

The Integration of Children's Participation Mechanisms in the Design of City Spaces

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Abstract

The game is an initiator of social relations. It is the intermediary through which the relationship with the other is established, it plays the role of initiation to socialization for the child. The qualities of play experienced during childhood have consequences for future adults. The public space is considered for the child as a creative environment of innovative behaviors, inspiring new values. However, the Algerian city does not always allow the practice of games and spaces dedicated to children, often keep them away from urban life, the latter conveying a violent and aggressive image (kidnapping, rape, etc.), distancing the child from public spaces: «The child is increasingly confined to the house and in spaces specific to his activities; he acquires a fragmented image of his environment» (Dolto, 1998).

The public space gradually becomes a space where the child is a spectator, not an actor. His possibilities of intervention in the space are currently reduced. Yet, the child could very well be «an active subject interacting with his environment», and not as «passively adapting to it. The relationship between public space and children has attracted our attention, because we have noticed how the unsuitability of public space for children is marked on several aspects (safety, atmosphere, morphology, form and structure...etc). This observation is centered on the quality of children's practices in these places. What is the place of the child in the design of public spaces in urban areas? Is the non-attendance of public spaces by children not caused by the non-integration of the child?

This questioning is justified by the role played by this social group in the public space. This is essential to understanding the issues related to the design of adequate living environments for all. How can we improve the situation to make these public spaces more accessible and appropriate for children? What are the participation tools to consider? How can we ensure that children's voices are heard? What is the relevance of participatory approaches in the urban management of public spaces? In this paper, we will try to shed light on the questions raised above, based on the «best practice cases» approach. We will detail the approach of child participation as the main actor to be considered in improving public space. We hope to find appropriate mechanisms that can integrate the child into the design process of public space.

Key words: Public space, children, participation, participation mechanisms.

INTRODUCTION

Public Space and Children: between Desires and Realities

The public space is a support to the imagination for children, a scenic space, it must be of quality, answering the expectations of the users and in particular of the children; a better-shared space, safer, more comfortable, welcoming multiple uses... a lived space; a place of life for the young people as for the adults: it is the crossroads between school and home, between the societal life (school and work) and the private life (housing). Adults, as well as children, seem to find there a breath of fresh air, a place of in-between, between two worlds, between two spaces, between two times... etc., a space conceived so that all ages, from the young child to the adult, through the teenagers, find a way to appropriate it and. To appropriate a place, the child must establish a relationship with it, integrate it into his or her experience and become an actor in its transformation. (CAUE, 2012).

Well aware of the need for children to appropriate their environment, adults recognize this right. Many developments in the Algerian public space, prove the decline of the designers - directors, because of the absence of a participatory approach. This absence excludes not only the children but also the professionals of childhood. (Cormenier, 2012).

As the child is removed from the public space, he or she encounters more and more difficulties in adapting to the social space. The child becomes increasingly rare in the public space. Parents' protection and lack of knowledge of public places, by overuse of the car as a means of travel, which separates children a little more from materiality, can explain this maladjustment of children to public space. As Françoise Dolto (1998) says, «deprived of observation of life in the street, the child cannot acquire the necessary experiences», and we are progressively witnessing a loss of the social character of the public space. Recalls the same author «The child is more and more confined to the house and in specific spaces to its activities; it acquires a fragmented image of its environment, splinters of the lived and the experiences within the new space-time conditions of the postmodern period”.

Participation: A Key to Success

While its emergence is still relatively recent, participation is increasingly becoming a legal obligation or a necessity to meet citizens' demands and optimize public action. However, participation has become a generic and even overused term, subject to multiple interpretations and sources of misunderstanding. We will give here the most commonly used definition.

Definition

According to Hurard (2011), participation consists in “putting the human being at the center of the decisions that concern him”, it is the involvement of citizens in urban projects: reflection, expertise, the definition of objectives, prospective, decision, etc.

Various Degrees

Sherry Arnstein in 1969, distinguishes three levels corresponding to different registers of participation practices, obtaining a total of eight possible degrees on his scale. Each level corresponds to a certain degree of power granted to citizens.

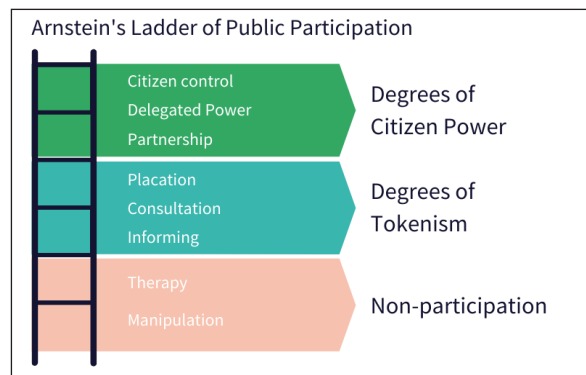


Figure 1. A practical approach to the diversity of participatory approaches. (Arnstein, 1969)

But in general;

- The first level is “information”.
- The second level of the scale is «consultation».
- With «consultation», we go a little further: this level gives rise to a real exchange between the stakeholders - with elected officials, technicians, and inhabitants in particular.
- The last level, which is the only level that Sherry Arnstein considers to be participatory, is what we can call «co-production»; «that is, the collective development of a project».

Difficulties and conditions for success

This is an interesting approach but also a difficult exercise. It is often confronted with difficulties that must be dealt with. These difficulties have been classified by Jan Bouinot and Bernard Bermils in their book on the strategic management of cities into five main ideas: disenchantment, short-sightedness, tradition, technicality, and dispersion. Participation is also confronted with problems of representativeness, incompetence, illiteracy, and disinterest on the part of citizens, and above all negative individualism.

On the other hand, it requires a strong political will and the presence of these elements:

- Increased information as a sufficient condition to increase popular participation
- The necessary acquisition of a common language
- Increasing the feeling of trust
- The clarification of roles and responsibilities is the second step
- Shared diagnosis
- The timely integration of the citizen as a strategic and opportunistic maneuver.

Citizen Tools

Participation in the form of:

- Weekend of participation, The day of the actors, The workshops of debates, The cards on tables
- The plenary session: this approach responds to an objective of local democracy where the problems and wishes of the inhabitants are listened to and relayed to the decision-makers (Verdiert, 2012).

The Child Actor, What Do We Mean by Child Participation?

According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, children should not simply be subject to decisions made by adults; they should be active and equal citizens and social actors. This means that they must be considered as full persons, rather than as mere subordinates of their parents.

Children's participation is defined as a continuous process of expression and active involvement of children in decision-making at different levels (see Figure 2) on issues that affect them (planning and management of public spaces). It requires information sharing and dialogue between children and adults, based on mutual respect and full consideration of children's opinions according to their age and maturity.



Figure 2. Involving children in urban development(Marcotte,2013)

Current debates on child and adolescent development emphasize the importance of addressing their political, social, and socioeconomic conditions in their daily environment. Some members of UNICEF, as well as academics and practitioners, have emphasized the need to develop strategies and initiatives that integrate children and adolescents into projects that affect their lives.

To ensure effective and successful participation of children, some recommendations need to be considered upstream (see Figure 3 for a detailed discussion of these recommendations).



Figure 3. Recommendations for successful child engagement.

The CFCI Secretariat has identified nine aspects that governments should consider in developing initiatives involving children's participation (Marcotte, 2013):

- Youth participation at all stages of planning and implementation.
- Youth-friendly legislation.
- A children's rights strategy.
- A coordinating mechanism or agency for youth.
- Evaluation of the impact of policies and programs on youth.
- A share of the budget and resources allocated to children.
- Regular reporting on the state of children in the city.
- Increasing vigilance and capacity for action on children's rights.
- Children's decision-making independence.

1- The Convention on the Rights of the Child is the first international human rights treaty to introduce the concept of the "evolving capacities" of the child. This approach emerged as a new principle of interpretation of international law, one that recognizes that as children gain competence, their need for protection diminishes while they are increasingly able to participate in decisions that affect their lives.

2- The needs and expectations of the children must be communicated as best as possible. The gathering, recording, and processing of information from children should be done with the necessary attention. To give their opinion and ideas in the design, communication should preferably be done in a structured way. This facilitates the integration into the project. Communication is done at the announcement of the project, at each moment of the design process, and the feedback of each meeting.

Examples of Best Practice Cases

Today, we note that the framework of urban life in Algerian cities does not always correspond as well to the specificity of children and the requirements they have about their environment. These cities have an obvious lack of playgrounds for children. When children are allowed and allowed to participate, they can help build a city for children, a city that hears their needs and necessities. Algeria, as any state signatory of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, has not failed to develop a plan of action (2008-2015) for children. This plan has set priorities and objectives that are part of the national development strategy, and which respond to the measures advocated in the declaration of the World Summit for Children: «States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight by the age and maturity of the child. (United Nations, 1989).

In other words, the states of the United Nations are formally committed to granting children the right to participate in decisions that affect them. This is an important point that should be part of the political and legislative evolution of the countries that have integrated the Convention into their government. According to the Convention, the child is considered capable of contributing to the development of the world in which he/she lives.

However, Algeria does not have high-level mechanisms with a mandate to implement the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is why we have opted to analyze some emblematic examples that have considered the child as a strategic actor whose participation in projects that concern him or her is essential.

The first thing to do would be to consult children directly to analyze their perceptions and ideas and systematically include them in the decision-making processes. Where we think there is the greatest potential is to include them in design processes on projects that transform neighborhoods. When we take the trouble to investigate, we notice that such approaches have been put in place all over the world:

Strengthening the Role of the School: La Dragonne in Cognac, France

For example, a project in Cognac in the southwest of France allowed a large number of children to participate in the decision-making process for the development of their neighborhood:

It all started at the school, where the children were consulted directly by the various project managers, who asked them to draw the image they would like to see if their future playground. The collection of drawings revealed the predominant presence of sometimes mysterious animals: Dragon, giant turtle, horse, etc.

The processing and analysis of the representations were done with the help of a team of psychologists in the presence of the architects, the result must necessarily have a relationship with an animal, this was the conviction of the co-designers.

After six weeks of study, the architects organized a lively meeting with all the parents and children, in which they chose the 1/20th scale model in a very friendly atmosphere.



Figure 4. Discovery of the 1:20 scale model of the project, Suspense for the group of co-designers: the discovery of the model: the Cauldron is born...Everything is there...every dream stated has taken shape (Steinfeld, 2008).



Figure 5. The day the project was received

Creating Organizations and Networks to Promote the Inclusion of Children in Government Decision-Making

Some policy makers have implemented such a vision in government decision-making. For example, in 2007, the British Columbia provincial government created the Youth Advisory Council (YAC) and changed its legislative structure to support the inclusion of children in government decisions. There are clear statements in the legislation that all children have the right to be involved in decisions that affect their lives and that they have the right to be consulted and to express their views according to their ability regarding decisions that affect them. This statement serves as a reminder that involving children in decisions that affect their means systematically including them in decision-making processes (Youth Advisory Council, 2007), including participation in all projects that affect them (playgrounds, public spaces, etc.).

In 2001, the Children's Forum Network (CFN) was created in Sierra Leone and contributes to the development of youth participation within the country. It is a children's committee, overseen by the Ministry of Social Welfare of the Government of Sierra Leone, whose mandate is to advocate for the voice of all children in the country. Through this committee, children participate directly in decision-making on several areas of government activity. The fact that these children are developing a network of relationships, as adults do, has led to projects that go far beyond the initial project, such as the production of a children's newspaper, a radio station, and the production of television programs. (Youth Advisory Council, 2001).

Workshop Animation as a Participation Mechanism in the Design of the Schweitzerplatz in Berchem-Sainte-Agathe In Brussels

In 2007, Pascal Smet, the Belgian Minister of Public Works, organized a design competition for the redevelopment of the Schweitzer Square in Berchem-Sainte-Agathe. The mission of the winning designers consisted of an architectural study and the organization of citizen participation.

The winning design project contained various innovative ideas such as the construction of an art installation and a participation kiosk and event preceding the project. During the design process, they also introduced other instruments like a website, meetings, and surveys. Through these methods, present from the beginning to the end of the participation procedure concerning the project, the designers aim at an interactive exchange between the parties involved in the redevelopment of the Schweitzer square.

For the realization of the participation of the citizens, the designers have addressed different target groups to which they have adapted their participation methods.

In addition to 1) shopkeepers 2) fairground vendors 3) adults who do not belong to the above-mentioned groups, 4) children were also invited to the participation sessions. This distribution was random and happened based on the will to distinguish different working groups in different workshops, taking into account the limitation in time and means.

In collaboration with the municipality, the winning design office organized different moments of participation with the children. Sessions were organized at different times during the design process. Thanks to the collaboration of the schools, where the Yota! had conducted a survey beforehand, the designers had the opportunity to organize a series of workshops with the same children throughout the school year. Thus, a certain dialogue took place. This was not the case with the seniors, for example, where the participants changed from session to session. In such a case, participation quickly becomes informative rather than interactive. (Yota, 2009).



Figure 6. The animation of workshops in schools in the framework of the development of the Schweitzer square in Brussels.

CONCLUSION

According to recent estimates, one in three urban dwellers in the world is a child. In Algeria more than 28.1% (RGPH, 2008). In this context, the reflection on the role of this social group in the city proves, more than relevant, essential to the understanding of contemporary urban issues and the design of adequate living environments for all.

Thinking about public space with children means anticipating systems that will facilitate their appropriation and sustainability. This upstream involvement, which is a fundamental trend, also manifests itself daily (information and management) and concerning future developments to guarantee harmony between uses and users. Today, children's participation is not an experimental device: rather, it is an urgent necessity.

Participation must be integrated into all phases of the project (Diagnosis and analysis of the existing state, Concepts, and vision, Pre-project, Planning & execution) and for each of these phases, a method of participation and specific techniques must be put in place.

In the case of the Algerian city, the participation of children in the projects of public spaces must take the place of simple information, by involving the child in the production and management of his environment, so that he feels responsible

for all the problems of his living space; while allowing him to exercise this responsibility to express himself, to defend his interests and his legitimate rights and to be associated in the decision-making process for the improvement of his living environment.

In this sense the school can play an important role, indeed our children can participate within the schools through the organization of events, competitions of ideas, days of participation. This requires, as we have already mentioned, prior preparation of the children responsible, good communication, and development of specific methods at each stage of the project.

Figure 10 shows in detail the integration of child participation mechanisms in the decision-making process. These mechanisms are likely to complement and correct the shortcomings of the various urban planning instruments at the local level, to integrate the child as the main actor in the decision.

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