

## The Playful City: A Vision of the City Through the Eyes of Young People

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The Playful City is a Vision of the city through the eyes of young people. It is not a vision of painted flowers on walls or a city where only children live. It is a fundamental rethinking of how we understand, design, implement and use the urban environment. It is an effort to create a city that meets the needs of all its citizens.

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### Introduction

The playful City conference held at Stanford University during the summer of 1990 was based on the assumption that the physical environment can support or hinder human development. It was also based on the belief that a city designed to support and nurture development of our youth will support and nurture us all. The intent of the conference was to create visions of urban environments in which people: feel welcome and at home, are comforted and protected, and where they can explore

and discover life. The Playful City is a national response to the trends and conditions which have created unfriendly and unhealthy places for children, youth, and families.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to report and review highlights from that conference including some of the visions and to suggest immediate strategies for art educators (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

### Playful City Conference Program Stanford University, July 29-August 1, 1990

Sunday, 7/29/90

#### INTRODUCING THE VISION

Opening Session: Introducing the Playful City Vision  
Playful City Carnival

Monday, 7/30/90

#### DEFINING THE VISION

Session I: Working Groups - Memories of Playful  
Urban Spaces

Session II: Working Groups - Visions and Goals

Session III: Working Groups - visions and Goals

Session IV: Plenary Session - Working Group

#### Presentations and Discussions

**Tuesday, 7/31/90**  
**IMPLEMENTING THE VISION**

- Session V: Working Groups - From Visions and Goals to Policies
- Session VI: Working Groups - Strategies for Implementation
- Session VII: Working Groups - Strategies for Implementation
- Session VIII: Plenary Session - Working Group Presentations

**Wednesday, 8/1/90**  
**NEXT STEPS**

- Session IX: Working Groups - Local Action Plans
- Session X: Plenary Session - Working Group presentations, Discussion, Summary, and Conclusions

**The Visioning Process**

Before the conference, participants reviewed a draft of policies and design guidelines for the development of urban communities supportive of the needs of children. The Playful City Guidelines were written for public officials, planners, designers, and citizen groups who were interested in future development of their communities to better meet the needs of children, youth, and families. During the conference, participants worked in small groups and practiced a "visioning process" in which these draft ideas were graphically debated, modified, expanded, contracted, evaluated, prioritized, defined, and imaged. Trained facilitators recorded in color every idea on large paper, big enough for all to see. Eight working groups focused on, and were so named: Housing/Neighborhoods, Market-

places, Transportation, Communication/Information, Systems, Parks/Playgrounds/Open Spaces, Child Serving Institutions (child care, teen centers, schools, cultural facilities and health care facilities), Public Buildings/Workplaces. This visioning process was used by each group to develop a series of concepts, ideas, and images which were condensed and presented to the entire conference group. Some groups actually used the large boards as visual aids and some created new vision boards for their presentations.

Delightful but thoughtful records and images were posted on every available wall in several of Sanford's residence, meeting and dining rooms due to the massive central theme which was to develop the concept of a playful city.<sup>2</sup> Through out the conference, participants were asked to create a city through the playful eyes of a child. During the very first session, the playful city vision was defined in each of the working groups with identification and explanation of participant's childhood memories of their play spaces.<sup>3</sup> These childhood memories were repeatedly called up, redefined and used to construct pieces and parts of a playful city of the future, one more supportive of children's needs than most cities of today.

The concept of play adopted for this conference came from a professional/practical approach used by city planners and designers, rather than a purely academic/research orientation. Designers of children's environments view play as a central factor in child development and as the way in which children explore and learn about their social and physical environments.<sup>4</sup>

Using this practical approach to play, participants focused on (1) the relationship between the physical environment and children's social behavior and development and (2) the role of play and the necessity for interpreting play principles in the design of urban environments (see Figure 2). As an example, the conference opened with a Playful City Carnival which was designed as a hands-on interactive event. The carnival provided an opportunity for participants (adults and youth) to meet and see the work being done by colleagues for and with children and youth. This opening evening of food, music, and games was staged in the courtyard of one of the residence complexes.



Figure 2 Stanford courtyard.

One key concern before, during, and at the close of the conference was involvement of youth in the design, maintenance, and evaluation of urban spaces. Preconference input from children came in the form of project reports from Youth Focus Groups representing fifteen cities across the USA and Japan. These focus groups were created and facilitated by organizations in each city to involve children and youth in discussion and model building exercises designed to reflect their perception of their cities and neighborhoods, and develop their ideas on improving these urban environments (See Figure 3).

This same ethnographic/environmental psychology research approach (user group participation) was used during the conference. Twenty youths selected from across the country were invited to work together as a group to design Playful City High. This fictional high school was designed in reaction to the youths' experiences of actual cities and schools. They later dispersed and used their curricular and environmental design ideas and strategies to inform each (adult) workgroup with a youthful perspective on the working process and potential end product.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 3 Youth presenting their ideas.

The youth provided constant reminders which sometimes were loud and then other times deeply introspective comments, including rich visual, highly symbolic graphic displays. Due in part to these influences, the overriding message echoed by each adult working group was *the necessary involvement of youth in the design, maintenance, and evaluation of urban spaces*. For art educators interested in and concerned with built environment education, the Playful City project provides yet another arena for service and growth of art education in schools.

### Schools and Cultural Institutions

Schools and Cultural Institutions was a subgroup of one of the larger working groups called Child Serving Institutions. The school subgroup first identified and presented eight goals which after two days of work were narrowed to three goals: schools as unfinished institutions, developing relationships between children and significant adults, developing relationships between schools and cultural centers. These were defined and further illustrated with images of potential projects and examples of real projects when possible (See Figure 4).

**Figure 4****Goals for School and Cultural Institutions****Day 1**

1. Operate as community hubs
2. Operate as learning environments
3. Promote growth and development through play experiences
4. Reflect cultural/social/economic diversity
5. Include children in decision making
6. Promote ongoing evaluations
7. Employ adults committed to learning how to support children
8. Operate as evolving/unfinished institutions

**Day 2**

1. Operate as unfinished institutions
2. Playful City High
3. Include children in decision making
4. Promote growth and development through play
5. Operate as learning environments

**Day 3**

1. Changing/unfinished/evolving institutions
2. Develop relationships between children and significant adults
3. Develop relationships between schools, cultural centres and the community at large

**The Sessions**

The purpose of the first day of meetings in all groups was definition of the Playful City vision, using childhood memories of playful urban spaces. One of our three goals was "to include children in the decision making process" concerning a program or setting for a school or cultural institution. Some of the visions were "listen to them, read their writing, look at their drawings..." Within the context of schools and cultural institutions the idea was that planners and designers, as well as administrators and educators would gather information from youth and work with youth to use their information for both design and evaluation of institutional programs as well as the design and evaluation of settings which support those programs (See figures 5 and 6).



*Figure 5 Transportation: the playful bus.*



Figure 6 A message from youth.

These ideas are not new to art education but need to be reemphasized in light of this conference. Ettinger and Hoffman (1990) have provided a model of how the participatory approach can work. These art educators found that students could redesign the curriculum to better suit their instructional needs and enhance meaningful participation. The working process and results of the Playful City echoed findings of the Ettinger/Hoffman quilt making experience with participatory curriculum in several ways. Conference participants at first felt like a scattered disoriented group of adults from a variety of disciplines and careers, unsure of their role with youth in this process of rewriting guidelines for urban design. The only bond seemed to be a shared notion that somehow the voices of youth were important in urban planning and particularly school curriculum design. At the end of the conference, however, some of the same positive outcomes noted by Ettinger and Hoffman (1990) were displayed by adults and youth at Stanford: Sharing ideas, making group decisions, developing social ties, and producing something meaningful.

The user-group participation approach to design and evalu-

ation of the built environment was also introduced by another art educator (Kurz, 1983; Guilfoil, 1986, 1990). These studies include notes on curriculum design and instructional art studio and criticism activities. All of these approaches to curriculum design require *active* student participation and evaluation, with which the youth at this conference strongly agreed.<sup>6</sup>

The purpose of the second day of sessions in all groups was implementation of the Playful City vision and defining goals and policies. Part of the Child Serving Institutions sub-group was concerned with schools as evolving or unfinished institutions. Our idea was that schools should be flexible and evolve over time, and that students should have an opportunity to participate or at least "leave their mark" in a planned, meaningful way. The participants struggled with the title "unfinished institutions" due to the negative or temporary connotation, but a more appropriate heading was not identified.

However, a few model programs and projects were quickly named. The first was the Exploratorium in San Francisco. This is a "hands-on" science and art museum, which also includes School in the Exploratorium (SITE), an integrated approach to teaching science and art. In another "hands-on" approach, a landscape architect focuses on landscape learning and has developed a model "school yard" which, designed with help from students, became an outdoor learning laboratory (Pottinger, 1989). The design encompasses the entire school grounds and offers a rich diversity of spaces, planes, vegetation, light, colors, textures, tastes (some edible plants), smells, and of course uses. Many of the ideas came from children's drawings and writings about their future school yard. On a smaller scale, art educators and students have also participated in the design, evaluation, and redesign of their school spaces (Taylor and Valasto, 1975) and have constructed permanent sidewalks, bike ramps, a flag pole base (Guilfoil in press), as well as countless temporary environments.

The third day and last session dealt with the next steps, specifically, local plans of action. Out of twelve strategies, our working group highlighted education, research, and training as the keys to implementing the visions identified earlier: unfin-

ished schools and institutions, developing relationships between children and significant adults, developing relationships between schools and cultural centres. These key concepts could also unlock several opportunities for service in art education (See figure 6).

Education of our youth to participate in urban design is a prerequisite for a more playful and responsible childhood and adult life. Throughout the conference and at the end, the youth constantly asked for help with: drawing, speaking, imaging, visualizing, working together, and leadership skills. All these skills can be readily practiced and refined in school art and other classes. But we must take the lead.

Some art educators already do visual thinking exercises in class. The youth said we (school art teachers) do not do it enough in school. Perhaps this is because we (art educators) do not do it sufficiently in teacher-training and art education courses. Maybe too many of us assume that the studio art courses will suffice. If we truly care about urban environments, we can no longer rely on that assumption.

The youth said "teach us" how to participate effectively so that "our vision" is clearly represented. Only then can planners and designers "use our ideas in a more democratic design process. It is our city too," they said. Our teaching charge is clear. We need to include visual thinking and group processes, some of which must center on the built environment.

The need for related research, however, may not be as clear but it is just as important. Research on children and their environments, especially school environments, is particularly valuable during these times of rapid social change. Such change often dictates school expansion, consolidation, closings, openings, renovations, and additions. This also includes change within the profession at the federal, state and local levels in areas such as pedagogy, curriculum, instruction, law, textbooks, programming, and transportation.

We need to train our (art) teachers so that they may be more

informed users of the built environment and more effective teachers about the built environment. Right now this is no one's job. It must be everyone's job. In debates, hearings, and presentations, too often responses from the primary user groups - the youth - are absent. Designers, planners, and administrators have continued to ask for representative data (in usable formats) on which to base their design decisions (Kurz, 1983; Lang, 1987). Drawings, photo analyses, and writing samples from youth that focus on the impact of the built environment on youth have begun to address this need (Guilfoil, 1986, 1990; Pottinger, 1989). However, we need more practice, research, debate, and refinement of these techniques, and dissemination of this information.

## Implications

As identified during the conference, art education has a crucial role to play in the creation of the vision of a Playful City. Art educators can help keep the play in Playful city for us all, through curriculum development, instruction, teacher training and research.<sup>7</sup> Curriculum development in built environment education and instruction would focus on visual thinking, architectural criticism, children's play, play leadership training, and cooperative learning. Teacher training would emphasize practice and mastery of these visual skills and research would be conducted on urban spaces and the social, cultural, and behavioral effect on youth, especially as school environments are concerned. Part of the vision is a playful city composed of cultural institutions, namely school buildings and school yards, whose programs and settings are in part designed, maintained and evaluated by youth. That is the work. It means responsibility. And it can be rich, meaningful and playful if youth are as actively involved in these processes as they were during this conference.

The Playful City Conference organizers accepted a huge challenge in designing a conference including youth at all stages and of developing youth oriented guidelines for urban planning. They, like the conference participants, represent a variety of

professions concerned with children and urban affairs. The tie that seemed to bind us all was the youth. Their ideas and frustrations became ours as we all attempted to build and travel the road to a more user-friendly urban future which would include ideas from children in democratic decision-making procedures, not one that would ignore them.<sup>8</sup>

Our vehicle for travel and the visual metaphor which evolved during the conference was the bus. It was based on the children's book and song, *The wheels on the Bus*. It was first presented by a sub-group of the Transportation work-group as a vision and model of their working process. It was celebrated at the end of the conference by all in song, following a slide-review of conference proceedings (See figure 5). In a public bus children are often present. As on a public bus, youth at the conference were ever-present and often loud, obnoxious and immature. But they were also mature, spontaneous and refreshing in their visions of how things could be. They provided a living reminder that the needs and desires of children as users should be reflected in every aspect of (city bus) urban design, maintenance, and especially travel into the future. The issue became how best to include their knowledge, experience, and feelings in these processes. During the slide-review several "next steps" were identified. These included identification of demonstration projects in which children have been involved in the design process and future conferences which would focus on particular urban areas and issues, involving more children in conference planning and participation.<sup>9</sup> These too will be rich, meaningful and playful events. Ching-ching, beep-beep, bye-bye.

### References

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### End Notes

- <sup>1</sup>. The United States organization, PLAE Inc. (Playing and Learning in Adaptable Environments), launched the Playful City Project, funded in part by the National Endowment for the Arts. Playful City is a national effort to create design guidelines for the development of urban communities that support the needs of children. For more information write: PLAE, Inc., 1802 Fifth Street, Berkeley, CA 94710, USA.

<sup>2.</sup> The campus at Stanford University was chosen as the site for the Playful City Conference because it provided the best location and facilities for large group meetings. Conference organizers and participants did not seem to have a problem with the obvious disparity between the lovely and gracious suburban conference setting and the difficult, unfriendly urban issues debated therein.

<sup>3.</sup> Since the conference, one of the participants edited a special issue of *Children's Environments Quarterly*, (1990) 7(4), titled "Special Places." Louise Chawla wrote the introduction to a collection of papers which are presented in three categories: analysis of environmental autobiographies; surveys of favorite or desired places; and examination of forces that prevent children's appropriation of places. In the first group of papers, memories of childhood are defined as clearly separate from childhood and the advantages of using (environmental) autobiographies for a variety of purposes are noted. In her article, "Ecstatic Places" Chawla studies fifteen autobiographies in relation to Edith Cobb's (1977) *Ecology of Imagination in Childhood*, New York: Columbia University Press. Chawla's references include work by Clare Cooper-Marcus (1978) "Remembrance of Landscapes Past" in *Landscape* 22(3) and Kenny Helpland (1979) "Environmental Autobiography," a paper presented at the International Conference on Environmental Psychology, Surrey, England. In all, the value of childhood memories of special places as self-discovery are celebrated.

<sup>4.</sup> For further explanation of this concept of play see Robin Moore's (1990) *Childhood's Domain: Play and Place in Child Development*, MIG Communications, Berkely CA. One of the organizers of this conference, Moore had just published this study in which he used children's drawings and interviews to investigate their behavior in urban settings and focus on the impact of environmental planning and design decisions on children's developmental potential.

<sup>5.</sup> Moore (1990) suggests the need for critical analysis of the use of public space and the need to involve children in community education and action. He cites Great Britain as a model in the growth of environmental education. During the last decade,

British environmental education has provided an excellent integration of childhood environment research with participation of youth in the planning, design, and management of community settings, including schools. British students experience documentation, debate, negotiation, and other crucial decision-making skills, which are essential for political effectiveness. For more information from another source, write: *Learning through Landscapes*, Third Floor, Southside Offices, The Law Courts, Winchester, Hants, SO23 9DL, Great Britain

<sup>6.</sup> An interdisciplinary national approach to student-generated curriculum design and evaluation comes from the *Foxfire* series based on Elliott Wiggington's high school teaching career. As first of nine core practices in teaching, Wiggington (1985) suggests in *Sometimes a Shining Moment*, that all work done by students and teachers must flow from student desire. It must be infused from the beginning with student choice, desire, revision, execution, reflection, and evaluation. Problems that arise during the activity must be solved by students. For more information on the *Foxfire* approach write: Eastern Kentucky Teacher Network, Kathy Hanon, P.O. Box 452, Hindman, KY 4182

<sup>7.</sup> Artist, author, and art education professor, George Szekeley has for years been working and writing in the areas of children's play and art making. See his *From Play to Art* (1991) and *Encouraging Creativity in Art Lessons* (1988), Teachers College Press, Columbia University, NY, N

<sup>8.</sup> Two more artists, authors, and professors of art education have for years been working together in the areas of art, educational systems and democracy. Doug Blandy and Kristin Congdon investigate the roles of art education that promote democratic foundations of individuality and community cohesiveness in *Art in a Democracy* (1987), Teachers College Press, Columbia University, NY, N

<sup>9.</sup> I hope more art educators, especially those involved with CSTAE, in the future will participate in the work of PLAE. In both groups are concerned with socially relevant programs and environments for children, which include the teaching of art. Only one other art educator, Hinda Avery, from Canada, attended this Playful City conference. Perhaps future conferences and other projects will involve more youth and art educators.