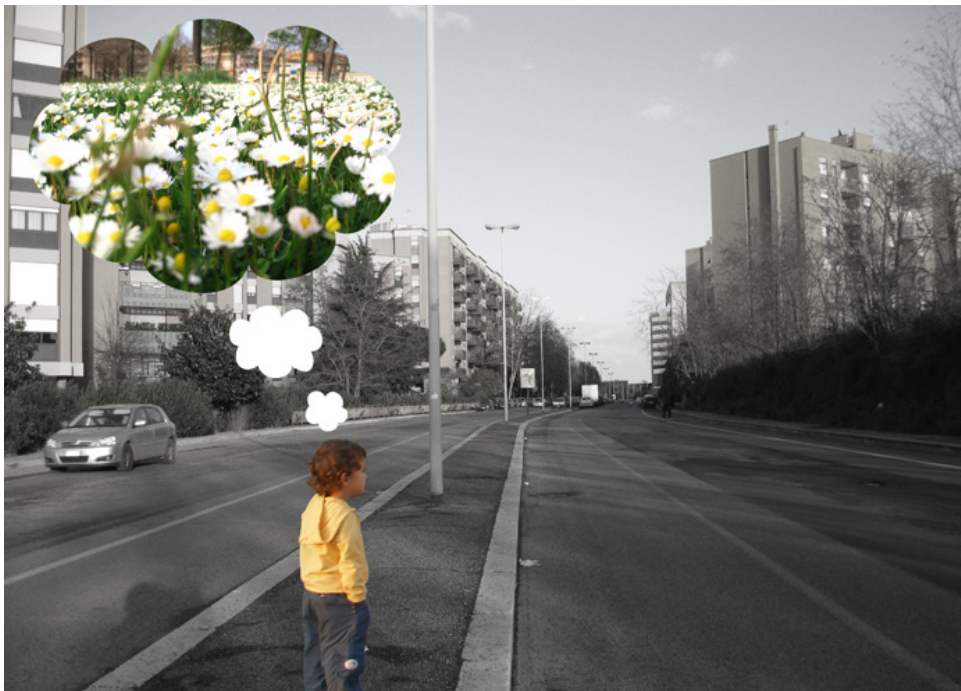


Figure 2

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3 “Convention on the Right’s of the Child” Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Right, 20 November 1989.

4 The quote of Jean Brune is in “Le mani guardano”, catalogo della mostra, Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna, Roma 24-IX/ 2-XI- 1980, Roma, De Luca Editore, 1980