A Dragon in the Neighborhood: City Planning with Children in Milan, Italy

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Introduction

> Aidan was the commentator. He was brilliant at it. We had to tell him our names before the match. We were playing across the road. Our pitcher was gone. The gates on each side were the goals. There were eight of us, just right, four a side. Whoever had the ball when a car was coming got a throw-in when the car had gone. If you decided to risk it but the driver blasted the horn before you took your shot, the goal was disallowed, if it was a goal. You couldn't use the curb for shielding the ball. Anything higher than the top of the pillar was over the bar.
>
> — Roddy Doyle (1993)

PLAY SPACES IN THE OLD CITY WERE VARIOUS, MYSTERIOUS, AND MULTIFARIOUS; THE children in it were active and independent. Playing was something not very different from going outside and simply living in your neighborhood. On every corner there was a surprise; the objects there — inhabitants, gardens, secret places — were playmates. Today the city no longer seems to support children's play; on the contrary, it seems to prohibit it. Spaces for play are increasingly narrow and enclosured. They seem to be small, artificial compromises that adults have given as a gift, but without any opportunity for children to express themselves. They can no longer go around by themselves or, if they do, they walk among street signs proclaiming "It Is Prohibited...," "It Is Forbidden...," "Warning," or "Danger!" The space no longer has "dense" meanings. External logic decides everything. Many children are driven by car between meaningful spaces — afternoon classes, friends' homes, enclosed playgrounds, to the soccer field, to the cinema, to buy an ice cream. They don't make decisions; somebody else is doing it. They hardly explore or discover anything: everything has already been planned. This is what I found when working with children on "The Needs of the Urban Child" project. The world described by Roddy Doyle (1993) represents a reality that we have been struggling to re-create.

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The project began in Milan in October 1994, as part of a UNICEF project in five countries — India, the Philippines, Brazil, Kenya, and Italy. It was based on the idea of children not as static objects to take care of, but as active subjects in improving their environments. The first phase of the project — two years of analysis of data on children's life conditions — ended in 1992 with an international meeting of city mayors, urban planners, and policymakers in Florence, Italy (Blue et al., 1994). Here participatory strategies were set for the second phase. The five Italian city mayors agreed to create a central structure within their city governments to coordinate existing services for children and encourage the participation of children in addressing key issues affecting them.

As a result, the Milan City Council approved the formation of a Children Wellness Council (Consiglio per il Benessere dei Minori) to promote action at the local level and coordinate strategies at the central level. Two pilot zones were selected: Zone 3, a central, densely residential area characterized by diversity of architectural styles and people (upper-middle-class, art noveau buildings mixed with decaying buildings where non-European immigrants live), and Zone 20, located in the city's northern outskirts, where several large public projects were built in the 1960s and 1970s after several waves of blue-collar immigration from southern Italy. The planning project reported in this study was on the edge of Quarto Oggiaro, the main neighborhood in Zone 20. It suffers in that the buildings are in bad condition and it is geographically distant from the rest of the city, though it is connected to Milan by three bridges and one railway. Unlike Zone 3, which is a very lively area where the main problems are lack of green areas and intense car traffic, Quarto Oggiaro has few places where children can gather on their own terms.

The Planning Project

This project was based in an elementary school, near a bridge where traffic flows heavily in and out of Milan. As such, there is air and acoustic pollution, and hardly any green areas. This severely affects children's autonomy of movement.

My work was with 19 fifth-grade children. Together with an urban planner, I met with them weekly, for two hours per week, as part of a process that took place during seven months between 1995 and 1996. Three other facilitators were carrying on similar tasks in other areas of Zone 3 and Zone 20. There were monthly meetings with the central coordinators and public administration's representatives and experts.

This process was inspired by a set of planning strategies for children's participation in urban design that was introduced in Italy several years ago (Lepore and Lorenzo, 1984). It includes guiding children to reflect on their own environments at a neighborhood level and to draw up an urban plan using maps, sketches, and tridimensional models.

Analysis of the Neighborhood

In our first exercise, "Thinking About the Future of the Neighborhood," each child was asked to describe and explain how they saw the future of their neighborhood, using drawings where the present and the future of the neighborhood were represented. The children's optimism was evident as 18 of the 19 children depicted the future of their neighborhood as improving. Only one child believed the neighborhood's conditions to be worsening. This optimism is typical of children still attending elementary school (first through fifth grade).

The children were then assisted in individually depicting what the neighborhood represents to them. These "mental maps" tell us how the life of the children is in that neighborhood, what streets are important to them, which places they love, etc. After interpreting the individual maps, we tried to draw a common map of the neighborhood on which everyone's home was located. Our interpretations were drawn from categories that Kevin Lynch (1960: 46) proposes in his study of people's perception of the urban environment. For example, we described the morphology of the neighborhood in terms of "paths" (linear channels that are used to move through the city), "edges" (boundaries between two sectors of the city), "districts" (areas with specific connotations, such as a specific architectonic style or social structure), "nodes" (focal points and meeting places), and "landmarks" (important, representative places or objects in the city). Our first finding surprised us: few common elements were perceived by the children. "Neighborhood" meant a different place to each of them. Common symbols of landmarks or objects in the city were rare. The mental maps revealed that the streets around the children's houses, with shops and buildings drawn very accurately, contained large blank spaces in between, indicating the children's unfamiliarity with other parts of the neighborhood (see Figure 1).

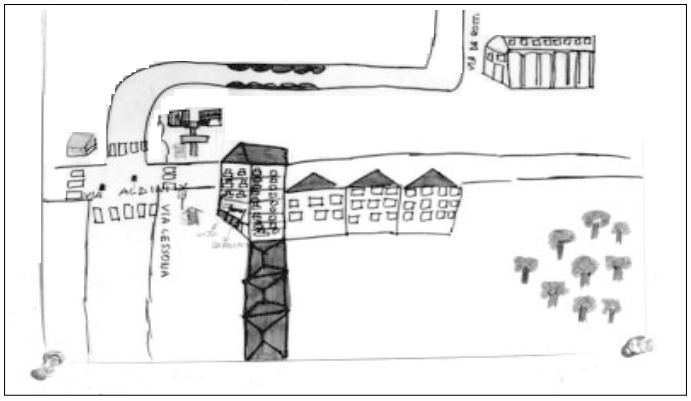

Figure 1:
A Mental Map showing how space is fragmented.

Nicoletta drew her house (the tall building at the center of the map) and its immediate surroundings in an accurate way. The barber and "Gisel's" shops are marked at the street level, like the bus stop, and — across the street (on the left of the map) — the *giornalaio*, the newspaper kiosk. Yet this small, lively area fades into an empty, blank space. The neighborhood becomes dense again with the school building, drawn in a very realistic way, on the top right corner. A bunch of trees in the lower right corner indicates a park, totally unlinked to the rest of the space. Nothing is said about the connection between the house, the school, and the park — the three principal aspects of Nicoletta's daily life.

The fragmented nature of their experienced world was a symptom of their lack of opportunities to even walk around and discover their neighborhood, relate autonomously to older persons, and to truly inhabit the spaces immediately around their own homes and the school. To confirm these initial interpretations, we asked the children how they spent their after-school time. Most said they are driven to school by their parents and none of them walk home after school. Few of them spend time in the streets after school because there is no space to meet friends or to play. They were not able to depict the other parts of the city through images and symbols, because they didn't inhabit them. To them "space" meant the "time" that it takes to reach some "distant" place by car.

We decided to take the group out into their own neighborhood to explore it. They were divided into five groups, each with different things to observe. To obtain a rich and complex final image of the neighborhood, we created a five-category model of observation.

As Table 1 (see page 201) reveals, this exploration took account of different aspects of the neighborhood that children could only grasp if they used all of their senses. The "Architects" had to visually observe and depict the natural and built environment; this helped make the children conscious of the different materials used in the built environment and their relation to the natural environment. The "Extraterrestrials" had to use feelings, trying to understand the place through the emotions evoked by it; they re-created the neighborhood with new street names to describe their experience of the place. The "Journalists" were to observe social factors of the neighborhood, using interviews and participant observations. The last group, the "Highway Patrolmen," dealt directly with the traffic problems, observing car drivers' behavior and comparing it to pedestrians' behavior, and giving tickets to cars parked on the sidewalks.

Walking in the streets and talking to people proved to be an easy yet rich mode of inquiry. The children initially depicted a very sad and gray environment, a neighborhood in which they felt alienated. It was a place with no spaces to play, streets filled with cars and trucks, many of them parked on the sidewalks and were therefore obstacles to the pedestrians; there were dark, gray factory walls everywhere. Few people were evident in these initial depictions of the neighborhood. Invited to give the streets new names, they offered names like "Street of Sadness," "Trash Avenue," and so on. As Jane Jacobs (1961) would have defined it, this was a neighborhood where no "Informal Public Sphere" existed, i.e., a network of relations between local inhabitants, between the "Public Sphere" (where institutions and authority reside) and the "Private Sphere" where private relations are located. The Informal Public Sphere is typical of the great metropolitan cities and can be experienced only at a specific, local neighborhood scale.[2] Without it, inhabitants are strangers to each other; informal public relations do not occur. Our neighborhood had, over time, become a body with no life blood in its veins.

Making the New Traffic Plan

The area we explored was under major reconstruction, with the school at the center. The Palizzi Bridge, the main connection between Quarto Oggiaro and the rest of the city, was being enlarged and this work, directed by the Milan Metro System, was based on a plan that included revision of the traffic system and construction of a new tramway line in Via De Rossi, near the school. The site the children chose for their research was approved by the city, but it was facing Via Console Marcello, a street with heavy traffic that was scheduled to be enlarged to let even more traffic stream through it.

For our project to be linked with the actual process of city planning, we engaged the children in understanding the planning choices that had already been made. The enlargement of the Palizzi Bridge would drive the major traffic flow into two streets and diminish it in the two streets around the school. The city plan mainly focused on traffic; our task was to work within the city plan, but focus on the relations between the street and its inhabitants as they play or gather together, trying to overcome the effects of the cars.

The children were asked to think about the future of their neighborhood by making collages superimposed on copies of photographs of the site. In these collages, a network of streets was turned into a huge playground, or a new paved street with separated pedestrian and bike lanes, a green field full of animals, or a new square with plants and flowers whose central decaying monument was replaced by a new monument designed by children. These collages suggested a strong need for color and lively forms in a gray and empty neighborhood.

We tried to stimulate new possible visions of the future setting of the neighborhood through an activity named the "Future Wheel." Because the children had defined the main problem of the neighborhood as car traffic — with all its consequences (air and acoustic pollution, less safety, danger for pedestrians, etc.) — "fewer cars" was put at the center of the wheel. "Fewer cars" meant "more safety in the streets," "more places for inhabitants to gather" and an increased environmental concern and civic sense, starting with the children. In this way, the children came to define the physical characteristics and atmosphere of a sustainable pedestrian-oriented street.

To imagine how their prototypical street might be experienced in their neighborhood, we now introduced a new activity: "Voices from the neighborhood." The children were split into groups representing categories of inhabitants of the neighborhood — parents, seniors, people with disabilities, children, shop owners and business people — and they described the points of view from these different perspectives. A neighborhood is a place where many different interests and people live together; using creative negotiations (Fisher and Ury, 1981), we tried to account for this diversity by negotiating conflicts that could possibly arise. Each group role-played the various interests within the neighborhood and listed a

set of goals. These revealed in particular the street's lack of recreational areas, where people can feel safe and comfortable.

A New Concept of the Street

> Sidewalk width is invariably sacrificed for vehicular width, partly because city sidewalks are conventionally considered to be purely space for pedestrian travel and access to buildings, and go unrecognized and unrespected as the uniquely vital and irreplaceable organs of city safety, public life, and child rearing that they are (Jacobs, 1981: 87).

Our site contained three streets, each with different characteristics. We analyzed the public administration's maps and the children thought that the car lanes should not be so wide, because pedestrians didn't have enough space to walk or exchange a few chats on a sunny day on the sidewalks. The children resented always being taken "somewhere else" by their worried parents after school, instead of having time outside the school building to wait for their friends and walk home together, to hide from school fellows with whom they had fought during the day, or simply to play one last game before going home. Because the sidewalks were filled with cars, even crossing the street was risky.

We explored how the situation could be improved in the street that is most familiar to children, Via Varesina, which connects the Palizzi Bridge with the city. Along its sidewalks are many shops, factory walls, and residential buildings. Initially, we reduced the car lane and made it one-way only. Then we planned special lanes for bikes and pedestrians, separated from the car lanes by a row of trees, which also gave shade to pedestrians and bikers and reduced sound pollution. In our plan, cars were parked in a parking lot instead of on the sidewalks. Our system of streets with multiple lanes, as well as sidewalks and pedestrian areas crossing the whole street, became a sort of physical "model" that could be used not only around our school, but also along the entire length of Via Varesina.

Then we moved on to Via Raimondi, which presented the greatest problems. The only buildings on this street are factories, and the street is used mostly by trucks to load and unload goods. The traffic flow does not annoy pedestrians because nobody walks here. The children used Via Raimondi as an extension of the school's courtyard to create a joyful and completely different space; they turned it into a stretched-oval square where they could play and no cars were allowed. It became a place to gather, play, and recover from the stresses of urban life. We planned pedestrian areas, a bike lane, and a skateboard area, all oriented to recreation and play, with a mural on one long factory wall facing the street. In front of the mural, we placed dragon-shaped benches, which functioned simultaneously as benches and as bike holders (Figures 5 and 6). The children felt that, given a place to park their bicycles, they would be more likely to bike from their homes to school rather than being driven by their parents. The large pedestrian area

contained tables and chairs to play chess and other games. We designed trash cans in different shapes, to be distributed throughout the area, along with a few pet toilets to make the animals feel part of the community. We wanted to educate everybody about keeping the street clean. A charming, green area surrounded by trees and bushes was set aside for lovers, who could sit on special red, heart-shaped benches, where nobody would disturb them. A thick barrier created by a double row of trees separated this "long square" from a truck lane, to be used during working hours to load and unload goods on one side of the street. We spent considerable time building a tridimensional model of the area, complete with all these details.

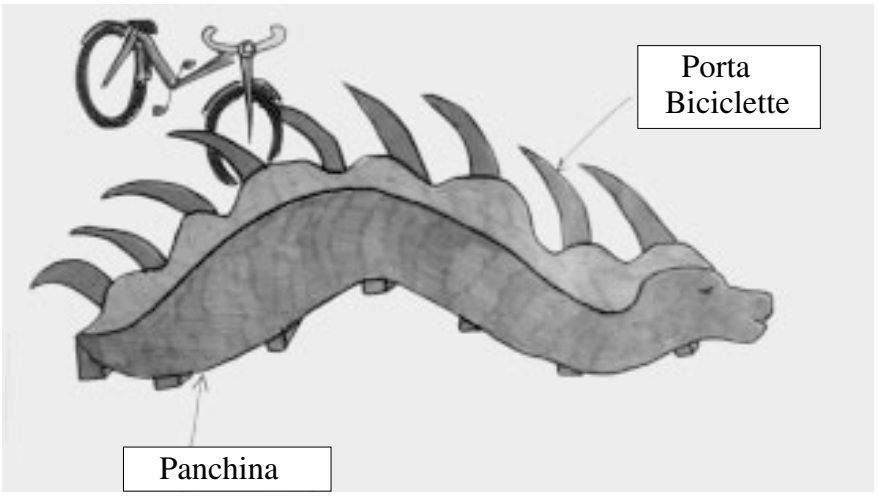

Figure 5: Dragon-Shaped Bench: Children's Design.

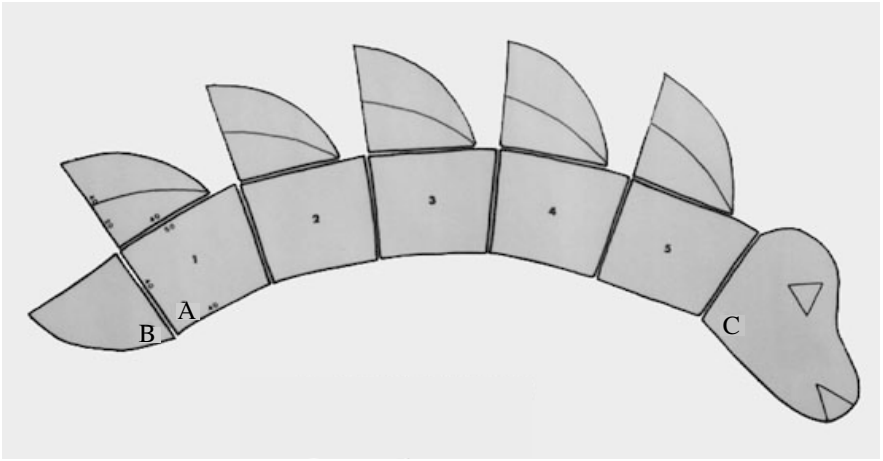

Figure 6: Dragon-Shaped Bench: Drawing by the Public Administration.
The bench's shape is simpler, composed of three elements: a trapezoidal element (A), a triangular element (B), and the dragon's muzzle (C). It was to be made of recycled plastic, green for the body, red for the comb.

The Dragon in the Community

Gradually, the dragon became the symbol of our project and a centerpiece of an exhibition at the school, which was visited by parents, schoolmates, and teachers. In exhibiting their work, the children gained confidence in their power to transform the physical space around them. We asked community members to make suggestions to improve the project, and the feedback was generally positive, except that some shop owners feared that enlargement of the pedestrian areas and the introduction of one-way traffic routing would decrease their business. For them, life in the street meant many cars driving through; one of them said that the street would be "dead" after the enlargement of the pedestrian areas.

Then came two months of working with the City Council, modeling the results, and preparing a public campaign to promote the children's ideas. The children designed cards to send to community leaders and fliers to put on shop windows and to hand out to people. In May, during a special week dedicated to the "Urban Child," a conference was held in Milan. Citizens, City Council members, and participation specialists were invited and an official presentation was made. Children from the different schools presented their projects. This marked the beginning of a new dialogue with the public administration. The mayor of Milan attended and promised that the children's recommendations would be seriously considered.

Negotiation between the public administration and the facilitators continue, though there are many problems to be overcome in the realization of the children's plan. Via Varesina will, however, be reconstructed, and hopefully the children's design will be considered for the area facing the school's entrance. Via Raimondi is a privately owned street and will probably need City Council approval before being renovated.

The findings from Via Raimondi were carried over to Via De Rossi, where some of the children's ideas have now been included in the master plan. The ground is now broken and the street is closed, but for several months no work has been done. However, the idea of a mural has been approved by the water company and we are trying to raise funds for it from private sponsors. The plan is that our 19 kids, together with other children from the school, will paint it during after-school hours, and once the work is finished the school will take care of it. One City Council member, who is also an artist, has offered his help.

The trash cans and some of the benches designed by the children were approved by the City Council's Urban Design Department and Ecology and Environment Department, and are now being made. A major private sponsor has been involved in this process.

The dragon-shaped bench has been discussed at several meetings with the City Council's Urban Design staff and a private sponsor; the design has been simplified and the sponsor has agreed to produce one or two benches from recycled plastic,

to be put in Via De Rossi right in front of the school. The children are very pleased about this. The dragons will become more than simple benches; they will be sculptures, rich in meaning and metaphor.

Conclusions

Children doing participatory research and planning are treated in many different ways. They are considered by some as the real actors of the process, by others as the objects of public politics, as students taught by teachers about environmental issues, or as nice and funny artists with unusual and interesting ideas about the city. The truth is that it is not easy to involve children in a truly participatory process and to guarantee that they remain the real agents and promoters of this process. The politics of city planning is a particular obstacle that threatens to diminish the work group's enthusiasm and energy and negatively influences the full implementation of the children's plans. If the children are to see themselves as active agents of their environment's change and improvement, it is important that at least some parts of their plan be realized.

This raises the question of negotiation. During the Urban Child Project, the facilitators at different sites were involved in a debate about how to deal with the children's individual choices in relation to their real chances of implementation. The facilitators followed two different approaches. Some schools decided to give children the freedom to express themselves beyond the possibility of realization; others, including my school, decided to foster a compromise between children's choices and bureaucratic restrictions, thereby making children the real actors facing conflicts and negotiating resolutions in their attempts to create change.

A participatory process involves many actors on the city's stage. We also learned the importance of involving public administration experts in the work team and of building mutual trust and cooperation with them to make implementation of the children's design plans more likely. We also discovered the need for training public administration planning staff in participatory and cooperative approaches to the managing of the city. They seemed open to this approach. If it were done with the children, this would likely lead to much better informed neighborhood planning.

Acknowledgments

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Table 1:
Model of Observation of the Neighborhood

Role	Category of Observation	Action on the Field	Result
Explorers	Physical Perceptions (smell, sound, touch)	Smell, hearing, and touch were used to observe the space around.	Neighborhood as a land to be discovered described in terms of impressions.
Extra-terrestrials	Perceptions and feelings (emotions evoked by the place)	Children were not able to read the names of streets on the map. Places and streets were renamed according to the impressions the place evoked in them.	Neighborhood as an unknown place. New toponomastic and geography of the place.
Architects	Anthropic and natural forms and materials in the space.	Sight and touch were used to observe shapes, colors, and materials of the built and natural environment around.	Neighborhood as an architectural object. Description of shapes and materials that have been used in the different sites.
Journalists	Behavior and moods of the people in the place.	Age, mood, actions, facial expressions, and attitudes of people in the streets were observed.	Neighborhood as a social place. Description of the relation between people's behavior and the environment.
Highway Patrolmen	Movements in the space (such as driving, biking, walking, and skating).	Street traffic's flow and movement. Cars and pedestrians' behavior, cars frequency and quantity were observed.	Neighborhood as a flow of movements and energy. Description of traffic rules and behavior of the citizens related to them.

NOTES

1. This article was adapted from the original by the Editors and subsequently reviewed by the author.
2. Jane Jacobs (1961: 56) writes:

> The trust of a city street is formed over time from many, many little public sidewalk contacts. It grows out of people stopping by at the bar for a beer, getting advice from the grocer and giving advice to the newsstand man, comparing opinions with other customers at the bakery and nodding hello to the two boys drinking pop on the stoop, eyeing the girls while waiting to be called for dinner, admonishing the children, hearing about a job from the hardware man and borrowing a dollar from the druggist, admiring the new babies, and sympathizing over the way a coat faded.... The sum of such casual, public contact at a local

level — most of it fortuitous, most of it associated with errands, all of it metered by the person concerned and not thrust upon him by anyone — is a feeling for the public identity of people, a web of public respect and trust, and resource in time of personal or neighborhood need. The absence of this trust is a disaster to a city street. Its cultivation cannot be institutionalized. And above all, it implies no private commitments.

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