

## RESEARCH NOTE

### Criteria for Best Practices in Building Child-Friendly Cities: Involving Young People in Urban Planning and Design

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#### Abstract

This article shares research-in-progress on a project entitled *Child-Friendly Cities, and Participatory Planning and Design in Canada*. Proposed is a protocol based on 15 factors for collecting examples of best practices—including the degree of young people’s participation, intended goals of fostering independence, recognition of diverse groups of young people, issues around safety and security, innovative use of existing resources, operational sustainability, replicability, and innovative development or implementation process and structures, among others.

**Keywords:** Children, participation, planning, design

#### Résumé

Cet article porte sur un projet de recherche (en progrès) intitulé “Les villes amicales pour enfants et la participation à l’aménagement urbain au Canada.” Le but de l’article consiste en une proposition d’un protocole de recherche basé sur 15 facteurs afin de recueillir les meilleurs exemples d’aménagement. Ce protocole inclut, parmi d’autres, le degré participation des jeunes, les buts destinés de favoriser l’indépendance, la reconnaissance des divers groupes de jeunes, les enjeux entourant la sécurité, l’utilisation innovatrice des ressources existantes, le caractère durable, les possibilités de reproduire le projet d’aménagement, et le développement innovateur ou le processus de mise en oeuvre des procédés ou des structures.

**Mots clés:** enfants, participation, aménagement urbain, design

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## Overview

This article proposes a framework for collecting best practices in facilitating young people's participation in urban planning and design processes. My research investigates ways of enhancing children's participation in those processes. The article outlines a new phase of research to be undertaken over the next several years following a successful funding application to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Initiative on the New Economy (INE) programme. The project—*Child-Friendly Cities, and Participatory Planning and Design in Canada*—focuses on fairness of opportunity, access to knowledge and participatory decision-making processes for young people within urban planning and design initiatives.

Specifically, the purpose of this new research is to define, identify and collect examples of best practices in educational programmes and environmental design projects that address the needs of young people in Canadian cities. These best practices may take diverse forms, including projects, programmes, activities, environmental design materials and curriculum. "Need" includes young people's emotional, social, cultural, spiritual and physical well-being.

What Canadian best practices embracing the needs of children could serve as useful models for others to learn from and adapt to their own situations? What approaches and projects from elsewhere could provide inspiration for Canadian initiatives? Further, what assumptions and values underlie various approaches, techniques and methods of engaging young people?

Through its focus on the contributions that children can make to the social, cultural, political and environmental sustainability of Canadian cities—thereby enhancing the quality of life for all citizens—the research will facilitate young people's independence and contributions to healthy communities.

The research is important because young people have in large measure been excluded historically from urban environmental design and planning processes; they have not been included in the definition of "The Public." The research advocates the importance of city form and social structure for the quality of young people's lives, and recognizes that young people are not *future citizens*—they are *active citizens in the present*. The research will make an important contribution by documenting and disseminating Canadian initiatives. It will contribute to critical assessment of the assumptions and values underlying various approaches, techniques and methods, together with their strengths and limitations. How do these relate to intended goals of enhancing young people's participation in community planning and design?

Brian Simpson (1997, 907) provokes this question through his general observations that: "One can find some instances of acceptance of the idea that children should be 'involved' in the design of the urban environment. But the general absence of academic analysis has meant that there are few proposals as to how such participation by young people can be effective." Myrna Margulies Breitbart (1995, 45) also affirms in her study of a participatory public art project with young people: "far too little information exists about the attitudes and experiences of youth and about methods for incorporating young people's perspectives into the planning process."

## **Background**

This research has grown directly from my ongoing research programme. That programme has involved ethnographic studies charting the development of innovative demonstration models for alleviating homelessness (Bridgman 2002, 1998).

Most recently, I have documented two demonstration projects—one for inner city homeless youth in Toronto, and the other for homeless youth in a suburb of Toronto. Both projects offer transitional housing for homeless young people, involvement of homeless youth in the development, construction and governance of the project, as well as educational opportunities, skills development and employment training.

Preliminary findings from that research have been the subject of two articles. The first article (Bridgman 2001) explores challenges to an organization's capacity to develop an innovative pilot project for homeless youth; it also explores the degree to which homeless youth were able to be involved in decision-making processes for designing and developing the pilot project. The second article contributes to recent theorizing about the concept of partnership and public-private partnership processes (PPPPs) (Bridgman 2003). It proposes a transformational "bridge" model as a theoretical framework for understanding conflicting perspectives and complex imbalances in co-ordinating responsibilities, decision-making, and accountability involved in developing housing suited to the needs of homeless young people.

The research on youth homelessness has led directly to my current research, as I have become increasingly interested in the potential of participatory methods to encourage the active engagement of children in urban initiatives. My interest in this active engagement of children was also presaged in one of my earlier articles (Anderson 1997), which explored contentious issues related to authority, empowerment and collaborative processes in arts education for young children.

## Conceptual Framework

The proposed research works towards a city that is indeed *just for all* (Beall 1997), including young people. Starting with Colin Ward's *The Child in the City* (1979) and Roger Hart's *Children's Experience of Place* (1979), there is a relatively recent but growing literature about young people's rightful place in the city; assessments of children's and youth's environmental preferences, for example, through cognitive mapping; and design guidelines for professionals developing appropriate environments for children. Many of the resources have, however, concentrated on designing and planning for young people. Actively designing and planning with children have received attention only within about the last ten years. This orientation—adults consciously working with children throughout design and planning processes, and recognizing children as genuine and “active agents of change” (Salvadori 2001) with competencies and strengths—is exemplified by the work of such researchers and practitioners as Roger Hart (1992, 1997) and Barry Checkoway (1992, 1998). They work to involve young people in community change. Within their frameworks, young people are active agents who challenge conventional representations of young people as “passive receptors of adult culture” (V. Caputo 1995). (See also Bass 1997; Forester 1999; Horelli 1997; Race and Torma 1998; and Mullahey, Susskind and Checkoway 1999.)

The growing body of literature concerning planning and design techniques and tools (fostering inclusive and participatory community-based approaches) features the pioneering work of such practitioners as Henry Sanoff (1991, 2000), together with the work of W. Arthur Mehrhoff (1999) in the US and Nick Wates (2000) based in Britain.

Of great utility to the proposed research is Roger Hart's ladder of children's participation (see Hart 1997) which builds on Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation. Hart's ladder characterizes children's capacity for engagement as progressing through a number of levels—from manipulation of young people by adults, through to child-initiated processes in which young people's decisions are then shared with adults: 1) manipulation 2) decoration 3) tokenism 4) assigned but informed 5) consulted and informed 6) adult-initiated, shared decisions with children 7) child-initiated and directed and 8) child-initiated, shared decisions with adults. The first three rungs of the ladder (manipulation, decoration and tokenism) are designed and controlled by adults, with young people playing predetermined roles—an undesirable situation. The other levels offer degrees of choice for young people that enable groups of children to work at different levels, to different kinds of collaboration (with adults and with other

children), and with varying degrees of self-initiation. Hart's model offers a fruitful beginning framework for my own study of Canadian and other initiatives.

### **Contributions**

Importantly, my research aims to link theorizing about young people's capacity to engage in design and planning processes, and the techniques and tools for enhancing that engagement. The research promises to lead to further insights about "children's participation," and may lead to refinement of Hart's model. The literature on young people's participation currently suffers from a bifurcation of efforts, in which participatory models are proposed, and methods/tools are suggested. Many of the methods are oriented to examining, documenting and learning from the environment—the first steps in developing young people's critical faculties. Rarely, however, is there critical assessment of the assumptions and values underlying various approaches, techniques, methods, and how these may relate differentially to intended goals of enhancing young people's full participation.

There is a dearth of research on young people's participation in urban planning and design in Canada. To my knowledge, there are very few Canadian studies, with the exception of the work of Michael Gray (1998, 2001), an urban planner. The professional association, the Canadian Institute of Planners (CIP), sponsored a *Kids Can Plan!!* session at the 1997 CIP Annual Conference in St. John's, Newfoundland (Miller 1997). CIP has also recently completed a manual for youth involvement (Canadian Institute of Planners 2002). The proposed research will thus add to the critical momentum of attention being accorded to "voices of Canadian youth." See for example, the recent Health Canada study *Hearing the Voices of Youth: Youth Participation in Selected Canadian Municipalities* (T. Caputo 2000).

### **Research Methods**

The first phase of the research will expand the literature review and synthesize themes arising. This phase will involve consulting with professional practitioners, educators, academic researchers, and others (across Canada, the United States and elsewhere) who have expertise in the areas of urban planning and architectural design with children. They will be asked to review the draft "best practices" criteria, and make suggestions as to projects, activities, initiatives or programmes within Canada or elsewhere that may qualify as best practices. Through snowball sampling, a comprehensive list of initiatives will be assembled.

During the second phase of the research, organizations and individuals responsible for initiatives identified during the first phase will be contacted and interviewed by telephone, where possible, to gain an overview of the initiative. Resource materials (both textual and visual) will be solicited. A preliminary inventory of key initiatives will be assembled. During this phase, it is anticipated that approximately ten (Canadian) initiatives will be selected for in-depth study. These case studies will represent various types of initiatives, based on a number of key variables, such as diverse representation of groups of children and youth, type of initiative, methodological approaches, regional distribution across Canada, sources of funding and support, and access to information.

During the third phase, insights from case studies will be gathered while taking into account the different perspectives of those involved in developing and implementing the groundbreaking initiatives. Where possible, site visits will be made. Interviews with “key players” will also be conducted (e.g., young people involved in the initiatives, administrators, staff, municipal officials, consultants, private sector participants, professionals, etc.). Semi-structured research questions will be directed to understanding project impetus, history, funding sources, political and social contexts, administrative profile, major challenges, factors that facilitated activities, overall philosophy and approach, and specific lessons learned. Could other institutions or groups replicate or adapt the initiative? Open-ended questions will also solicit different participants’ perspectives on the processes of developing the initiatives. For example, what insights or concerns do they have about the effectiveness of their initiatives?

### **Best Practices Protocol**

The term “best practices” has been adopted by several international human settlements organizations (United Nations Commission on Human Settlements, UNESCO’s Management of Social Transformations Clearinghouse (MOST), and MUNICIPIA (Multilingual Urban Network for the Integration of City Planners and Involved Local Actors). Used in a wide variety of contexts, the term refers to “actions, initiatives or projects from which others can learn, adapting them to their own situations” (CMHC 1999,1).

I have developed a list of *Criteria for the Collection of Best Practices for Building Child-Friendly Cities: Involving Young People in Urban Planning and Design*. The protocol is adapted from a list of criteria originally developed by Mary Ann Beavis and Nancy Klos in their study of projects designed to alleviate homelessness (1997).

The 15 factors include:

- 1) Participation by young people in the development of initiatives for children and youth.
- 2) Participation by front-line educators and workers who engage with children and youth on a daily basis.
- 3) Empowerment of young people to determine the nature of the programme or project.
- 4) A holistic set of approaches or methods to meet the needs of young people.
- 5) Short- or long-term goal of fostering independence for young people and sense of leadership.
- 6) Recognition of diverse groups of young people (e.g., on the basis of age, gender, culture, religion, disability, neighbourhood, region).
- 7) Accessibility for young people with disabilities.
- 8) Safety and security.
- 9) Innovative use of existing resources (e.g., urban infrastructure, financing, volunteers, social services), responsible use of public resources, and partnerships between non-profit organizations, levels of government and the private sector.
- 10) Operational sustainability.
- 11) Replicability or adaptability.
- 12) Identified (short-term and long-term) impacts and contributions.
- 13) Amenability to being studied, access to information, and availability of empirical research, case studies or other external evaluation that document the impact of the activity, programme or initiative.
- 14) Challenge to conventional beliefs about the nature of identified problems/solutions.
- 15) Innovative development/implementation processes and structures.

Using the above protocol as a framework, my research will explore the degree to which initiatives have been able to be implemented as planned; establish a clear understanding of implementation issues and barriers; and suggest how these issues could be addressed in replications of the initiative; as well as identify key issues that may help guide and interpret outcomes for future research directions.

Through sharing this research-in-progress, it is my hope that others may find the proposed protocol useful for assisting with planning, implementing or assessing their own initiatives in relation to children's participation. More broadly speaking, the protocol may also be useful for any existing or new project that seeks to facilitate the participation of historically disenfranchised groups.

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