Cities Alive: Designing for Urban Childhoods

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In 1996, the second UN Conference on Human Settlements, widely known as Habitat II, addressed the pressing global need, in an increasingly urbanized world, for towns and cities to place sustainable, livable environments that support universal human rights at the heart of their plans. The Istanbul Declaration (United Nations, 1996), which established the Habitat II agenda, included the recognition that this endeavor must pay particular attention "to the needs of… children and youth for safe, healthy and secure living conditions"; it resolved to "ensure… the effective participation of youth in political, economic and social life."

More than this, as UNICEF (2018) reports, the conference declared that the wellbeing of children is the ultimate indicator of a healthy habitat, a democratic society and of good governance. This idea, that "children are a kind of indicator species," was later famously taken up by Enrique Peñalosa, mayor of the Colombian capital, Bogotá, who added: "If we can build a successful city for children, we will have a successful city for all people." Peñalosa's words are frequently cited at gatherings of the child-friendly city (CFC) movement that has developed around the Habitat II agend, and they now can open this succinct, handsome publication from the planning and design specialists, Arup.

Although presenting itself as a "report," the document might be more accurately described as a short guide. It breaks the innately complex, crosscutting issues of its subject matter—children's rights, urban design and sustainable development—into manageable headings and accessible lists: two "key concepts" ("everyday freedoms" and "children's infrastructure"); seven "key messages" (e.g. "Decision makers should be opportunistic and strategic, and integrate child-friendly thinking into all aspects of city making"; five "core challenges" (from "traffic and pollution" to "isolation and intolerance"); seven broad "benefits" (from "health and wellbeing" to being a "catalyst for improving cities"); and 14 "recommended interventions" (e.g., "Intergenerational spaces," "Pedestrian priority," "Neighborhood mapping").

The main section is illustrated with neat, thumbnail case studies (beginning, inevitably, with Bogotá), helpfully located on a map of the world, and the whole document is liberally garnished with beautiful photographs of children, sharp info-graphics and a welter of carefully referenced (though not always accurately represented[1]) facts.

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[1] For example, "…30% more children (in developing countries are) overweight compared to developed countries" (p. 11) is clearly a mistake; the figure refers to the rate of increase.

Although the document aims its conclusions at "policy makers and city leaders, developers and investors, and built-environment professionals," many other practitioners may also find it useful as a handy summary of some of the main issues, a resource from which to discover further reading, and—being highly accessible in both style and format—an effective campaign tool. Advocates seeking to engage busy policymakers in a more serious consideration of children's needs in the planning process could do worse than pull out some of the key points here. Indeed, presenting the document as a whole—with its well-marshalled facts and concise summation of challenges and solutions—may help to make many a policy case for adopting a more child-friendly approach to urban planning.

This is the document's stated purpose, and, with Arup saying it is already their most downloaded publication ever, in this it must be judged a success. There are nevertheless a number of interconnected criticisms that can be made of this report, touching on issues for the CFC movement in general.

The first is that it gives the impression that children's well-being and the safeguarding of their rights is primarily a matter of design, as though the built environment were the main determining factor in children's quality of life. Arup are planning and design specialists, and so perhaps this perspective is inevitable. They may also argue that the CFC idea was conceived to focus attention on the importance of the built environment for children; that their approach here merely reflects this agenda. This is a common misconception. The significance of Habitat II is indeed that the liveability and sustainability of human settlements are vitally important issues for the global community, but the agenda is a socio-economic one; the built environment and its design are *part* of the challenge, not more important than "homelessness, increasing poverty, unemployment (or) social exclusion" (United Nations, 1996).

The narrower emphasis on the built environment is both a strength and a weakness of the independent (non-UNICEF) CFC movement. It is a strength because children and youths' needs, perspectives and aspirations are routinely overlooked in spatial development, planning and infrastructure decisions, where the needs of commerce, traffic and adult culture tend to dominate. Children's advocates are traditionally more prevalent and influential within the large, usually statutory, services dedicated to them—education, child health and social care. Even the international play movement has, arguably, led to more (and not always better) segregated play areas than it has succeeding in making or conserving space for children within the general public realm. In cultivating the acceptance of a responsibility to children within the big professional sectors and policy contexts that shape the built environment, the CFC movement is slowly surely changing this; embedding the crucial notion of children's agency as citizens with needs for incremental degrees of independence that should be negotiated within families, not denied them by the mere fact of growing up in a city.

This guide supports this purpose and is to be welcomed for it, but the problem with narrowly focusing on design, planning and the built environment is that this overlooks the complexity of factors that impact children's lives, and, in the process,

also tends to minimize the significance of the human rights framework within which the CFC movement is properly situated. It is telling that no reference is made in this guide to the official UNICEF (2018) CFC Initiative, the mandated program to promote and implement the Habitat principles for children and youth around the world. This leaves the publishers open to charges of appropriation, by commercial interests, of a UN children's rights initiative (the document is indeed a very effective calling card for Arup's services in child-friendly developments); it also means the omission of the essential guiding principles that should underpin every such endeavor: non-discrimination; the best interests of the child; the inherent right to life, survival and development; and respect for the views of the child—the four cornerstones of the UNCRC (1989).

This is not to take the ideological high ground (and I repeat that this critique can be levelled at the independent CFC movement in general), but there are consequences to this approach that have ethical implications. One such concerns the question of gentrification. For example, the City of Rotterdam has adopted its own interpretation of the CFC approach to the economic regeneration of downtown areas that had become rundown and unattractive, as the city's industrial hub declined as did its status as a major port. The city council is unapologetic about its gentrification program, arguing that its relatively high social housing stock meant that all socio-economic groups benefit. Yet a critical analysis of the Rotterdam program (Berg, 2013) finds that these plans discriminated against poorer families, priced out of their traditional neighborhoods to make way for more affluent families. The research concludes that because "child-friendly" in this case means "middle class-friendly," it is to be expected that the "poor become further marginalized" (Berg, 2013).

This is a major issue requiring further research and debate. If Rotterdam's strategy is indeed discriminatory against children from poorer families, then it cannot claim to be a child-friendly city in terms of the UN's Habitat agenda, which is squarely situated as far as children and youth are concerned, within the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Arup's guide fails to set this wider context and only obliquely refers to the issue.

Linked to the report's neglect of the full children's rights context for the CFC movement is a final criticism: that the role of central government in this agenda is not recognized. Even within a narrow, built-environment perspective, the role of the "city leaders and policy makers" to which the report is addressed are constrained by whichever national planning policy framework may be in place. Even a relatively minor piece of national legislation such as the Play Sufficiency Duty, introduced by the Welsh Government (2010), can have a big influence on how local governments respond to children's claims on space. Conversely, the UK government's radical deregulation of national planning policy in 2010 has made a similar challenge much more difficult in England because development is now the default. Taking the full CFC agenda, wherein poverty, crime, public health and statutory services all have a big impact, the significance of national government policy is unavoidable; a serious omission from Arup's guide.

In summary, this is an attractive, helpful synthesis of the key arguments for a child-friendly approach to planning and design for urban environments, but it fails to situate its rationale within the full context of children's rights or the holistic policy context of the Habitat agenda. Thus, it does not acknowledge the complex ethical and political questions arising from concerns, for example, that child-friendly planning sometimes equates to discriminatory gentrification.

In fairness to Arup, this is a challenge to all of us in this movement. Can we really aim to influence the shape and culture of towns and cities without addressing the political and ethical arguments behind big policy decisions? They may be a metaphorical "indicator species," but children are first and foremost the entire human race at its most vulnerable and dependent stages of life. If child-friendly cities are not for all of them, then who and what are we advocating for?

Review by Adrian Voce

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