



CHILDREN NEED SPACE

The child's perspective – allowing children to participate in the urban planning process

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participate in the urban planning process*

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FROM THE UN'S CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

ARTICLE 1

A child means every human being below the age of eighteen years.

ARTICLE 2

All children have the same rights and are equal.
No child shall be discriminated against.

ARTICLE 3

The best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration
in all actions and decisions concerning children.

ARTICLE 6

Every child has the right to survival and development.

ARTICLE 12

Every child has the right to express his or her own views
and in all matters affecting the child, his or her views should be given due weight.

1. State Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming
his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters
affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight
in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity
to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the
child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body,
in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

ARTICLE 31

Every child has the right to engage in play, recreational activities and to rest.

WHAT EXACTLY DOES THE CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE MEAN

*– and how do we go about incorporating the
child's perspective?*

All city planning and construction should include the child's perspective. Planning efforts should strive to use a process that allows children and youth to influence what their city will be. Young people are also citizens. This concept is more than a vision. Efforts are already underway to achieve these goals in the long term. In fact, many stakeholders throughout Europe have already committed to working in this manner. In Gothenburg City, we have a network that deals with methodology issues on how the goal of including the child's perspective can be achieved within our various areas of responsibility. Representatives from the city districts and administrative departments participate in the network by sharing their perspectives.

The network and forum for the child's perspective were launched at a conference with the theme, "Children need space". The results of the experience and knowledge that were exchanged have been compiled in this document. We have attempted to collect and document a portion of the knowledge that resulted from this collaboration. You will find thoughts and ideas about the child's perspective from a variety of perspectives. For example, the child's perspective has been illuminated by a landscape architect, a social welfare researcher, a professor of architectural theory, an ethnology researcher and a city gardener, to name just a few.

There are many issues and aspects to discuss and focus on. Who should be the one gathering input from children? When and how should children be asked? Or, is it enough if the adults involved have a child's perspective? Who has the time to do this? How do we incorporate teenagers' experiences and needs? If our approach incorporates the child's perspective, what should we consider as the reasonable consequences of doing so? What are the various roles that we should have? What should I do? What can I do?

This has to do with developing methods and clarifying the implications for all of us when we incorporate the child's perspective into the actual planning process. Furthermore, it applies to the entire change/planning process as well as the dialogue methods and impact analyses/descriptions.

Society needs to consider the child's perspective during all phases and at all levels. Only then can we understand, make conclusions, provide suggestions and describe the consequences of considering children and the child's perspective.

We hope that this document will serve as a useful tool and source of inspiration as you go about your daily tasks.

On behalf of the network for children and youth in urban planning, City of Gothenburg.

Ulrika Lundquist
City Planning Authority

Gerd Cruse Sondén
A Safer and More Humane Gothenburg

City of Gothenburg – The city council's budget for 2010:

"All urban development and construction must be carried out from a child perspective. Children are experts when it comes to their local environment. Children don't just move about in places made for them, such as playgrounds – they use their whole local environment. This wider environment, however, has usually been planned by adults for adults' needs. The child's perspective must, to a greater extent, be considered during all phases of planning. It must be incorporated into the planning process at an early stage and considered through to the detailed stage of planning. Planning efforts must evolve towards a more inclusive process, in which children and young people have influence over how their city is shaped. In order to do this, non-traditional strategies and methods must be tested."

GOTHENBURG AS MODEL

Petter Åkerblom, Landscape Architect and Senior Lecturer at SLU, the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences explains why Gothenburg is a model for efforts to engage in dialogue with children and young people about their own city environment.

The first speaker of the day started off by praising Gothenburg, the city where the conference was being held.

“For many years now, Gothenburg’s Cultural Affairs Committee has very successfully involved children in urban planning activities under the leadership of Architectural Advisor, Mie Svennberg,” said Petter Åkerblom.

LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER

“Taking young people’s knowledge, views and experiences into consideration in this way is a unique thing in Sweden. The rest of us have much to learn from how you do things here in Gothenburg,” he said.

Petter Åkerblom also mentioned a new book about the Gothenburg method, *Barns rätt till staden. Om arkitekturpedagogik som demokratisk metod i Göteborg* (which means, “Children’s right to the city. A look at architecture pedagogy as a democratic method in Gothenburg”). The book was published just in time for the conference and it is the result of a collaboration between Gothenburg’s Cultural Affairs Committee and Movium – Centre for the Urban Public Space at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences.

“The book presents the working method used by architecture educators and the Cultural Affairs Committee and it has been published as part of Movium’s efforts to spread and develop knowledge about urban outdoor environments that have pedagogic value for children and young people,” he said.

Petter Åkerblom noted that Mie Svennberg remains the country’s only architectural advisor for children and youth. He also shared some of his thoughts on why other towns and cities in the country have yet to follow Gothenburg’s lead.

“We are more or less stuck in our professional roles, and most of us are simply not used to talking to children and teenagers. It is not part of the planner’s everyday routine, and therefore the lack of involvement of children in planning often boils down to a question of time. It’s actually quite easy to involve children



and teens and allow them to express their views. But, it is a much greater challenge to really listen to what they have to say, to absorb their opinions and incorporate their knowledge into the actual planning process. This is precisely what you have managed to do in Gothenburg,” said Petter Åkerblom.

As coordinator at Movium, Petter Åkerblom has an overview of what is going on around the country to improve outdoor environments for young people. Besides Gothenburg, he singled out Lund as a good example. He also reflected on the past and declared that he preferred today’s good intentions to the pedagogic ideals that were dominant when he (and many in the audience) attended school 20 or 30 years ago.

LOCATION IS IMPORTANT FOR LEARNING

“Back then, we learned about nature by reading about it in books. Fortunately, many people have understood that that method isn’t very effective. It goes without saying that you get a completely different relationship to environments if you get to know them and study them up close. You need to be on location to understand the contexts you are part of, contexts in which knowledge is required in order to register how the world functions,” said Petter Åkerblom.

Petter Åkerblom stressed that it was not a question of choosing one or the other – theoretical studies or learning through experience. He explained this by comparing to how a person learns to bake a cake.

“Both are needed and there must be interaction between the two. First of all, you need a kitchen. Then, you need to know what the ingredients are, which utensils are needed, how you do it and so on. Just having a recipe is not enough! You have to actually do the whisking, notice when the sugar stops crackling and see how the cake gradually takes shape. You also need to learn from mistakes made along the way. This is the only way you can become a good baker. You also have to test the recipe a few times before you get it right,” he explained.

The same method and pedagogy applies in understanding and learning about the city as a living environment for people, plants and animals, he continued.

“Interaction is required for this as well. You need theoretical studies of the environments you are trying to learn about and you have to visit them as well. The two go hand in hand. We actually become stupid by simply sitting still and trying to learn things solely through books and theoretical reasoning. Children develop by crawling, learning to walk, making hiding places and doing somersaults. We require this sort of physical activity throughout our lives in order for our brains to continue growing, figuratively speaking. Considering the child’s perspective has become a trend that will hopefully

lead to a permanent change in attitude and long-term improvements for children and teens,” said Petter Åkerblom.

He went on to discuss another trend that is even bigger and more noticeable – the urban lifestyle.

“The urban lifestyle is becoming increasingly popular. More and more people are getting involved in issues about how cities are planned. Consequently, these issues are being delegated to people at the grass roots level, rather than the experts,” he said.

CITIZEN DIALOGUES

This tendency is also visible at the municipal planning level.

“Instead of city architects we now have citizen dialogues and via various channels, more and more groups are being given the opportunity to participate and express themselves.”

He is hopeful that the next step in this trend will be allowing children and teens the same opportunities for taking part in both planning and democratic decision-making processes.

“Much progress has been made over the last 20 years, not least thanks to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Children can make their voices heard in ways that weren’t possible before. We must now start taking these young voices seriously. We have to start taking to heart the things they are actually saying. And, as I mentioned earlier, we can certainly learn a lot from what you’ve already achieved here in Gothenburg,” said Petter Åkerblom.

REALITY IS NOT CLEAR-CUT

Erica Litzén, an Urban Planning Manager at the City of Gothenburg's Administrative Office, used statistics to give the audience something to think about. "Reality is not clear-cut. For example, children from low-income areas tend to be happier at school than children from wealthier parts of the city," she said.

It is likely that Erica Litzén's presentation partly confirmed the image many of us have of children in Gothenburg, i.e. that the most vulnerable ones, from a socio-economic perspective, live in the northeastern part of the city, while those with the best chances for success live in such areas as Älvsborg, Askim and Torslanda.

"But reality is more complicated than that. The results of the municipality's study show that children who grow up in the northeastern parts of town feel that they are more able to influence their situation than children from such areas as Älvsborg," she said.

The responses from the study, which focused on students in grades 4–9, also show that children and teens in socio-economic disadvantaged parts of the city tend to be happier at school, explained Erica Litzén.

"One explanation for this may be that people in areas like Bergsjön live under more crowded conditions. Possibly, school becomes a kind of refuge and escape from all of that," she said.

She added that perhaps, along the same line of reasoning, children in the better-off areas take things for granted in school.

"It might follow from this that they don't appreciate things as much," said Erica Litzén.

Erica Litzén emphasized that the point of conveying these facts was to give a more nuanced view of reality.

"It is very easy, after all, to use statistics for the purpose of showing how big the differences are, or how extreme. By incorporating the results of the study, we can show that reality is not black or white. Despite the statistics, children and adults enjoy living in Bergsjön, and that is worth noting," she said.

She then pointed out that her thoughts about cause and effect are her own.

"I'll leave it to the researchers to determine what underlies the results," she said.

She also noted that there is a slight risk associated with portraying a more multidimensional view.



“For example, people may then question why we should invest resources in improving the situation for people who already seem happy. Nevertheless, I believe that most people have the ability to see this in a larger perspective. The point here, of course, is that results like these can help us obtain a deeper understanding of children’s situation in Gothenburg,” said Erica Litzén.

18-YEAR-OLDS ARE AT RISK

Erica Litzén went on to discuss another important aspect, i.e. the impact that the recession has had on children living in the city.

“For example, because of the recession, 18-year-olds living in Bergsjön run an even greater risk than before of becoming unemployed,” she said.

During her presentation, Erica Litzén used eXplorer, a relatively new tool for visual analysis that was developed by Linköping University. This tool makes it possible to obtain an overview of multiple parameters for a particular city district, as well as for the city as a whole. It is also possible to look at both past and present conditions, either in isolation or together with other parameters. She explained how »bubbles« move across the diagrams in order for the user to follow the development of a particular issue over time, for a specific geographic area.

“At the City Administrative Office, we’ve been using this tool since the beginning of the year. It is so useful that, from now on, we will publish our annual publication on the development of Gothenburg on the web using eXplorer,” said Erica Litzén.

She added that one advantage of doing so is that it allows you to see how economic, ecological and social aspects are interconnected in ways that simply wouldn’t be possible with a paper publication.

“In a paper publication, each dimension would be presented in a separate chapter, which isn’t nearly as dynamic,” she said.

By way of example, she said that in the future, the text next to the illustrations will not show up as “Share of children in the district” or “Traffic” like they are in the prior printed versions of this document.

“Instead we will be able to focus on trends that can be observed. These might have to do with children in traffic, for example, or with how traffic and the economic situation interact, moving us towards a more stable situation, and so on,” she said.

OF INTEREST TO ORDINARY PEOPLE

It is already possible to visit the City of Gothenburg’s website (www.goteborg.se/explorer) and use the tool to learn more about the city. The following variables are available for each city district for the period 1992–2009: population,

average income and the percentage of the population with a college or university degree. Erica Litzén said that she thought this technology would increasingly start being used by ordinary people.

“If you have the skills required for reading Aftonbladet’s web edition or paying your bills via the Internet, you can certainly learn this without any problems. My assessment is that it is not so technically advanced and most people can easily learn how to use it,” she said.

On the contrary, she pointed out that she saw great advantages in not having to print stacks of reports that often end up collecting dust in bookshelves, unread.

“With this technology I think more people will become interested, and those of us who want to share important statistics and information will therefore be able to reach much larger audience,” said Erica Litzén.

TEENAGERS ARE CHILDREN TOO

Children need to be protected from the dangers of the city. That is something that most people would agree on, according to Björn Andersson, Researcher at the Department of Social Work, University of Gothenburg. “But this only seems to apply to children up to a certain age. When children become teenagers, the situation is reversed and people start feeling like it’s the city that needs to be protected from the teenagers,” he said.

In his introduction, Björn Andersson shared a slide show he had made illustrating the theme of the conference: Children Need Space. The girl in the center of the city grew older and around her, many more young people started popping up.

“I was trying to illustrate that as children grow up and become teenagers, they are typically the ones that give the city life,” he said.

His presentation was the only one at the conference focusing on teenagers. And, as he explained, there are specific reasons why it is important to consider the teenager’s perspective at a conference like this.

“Many adults don’t think about the fact that children are children until they turn 18. Accordingly, teenagers also fall within the scope of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child,” he explained.

Unfortunately, however, many people perceive 15 to 18-year-olds as difficult, troublesome and even dangerous.

“People also tend to generalize about teenagers, making statements like, ‘that’s just the way they are’ in the same way that they generalize about people who live in the suburbs.”

SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

Björn Andersson then admitted that many boys in their upper teens are indeed the root source of certain problems in society.

“We can’t pretend that this isn’t true. But we still need to remember that, for the most part, the ones complaining aren’t usually the ones suffering from the lack of safety. The victims typically tend to be other young people. Furthermore, when we stereotype teenagers there is a risk that the prophecies will become self-fulfilling. We wind up pointing the finger of blame at the vast majority of teenagers who behave just fine.”

In his thesis from 2002, Björn Andersson studied how teenagers move about within the city.

“Something very important happens around the age of 16, when teenagers begin high school. At that point, to a much greater extent than before, they start spending time outside their own neighborhood and begin moving about within the city,” he explained.

This is also the age when young people start seeking their identity, testing their independence and freeing themselves from the control of adults, he went on to say.

“During this process, it is important that there are places in the city for teenagers to meet and interact with others they can identify with. The problem is that there is a lack of such places in most cities,” he explained.

So, as a result, young people tend to simply roam about during this search. This was captured in the title of Björn Andersson’s presentation: From roaming to skateboarding – how youth move about within cities.

“This searching is perceived by many as a disturbance in the urban landscape, when in fact it is a perfectly natural part of how young people develop.”

Björn Andersson’s view is that instead of criticizing this behavior, we should create the kinds of places that don’t exist today, i.e. places where teenagers are able to conduct their search for identity in a meaningful context together with others of the same age. He also pointed out that teenagers between the ages of 16 and 18 are very dependent on public transport. Because of this, many adults also tend to develop stereotypes based on the minority of teenagers who ride without a ticket or behave badly.

“This naturally becomes especially problematic for young people in view of how important public transport is for them,” he said.

TEENS SHOULDN’T CAUSE ANY TROUBLE

Björn Andersson explained that, in the title of his presentation, “skateboarding” has to do with teenagers who have an interest in a specific free-time activity.

“A city also needs to have places for these types of groups. It is also important to integrate the activity into city life such that it doesn’t disturb other people.”

He went on to say that there are examples in Gothenburg of both successful and unsuccessful skateboarding solutions. At Action Park, which is close to the Bergakungen cinema, there is a very successful skateboarding area. The opposite is true of Esperantoplatsen, where conflicts have arisen between skateboarders and local residents, who find the activity disturbing. Björn Andersson reiterated the fact that young people bring a great deal of life to a city.

“At certain times, like the end of the school year, some public spaces are completely overrun by teenagers. This is a time when they particularly need

to interact with others of the same age. Furthermore, at that age, the need is much greater than it is at other stages in a person's life."

Björn Andersson pointed out that this also applies to teenagers' need to 'know what's going on' or, as he put it, their need to acquire an overview of the social landscape.

"That need is part of a teenager's efforts to figure out his or her place and position in relation to others. In this search for identity, i.e. who you are in relation to your peers, obtaining the approval of others your own age is a crucial part of the process," he explained.

THERE IS NOWHERE TO MEET

In closing, Björn Andersson pointed out that teens between the ages of 16 and 18 are faced with a dilemma. The city is a place where they can satisfy important needs such as emancipation and independence. But, there is a lack of meeting places specifically intended for this age group.

"Another problem, as I already mentioned, is the crude stereotypes. As adults, we certainly need to respond when children in this age group exhibit behavior that compromises safety. At the same time, however, we need to remember that older children and younger children alike are entitled to the same protection. It's a difficult balance, but we need to find solutions nevertheless," he concluded.

A HISTORY OF ARCHITECTURE FULL OF GOOD EXAMPLES

Claes Caldenby, Professor in Theory and History of Architecture at Chalmers University of Technology, took Ellen Key's book, The Century of the Child, as the point of departure for his presentation. He asserted that during the 20th century, there has been a swinging pendulum when it comes to prioritizing children's needs.

"The city's focus on children was clearly greater during some decades than others," he said.

In order to illustrate the status of children in the context of 20th century architecture, Claes Caldenby looked to children's literature. He began in 1918 with the Swedish classic by Elsa Beskow, Aunt Green, Aunt Brown and Aunt Lavender. He spoke about that era's concept of the ideal city by way of the fictitious town of Lillköping, modeled on Sigtuna. In 1947, another children's classic was published, namely Astrid Lindgren's The Six Bullerby Children.

"In Astrid Lindgren's book about the Bullerby children, we encounter an idyllic country environment," he observed.

The third example he shared was Jan Lööf's, The Story of the Red Apple, from 1974, where we encounter a city with old-style quarters that is teeming with life. Claes Caldenby then illustrated how we can see a pattern where the 1910s, 1940s and 1970s were particularly child-friendly compared with other decades of the 20th century. He asserted that, in the era of romantic nationalism, there was great interest in the conditions under which children lived.

"Consistent with the message in Ellen Key's book, many felt that it was in the best interest of children to live outside the city. It was primarily the middle class that held this belief. We can observe this in other art forms as well, such as the paintings by Carl Larsson," he said.

He then talked about the 1940s, which many consider to be the golden age of Swedish children's literature, largely because of Astrid Lindgren's contributions. She depicted the idyllic setting of children growing up in a country village, such as in Pippi Longstocking (1945) and the previously mentioned Bullerby books.

"The 1970s was a period of intensive building activity, culminating in the so-called Million Homes Programme, which many felt had negative

consequences for children. The critics advocated a return to the traditional city, and this view is also reflected in the children's books from that time," explained Claes Caldenby.

Claes Caldenby then discussed the two main schools of thought that can be discerned in studies of urban development: the concept of the 'good life' and the concept of the 'efficient society'. One example of this is the book by Professor Tore Frängsmyr that was published in 1980, *Progress or Decline: Vision of the Future and Utopias in Western Thought*.

"It is legitimate to question where children fit in a society that values efficiency above everything else," he said.

IDYLLIC LILLKÖPING

Professor Caldenby also shared a number of examples to illustrate the 20th century city from a child's perspective. Among them was a photo of the picturesque residential area, Landala Egnahem, where construction began just under a century ago.

"You can see that there was an ambition to recreate the old Swedish town along the lines of Beskow's Lillköping – with nearly identical houses standing side-by-side," he explained.

He went on to say that in the 1920s, a lot of effort was put into standardizing both schools and school playgrounds, and that the foremost architects were also commissioned to design schools. Nordhemsskolan in Gothenburg was mentioned as an example. He talked about functionalism in the 1930s, when many homes for large families were built. The Salabacke project in Uppsala at the end of the 1940s, initiated by City Architect Gunnar Leche, is another example.

"Leche was interested in children's play environments in residential areas, and the farmhouse names from Bullerby – Mellangården, Norrgården and Sörgården – feature in Salabacke, which was planned during the same year that Astrid Lindgren's book about the Bullerby children was released," he said.

He then showed a picture of Vivalla, located in Örebro, as an example of SCAFT planning in the 1960s as a means of protecting children from traffic danger (SCAFT was the acronym of a working group on road safety in urban planning at Chalmers University of Technology). He observed that SCAFT may have made the environment safe from one point of view, yet unsafe from another, in that the car-free environment also created large unpopulated areas.

"As I already mentioned, Jan Lööf's urban ideal was a reaction to this. He shared his vision of the ideal city as a place bustling with life, where you never feel alone," he said.

Professor Caldenby also talked about a book published in 1983 that he co-authored, which is a handbook on urban studies.

"We wrote about the good and bad aspects of a city. We mentioned Haga as a good example of how to integrate older parts of the city with new ones," he said.

He also talked about the playgrounds designed by former Park Superintendent, Arvid Bengtsson. This was an important urban planning initiative for children. Then, he showed the poster from an exhibition on functionalism at Stockholm's Liljevalch Museum in 1980.

"Among other things, the exhibition dealt with the psychological aspects that functionalism had failed to address, not least when it came to children's needs," said Claes Caldenby.

The construction of day care centers in the 1970s took on such colossal proportions that Claes Caldenby compared it to the Million Homes Programme of that same era.

"Day care facilities were constructed for half a million children and since then, new facilities for ten times that number have been built," he explained.

He also touched upon a remarkable initiative in Frankfurt during the late 1980s through the mid 1990s.

"This was all about city branding as a way of attracting residents who were considered to be 'creative'. The unusual thing was that day care centers eventually came to be included in the project and famous architects were commissioned to design them," he explained.

BORROWED EARTH

The tallest building in the world, Burj Khalifa in Dubai, exemplifies an ideal that Claes Caldenby hopes we have now discarded. As an alternative he recommended the philosophy conveyed in a Greenpeace poster from 1980, with the message: We have not inherited the earth from our parents, we have borrowed it from our children. He then concluded his presentation with the following words:

"We have, however, inherited a history of architecture full of good examples that we can pass along to our children."

DENSER CITIES

According to Anna-Johanna Klasander, Architect at White Arkitekter, Gothenburg, there are many benefits associated with making cities denser. But she also posed the question of how this affects children. Will their football fields and playgrounds disappear? Will areas that are already crowded become even more so?

Anna-Johanna Klasander didn't have answers to those questions. Rather, they were posed in order to illuminate the risks. She also added the following:

"It's good if unsafe areas disappear by making cities denser. But the open spaces in cities that are used for play and socializing are necessary and they shouldn't be sacrificed in a frenzied effort to make a city denser. It is also questionable whether it is a good idea at all, not least from the point of view of children, to build in places where the city is already very dense."

Before arriving at those conclusions however, Anna-Johanna Klasander looked back in history, focusing on the spatial structures of cities in different periods. She observed, for example, that the current trend of making cities denser is a natural response to the Modernist view that 'form follows function'.

DENSELY BUILT VS. OPEN SPACES

She then briefly spoke about various historical periods to show how Gothenburg has, at times, promoted efforts to make the city denser and at other times, invested in more open spaces.

"During the 17th century Gothenburg was a fortified city that needed to be able to defend itself against external threats. Then, as trade increased in importance during the 18th century, there were of course good reasons for allowing the city to spread out. Due to industrialism, similar industries were set up in specific areas of the city. This trend continued as more people began travelling by car and the distances between home and work increased. For example, many people working at Volvo decided to live in Angered. Subsequent to the shipbuilding crisis, Gothenburg has successfully developed into a knowledge and event city, which is reflected in the city's infrastructure," she explained.

Anna-Johanna Klasander went on to explain that infrastructure needs are typically why cities emerge in the first place.

"Having everything you need in close proximity helps satisfy three fundamental needs that people have when it comes to interaction – economic, social

and cultural. So, from a functional point of view, it makes sense to build cities that are dense. As we are all aware, there are currently many advocates of densely built cities and they often claim that such cities are more sustainable," she pointed out.

Anna-Johanna Klasander mentioned the National Board of Housing, Building and Planning, the former Rail Administration (now part of the Transport Administration), the Urban Environment Council and the Swedish Association of Architects among the proponents of denser cities.

"The overall plan for the future development of Gothenburg is also clearly based on the notion of making cities denser," she explained.

In this context, Anna-Johanna Klasander also mentioned Richard Florida, an American professor of cultural geography who coined the term 'creative class'.

"Florida points out that those belonging to the creative class are the ones driving development in modern knowledge cities. He also describes attractive cities as being permissive, eventful and culturally diverse. But critics claim that development should not exclusively cater to the creative class if the result is primarily densely built cities offering a fashionable cafe atmosphere. They also ask how children fit into such environments."

Another voice in the debate on making cities denser is YIMBY (Yes, in My Backyard).

"This is a network that was created as a reaction to the group called NIMBY (Not in My Backyard)."

Anna-Johanna Klasander said that basically, those belonging to the YIMBY network want to see densely build city neighborhoods everywhere. Or, another way of looking at it is that they want to create places like Linnéstaden even in areas like Högsbo.

"Some object to this on the grounds of what would wind up destroyed if YIMBY gets its way. For example, there could be a negative impact on environments for children. Also, cities should allow variations in the types of buildings that are constructed. YIMBY's voice is important in the debate, and they're right about many things, but they've failed to consider our need for diversity," she said.

NEED TO KNOW MORE

Anna-Johanna Klasander went on to say that, regardless of one's opinion, the trends are stronger than the theories and the denser city trend is clearly dominating.

"The fact is, that we need to know more before we can determine which is more sustainable. There is not enough research on the best ways of merging the three aspects of sustainability, i.e. the economic, ecological and social dimensions," she said.

She then talked about Researcher Karin Bradley's thesis on the sustainability ideal in urban development.

"Bradley questions what is actually sustainable in densely built cities other than inhabitants' proximity to various meeting points. The ideal of densely built city blocks is entirely based on the norms of the middle class, while people with other lifestyles are ignored. They promote this ideal based on the sustainability aspects, such as shorter walking distances, locally grown organic produce, etc. But at the same time, this is actually the group with the most unsustainable lifestyle. Many live in large homes, own several homes, commute to work by car and fly abroad on their holidays. In this context, the sustainability of their city life has to do with rather minor issues of symbolic value," she explained.

Anna-Johanna Klasander pointed out that, regardless of building patterns, income level is what determines how sustainably people live. The fact is that income is more important than values when it comes to resource consumption.

"People with the lowest incomes – such as those living in the 'Million Homes' housing developments – are the ones with the most sustainable lifestyles," said Anna-Johanna Klasander.

She went on to say that the trend of building increasingly larger apartments shows that we are actually trying to create some distance, even as cities become increasingly dense.

"In the past, 96 square meters would accommodate four to five rooms. Today it is more common for a three-room apartment to occupy the same amount of space. Perhaps the concept of sustainability should include the return to a more efficient use of space? That way we might preserve many valuable exterior spaces, not least for children, by trading a few square meters indoors for additional square meters outdoors," she said.

She observed that children and elderly people risk losing out as cities become increasingly dense. Besides the lack of open spaces, other negative effects are the traffic and noise. Children are particularly vulnerable when it comes to traffic dangers.

"In the so-called Million Homes housing developments, there has been traffic separation from the very start. Now, many people want to change this and allow traffic to flow through these areas as well. Why should the people living there agree to traffic right on their doorstep when the trend in city centers is the exact opposite? It would of course be greener and more child-friendly to expand the network of sidewalks and bike paths to and within these areas. We should be promoting and prioritizing pedestrian traffic, i.e. walking, cycling and the use of public transport. It's healthy and good for the environment – something that benefits children and adults alike," she explained.

INTERIOR COURTYARDS ARE THE BEST CHOICE

To make cities denser without increasing noise levels is almost impossible, explained Anna-Johanna Klasander. Children and elderly people are particularly sensitive to noisy environments.

"The best design for protection against noise is the closed city block with a quiet interior courtyard, not the tower blocks we see sprouting up just about everywhere," she said.

In closing, she said that the current urban development ideal of denser cities can certainly benefit children, due to such aspects as having to travel shorter distances.

"However, it's important that efforts to make cities denser are not just about providing more housing and increased traffic. There must also be a sufficient number of good-quality open spaces such as parks, green areas and residential courtyards. You need to come up with the right mix, ensuring that there are places for holding events and meetings. So, even if the overall idea sounds good, what really matters is the details. We need to take great care in how we design everyday environments for people of all ages in future projects. The design of a city impacts lifestyle well into the future, which is why we must learn from earlier mistakes and get it right from the start, now, while we have the chance," she concluded.

CHILDREN AND TRAFFIC

Don't invent utterly ridiculous and potentially deadly pilot projects about how children should get used to traffic. Pia Björklid, Professor of Pedagogy at the Department of Education, Stockholm University, shared these words of advice from a high school teacher with the audience. She feels that he is quite right, i.e. the traffic environment is what needs to change – not the children.



Masses of cars on the streets and roads, cars in schoolyards and other places where they shouldn't be, drivers going too fast and breaking other rules, cars on thoroughfares, cars making sudden turns, drivers in a hurry not caring about their surroundings, obstructed visibility noise, exhaust fumes ...

This is how Pia Björklid described changes in the traffic situation over the last 20 years and how this has been detrimental to children's freedom of movement, health and well-being.

"Children are entitled to safe, stimulating environments. But instead, we have ended up with a dangerous traffic environment that causes stress and worry to both children and parents," she explained.

Pia Björklid shared some research statistics showing that nearly all 7 to 9-year-olds walked to school on their own during the mid 1980s. By 2003, this number was down to 67 %, as a result of a more dangerous and increasingly complex traffic situation.

TRAFFIC SEPARATION

"More and more people are driving their children to school, causing an increase in the number of cars in places where there shouldn't be any," she explained.

Pia Björklid went on to say, however, that more children were involved in traffic accidents in the 1950s compared to today.

"The figure then began to fall in conjunction with the SCAFT reform and traffic separation initiatives in the 1960s. Even today, fewer children are the victims of traffic accidents compared to the 1950s – but at the same time severe restrictions have been placed on their freedom of movement and play," she explained.

She then talked about her own research, which shows that many children are involved in traffic incidents – i.e. situations that don't necessarily culminate in an accident.

“This research is based on interviews with children between the ages of 8 and 13. Half of the children I interviewed had been involved in either an incident or an accident,” she said.

Pia Björklid also showed excerpts from some of these interviews, including an 8-year-old boy who shared the following:

“Once when I was riding my bike a man almost hit me because I wasn’t looking where I was going. Actually, he was the one that didn’t see me, but I didn’t see him either. I was only trying to get across the street and onto the sidewalk, where a bunch of cars were parked. I didn’t dare tell my father about it.”

During the SCAFT era there were research-based standards with clear guidelines on how to plan traffic and design play areas that would be secure and safe for children.

“Today, we no longer have any such standards – only recommendations, which are meaningless. I would like to see renewed emphasis on the needs of children in all traffic planning initiatives,” she said.

Pia Björklid also emphasized that a completely different planning approach was needed.

“Landscape architects and other experts should be brought in much earlier in the process. That would be a way of guaranteeing open spaces for children, as well as for the functionally disabled and other groups. The way it is done today, only from the motorist’s perspective, is not sustainable,” she said.

Pia Björklid explained that she was adamantly against attempts to ‘train’ children such that they adapt to the existing traffic situation.

“Children aren’t the ones who need to adapt. They have a right to environments in which they can play and develop at their own pace. The traffic situation is what needs to change such that children are given the space, safety and security that they are entitled to,” she said.

She also pointed out that children are simply not able to comprehend traffic situations in the same way as adults because children’s sight, hearing, concentration and judgment abilities have not yet fully developed.

PLAYING EVEN WHILE IN TRAFFIC

“Children are always playing, even when they are in traffic situations. That’s simply how it is to be a child. They are unable to change this behavior and they shouldn’t have to either,” she said.

Pia Björklid shared some stories to illustrate this point as well, including the following by an 8-year-old girl:

“Johan was bicycling to daycare with his mother one day when a car hit him from behind and he fell, head first, into the street. Johan said it was his own fault, because he hadn’t been paying attention. He just kept going, right

into the street. He said that if you do something like that, you only have yourself to blame,” said the girl.

“This boy, like many other children, assumed the blame himself, which we all know is wrong,” said Pia Björklid.

The problem, explained Pia Björklid, is that traffic encroaches on children’s space.

“What we should be doing is regarding traffic as an uncalculated risk to children. To a certain extent, traffic is a necessary evil. But from a child’s perspective, it shouldn’t exist at all.”

PLAY IS AN IMPORTANT FACTOR

Pia Björklid said that earlier attempts at traffic education were not successful either.

“Of course, children are able to learn. But because play is such an integral part of their lives, they frequently forget very quickly what they’ve been taught, even in traffic situations,” she said.

She went on to say that many feel children simply must adapt to the traffic situation, particularly when it comes to their route between home and school.

“Today, many children attend independent schools that are quite far from their home, so their parents end up driving them. In other words, both children and parents have adapted to the prevailing traffic situation,” she said.

Adaptation needs to be in the opposite direction, such that children are offered sustainable transportation alternatives to and from school.

“One solution, of course, would be public transportation that delivered children right to main school entrance, with timetables adapted to the school day,” she said.

She then pointed out that there are, after all, good examples of traffic planning that take children’s and other pedestrians’ needs into consideration – many of which are in Gothenburg.

“Gothenburg has succeeded in lowering traffic speeds, particularly in places where there are lots of pedestrians and cyclists. About 2,500 speed reduction measures have been implemented. They include speed bumps, narrower sections, raised pedestrian crossings and bicycle viaducts, all of which have helped lower speeds,” she said.

Pia Björklid went on to say that such measures benefit motorists as well.

“Their safety has also increased, even though pedestrians and cyclists have benefitted the most”, she concluded.

PARTICIPATION AND DEMOCRACY

Since 2002, Gothenburg and Västra Götaland have been the only places with an Architectural Advisor. But Mie Svennberg, Architectural Advisor at the Gothenburg Cultural Affairs Committee and Kultur i Väst, Västra Götaland, might soon be getting some colleagues in other parts of the country. »It's taken a while, but others are now starting to show some interest in how we work here in Gothenburg,» she said.

For several years, Mie Svennberg has had children and young people as a target group in her work as an architect.

“This initiative began in 2002 when my boss, Ann Hattéböl, came up with the idea of an Architectural Advisor. The goal was more than just trying to change children’s and young people’s physical environment. We also wanted to involve them in the process. In other words, it was meant to be something both ‘for’ children and ‘by’ children.”

The appointment went to Mie Svennberg, who divides her working time between the City of Gothenburg and the Västra Götaland region (where she began working in 2004). Before that she spent a lot of time in the field, meeting children, teens and teachers. She provided inspiration, collected new thoughts and ideas, engaged in discussion and gathered material.

“Lately my tasks have become more and more strategic, particularly at the regional level. I simply can’t be on location, monitoring the situation in all 49 municipalities at the same time,« she explained.

Mie works in close cooperation with the cultural coordinators and she explained why they are so important.

“I discuss ideas and approaches with them and they relay this information to the cultural ombudsmen in schools and preschools. These are typically teachers or other school staff who influence, inspire, gain impressions from and have direct contact with children and young people,» she said.

DEMOCRACY A DRIVING FORCE

Mie Svennberg explained that democracy in general, and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in particular, are the driving forces for her work.

“Article 12 of the Convention establishes the right of children and young people to express their views about things that affect them, such as their outdoor and indoor environments. Striving to make that happen is important,» she said.



She went on to say that these efforts had taken on many concrete forms over the years, and told the audience about her own role a few years ago.

“I started out working with various projects at schools and preschools interested in involving children and young people in certain things like playground renovations and we have continued along those lines. We work hand-in-hand with the children and teens to document their environment and brainstorm about what is most important. We work in a creative way with selected sites. This might involve building models or putting together proposals in other ways and then presenting them to decision makers,” she said.

Mie Svennberg then mentioned some other projects focusing on making changes to the environment, such as the ones at Vasa Park, the examination rooms at Sahlgrenska University Hospital and a several libraries. She was influential in starting up all of these efforts and getting children and teens involved.

She has also served as the contact and resource person for projects dealing with similar issues in several other parts of the municipality, including Angered, Biskopsgården, Tuve-Säve – almost always in partnership with other stakeholders. The Public Transport Authority in Gothenburg has also provided GIS maps that have been used to document the need for changes to environments where children and teenagers spend a lot of time.

Mie Svennberg also told the audience that she has received assistance from city district administrations and other administrative bodies in her attempts obtain an overall grasp of the work being done for the physical environment in Gothenburg – for, by and with young people. She pointed out that at the national and international level there is otherwise very little documentation of activities in this area.

“There aren’t any documented strategies on how to use the existing methods. But I belong to an international network of architects called Playce, and through them, I’ve learned that Finland is pursuing a similar initiative with Architectural Advisors,” she explained.

IMPORTANT AND DIFFICULT

Mie Svennberg then spoke about the study by the Ombudsman for Children, which looked at how well Sweden’s municipalities have been able to implement the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

“Many municipalities scored low on follow-up, which is a serious problem, since evaluations and follow-up are very important – and very difficult tasks. One solution might be to train key persons in the city districts, who in turn would train students and teachers. Another suggestion is for school classes to be consulted on a referral basis regarding issues that have to do with their local environment,” she said.

Mie Svennberg has noticed a growing interest in the child perspective and she does not believe that this is just a passing trend.

“I think that the focus on children’s needs and the child’s perspective indicates a profound and positive change in our society. It’s part of the democratic process. There is a general view that children and teens should be involved in the process, but there is uncertainty about how to make that happen.”

She compared this to other events in history that involved radical changes in attitude.

“Women’s suffrage is a good example. In Sweden, women were able to vote for the first time in 1921. Before that, it was impossible to take women’s views on various issues into consideration. I feel fairly confident that there will be a similar development regarding children and teens – that in the future, it will be completely natural for young people to participate in decision processes,” she said.

Mie Svennberg started working as Architectural Advisor in Gothenburg in 2002. Two years later, she began working throughout the Västra Götaland region as well. She explained that, despite the relatively wide geographical scope of her work, other parts of the country haven’t shown an interest in this method until very recently.

“We have recently been contacted by Stockholm, Botkyrka, Malmö and the Skåne region, all of them asking for insights into how we work. The fact that it has taken so long for others to show an interest is probably due to our own failures at sharing our knowledge. That, of course, highlights another important issue, i.e. how crucial it is for there to be communication within and between municipalities, authorities and the general public,” she concluded.

CHILDREN'S INFLUENCE ON URBAN PLANNING

Barbro Johansson, Ethnology Researcher at the Centre for Consumer Science, University of Gothenburg School of Business, Economics and Law, observed that children still have very little influence on urban planning. Nevertheless, she says that there are a few exceptions that make her feel hopeful about the future.

Barbro Johansson's research ordinarily focuses on issues having to do with the consumer habits of children. She is also working on a project about children in the role of co-researcher. She told the audience that she was able to focus on young people's ability to influence their own situation and participate in planning when she was engaged as a researcher in Södra Älvstranden's citizen consultation initiative a few years ago.

A DESIRE TO TAKE THEM SERIOUSLY

"There were six different citizen teams participating, and my job was to study the Children and Youth team. They were given the opportunity of formulating their thoughts and ideas about the Södra Älvstranden of the future."

She mentioned that she has written about her observations during this process in the research anthology about changing landscapes titled, *Mellanrummets möjligheter. Studier av föränderliga landskap* (ed. Katarina Saltzman, 2009). In it, she describes how adults typically reacted when the children and youth presented their results.

"There was certainly a generational hierarchy and everything associated with that, such as the indulgent laughter and smiles you often encounter when young children perform for an audience. But, the adults also exhibited a more rare behavior, i.e. a genuine desire to take the children's and teens' opinions seriously," she said.

At times, Barbro Johansson also encountered the attitude that the opinions of the children's group didn't have the same weight as the others.

"For example, you might hear a reference to the five teams, plus the Children and Youth team, as if it was something not to be taken seriously. Nevertheless, I still believe that the process caused many adults to change the way they think about children and their right to become involved," she said.



DIFFERENT APPROACHES

Barbro Johansson pointed out that the concept of children having rights is not in the least bit controversial.

“It is stated in numerous policy documents and in other contexts. But what does it actually mean? And why should children participate and be able to influence urban planning?” she asked.

She talked about how she had discussed these questions with a number of urban planners. Their responses showed that there are various approaches.

“One view is that the child perspective is important in planning playgrounds, for instance. The idea is that by doing so, you help ensure that the playground will turn out safe, secure and attractive. Others feel that children’s involvement is a continually evolving process. With that approach, you never get any conclusive or decisive answers about children’s needs, because each person (child or adult) is unique. Personally I feel that we need to apply both perspectives, since they complement each other,” she explained.

She then talked about the prerequisites for enabling children to participate in urban planning.

“Well-meaning adults are not enough. I firmly believe that models like the one used by Södra Älvstranden, which had a Children and Youth team, are much better. They used materials such as maps and pictures. The youth were placed in a team with the task of presenting their results to others. In the end, they delivered their conclusions in a context where it was clear that their work was valued,” she said.

Context plays an important role even when children are so small that they find it difficult to grasp the consequences of their efforts.

“The presentations made by children typically received the most applause. Sometimes they were even interviewed by journalists and got their picture taken for the local newspaper. Children gain an enormous amount of self-confidence when they are allowed to speak for themselves, rather than always being represented by adults,” she said.

The citizen consultation process has, however, been criticized. Many people feel that the process was just for show and that its results haven’t been implemented.

But Barbro Johansson feels that involving children in this way indicates that something new is going on in Gothenburg.

“The work being done by architecture educators to get students involved in efforts to improve the physical environment at schools is another example. New ground is being broken, and in situations like that things are always tentative,” she explained.

She went on to say that, despite the many positive signs and intentions, there is still a lot of work to be done before we can start claiming that children actually have any influence.

“For example, children are expected to put up with an environment at their schools that is far below the working environment standards for adults. Furthermore, children spend nearly all of their time in groups, in the classroom. Always being part of a group does something to the individual. Flock behavior starts to occur, and people lose their ability to take overall personal responsibility. Children used to regard adults as authorities not to be challenged, so this might have worked in the past. But it is certainly no longer appropriate,” she said.

THE INDIVIDUAL IS IMPORTANT

“Things are no longer like that, and we don’t want to revert to what things used to be like either. Besides, school is completely based on individualization, i.e. a focus on the individual in a variety of contexts. Nevertheless, we still seem to be stuck with the same old group mentality. I know it’s a question of resources, but we must strive to have smaller groups in school, something like five students per advisor or similar solutions,” she said.

Barbro Johansson went on to say that it is easy to confuse the concepts of “having influence” and “being able to decide”.

“Some feel that children should not be given the responsibility of making decisions, because it places too great a weight on their shoulders. In other words, children should just be allowed to be children. But that view is based on a misunderstanding. Without question, children should not be deciding about things they have no knowledge of. The real issue is about children working with others and being able to influence and participate in a process that leads to a decision.”

She added that municipalities need to try implementing some new decision-making processes, not least for the sake of children.

“I think it would be constructive to look at local associations of householders for inspiration and take a bottom-up approach. With that model, the school and class councils could serve as links in a chain that would eventually enable students to obtain greater influence on issues besides the ones having to do with their own school,” she said.

Despite indications that the Älvstrand project has not had the desired effect, Barbro Johansson still feels it has been meaningful from the children’s perspective.

“Self-image improves when you feel that your knowledge is taken seriously and that people actually listen to what you have to say. That was what happened for the youth who participated in the Älvstrand project,” she concluded.

CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVE IS NECESSARY

Why ask children when you could ask an adult instead? Unfortunately, that attitude is quite common. It is also one of the reasons why so few child impact analyses are conducted. These were the words of Heidi Pintamo-Kenttälä, a Strategic Community Planner in Enköping municipality who has carried out three child impact analyses, all in Stockholm.

Aside from these three, hardly any other such analyses have been conducted in Sweden, she told the audience.

"I don't know the exact number, but it can't be more than a handful, with the exception of the ones done by the Swedish Transport Administration," she said.

In the three analyses that she conducted (in the districts of Hjorthagen and Mariehäll and around the Skolfilmen building) Heidi Pintamo-Kenttälä interviewed teachers, parents and children.

"The only way to obtain a child's perspective is to ask a child. Otherwise, a child's perspective is an adult's conception of the child's perspective, wishes and circumstances – which of course is not enough," she said.

RARE FOR CHILDREN TO BE ALLOWED TO PARTICIPATE

She developed this theme:

"The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has been around for some time, and it establishes, among many other things, that children have the right to be heard and to have an influence over their local environment. It also says that all humans are equal and that no groups may be discriminated against. Despite this, it is still very rare that children are given the chance to say what they think or take part in planning processes," she said.

Heidi Pintamo-Kenttälä went on to say that this may seem contradictory. Interest in issues relating to children is high, and it wouldn't be an exaggeration to call the child perspective a trend.

"It doesn't make sense, therefore, to say that child impact analyses aren't being conducted due to a lack of interest. A more likely reason is that many people feel it is too complicated to get the child's perspective by asking children directly. I often encounter the attitude that it is easier and more efficient to

obtain the child's perspective indirectly, by interviewing parents or teachers. Besides the fact that children aren't given a voice, this is also problematic because parents and others who work with children tend to drift and start talking about their own needs. Once, when I asked how a plot of land might be improved for children aged 3 to 5, a preschool teacher replied that she would very much like to see a tennis court there," she said.

She underlined that there are further justifications for seeking out the child's own perspective, beyond trying to avoid more or less unspoken conflicts of interest between children and adults.

"Often, despite having tried, adults simply fail when they try to understand something from a child's point of view. One reason for this is that adults don't spend all of their time with their children. So, it is not possible from them to have the same perception or experience as their child," she said.

To illustrate this point, Heidi Pintamo-Kenttälä described the concept of retreats, i.e. places where children can 'escape' from the adult world for a while. These are often places that an adult wouldn't find particularly appealing. One example is an unloading area in Hjorthagen, which has become popular to children aged 10 and older.

"Younger kids go there to play games, build bicycle jumps with planks and so on. For teenagers, it is a good place to just hang out, away from adults. I only learned about the importance of this place by conducting a child impact analysis in the district."

VALUABLE INPUT IS LOST

She went on to say that much valuable input is lost when children are excluded from planning processes.

"If we really listened to young people and involved them, we would discover that they can help us achieve a much better environment for everyone in the city district, i.e. adults, the elderly, the functionally disabled ... everyone," she said.

Heidi Pintamo-Kenttälä described how the two districts of Hjorthagen and Mariehäll were in different stages of the planning process when she conducted her analyses there.

"In Hjorthagen they only had one approved local development plan during the time I was there. So, there was plenty of scope for influencing the outcome, not least based on the views children had shared with me. In Annedal (which is in Mariehäll), the situation was different. Most of the local development plans had already been approved long ago, so the task there had to do with getting things confirmed. Residents had been contacted by other officials at an earlier stage, and for me it was more a question of picking up where they had left off and moving forward," she explained.

FOCUSING ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Heidi Pintamo-Kenttälä is currently working as project manager on a comprehensive plan for Enköping municipality. Although she is not conducting any child impact analyses at the moment, she still strives to improve the situation for children and young people.

“The municipality’s vision includes the notion that young people are a specific target group. In accordance with this, we are now trying to involve high school students in our work with the comprehensive plan. We will also strive to involve younger children somehow,” she said.

She closed by saying that child impact analyses, where you obtain the child’s perspective directly from children, should always be an integral part of the planning process, just as environmental impact analyses are.

“It’s all about participation, democracy and security. If children are allowed to take part in planning and shaping their local environment from the outset, they are much more likely to remain involved in efforts to improve their local environment as adults,” she concluded.

THE GOOD EXAMPLE

An unusual process that ended well. That was how Maria Nordström, Researcher in Environmental Psychology at Stockholm University, described the story of how building plans were altered so that the children could keep their playground. “The success was due to many factors, such as committed, knowledgeable parents and the involvement of architects,» she said.

Maria Nordström declared that she was happy that this four-year process ended so well.

“But, at the same time, I can’t help wondering why it took such a huge effort just to change those plans,” she said.

The process got underway in 2005 in the residential area of Aspudden, which is in the southern part of Stockholm. The plan was to build five tower blocks on a plot adjacent to the primary school. Valuable play areas, among them a football field and a piece of woodland where students often spent time and played, would disappear as a result.

“Both teachers and parents protested. Hundreds of petitions were sent in to the urban planning office. The letters contained explanations and descriptions of the impact the plan would have if it were to be implemented,” she explained.

ATTENTION IN THE MEDIA

Before long, articles about the conflict started appearing in the local newspapers. The City Planning Authority, took notice of the number of parents who had become involved and the considerable media attention thus far received. SBK then decided to carry out an independent study with the help of a researcher, Maria Nordström. She began working on it together with a student in the Master’s Programme in Urban and Regional Planning at Stockholm University’s Department of Human Geography, where she works.

“Our starting point was to establish why physical activity is so important to a child’s development and why an ample amount of space is thus required,” she explained.

Maria Nordström and her colleague decided to include in the study the elements of a good preschool environment/playground in terms of children’s developmental needs, along with a specification of what children living in cities require.

“We know that children develop in different types of environments, where they can play and explore on their own and with other children,” she said.

STUDENTS GOT INVOLVED

Data for the study was collected through field work. They made observations of how the students used the outdoor environment, photographed the places where they spent a lot of time, described their activities, interviewed teachers about what the children did during recesses and lessons, etc.

“The students also got involved in various ways, like marking on maps the places where they spent the most time,” she said.

The media also continued to follow the story. Articles were written based on interviews with the children, parents, teachers and officials.

Maria Nordström highlighted the crucial role that parents played during this four-year process.

“Their considerable knowledge and commitment were enormously important factors. Without them and without the media attention, it would never have turned out as well as it did.”

In the completed study, Maria Nordström emphasized how important the physical environment is to a child’s play and development.

Once The City Planning Authority had read the study, Maria Nordström was invited to a meeting to discuss its results. She was certainly pleased by the support she had gained. Everyone now seemed to agree that significant benefits would be lost if the original building plans were carried out.

“The next step in this unusual story was that one of the construction companies was eventually designated land at another site. Instead of the five tower blocks originally envisaged, only three were built. This meant that the most important places for play and physical activity could be preserved,” she said.

Along with the success factors already mentioned – parental engagement and media pressure – Maria Nordström talked about a few more:

“The protests came at the right phase in the process, before it had gone too far. It was also important that cooperation between the parents and teachers worked so well.”

“The architect I collaborated with really listened, and also had a manager who was prepared to think outside the box.”

“And last but not least, other potential site locations became available,” she said.

Maria Nordström reiterated her satisfaction at having been involved in a process with a happy end.

“It was very satisfying to have been involved and know that I was able to make a positive contribution,” she said.

She also criticized “the business-as-usual way of doing consultation”, as she called it.

“Plans are typically communicated in an unclear way, using very technical, complicated language. The same applied to Aspudden. Many people commented that the text was complicated and difficult to understand.”

Maria Nordström also praised the Gothenburg initiative of arranging a conference about children living in cities.

“It’s fantastic that Gothenburg is doing this. In Stockholm it has yet to happen! I think interest in these issues is much lower there.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has been around for 20 years, but not much concrete action has been taken. There is still too much talk and too little action,” she said.

She then made some comparisons with Norway.

“They’ve made a lot more progress there. The entire Convention on the Rights of the Child has been incorporated into Norwegian law, and local children’s ombudsmen have been appointed. Nevertheless, I still want to point out how important and positive the Aspudden case was. The parents were so committed and they devoted a tremendous amount of time and resources such that their children would be able to grow up in a good, stimulating environment. It was also important to have architects who cared about what we were doing and actually considered the children’s needs. I just wish that the concern for children’s environments were something that always applied – and not just in an isolated case like this one. All children, regardless of whether they have the support of their parents and of architects, require access to a good outdoor environment,” she concluded.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAYGROUNDS

According to Researcher in Environmental Psychology at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences Fredrika Mårtensson, there is nothing to suggest that a densely built city is beneficial to children's play. "When play areas disappear due to new construction, the outdoor spaces used by preschools become even more important," she observed.

Her thesis from 2004 was about preschool playgrounds and how important the physical environment is to children's outdoor play. Exciting environments are inspirational, and ideally, they should actually 'invite' the children to play, as she expressed it in her thesis. Fredrika Mårtensson said that existing plans for denser cities are a threat to such play areas.

"There is a kind of unawareness behind the theories about the positive effects of denser cities. But there is no research suggesting that a densely built city is beneficial to children's physical activity," she said.

According to Fredrika Mårtensson, the trend of denser cities started in the United States. Many cities there have huge empty spaces.

"That's not at all how things are in European cities. Nevertheless, the trend has taken hold here anyway and the negative consequences are already beginning to show," she said.

She took playgrounds as an example.

"Ten or fifteen years ago, we typically had one playground in each residential area. Today, many municipalities are instead putting all their resources into a few, well-equipped playgrounds," she said.

This means that children aren't playing as much in their own local environment. Instead, it's become more of a lifestyle issue for the whole family, she explained. At weekends, families go to the inner city playground – frequently quite far from home – to spend some time there.

POPULAR THEME PLAYGROUND

In this context, she brought up Malmö with its theme playground.

"It is enormously popular, particularly on weekends. The playground also seems to be as important to parents as it is to their children, because it gives parents the chance to socialize while their children play."

Other municipalities are following the trend and plan on offering a similar concept.

"Children are a sort of emotional project and the creation of wonderfully well-equipped playgrounds can be regarded as an important component. So, even though such efforts seem sensible from that perspective, they are also superficial. It seems as if the most important thing for many municipalities is to appear clever or trendy, and demonstrate that they are doing something impressive in the inner city."

Fredrika Mårtensson went on to say that, in the worst case, making cities denser can lead to the disappearance of spontaneity and greenery.

"Instead of spending so much time talking about the vision of the denser city, they should be investing in nature and parks. This certainly applies to Malmö and Stockholm anyway, where I'm more informed about what's going on. I don't know if the same applies to Gothenburg," she said.

She finds it surprising that so many people have unquestioningly supported the vision of denser cities.

"I don't understand how they simply take for granted that valuable wooded areas will remain if we strive for a denser city. For me it is obvious that there is a conflict of interest. It simply doesn't add up. How can you make a city denser without sacrificing nature and open green spaces?" she asked.

Fredrika Mårtensson referred to research indicating the strong correlation between outdoor play/physical activity and mental/physical health. She also described findings showing that children's concentration skills improve/recover by spending time in nature.

"From that point of view as well, one has reason to question why making things more crowded is such a good idea. Looking once again at Malmö, it is becoming increasingly common to locate preschools within residential areas. Such environments inhibit play," she said.

She continued:

"Good outdoor play simply isn't possible in a dense urban environment. There must be nature, green areas and plenty of space."

Fredrika Mårtensson then noted that, on the one hand, there is a great awareness of the importance of investing in children. There are conferences and seminars about children, and both politics and research consider what is in the best interests of children.

"But on the other hand, it is remarkable that the child perspective is still given such little weight in physical planning efforts.

I find this strange because children's play could actually serve as an incredible source of inspiration for those who are involved with urban planning! And what's more, improvements targeting children benefit all of us and the entire city," she said.

Fredrika Mårtensson noted that there is a trend of building small preschool playgrounds in other places as well, not just big cities.

“I find this to be surprising as well. I understand why this can happen in densely populated areas where there is limited space. But why make that choice when you aren’t faced with the same limitations? It’s as if what goes on in the big cities is contagious,” she said.

She then made yet another comparison with the situation in the United States, based partly on research about the physical activity of 10-year-olds.

“The figures show that as US cities become denser, the consequences for that age group are more severe than they are here in Sweden. The Swedish 10-year-olds who get the least amount of exercise are on a par with the average American 10-year-old according to the study I just mentioned,” she said.

In the light of such facts, Fredrika Mårtensson is apprehensive about the shift towards fewer and bigger playgrounds in Sweden.

“Places for children to play in their local environment are incredibly important because this is what helps them develop their independence. By making children too dependent on adults, we risk slowing down the rate at which they develop such skills. That could be the result of allowing the current trends to continue. Children also need good playgrounds nearby for motor skill development, i.e. developing appropriate physical reactions to signals from the body,” she explained.

Fredrika Mårtensson also described how she is now about to move ahead in her research by conducting a study of school playgrounds in Malmö.

“In this study, I will focus on schoolchildren’s opportunities for independent play and socializing in their local environment. What we already know is that environments that ‘invite’ small children to play and move about have the same effect on teenagers and adults. Physical activity requires stimulating places with plenty of space for us all,” she concluded.

COOPERATION FOR THE FUTURE

“A child’s play environment is also his or her life environment and those of us who work as urban planners are responsible for children’s life environment. So let’s promise each other that tomorrow, when we’re all sitting in our offices again, we’ll try to be twice as good at that going forward,” said Helena Bjarnegård, Parks Superintendent and Director of the Strategy Department at the Nature and Parks Administration, City of Gothenburg. She got the audience to rally behind her enthusiastic challenge when she ended the conference as the final speaker.

Helena Bjarnegård reminisced about the 1970s when her predecessor, Arvid Bengtsson, put Gothenburg on the world map by creating building playgrounds.

“That is yet another surprising thing – Gothenburg really did achieve world fame for these creative playgrounds. They had all sorts of planks, nails, tools and not least, staff to help the children build things.”

Much has happened since then, however, and after a few years the project was discontinued. Today building playgrounds are just a memory.

“It wasn’t possible to keep so many staff employed when there weren’t any children at the playgrounds. The children were spending most of their day at recreation centers and preschools, which were steadily growing in number.”

Helena Bjarnegård is optimistic about the future and she was easily able to spread her enthusiasm to the conference participants, despite the fact that they were probably tired after having listened to so many presentations during the day.

“It’s all about cooperation, and that is something we’re good at here in Gothenburg. Together, I am sure we can re-establish Gothenburg as a world class city for play,” she said.

She described various types of playgrounds such as neighborhood playgrounds, playgrounds on premises, city playgrounds and excursion playgrounds. She spoke of the dialogue with users about accessibility and safety, about durable building materials and much else. She showed, in words and images, a number of examples of playgrounds across the city, from the rest of Sweden and from other countries. She also emphasized the important link between dialogue, cooperation and results.

HIGH DEMANDS ON EXCURSION PLAYGROUNDS

This year the Parks and Nature Administration has been commissioned by its committee to develop concepts for excursion playgrounds and propose suitable sites for them.

“Efforts are already underway. Among other things, we have held workshops with several administrations on this theme, and we are planning to do the same with children. An excursion playground must be located near public transport and in an area with all types of housing alternatives. The site must also be near woodlands and nature, as well as near commercial and cultural attractions,” she explained.

THE FIRST PLAY GARDEN

The audience was left in no doubt as to the park superintendent’s qualifications for managing the work on playgrounds when she told them about the play garden in Karlstad, the country’s first. Helena Bjarnegård is one of the architects behind this play garden, built a few years ago and located in Karlstad’s city park.

The play garden covers 13,000 square meters and contains features to stimulate the senses based on various cultural themes such as music, literature and art. These include musical instruments, a meandering path with a fairy tale written by children, and the possibility of making your own works of art.

Nature and physical activities are also important elements of the playground. Children can do climbing, for instance, and it borders on woodlands and large expanses of nature.

REALITY AND POLICY

Gothenburg’s investments in playgrounds, however, are not solely directed at large-scale, grandiose solutions:

“At the moment, we are trying to conduct a survey of the city’s playgrounds,” she said.

Once completed, Helena Bjarnegård and her colleagues hope to have an overview of the situation and all of the city’s playgrounds.

“At that point, we will hopefully also be able to compare the actual situation to our policy,” she said.

According to this policy, children living in Gothenburg shall have access to both large and small playgrounds that are nearby, as well as a little further away.

“However, it is also important that those of us working as city administrators cooperate in further developing the city’s playgrounds. One might well ask how we should go about this. Personally, I think we should continue along the

same path and further develop what is already good. In other words, going forward, we should provide children and teenagers with even more opportunities for participating in planning and sharing their opinions about their local environment.”

In this context, she mentioned nature pedagogy, which is a method that has been successfully used by the Parks and Nature Administration.

“Cooperation is key, and by that I mean cooperation on several levels. There can be cooperation on a smaller scale for small projects and more large-scale cooperation on bigger projects. The main thing is that we actually cooperate, because we all have a lot to learn from each other,” she concluded.

CURRENT PUBLICATIONS FROM A SAFER AND MORE HUMANE GOTHENBURG

What follows are some reading recommendations of books about children's rights and participation that have just been published.

The book *Participation – on the children's own terms*, ISBN: 978-91-979185-7-2 written by Monica Nordenfors, provides an overview of parts of the existing research on children's participation. Monica Nordenfors is a social worker who has a doctorate in social work and who works at the University of Gothenburg.

The book *To be Taken Seriously. Examples of children's participation*, ISBN: 978-91-979185-6-5. In this book, Tina Eliasson describes three activities that require the participation of children and young people. We learn what this participation means – for both children and adults.

The books can be downloaded as PDF files or be ordered free of charge at www.goteborg.se/tryggaremanskligare

