

Experiencing and interpreting city architecture

Physical environment from childrens perspective discussed within a framework of developmental tasks

*Ann Skantze
Stockholm University
Department of Education
106 91 Stockholm
Sweden*

Résumé

L'étude porte sur la relation entre développement humain et environnement physique dans un quartier périphérique récent situé au sud de Stockholm. Des enfants de quatre groupes d'âge ont été approchés. Cet article rend compte des résultats pour le groupe des plus jeunes (10 à 12 ans). Le matériel consiste en entretiens et en essais rédigés. Les résultats sont discutés par rapport aux tâches liées au développement des enfants entrant graduellement dans la vie d'adultes. L'étude montre que le quartier ne favorise pas "les activités de transition" de l'enfance à l'âge adulte.

Summary

A perspective on the relationship between human development and the physical environment is discussed. Children in four different age-groups in a new suburb located in southern Stockholm were studied. This article deals with the youngest age group (10-12 yrs). The material consists of interviews and essays and the results are discussed in terms of developmental tasks, related to gradually integrating into adult life. The study shows that the suburb lacks "transition activities" from childhood to adulthood.

A study of meaning-making and human development

The interaction between human beings and their environment is complex. Many aspects of this phenomena are dynamic and difficult to study. In this article my aim is to discuss a perspective on the relationship between human development and the physical environment. A starting point in my ongoing study is that human beings react to and are influenced by the environment depending on how it is experienced and perceived. The experiences and perceptions develop within a meaning-making context. According to Kegan (1982) the core of the human developmental process consists of the activity of meaning-making. Meaning-making occurs during the life

span. It is a process of qualitative transformations. Our modern society is, on the other hand, characterized by reflectivity and choice (Giddens, 1991). Sociocultural influences are not tied to ages and stages as in the traditional society. Norms and demands with regard to age and gender are less restricted today. On the basis of these new conditions theories containing continuity and predictability about "ages and stages" have been criticized. But, even if we can make choices and thus create our own identity and development in a freer way than before, we face similar biologically and socially based demands within age phases. My aim is to clarify the role of the environment in the context of meaning-making and developmental tasks.



Fig. 1 The main street, known as the avenue, of Skarpnäck

The empirical study took place in a new town, Skarpnäck, 10 kilometres south of Stockholm. It is planned and shaped like a city with 4 – 6 storeyed brick houses, streets, alleys and multi-storey car parks. Skarpnäck is located on a large field, which was previously used as an air field. The suburb was built 11 years ago. Approximately 10 000 people live here, a third of them children. The area was specially planned to be suitable for children with day care- and leisure centres in good supply. Housing is provided for old age pensioners in blocks of service flats and in residential buildings equipped with modern facilities. The suburb is interesting because it was built based on intentions different from those of earlier Swedish residential areas, which were built with more purely functional purposes in mind. In this particular area the aim has been to create an atmosphere of a town with characteristics from medieval towns like those of Siena in Italy. The houses are placed so that square blocks are formed with inner yards in the center. A main street, the avenue, runs right through the town, dividing the grid into two parts. Other streets

are smaller and are made like alleys in accordance with old towns. My study includes four age groups, 10 – 12 year olds, older teenagers, parents of small children and old age pensioners. My question concerns the inhabitants experience and use of the physical environment in their every day lives. This article will describe the younger age group only. The research material consists of qualitative individual interviews, group interviews, essays and informal interviews conducted during walking tours. I interviewed 20 children and received 43 essays written by the 10 – 12 year olds. The data was mainly analyzed in terms of meaning units and transformed meanings (Giorgi, 1989).

An action oriented perspective

When the children talk about the different places that they like and where they usually spend their time, their perspective is action oriented. The places the children attach importance to and like, contain qualities that can be used in their games or in their activities of exploring and discovering. The yards within the blocks are described on the basis of their possibilities for play and other activities, such as to become "mountaineer", to play football, to ride a sledge. The children prefer the yards where walls, projecting balconies, sheds, and vegetation create small rooms. Consequently, it is the natural variation and the making of rooms as basis for actions, that attract the children's attention. Empty flat yards are, by many children of this particular age group, looked upon as dull and only good for small children. Several of the children mention and show me a special place where there is a lot to do. This particular place is – a leisure centre – situated on the fringe of the area. There are sheep, pigs, rabbits and ducks, and the children are able to assist in taking care of these animals. Apart from this place, the candy shop and the video shop are among the mentioned and well liked places.

The aesthetic aspects of the houses are seldom brought up by the children. They wrote very briefly about the houses in their essays. Only 28 of the 43 brought up the houses. 17 wrote that the houses are "good", 9 that they are "dull", 2 established the fact that there are high-rise buildings. The 17 children that rated the houses as being good include motivations such as: "they are fun because it is possible to climb up on the roofs"; "It's good that there is no graffiti"; "They are good because they have colour".

Ways around and out, exploring and discovering

Some of the children told me that they used the yards for roller skating or for biking. They seem to begin doing this in their own yard, then use the ones close by and gradually go on in wider circles to the surroundings of the town. Yards and parks are used as roads and short cuts. They feel that they are allowed everywhere – not one of them has expressed feelings of other yards being forbidden areas or of children not being wanted there. They looked upon the whole town as free for them to use. Some of them told me that they are now old enough to get out of the town and explore the neighbouring nature reserve together with their friends.

Places for adventures, excitement and imagination

The experience of the place is also related to its possibilities for creating adventure, excitement and imaginary play. In this context a place, "forgotten" by adults, or marginal spaces such as between buildings and well-planned spaces, play an important part. This may be due to the fact that adults have not marked out the space and preplanned different games by placing out play material. On these particular spots children play games like being chevaliers, being members of a stone-age clan, taming horses etc. The area is shown to be important for the creation of play. Both boys and girls particularly mention the grove. One girl said it is good because "it is there that one's imagination comes into action". One of the boys comments that one can play so many different games there. "We are two boys with such imagination that we can turn the woods into a fairyland. It's a lot of fun to play there". The children consider the grove to be theirs and they feel strongly that they should protect it against possible interference.

For some of the boys the multi-storey car parks are interesting places for biking and roller skating, which is, however, against the rules. They have a "superman"-strategy in challenging the danger and handling the situation. When the cars turn up and approach at full speed "one throws oneself to the side at the speed of lightning".

Experiences of atmosphere, feelings and sensory impressions

Sensory impressions and the atmosphere of places are important. The descriptions contain impressions of light, darkness, smell, coldness, warmth, colours, sounds and feelings. In the grove the children find frogs among the "wet leaves" and they play in the "cold brook" and on the "soft" mossy stones. This place has objects, qualities and an atmosphere that the children use to create imaginary games. In these games they are faced with dangers and with their feelings. A fascination for the horrible and frightening also comes out, mostly related to the woods or the darkness between the houses or among the bushes in the yards. This theme, as well as most of the other above mentioned themes is found in other research on children. (To mention only one, Roger Hart's comprehensive study of 1979).

Possibilities of adult-like activities

A group of 12-year olds told me about their disappointment in the few opportunities for "real" activities. The essays also show that the children long for more shops and for organized games (24 out of 43 mentioned this). The activities the group of boys think of as "real", are various types of sport games involving training and being in teams. They feel let down because they are no longer considered to be in need of organized activities such as those that the smaller children at the leisure center have. They are now left to themselves, due to their age and to the financial cuts made by the city council. They themselves feel they are too old for "childish play". They would like more adult-like activities.

Using the town for developing competence and independence

How can we understand the children's experience and use of the environment in terms of developmental tasks? The children get out and about, they gradually increase their territory starting from their own yards and go on to the ones closest by, then further into the whole town and into the nature reserve in the vicinity. This exploring and discovering of new places in their surroundings can be considered as means for developmental tasks like physical competence and geographical orientation. This goes hand in hand with a mental competence for encountering new places, situations, conditions and people. We can also understand the expansion of their territory in terms of a growing independence as a developmental task. They are working towards independence from their parents and the physical environment is a tool for them in this respect. By exploring the environment with their friends they are gradually learning to manage by themselves without parents. Going away is a physical act requiring self confidence, imaginative and cognitive skills, but it also comprises self image and mind. Children transform outer control into inner control simultaneously on different levels. The design of the town serves as a positive contribution for this particular age group in this respect.

Places of their own: managing relations and feelings

The places which permit and inspire adventure, excitement, imagination and symbolic play are those that are more or less forgotten by grown ups. These places are marginal spaces, a grove, a group of trees and bushes between houses etc. In the symbolic situation brought about by play and place the children experience being exposed to threats and dangers and coping with them. The children make up rules, they learn about themselves in relation to others, they test boundaries in these relations. These kind of places can be said to be non-existent or forgotten on the adult map. They are used by the children along lines which are not forced or prescribed by adults. There is no immediate supervision or adult control. The claim for such a place of their own in the physical world may simultaneously be seen as a claim for a creative place in their identity formation and development. They use their own means, such as symbolic play and imagination, to deal with self and relationships as well as with feelings of danger and anxiety etc. Perhaps they are learning not to be subject to emotions, or being embedded in them as Kegan states (Kegan, 1982). Perhaps the play/place is used as a means of "throwing out", making an object of feelings and emotions and then integrating them in a more mature way, having them instead of being them. The play and place are part of the strategies to manage the world around and the world within – worlds which are not separate worlds for them.

Integrating play into mature activities

A group of 12 year old boys has a slightly different outlook than the children mentioned above. These boys do not "play around" anymore. They want organized games, which they call "real" activities. We can understand this as related to the

developmental task: participating in more adult-like ways of being and acting, to be able to gradually integrate into adult life. To participate in "real" activities gives a certain amount of importance to the interaction and opens them up for more mature behaviour. The "town" does not offer opportunities in this direction. The ideology of the planners seems to be that this age group are old enough to take care of themselves, an ideology which is strengthened by municipal economical problems. Sports and games with training facilities are supplied only on individual bases, situated far away, that are expensive and demand parental support. There is a lack of "transition activities" between childhood and adulthood. This town does not offer a variety of shops, trade, handicraft, offices, working sites etc, all parts of adult life which would have given opportunities for the children to interact with adults, to explore and to learn by participating in adult life.

Conclusion

My material shows that the children use the environment for exploring and gradually enlarge their territory. This town is used as a means for the developmental tasks of physical and mental competence and geographic orientation as well as for growing independence. Some places, so called marginal spaces which are not preplanned or intended for children are used as means for playing and creating symbolic situations in which they learn about themselves in relation to others. They expose themselves to feelings and emotions and work out strategies to handle the world around them and the world within. Some of them express a longing for "real activities" which can be seen as a demand for transitional activities between childhood and adulthood. The new town gives few possibilities for the children to explore and gradually take part in adult life.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- GIDDENS, A. (1991), "Modernity and Self Identity" (Polity Press).
- GIORGI, A. (1989), One Type of Analysis of Descriptive Data: Procedures Involved in Following a Scientific Phenomenological Method, *Methods, A journal for Human Science*, Spring 1989, (Saybrook Publishing Company).
- HART, R. (1979), "Children's Experience of Place" (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., New York).
- KEGAN, R. (1982), "The Evolving Self. Problem and Process in Human Development", (Harvard University Press).