

Remembering urban childhoods

Some lost aspects that may need recreating (A tip for involving parents and others)

In 1990, while coordinating a WWF project entitled “Let’s Imagine the Future”, I had the opportunity to examine thousands of children’s drawings concerning the future of many of Italy’s cities. The drawings were, for the most part, concerning for two reasons. On the one hand, the majority were pessimistic and characterised by fear. They often depicted a single child (or, less frequently, an adult) in a violent, environmentally devastated urban scene. On the other hand, the numerically fewer images that might be considered optimistic often envisioned a future city in which all signs of human activity had been replaced by natural elements - primordial forests, free-roaming wild animals, etc. The cities had disappeared.

While these images might be considered positive on a metaphoric plane (or from a *deep environmental* point of view, like that of some colleagues at the WWF), they worry me because they seem to demonstrate, on the part of our children, both an incapacity to envision a city in which culture and nature can coexist and, perhaps, an inability to even imagine a *better human environment*. Several recent studies (ArciRagazzi, 1991¹; WWF-Italy, 1994²) seem to indicate that very few Italian children are happy with their cities - they *do not love their cities*. These studies imply that the origins of this observation can be found in the fact that many children are unable to go outdoors alone and explore their cities. ***And how can one love what one does not know?***

This situation is a relatively recent phenomenon. Over the course of numerous workshops, I have had the opportunity to confirm that many adults in Italy (and elsewhere), those who grew up before our cities were invaded by cement and steel, often recall harbours and have cherished childhood memories of the city places and paths they explored on a daily basis. Who cannot remember playing hide-and-seek in those gradually lengthening late spring evenings? Or the hunting expeditions for fireflies and frogs in empty city lots? Or the construction of tree houses and club houses along the banks of a city river? Two short stories of *yesterday’s childhood*, I feel, can help us to remember and understand some of the essential developmental experiences for children that have, for the most part, disappeared from our cities.

The first account is offered by Albert Parr, deceased Director of the American Museum of Natural History, who briefly describes an early childhood journey in a Norwegian seaport at the turn of the century:

“Not as a chore, but as an eagerly desired pleasure, I was fairly often entrusted with the task of buying fish and bringing it home alone. This involved the following: walking to the station in five to ten minutes;

-
1. ArciRagazzi, *Bambini per Strada*, Milan, 1992, internal document.
See especially: LORENZO Raymond, *Too Little Time and Space for Childhood*, UNICEF, Innocenti Studies, Florence, 1992.
 2. WWF Italy, *Immaginiamo il Futuro. Indagine Elettrolux*, Rome, 1993, internal document.

buying the ticket; watching train with coal-burning steam locomotive pull in; boarding train; conversing with passengers; riding across long bridge over shallows separating small-boat harbour (on the right) from ships' harbour (on the left), including small naval base with torpedo boats; continuing through a tunnel; leaving train at terminal, sometimes dawdling to look at railroad equipment; walking by and sometimes entering fisheries museum; passing central town park where military band played during mid-day break; strolling by central shopping and business district, or, alternatively, passing fire station with horses at ease under suspended harnesses, ready to go, and continuing past centuries-old town hall and other ancient buildings; exploration of fish market and fishing fleet; selection of fish; haggling about price; purchase and return home³.

It is important to note that Parr, at that time, was only four years old! I am certain that today no Italian city possesses the characteristics that would permit a similar experience for a four year old, and I imagine that quite a few parents might deny this experience to their 14-year-old offspring. In any case, I think it is opportune to reflect for a moment on the richness of these (frequent) experiences that Parr himself recognised as fundamental to his cultural and scientific development and achievements in later life.

In the first place, AP enjoyed notable autonomy at a very early age. He moved across an urban area, which, from his description, we might presume measured 10 or more square miles. He had become familiar with a mental map of considerable dimension and demonstrated competence in selecting and using both transport and pedestrian paths. It seems that the seaport city did not represent any dangers - there is no mention of any in his description. One can only wonder whether his mother worried during his absence. Certainly, present-day Milanese parents would bite their nails to the quick awaiting their child's return from such a lengthy shopping expedition.

Young Albert acquired his first notions and understanding of technology (station, locomotive, fisheries, museum, etc.), history (town hall and other ancient buildings) and urban services (military band, fire station, business district, etc.) on his own, while today's child must be taught through schools, books, computers and TV. Parr could participate directly in the everyday social life of his town. Spurred by childhood's natural curiosity, the boy could confidently converse and socialise with whoever sat beside him - his fellow passengers, firemen, fishmongers and so on - learning a general studies lesson, which gradually clarified Albert's social role. His autonomy, and the skills and maturity he acquired gave him an active role in the management of his family's domestic economy. Selecting fresh fish and haggling over prices with adult fishmongers presupposes scientific knowledge, mathematical and interpersonal skills, which our children certainly cannot acquire through watching television.

3. PARR A., "The Child in the City: Urbanity and the Urban Scene", in *Landscape*, Spring 1967.

At the turn of this century, the Lower East Side of Manhattan, densely populated by impoverished immigrants from all parts of the world, certainly offered its children a less friendly environment than that of Parr's Norwegian seaport town. Nevertheless, the account offered to us by Michael Gold (born in 1894) underlines the important role that a city's liminal, forgotten places provided for children still capable of exploring and imagining *other worlds*.

"On our East Side, suffocated with miles of tenements, an open space was a fairy-tale gift to children.

Air, space, weeds, elbow room, one sickened for space on the East Side, any kind of marsh or wasteland to testify that the world was still young, and wild and free.

My gang seized upon one of these Delancey Street lots, and turned it, with the power of imagination, into a vast western plain.

We buried pirate treasure there, and built snow forts. We played football and baseball through the long beautiful days. We dug caves, and with Peary explored the North Pole. We camped there at night under the stars, roasting sweet potatoes that were sweeter because stolen.

It was there that I vomited over my first tobacco, and first marvelled at the profundities of sex... It was there that I first came to look at the sky... Shabby old ground, ripped like a battlefield by workers' picks and shovels, little garbage dump lying forgotten in the midst of tall tenements. O' home of all the twisted junk, rusty baby carriages, lumber, bottles, boxes... But in my mind you still blaze in a halo of childish romance. No place will ever be as wonderful again"⁴.

With a decisively poetic and romantic tone, Gold's account of childhood experiences in "empty" lots implicitly raises questions regarding the importance of autonomous group activities in unstructured, fringe areas of our cities. It seems that this type of activity has either disappeared from contemporary childhood or is viewed, generally, as a problem situation to be avoided at all costs. Certainly, the cultural context in which our children grow up (and which judges them) has changed dramatically. One only need think of the image that the term "gang", perhaps justly, conjures up in contemporary America or Europe. "Our Gang" is no longer the *Little Rascals*; it is the *Crips* or the *Bloods*. Granted, growing up on the Lower East Side of New York was never easy; however, in Gold's days the American Dream had not yet disintegrated and Michael and many of his peers went on to become important figures in various professions, arts and trades. Similar opportunities for today's child "gang members" have certainly diminished; nevertheless, I hold that it is important to consider, briefly here, the developmental benefits that young Michael and his *gang* enjoyed in the empty lots of lower Manhattan.

4. DARGAN A. and ZEITLIN S., *City Play*, Rutgers Press, 1990, p. 69.

Gold and his friends seem to have been in complete control of their activities, which they planned and managed autonomously. They could decide upon an activity, plan it and carry it out. For example, thanks to the abundant “loose parts” (junk) and the absence of fixed rules (by adults) the children could build a club house or dig a cave all by themselves or, occasionally, with the help of an available, compliant adult.

Their play was both *fantasy*- (“a vast western plain”, “explore the north pole”) and *real world*- (camp out, cook a dinner, play football) orientated. Adventure was a fundamental aspect of the *gang*’s everyday activities. In this account, Gold makes reference to imaginary adventures such as digging through to China. Such “journeys” can occur only when children’s capacity to fantasise meets with an abundance of available, manipulable raw materials, such as earth, wood or snow, with which one can create the props for the voyage (NB: today’s planners of playgrounds and other child-specific areas would do well to reconsider the limits placed on children’s imagination by fixed-theme objects, in which fantasy is connoted by a cement turtle or a plastic castle). In other Lower East Side accounts, *adventure* often connotes exploring risky places outside the neighbourhood: the East River waterfront, subway construction sites and the abandoned warehouses downtown. Such places were risk-filled adventure playgrounds at the turn of the century; they are probably much more dangerous in today’s urban context.

Michael Gold’s accounts might raise questions concerning children’s licit and illicit activities, and in doing so precariously skirts the thin line between adventure, risk and danger. These are very controversial issues, but these and others, such as the role of social class, parental culture, gender and urban transformations in the changing kaleidoscope of city children’s play opportunities need to be raised in our attempt to evaluate the relationship between today’s cities and childhood needs. Such a debate is beyond the scope of this short essay. There are, however, several excellent texts⁵ that the reader might wish to consult before carrying out the following activity, which is intended for adults who will be involved in rethinking and redesigning urban living and places together with children. Exploring one’s own memories of childhood places and activities and analysing their environmental and social characteristics together with others is considered an essential first step in winning back our cities. **And Shaping Up!**

5. DARGAN A. and ZEITLIN S., *op. cit.*; WARD Colin, *The Child in the City*, London, Architectural Press, 1978.



ACTIVITY: MEMORY TRAVELLING (ENVIRONMENTAL AUTOBIOGRAPHIES)

Participants

Adults: parents and grandparents, teachers, health professionals, youth workers, urban planners and designers, local authorities, neighbourhood residents.

Objectives

- Recall images of significant behaviours, places, activities, actors and situations from one's own childhood.
- Communicate these memories and images within the group.
- Extrapolate the significant characteristics of the memories; represent them briefly with sketches, lists, notes, etc; analyse these characteristics and identify qualitative criteria of childhood places.
- Reflect upon present-day changes in the urban environment (and the culture of eating), childhood and parental cultures, etc., which impinge upon contemporary children's opportunities for such (or other) experiences.

Materials and instruments necessary

Large sheets or rolls of newsprint or other paper; thick-tipped coloured pens; drawing pins or masking tape; base and site plans of city.

Description of activity

- The facilitator of the group introduces her/himself and all members of the group do the same. It is assumed that the activity is carried out with people who are informed about (or already involved in) the project to be carried out with the children. If not, do so.
- The participants are invited to mentally reconstruct a typical, but pleasantly significant, childhood (play or eating) experience. Questions concerning the exact developmental phase (early, middle childhood, etc.) or the inclusion or not of special occasions or places (e.g., holidays, grandpa's farm, our club house, etc.) depend on the specific objectives of the project. For example, it is often useful to have teachers recall their childhood experiences at an age that reflects that of their students. Recalling experiences in rural areas can be useful in projects that aim to consolidate the role of nature in urban child play (in any case, it is probable that participants have grown up in both rural and urban environments).
- Participants are invited to relax, close their eyes and, in silence, *revisit* the site - attempting to recall as many details as possible: environmental characteristics, people present, time of day and season, etc. It is important that the sensorial aspects of the experience

emerge: try to *feel* the light, sounds, odours, tactile sensations, etc. After opening their eyes, participants may jot down notes, or make quick site sketches if they wish in order to help them during the group discussion that follows (NB: In some cases, participants have spontaneously written beautiful and moving poems describing these cherished activities and places).

- One by one, group members describe the specific childhood memories and the facilitator *translates* their accounts onto the predisposed large newsprint sheets in the form of notes, sketches and symbols - inserted onto annotated, free-hand site plans, etc. The participants should be invited to offer as many details as possible. Following each description, other participants (and the facilitator) are free to raise questions to help clarify and complete each map and list. In this phase, the quantity of impressions is more important than their quality, and analysis of the single experiences should be postponed until the next phase.
- Next, the group's task is to extrapolate from the descriptions (lists, maps) the characteristics of the activities (solitary or in group, free or structured play, socialising or competitive sports, etc.), the actors (age-mix, gender-mix, etc.), the settings (natural or man-made settings, open space or indoors, fixed or moveable structures, etc.), and the relationship between the setting and the community context (isolated or central, observed or unobserved, role of adults, etc). In the process of analysing these characteristics, participants are invited to consider those general aspects that contributed to the success (pleasure, continuity, etc) of the activities. Out (tacit) goal is to arrive at the creation of a list of, let us say, qualitative criteria. Some examples of criteria might include: proximity to home and accessibility presence of diversified actors and environmental elements, sense of belonging, possibility to modify and transform components, etc.
- At this point, group members are requested to reflect upon the opportunities available to today's children for such (or other) experiences. The group discusses how local environmental development (increase in automobile traffic, demise of neighbourhoods, disappearance of natural areas, etc.) and cultural and social changes (changing life patterns of families, demography, parental preoccupations, social services for children, etc.) contribute to the present situation. These considerations can be gathered in the form of lists and eventually annotated on local base plans; the group can, in this way, begin to identify (spatial or social) strategies and interventions to undertake with, and in favour of, children.

Edited 29th April 2017 within the HEPCOM project)