Self-guided *snoop-abouts*
Documenting and evaluating neighbourhood living

Objectives

- Increase children's knowledge of human and physical geography in the local context.

- Improve capacity to read and utilise urban design tools and carry out critical observation of the environment.

- Begin to gather audio-visual documentation and expressive-creative interpretation of the neighbourhood.

- *Open dialogue with community residents* and increase the children's awareness of the diversity of individual perceptions of neighbourhood spaces and lifestyles.

- Identify neighbourhood resources, problems to resolve and spaces to redesign.

- Create a neighbourhood "affective" map (or "feelings" map); introduce new "language" to traditional city planning jargon.

Materials and instruments necessary

- One base plan of the neighbourhood (scale 1:1000); numerous photocopies of a smaller scaled neighbourhood plan; self-adhesive coloured circles; digital cameras; audio recorders; slide projector.

Description of activity

During observations of the maps prepared in the preceding activities, we probably will already have heard numerous individual, subjective comments concerning sites in the neighbourhood ("...yeah, that's a park but it really stinks"; "I usually avoid that street if I can"; "... I really love the oak tree near the petrol station"). The teacher or project coordinator can take off from these opinions to begin this phase. The children can now begin to categorise these and other places in the neighbourhood according to a series of affective characteristics. We have found it useful to prepare a questionnaire, which the children are invited to compile. A typical example follows:

Questionnaire: Please indicate a place in the neighbourhood that best represents each of the following phrases and your reasons for selection

Phrase	Place	Why?
1. Most beautiful		
2. Most ugly		
3. Most fun		
4. Most dangerous (or:_____)		
5. Most feared		
6. Which make me laugh		
7. Where I'd bring a friend		
8. Which I don't understand (I'd like more information about)		
9. Without this place, my neighbourhood wouldn't be the same		

After each child has completed this form, the responses should be shared within the group. As in the preceding activities, the individual perceptions or opinions are gathered onto a centrally located large newsprint sheet, which has been divided into "phrases - characteristics" columns. Another sheet can be elaborated to

gather the "whys" of each response. Children, in many of our projects, have chosen to create symbols (such as a smiling face, skull and crossbones, question marks, etc.) for each characteristic. Several children should be selected as the *facilitators* of this activity. While the lists are discussed and prepared, several children can help situate each selected site-element on the base plan of the neighbourhood (symbols drawn on self-adhesive coloured circles).

The discussion that develops around this activity is generally rich, since the children *discover* that different individuals often have differing perspectives on the same places. In some cases, the "most feared" place of several children may be the "most fun" place of others (they may have had the courage to enter into it, or they might be the *source of the others' fears).* In other cases, someone might be able to offer information about another's "most curious place". Do girls and boys generally have different perspectives and opinions of places? What relationships might age, cultural origins, social class, parental restrictions, etc. have on one's opinion and evaluation of different neighbourhood places? All of these issues, and many others, have come up in the numerous, exuberant discussions that have developed around this activity.

Another interesting outcome of the mapping of the "felt places" is that, often, some places are heavily "voted" under the same category. Why is the underpass covered with numerous "skull and crossbones" stickers (most feared)? Why is the corner of "Fifth Street and Vine" submerged in "smiling faces" stickers? Why does the school sometimes get covered in numerous "sad faces" stickers? What are the characteristics of these places? How have the children explained their choices? As the descriptions become richer and the "data" begin to accumulate, the children may already begin to identify ways that "hated places" might be improved. Is there any way we might bring the "positive whys" into the "negative" places? Our "game" is just that; but, naturally, just talking about these places does not get us very far. We need to get out and visit the sites, document them and bring back into our "workshop" even richer analyses of their characteristics.

Before going out into the neighbourhood, it is useful to trace one or more paths or *snoop-abouts* that connect the sites to the school. In order to be able to visit as many sites as possible, one must take into consideration the factors of distance and the time necessary to observe and document each space. It may be necessary to divide the group into sub-groups that visit different sites or, more probably, to plan additional outings. It is important that the children clearly understand that they are the "guides" of the *snoop-about* and that their comments and reflections are important and, as such, should be documented. A notebook for each child and an audio recorder for each sub-group are the minimum tools necessary.

Regarding visual documentation, we suggest that two cameras be used: one with slide film and one for prints. Each site should be photographed from as many perspectives as possible. Preferably, each child should be allowed to take at least two photos ("what I like" and "what I don't like", for example). It is important that the photos capture both panoramic views (full site, sections, long distance) and

significant details (close-ups).

In addition, the children should be reminded to write down observations and make sketches in their notebooks or directly onto the maps that they have brought along. These annotations will be useful, upon return to their "centre", for remembering locations, comparing opinions and refining their re-elaborations. The recorders are useful for *capturing* spontaneous comments from the group. Children not only enjoy interviewing each other, but would do well to interview passers-by encountered during the outing as well. A few directed questions can serve to verify whether other age groups share the opinions of the children regarding particular sites. For example, the children have sometimes "bounced some results of the *affective places* questionnaire[1] off passers-by": is one's "most fun" place also that of the postman? Do older children prefer the sites selected by the children? Or do they have other "favourite places"? Do people who live in a street that the children "fear (or avoid)" feel the same way about it?

In this way, the group begins to understand that different people hold different opinions about neighbourhood places. Expanding on this, one understands that it is not easy to redesign a place and satisfy everyone. Just as (we believe that) architects and planners must not be allowed to decide by themselves, so the children "planners" must expand their "community conversation" beyond their classroom or workshop. It is often useful, at a later date, to organise *snoop-abouts* of the selected sites guided by other community residents. Their comments and evaluations enrich the group's understanding of a place. For example, an elderly "guide" can narrate the changes through which a place has gone in her or his lifetime. The children realise that places change for better and for worse, and that these changes involve and affect all the inhabitants directly and indirectly.

Upon their return to the *workshop*, the children begin to organise and reformulate all the data that they have gathered: notes are completed and compared; interviews can be transcribed and synthesised; sketches can be re-elaborated into finished drawings; lists are made of the questions that have been raised; comments and notes are inserted onto the working maps; slides are projected and comments transcribed onto wall charts; photos are viewed and selected to mount an *interim* exhibition or inserted (small proofs) onto the base maps to render them more *understandable and lively.*

Edited 28th April 2017 within the HEPCOM project

---

1. The questionnaire can be distributed in printed form throughout the community at a later date; this is an interesting way to open a community meeting.