Children’s mobility and playability: planning with children equitable spaces

Abstract

City planning generally assumes that providing a service or designing a system for able-bodied adults is equivalent to addressing the well-being of children. An underlying premise is that adults are the guardians of children, who are deemed dependable and vulnerable. Thus, a city that is convenient for adults will also be beneficial for children. However, the idea behind planning with children is just the opposite: providing for the needs of children also provides for the basic needs of society. Recognizing the need for children to intrinsically read, build, play and move in a city, this paper highlights how a car-centered society has socially excluded children, and other populations; it has impoverished their mobility.

Based on a participatory action-research approach, this is a case study of a marginalized community in San Juan, Puerto Rico. The purpose is to answer two questions: what are some strategies to innovate space re-imagined by children, and what are useful approaches and techniques to engage children in city planning. With an emphasis on play, used techniques were community photo shooting, mapping and chalk street play. Strategies re-imagined by children included beautification of the neighborhood, sharing the street for play, finding home for the homeless instead of removal, and a straightforward eradication of criminal activity. These reflect children’s strong sense of beauty, empowerment, equity and justice. Engaging children to do city planning requires time, flexibility and much observation, as well as hands-offs approach from adults. Using play as a guiding principle for developing a planning process, as well as an objective of planning, is recommended. With this two-fold purpose, child led pop-ups seem a useful strategy for city planning since it involves serious play as well as tangible outcomes.
Play is a basic need of children, for it is what they do in order to develop their personality, skills and values. Recognizing the city as a playground for children implies that they have a right to the city. The city, as a sociopolitical phenomenon, and its physical locus, may engender—through play—paramount opportunities for children to become empowered, tolerant, solidary and free citizens. Playability as the capacity of children to play in any given time and space, such as the neighborhood, is endangered.

While children play anywhere and everywhere—from a staircase to a fence—the problem is having access, safety, security and mobility to reach playful places in a city. Planning with children brings their perspective in order to address such issues, and innovate spaces to improve their playability and mobility. However, planning with children is a practice that has gained limited attention and may not seem of crucial importance to different agents that do not align with principles of participatory planning, that may lead to more democratic practices, such as radical municipalism.

Child Friendly Cities (CFC) is an international movement that has resulted in various efforts to plan with children. It has promoted integrating children’s needs for play, development, safety, mobility, nutrition and other matters, to the management, development and planning of cities. Concrete initiatives vary from securing water for children and decreasing poverty, to children’s direct participation in municipal decision-making. Other efforts have focused on providing guides, manuals and protocols for improving the participation of children in city matters, and city conditions based on children’s needs. In the case of industrialized cities, the problem of children’s playability has been influenced by a dependence on cars for transportation, and an infrastructure that relies on parking and streets—which occupy much of the space available.

Planning with children may serve to take notice of how the city meets children’s scale and needs for exploration and discovery. Based on the experience of a small community in the middle of a car-centered city, what are strategies to innovate space re-imagined by children? A second question presented in this paper examines how to actively integrate their voices into the planning process of their neighborhood. Resulting recommendations are strategies to establish more inclusive and equitable participatory practices to promote children’s mobility and playability as something crucial to their development and sense of belonging, as well as a stronger sense of citizenship.

**Planning with Children**

Discovering children’s perspective implies planners’ need to transform the decision-making process to make it more participatory of children, equitable and inclusive. This requires planners and all stakeholders to learn the language, knowledge and ideas of children, and to transform them into concrete initiatives, when needed. The fundamental idea is to redefine and transform current participatory practices to plan with children instead of for children.

A conceptual framework for planning with children must have their participation in the decision-making process as a building block. Researching with children is necessary for uncovering their needs and helping them fulfill their rights. This sheds light into what constitutes a more livable city: what meets their scale and needs for discovery, as it benefits
the majority of society and most vulnerable populations. One challenge to this end is to redefine the conventional construct of childhood.

Historically, children have been conceptualized as little adults or adults in-the-making. Thus their intrinsic childhood has been dismissed or considered in relation to adult life (Bustelo, 2007). Instead, children ought to be considered as social constructs, relative to the place, society and historical context where they live, as well as other social dimensions such as class, ethnicity, gender and age; they have agency and rights that shape how they live in society and the environment (Matthews, Limb, & Taylor, 1998). This concept of children as social beings implies the need to consider their interests, perspectives and knowledge, which are different from adults. Also, this construct recognizes that children are not a homogeneous group. Differences must be taken into account when planning with children.

Usually adults decide what is in the best interest of children. Likewise, planners plan a city for children, instead of with children. Children have no individual autonomy, neither individual rights since they are considered indefensible and vulnerable. Instead of autonomy, children have heteronomy. For this reason, children’s social rights, instead of individual rights, are to be recognized (Bustelo, 2007). Thus, their rights are in the public realm since the whole society is responsible for children’s rights. Unmistakably, city planning is primarily of the public realm. For city planners, this means that they, and all implicated stakeholders, have to learn to understand childhood in order to be able to hold a dialogue with them (Bustelo, 2007). This represents a great challenge: training and educating adults involved in a planning process to learn to discover the knowledge, interests, desires and language of children.

There should be a “communicative bond between children and adults, and the duty and commitment of adults to learn with the children and to penetrate to the interior of the children perspective as much as possible” (ibid). Thus, a planner would learn issues deemed of lesser importance for city functions, such as play, whereas play is a significant activity for children:

*Children’s ability of playing free and spontaneously is similar to adults’ most elevated and extraordinary experiences such as scientific research, exploration, art, and mysticism; precisely the experiences in which humans find themselves in front of complexity, where he or she finds again the possibility of letting himself or herself be guided by the great motor of pleasure.* (Tonucci, 2007)

One may conclude that a livable city is where children can play. The importance of play is directly related to health, safety and access. Play is defined as a free process, self-directed and motivated where children develop their own ideas for their own reasons (Lester & Maudsley, 2006)

During the last decade, children issues such as obesity and general health, access to parks and safe routes to schools have emerged as part of city planning (Loukaitou-Sideris & Sideris, 2010) (Goodwin & Soria, 2008) (Ewing, Schmid, Killingsworth, Zlot & Raudenbush, 2003). While this practice is in favor of children, it is still from the perspective of the adult. They focus on safety and time and space structure as needed to “control” children in city spaces. In order to improve children’s playability in the city, planners should
recognize children as citizens with social rights and learn their language, knowledge and ideas.

Planning theoretical perspectives that offer childhood-oriented approaches are advocacy and participatory planning. The advocacy planning perspective suggests that planners should advocate for children when developing plans and projects if a childhood-oriented planning perspective is adopted. In this case, planning in favor, in representation of or for children is acceptable. This suggests but does not emphasize planning with children. On the other hand, participatory planning perspective states that children should be included in the planning process; planning could be either for children or with children. Participatory planning seems to provide a useful framework for planning practices more in tune with children rights. However, children's rights' supporters observe that most of the work done with children, ends up using children as tokens instead of really having them participating as individuals with important perspectives and ideas (Hart, 1992).

Both an important justification and guidance for transforming city planning practices into childhood-oriented decision-making processes, besides improving the livability of cities, is the emancipation of children. Children rights movement has remained in the international agenda ever since the Convention on the Rights of the Child of the Charter of the United Nations (CRC) in 1989 was ratified by most countries. Advocates propose that the well-being of children and their emancipation through the guarantee of their rights should constitute parameters against which to measure the success of a city as a desired human settlement, in rich and poor countries. The idea however is not to build a city for children, but a democratic city for humans (Chawla, 2002). Instead of building more parks and childcare, which are necessary services, the argument is to plan, build and maintain urban services and spaces that allow children to be free and safe to play and learn. Thus, planning with children is the on-going process of identifying current and potential future problems that affect mobility, the natural environment, and economic development through the eyes of children. It also aims to define solutions that enable children improve their playability by participating in decision-making and the implementation of solutions.

Community and Planning Context

This case study takes place in Capetillo, a small neighborhood. It is located on a larger community, Río Piedras (RP), in the Municipality of San Juan (MSJ) in Puerto Rico (PR)—an unincorporated island-territory of the United States (USA) in the Caribbean region. Puerto Rico’s population, 3.4 million, has been decreasing during the last decade due to fast migrating rates to USA. Economic stagnation together with austerity measures from the government, has in part promoted such migration. In the middle of this precariousness, the community in RP has kept organized to promote its revitalization through community planning and other cultural and social initiatives.

The community amended their revitalization law in 2015. This version of Act No. 75-1995 for the Rehabilitation and Revitalization of Río Piedras, updated economic incentives, and included a community organizational scheme that integrated governmental agencies with community leadership. One of the main objectives of the Act is to update planning instruments, such as the Río Piedras Revitalization and Comprehensive Development Plan of 1996, and produce new neighborhood plans. The Act also created the Río Piedras Land Trust to promote land use development.

The Act calls for strong community participation in all planning initiatives, including residents, businesses, government and the University of Puerto Rico (UPR)—which campus is located within RP, adjacent to its main square. The UPR has been active within the
community through its fifteen-year old initiative named Urban Action and Community Development Center (CAUCE in Spanish) at RP. CAUCE, which has representation in various community organizations, has been active in supporting and facilitating recent planning efforts in the community. In the past, it has built trust in the community through social work interventions and services, and developed the Capetillo Community Garden. This has become a central initiative, both for increasing collaboration with the UPR, as well as integrating youth and children in community activities—-from tutoring services, to water management trainings, small business development, and summer camps. In 2016, it won the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency World Environmental Champion Award for its exceptional commitment to environmental and public health.

The MSJ conducted a participatory budgeting process. In RP, hundreds of people, including children, participated in a series of popular assemblies to present project proposals and vote for preferred ones. Among projects were bicycle lanes, parks, recreational facilities, buildings for community use, among others. Winning projects were recreational facilities and a park. The first one was implemented, and the second one is in process. The rest of the projects are still on the community's agenda. One of them is a flag project in Capetillo: putting a ceiling on the community basketball court.

Capetillo shares RP history of urban decline. RP is one of eighteen subdivisions of San Juan--the capital city with a 355,000 population. RP has an urban core area with eight neighborhoods surrounding a Spanish-style plaza, a church, a farmers’ market, government and commercial establishments. San Juan’s urban sprawl, starting around from 1960’s, has led RP to an urban decline depicted in a loss of population and shrinkage in its economy. Its urban decline is evident in a 30% of its structures without use. This increases the obsolete and insecure space in RP, that hinders the attraction of prospective settlers to the area (Oswalt, 2005). In fact this sort of abandonment not only permeates a lack of color, joy and insecurity in the physiological nature of the neighborhood, but it also brings a look of “rotten teeth” in certain parts of the streets of this community. Regardless of these conditions, residents of the area are struggling to improve RP’s livability. Its human scale design, mix of uses and density, as well as access to transit and a metro, make RP attractive for revitalization compared to most of the areas in San Juan.

Capetillo covers a geographic area of ten small blocks, mainly residential, with some commerce. Its population is 1,936 inhabitants, with 42% of them Puerto Ricans, and approximately 57% from other Caribbean islands, with Dominicans being the predominant residents. Only seven percent of the population is between the ages of five and nine years of age (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Even though the average income is $18,185, most of the occupants earn less than $10,000 a year, depicting high levels of poverty in the area girded by urban desolation. Nonetheless, community leaders have kept active to improve such conditions.

**The Method**

This case study results from a collaborative effort between CAUCE and the community of RP. CAUCE has supported RP’s on-going community-based city planning initiative for revitalization. While children’s wellbeing has been a concern in the community, their
engagement in planning has been limited. The objective of the study is to explore children’s perspective on their playability in the neighborhood they live in; including mobility which provides for the capacity to play. Main questions are what are some strategies to innovate space, re-imagined by children, and subsequently, what are useful approaches and techniques to engage children in city planning.

Participatory action-research is the approach of this study since it is most effective when there is a need to generate new knowledge to serve as the evidence base for new designs—in this case, designing planning with children approaches (Moore & Marcus, 2008). It is actually recommended within the children’s rights movement (Chawla, 2002). In addition, participatory action-research provides for devising a concrete action that results from the research. Such opportunity is of great importance when planning with children because it contributes to a sense of accomplishment. This is of special concern since resulting action plans might take a long time to implement, while children relate better to the present moment than to the future. Furthermore, resulting empowerment motivates participants to engage in community work (Selener, 1998). Supporting children in city planning provides opportunities to exercise their citizenship and autonomy.

Qualitative methods are recommended when working with children, such as formal and informal observations of children, interviews, children-created behavioral and vision maps, children taken photographs, children and other participants’ annotation of memories and activities on base maps, role plays, and child-led walks (Tonucci, 2007) (O’Brien, 2003) (Driskell, 2001). Examples of projects with children are mappings of a community or neighborhood from the perspective of children, identifying their preferred places to visit, time used and schedules (Ragan, 2009) (Wridt, 2005). Child-led tours is a preferred technique given its potential to integrate qualitative information with spatial analysis (Loebach & Gilliland, 2010). Other conventional city planning methods employed have been focus groups and small group discussions, interviews with parents, community leaders and city planning officials, community workshops, photographs, and background information such as sociological, historical and economic data from census, local histories, old photographs, government reports and surveys.

A minority of initiatives to engage children in planning emphasize play as a desired outcome, they are more focused on general participation, directed space design, mobility, and learning. A broad initiative that includes both research and practical projects is the CFC, built on the previously existing Growing up in Cities (GUC) project by K. Lynch in the 1970’s, further developed by UNICEF. CFC partners include CERG and Child Watch (UNICEF, 2004) (Bridgman, 2004). These are mainly focused on general participation of children.

A great number of studies and guidelines emphasize the design of urban spaces rather than mobility or playability (Passon, Levi, & del Rio, 2008) (Machemer, Bruch, & Kuipers, 2008) (McKoy & Vincent, 2007) (Frank, 2006) (Talen, 1999) (Vliet, 1981). While more limited, studies on how to integrate children and youth in planning are available (Masri, 2016) (Knowles-Yáñez, 2005). Resources for addressing children’s mobility in particular are available in the international forum. For example, the Children’s Tracks project in Vestfold, Norway, where children are asked to map their mobility patterns in the outdoor around places where they live; areas, places, playgrounds; streets, roads, trails used and areas that they
perceive as dangerous (City of Vestfold, 2009). Another example, is the Kids on the Move handbook (Ontario, Canada), which draws from the European Commission’s Kids on the Move project (The Centre for Sustainable Transportation, 2004) (European Commission, 2006). The main principle of its conceptual framework is “children admitted” in the city as a guide to identify priorities, develop strategies and taking action regarding the transportation system. However, none of them emphasize play, neither for developing the planning process nor as an object of planning. The Nature Play and Learning Places (Moore, 2014), the International Play Association (IPA, 2016), and the Children and Nature Network’s Community Action Guide (2014) are play-oriented complementary initiatives that offer guidance in such manner, while not necessarily geared towards city planning.

In sum, revised guidelines and protocols for working with children in city planning are abundant, yet mostly focused on including children using conventional planning approaches. Guidelines and protocols that actually employ play, it is something highly structured and directed—rather than an open, free and flexible approach. This study employed three conventional participatory activities, but with an added emphasis on play: community photo shooting, a mapping game, and chalk street game. To make them more playful means to allow children to take initiative as much as possible during the activities, and locate them outdoors—where more flexibility and options to move and see were possible. The idea was to explore planning with children practices that are play oriented, both in terms of the process and as a planning objective itself.

These three activities were part of the agenda of the community summer camp. Its site was the community garden, which has opened-air small meeting facilities. It also has access to a creek, Juan Méndez, and it is surrounded by trees and small green areas, and next to a small traditional playground. The camp leader recruited the participating children. Of the 20 children who signed up for camp, we received the assent of twelve children. Participating children ranged from four to fifteen years of age.

Community photo shooting

The community photo shooting consisted of an hour and a half morning walk within the community, with the participation of camp leaders and activity facilitators. The main camp leader selected the route spontaneously, even though the original plan was for children to select and direct it. It had three destinations: an over the creek pedestrian bridge; the basketball court; and the University campus. The origin of the walk was the community garden. Children walked in pairs and shared a tablet as a camera. Facilitators prompted children to take pictures to every place in the community they esteemed desirable for play or undesirable. See Figure 1. Afterwards, children showed their most and least favorite pictures regarding playability.

Mapping game

The geographic map location game consisted of a large three-by-two, pre hand-drawn parcels map of the community. Children were to identify the names of the streets, special places, where they live, preferred spaces to play, places that needed intervention to make them
adequate for play, and their route from home to reach the community garden and playground. Facilitators provided children with a pair of letter-sized colored photocopies of the creek bridge and the basketball court, as they were consistently photographed during the previous activity. See Figure 2. Facilitators asked children to draw changes they would like to see in such places in the future, to improve them for play purposes.

Chalk street play

Right after the mapping game, facilitators invited children to draw on the sidewalk with colorful jumbo chalks. Facilitators prompted children with open ended questions related to things they would like to see and to change on their street. While children drew, facilitators posed questions related to urban planning issues: play, mobility and exclusion. This took place on the main street of the community, which is in front of both the community garden and the playground. Although, originally, the activity was to take place on the sidewalk, it ended up on the street.

Findings

Based on posed research questions, findings are grouped in two sections. One section relates policy strategies to innovate space, re-imagined by children. The other section contains findings about approaches and techniques to engage children in urban planning. Children’s strategies to innovate space were rather expected in terms of the issues addressed, but their approach reflected sensitivity, empowerment, compassion and justice. The main four strategies were the following ones: making the area more beautiful; reclaiming the street for playing purposes on their own terms; taking care of homeless people; and eradicating point spaces from criminal activity. Children seemed to perceive their playability conditioned to improving their mobility in terms of addressing dangerous obstacles (cars and drug dealers) that inhibit their access, rather than physical elements, like deteriorated sidewalks. Findings on approaches and techniques to engage children, stress a hands-off role for the adults, and suggest the need for time, flexibility and much observation of children while participating.

Innovating space: policies re-imagined by children

A happy and friendly place for children is a neighborhood where they can improve their playability, in the short-term, with some help from adults, in the longer-term. Policy strategies are grouped in four: beautification of the neighborhood; fun street management; home for the homeless; and drug dealing eradication.

Beautification strategies consist of cleaning, adding life to the space with greening tactics and murals. Children identified cleaning the neighborhood from rubble and debris as a straightforward strategy. It includes not only the large, notorious long-time, abandoned cars and mountains of debris, but also corner sewers and small drug trash from ditches. This last one seemed like a symbolic reassurance of a rejection of drug dealing in the neighborhood. Cleaning the creek was also a desired intervention, due to its limited accessibility, which has
deprived them from playing in it. The creek has become an object of education on environmental issues and water management in the community, thus it seemed very present in children’s collective mind.

Children’s greening the space idea was about “decorating with flowers”. Their strategy consists of both, drawing flowers as well as planting them. Painting and planting seemed similar in their perceived effect on making the place more beautiful. This can be explained by the fact that their environment has more cement than earth to plant flowers. Both, boys and girls from all ages agreed with this, yet girls mentioned it more. Older children (7-10 yrs.) were more aware of the contribution of trees, not only for providing shade for playing on the street or sidewalk, but also as something that beautifies the space with flowers.

Murals in the community seemed as landmarks which children were proud of and were seen as playful objects. The available street art not only shared educative (gardening) content in the community, but it also seemed to attract older children. This was noticeable during the chalk street play, in which children appreciated a mural alluding to the garden and had the face of a person from the community. Another one—located at the University—had brilliant colors and endemic birds, which children admired and played with it. In sum, this strategy consists of looking and interacting with murals rather than painting them.

Children’s approach to street management was spontaneous. They seemed aware of the street as a shared space, where cars limited their mobility. The street also belonged to them, and they were enthusiastic about changing the rules of its use. The programmed activity, chalk street play, was to take place on the sidewalk. However, children led their way. The street seemed a bigger, open chalk board. They transformed the street, spontaneously, into a multi-use playground that worked for all children. Older children turned the street into a baseball-field, which became an unspoken invitation to smaller children to take the street as well. As they followed, young and old children mixed in drawing messages of social content and nationalism. They also added elements of beauty such as flowers, rainbows and games (e.g. hopscotch, house through symbolic play within a large drawing). They mixed, played and decided which adults to invite into their dynamics.

Children seemed to have fun while seriously implementing their measures on street management. They included setting spontaneous traffic calming barriers, as well as talking to drivers and writing clear messages. See Figure 3. Their more personal approach seemed necessary since the existing speed bump was not enough to control cars. They incorporated large trash cans and empty boxes as barriers. They also proceeded to write “stop” “do not pass” messages on the street and boxes, pop-up style.

When cars ignored their attempt to close the street, children decided to stop and talk to passer drivers. They even developed a system in which they would discriminate outsider drivers from local ones. Children told drivers to acknowledge a set time for closing the street for them to play. Yet, for some drivers, their time proposal was a joke. Regardless, this
child-led activity attracted neighbors to come see what was going on, as well as some drug users passing by. In general, the fact that the whole management of the street was under their leadership made it fun and fulfilling to the children.

Children strategies for homeless population located in their community seem out of compassion rather than fear or stigmatization. The main focus was to provide shelter rather than eradicate them from the area, promoting equity. The homeless population in the community gathers at a bench, green area next to the basketball court under the trees. They oscillate between ten and thirty people. Religious evangelize them regularly in exchange for food. Children indicated that parents do not allow them to go to the court often because homeless people are dangerous, thus restricting their mobility. While they seem to acknowledge and respect their parents view, they saw homeless people as their neighbors who should have a home around the community. Finding homes around the area, might seem as a logical strategy since there are numerous empty houses around the neighborhood.

Children directly and clearly rejected drug dealers and related criminal activity. Their straightforward approach was based on zero tolerance. The strategy “simply” consisted of removing the drug selling point, located next to their playground and community garden. In addition to getting rid of the latent violence that the drug selling point represented, removing it would free open play area. The drug selling point is located in a forest area, next to the creek, were some of the older children used to play. Once the drug selling point was established, it expelled children from their appropriated space, thus limiting even more their playground. Children felt entitled to the area where drug selling point locates. Children were aware of the fact that the removal was not in their hands, unlike managing the street, but it was a matter of claiming justice to them. However, the removal seemed of utmost importance, more than all of the other strategies, especially for older, male children. Similarly, a related strategy was to overthrow the one abandoned building where criminal activity takes place in front of the community garden. Again, the solution was straightforward since the perception is that the building attracts unwelcome criminal activity, which makes the space unsafe. Both, the drug dealing point and the abandoned building were negative landmarks that limited their mobility since parents would restrict them from passing by regularly.

Challenges and opportunities for planning with children

The following set of findings, identify approaches and techniques for engaging and planning with children. They point to challenges related to mixing children of different ages, hands-off role for adults, and addressing vocabulary needs. Findings for this case reaffirm that adult perspective heavily influence what children do and say. This applies to all adults, be it a community leader, an urban planner or experienced facilitator. Findings also indicate that planning with children requires time, flexibility and observation.

While observing children during the first activity—community photo shooting—they varied in taste and preferences for participation due to their large difference in age span. Yet, this was not a problem in their socialization process. They seem to act as a united community or family. Older children helped younger ones in manipulating the Ipad used to take pictures, and mingled during the following activities. Older children with better mobility in
terms of awareness of safety and geographic orientation, helped younger ones. During
drawing activities, children ages four to nine would draw and paint with materials, older
children, ten to fifteen, would hang out, slouched in chairs, while staring at their phones.
They would share videos and exchange conversations with regards to songs, dances and
other, like taking selfies. Some of them participated more actively during following activities.
For instance, during the mapping game, older children engaged and helped younger ones to
locate their homes and destinations.

Mapping with young children takes time. At moments, the activity seemed too
abstract for them in relation to their playability. Facilitators helped by asking specific
questions and locating places on the map. An alternative to help children visualize the
community without much direction is to provide loose parts, such as block and toys. Loose
parts may allow them to express their perspectives of the space in which they live, use and
play. In sum, technological devices compete with older children’s attention, while younger
children would benefit from more unstructured play with guided open questions.

Adult influence was more evident in directed activities where they had an opportunity
to intervene, such as the community photo shooting and mapping game. Influence was less
in a more free activity, the chalk street game. Some of the pictures children took were
suggested by an adult. For example, children photographed and recommended adding a
ceiling and lights to the basketball court. While children were aware of the amount of sun
they receive in the basketball court, these choices of amenities have been part of the
proposals that the community suggested at the municipality’s participatory budgeting.
Similarly, children of all ages agreed with cleaning the community’s creek. This is also a
community project located on the community garden, long supported and used for
educational purposes with children.

During the mapping game, children demonstrated their awareness of who lives where,
where danger is located, and what was across the main six lane avenue. Young children did
not comment on the dynamics and functionality of spaces in the neighborhood. Basically,
they depended on structured and adult support to express about the community. However,
when immersed in play, they were able to express, as questions were asked, about their
preferences once places were identified on the map.

In general, their vocabulary about ideas for innovation was limited. This was the case
during the community photo shooting and mapping game. During the chalk street game—a
more free play game—children’s actions in terms of drawings and loose materials
manipulation demonstrated greater innovation without the need for using particular
vocabulary. The more space and time given to allow children to move and express around a
planning issue, the more insights we were able to get.

During this final chalk game, they were immersed in the action of drawing, while
facilitators probe with questions and comments about how to change the street so that they
could play. Also, while the original question, how to improve the community to make it more
free-play friendly, was posed with the future in mind, children seemed to relate to it in the
present time. With regards to options, some of them expressed wanting to do different things
in the community. Yet, they did not elaborate on what they meant. Certainly, to obtain more
comprehensive ideas and perspectives, particularly from the younger children (four to seven),
more interactions would be beneficial. These interactions might include more free play, an
array of options, and loose parts as they need them to achieve the type of game they wish to play.

**Recommendations for Planning with Children**

Play should be a guiding principle for developing a planning process involving children, as well as a desired outcome. That is, in order to involve and engage children in urban planning, a useful protocol is one that uses play as a key strategy. This is a two-fold recommendation. On the one hand, the objective of planning should be to improve children’s playability. On the other, the activities for gathering children’s insights, should be playful. For example, if an activity is a geographic reading of the neighborhood, this should be a game with intrinsic characteristics of play. These are for example, that children can generate their own rules, get a sense of awe while playing, feel free, and so on. Children should be able to play, as unstructured as possible, as the objective of the planning activity. Allowing and helping them to play, for example on the street or at an abandoned lot, would be the purpose of the activity itself. Insights about their preferences, needs and opinions can be gathered as play unfolds through observation and probing questions. This is useful since children live in the present time, younger ones specially (approximately up to ten years old), and the future seems more difficult to grasp. This also implies that on-site planning activities with children are more desirable that at meeting rooms, classrooms or community centers.

Planners should become play experts. It is usually recommended that when planning with children teachers or people that are trained or have experience working with them are part of the activities (Bridgeman, 2004). Nonetheless, it is the planner who in the end has a clearer idea of what the planning process is meant to discover and transform for and with children. Thus, it would be beneficial that he or she gets involved in designing and/or facilitating planning with children processes and activities. Becoming a play expert means both getting acquaintance with children’s playing trends and perspectives, but also, getting a playful attitude. A playful attitude consists of keeping a sense of the planning purpose or objectives at hand, while staying aware and open to shifts in events in order to adapt to them as they unfold. It also means that planners must allow for children to participate in setting the rules of the planning activity at hand. Having a playful attitude is also a personal invitation to regain or maintain our “homo ludens” dimension, as Johan Huizinga discussed in the 1930’s. Play, while essential to human freedom and autonomy, promotes flexibility to adapt-a useful skill for planners engaging in participatory planning.

Planners need to dominate qualitative, ethnographic methods, such as participant observation. It is desirable to keep planning with children activities as spontaneous and unstructured as possible; the less intervention, the better. Thus, observing while supporting children’s engagement in playing with a planning purpose, requires practice and sensitivity. Because of the nature of play, a planner whose practice is with adults, would need to change gears and become immersed in probably the most “pure” form of participatory planning, so called “child-initiated, share decisions with adults” in Hart’s adapted ladder of children’s participation. (Hart, 1992) That is, unlike a conventional charrette or vision meeting where a planner’s role is to actively guide the process, in a play-oriented process, a planner needs to
be more observant and hands-off. A play approach to planning with children, suggests the creation of a niche as its practice spreads. Ideally, planning with children turns into a sub-specialization.

A useful strategy to engage children in planning that also has short-term outcomes for their benefit, is pop-ups. Pop-ups is a term to identify temporary uses or activities in the context of economic recession in cities of the global north (Tonkiss, 2013 in Harris 2015). It started as an alternative use for empty buildings in cities as incentive for new activity. Recent literature suggests pop-ups have been used as a strategy for business and for urban revitalization, with positive and negative consequences. On one hand, pop-ups allow social inclusion of marginalized populations, like children. However, pop-ups interventions can have gentrifying outcomes where vulnerable populations might get displaced.

From the planning with children perspective, pop-ups seem desirable as “serious play”. They can expose multiple meanings of space, such as that of children, as well as help in visualizing different future scenarios—like from the children’s perspective (Lashua, 2013 and Pratt & San Juan, 2014 in Harris 2015). The ludic aspect of uncertainty that pop-ups bring into planning with children is important. Technology is nature’s biggest competitor, yet conducting pop-ups with children adds elements that are intriguing to children’s behaviors. One of the advantages of pop-ups is the fact that they are dynamic, multifaceted and fluid. Hence, pop-ups can differentiate children’s level of engagement and allow them to use their analytical skills for solving issues in different contexts and different ranges of time.

There are a sort of pop-ups that spark the curiosity of families and children. These are pop-up playgrounds (e.g. Pop-Up Adventure Play and ¡JU! Inc.). Pop-Up Adventure Play is known for popping up in world tours in which they coordinate events among different community spaces leading adventurous play. In the case of JU—a small non-for-profit organization in PR—its mission is to integrate the participation of different organizations. Through community brigades they would enhance the potential of unused and abandoned spaces that would house their pop-up playgrounds (López-Navarrete, 2014). While pop-ups efforts have been disconnected from community planning efforts, a recommendation is to make them part of a planning with children toolbox. A following list of principles would help in doing so.

*Principles for child-led city planning pop-ups*

When thinking about planning with children through play, it is difficult to consider a standardized protocol. Instead, guiding principles for child-led pop-ups helps planners and facilitators visualize an array of factors and possible ways, in which children interact with place-making materials and their reactions. The objective is to support participatory planners and others to think about protocols when preparing activities that aim to weave children’s voices in the recommendation of tactical urbanistic features, allowing their visibility, walkability and playability in given contexts. Ideally, children are able to express their proposals, needs and intents for an area. Pop-ups give a chance to change spaces exemplifying concrete (formal or informal) solutions into the planning and programing of spaces.
Recommended principles for developing child-led urban planning pop-ups are the following:

- Be flexible in your train of thought- children play, interpret and read spaces- respectively to their developmental span.

- Adults that listen - integrate adults from the community and explain to the adults the importance of listening rather than giving children direct answers.

- Prefer outdoors - choose a location to conduct activities outside rooms, as close to the street as possible if the context allows. Either ask children for preferences or extrapolate from observation criteria for selecting a location.

- Consider child led tours - explain to children that you would like to receive a tour of their community. Make sure you guide the conversation with open-ended questions that can give insight of their train of thought.

- Walk around - allow children to show you the place(s) where they would like to play the most.

- Ask - children have a unique way in which they describe things. Guide the conversation with questions that can help you understand why they are or are not allowed to visit and play in certain spaces.

- Map it out - allow children to identify the places in which they walk. Try to understand how they read the environment. Ask them to identify a place that they would like to see differently while walking. Have them make the maps on the street, on walls, big format and in group.

- Increase the playability of a space - give children the opportunity to build with loose parts materials and through unstructured play. This seems to help optimize the way in which children develop confidence in reading, walking and playing in an area.

- Allocate resources - ask children what they would like to see in their selected place. Probe with related questions and add observation points to particular themes.

- Identify interventions - based on children’s needs and criteria for their selected spaces, make sure to analyze different possible interventions that you wish to explain to children. For example temporary restricting traffic on the street or removing fences. Beware of keeping it realistic and avoid creating false expectations.

- Make it possible - think of what interventions they suggested for their place and provide a variety of loose parts materials (e.g. yarn, plastic bags, paint, cardboard, fabric, tape, etc.) (Nicholson, 1975) (Pop-Up Adventure Play, n.d.). Allow children to transform these loose parts into the pieces they would like to see in their selected place.
Keep it active - mitigate children’s boredom by providing possible interventions and giving them new vocabulary for possibilities. If children verbalize that they do not know what to do, guide them with smaller open-ended questions (e.g. what is it that you would like to see?) While they are explaining things, make sure that you assure their answer with an example of it. Play silly and tell them to show you how since you seem not to understand, especially with young children.

Know your place - unless children ask for your guidance, just observe and record their comments and conversations. Let children play with the materials, this increases their playability in the space. Remember guidance does not mean telling them what to do. Let them know their knowledge is just what you want in order to help make their visions of a place possible.

Conclusion

Play as a desired outcome of a planning with children process, means that the city actually provides the time and space for free play. Instead of focusing only on conventional urban issues, such as security or safety in a neighborhood, planners may focus on play as the objective, and from there, ask the key question, what is needed in order to play. Furthermore, since having good mobility is a condition for play in a city, safety and access, should be considered from the social perspective and not only based on infrastructure availability and design, or modes of transportation.

In order to make cities more livable, children recommended making their communities more beautiful, taking back the street for play, offering homeless people a home and cleaning play spaces from criminal activity. While children’s perspective might sound simplistic to a conventional planner, the intent is to listen to their claims and what is of outmost importance in order to have such input for criteria in decision-making. Also, having their input is not the only reason for engaging children in urban planning, but actually having them take action on pressing issues that curtail their playability in the short-term. Like closing and managing the street themselves, supports their sense of empowerment and allows for their emancipation as present citizens.

This research was based on a case study, which overlooked a myriad of variables that influence children’s ability to express their preferences. These have to do with their level of cognitive and emotional development, their exposure to community concerns and activities and self-exclusion from participating in a summer camp. Further projects with other children in the community would help in validating the information obtained. Nonetheless, this case study findings and recommendations help in identifying various particular approaches and preferences from the children’s perspective to have a happy and friendlier neighborhood. They were sensitive to beauty, empowerment, equity and justice more than aware of functionality of spaces in the neighborhood. Furthermore, from this case study urban planners can get ideas for engaging children, and improving their playability, following basic recommendations. Planning with children requires time, flexibility and observation, as well as
a playful attitude from adults. A suggested approach is to transform often-used pop-ups for play into a city planning strategy for planning with children.

A planning niche would emerge as more consciousness of equitable planning gains terrain in a context of greater democracy claims from society. In the end, if children’s rights are social rather than individual, planners have the responsibility to add play to a city planning turn for more livable cities.
References


https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/416/


