# Small children, big cities

Bernard van Leer FOUNDATION

EARLY CHILDHOOD MATTERS

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Cover: Two girls looking out over Barcelona from a bench in Antonio Gaudi's Parc Güell.
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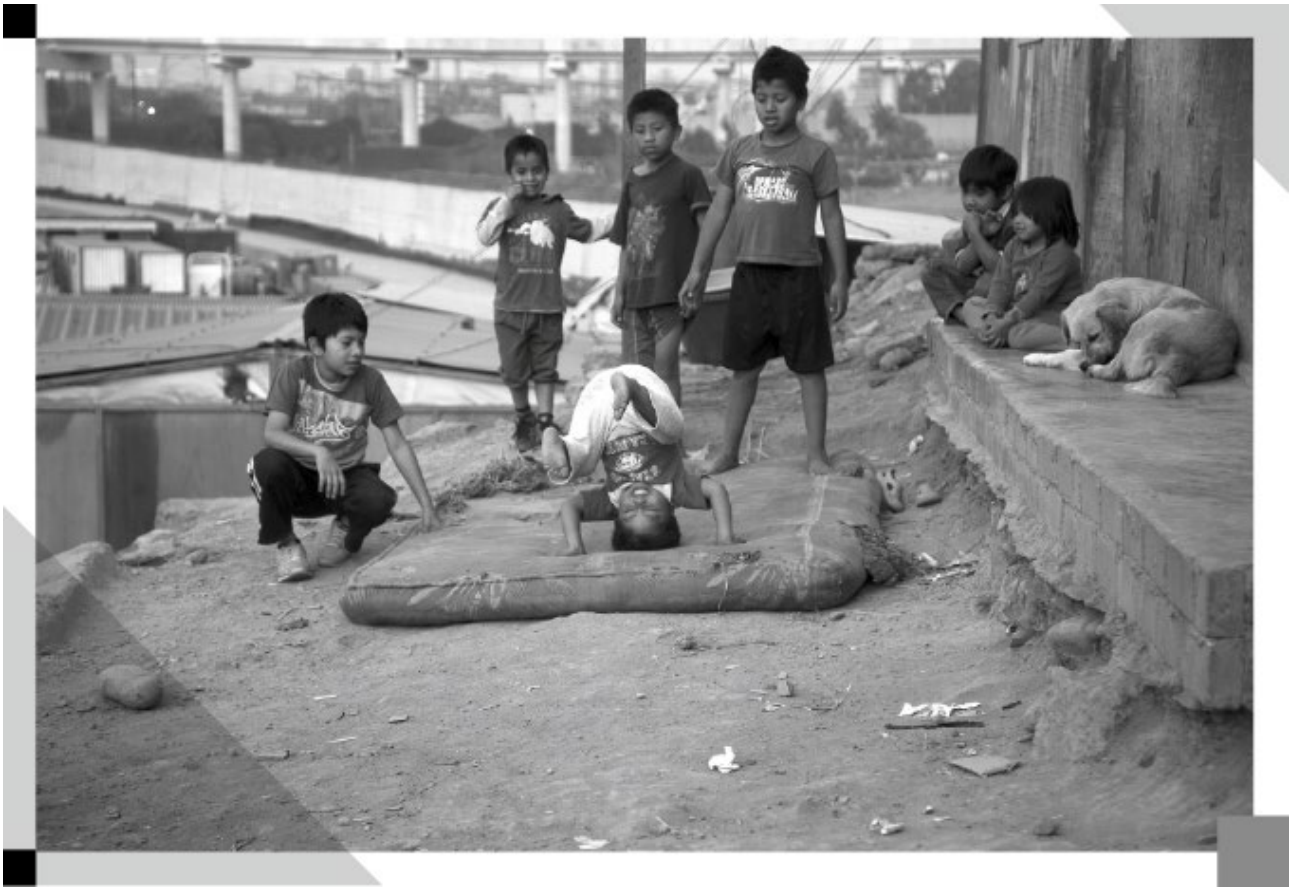

**Increasingly policies and frameworks exist to address the needs of children in cities – but many challenges remain. How to move the needs of children further into the mainstream of discussions about urbanisation?** Photo • Jon Spaull/Bernard van Leer Foundation

*'And how to involve children themselves, tapping the fresh thinking and creative energy of urban youth? Where their governments, schools and parents fail them, children themselves often innovate surprisingly effective and powerful responses.'*

**Editorial**

# Small children, big cities

John Cary

San Francisco-based John Cary, Curator of TEDCity2.0, is guest editor of this issue of *Early Childhood Matters*.

Well over a billion children are growing up in cities today, a number which will only climb in the coming years. It is nearly two decades now since UNICEF and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme jointly launched the Child-Friendly Cities Initiative, and increasingly policies and frameworks exist to address the needs of children in cities – but many challenges remain. How to connect abstract policies to the daily experiences of children, caregivers and parents? How to move the needs of children further into the mainstream of discussions about urbanisation? And how to involve children themselves, tapping the fresh thinking and creative energy of urban youth? Where their governments, schools and parents fail them, children themselves often innovate surprisingly effective and powerful responses.

This issue of *Early Childhood Matters* is being published to coincide with a conference held by the Bernard van Leer Foundation in New Delhi in November 2014, in partnership with India's National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA). On page 7, the NIUA's director, Jagan Shah, discusses the philosophical implications of making cities child-friendly 'as a way to inculcate in young people the responsibility and reciprocity on which all democratic societies ultimately depend'. As he says, explaining why child-friendliness is an objective that interests his organisation so much, it 'cuts to the heart of many overlapping problems and doesn't just benefit children'.

It is in emerging countries such as India that the majority of growth in the world's cities is occurring – and these rising cities often feature both expanding slums and a burgeoning middle class. In this context of inequality, the public space of the world's bustling cities has the potential to be the great equaliser among children. While some children may not be read to in their homes, they can often access the literary world and all that it promises through public libraries; while not all kids have the privilege of travelling, they can be exposed to nature in public parks and a diversity of people on public transport. It is in these common spaces that the urban child, no matter how rich or how poor, has the potential for mind-expanding experience.

When invited by the Bernard van Leer Foundation to guest edit this issue of *Early Childhood Matters*, I began to think about how Amsterdam – close to the Foundation's hometown of The Hague – had been the epicentre of an early movement pertinent to this issue from which the world's emerging cities can take inspiration. As Katie Crepeau explains (page 10), it was there over a 30-year period starting in 1947 that Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck designed and built over 800 playgrounds, putting both policy and pragmatism to work. The very first, in the city's Bertelmanplein neighbourhood, remains unchanged to this day. Crepeau spotlights two present-day initiatives in the same vein, focused on reintroducing play as critical to child development (and parental sanity).

Also taking a historical perspective on urban life for children in the Netherlands, Lia Karsten (page 14) observes that 'children used to be seen as resilient, whereas today they are primarily seen as vulnerable'. While something valuable has been lost in this transition, Karsten also believes in studying 'the positive aspects of what has become new practice'; as she explores, urban spaces are increasingly being claimed by middle-class parents as venues for 'public parenting'.

Andrew Slack (page 17) extends these themes of play and children's involvement in reclaiming urban spaces, describing an experimental 'Bureau for Re-Funification' that he and a group of young people piloted in Washington DC, as part of a Smithsonian Institute initiative. Slack founded the global Harry Potter Alliance, which encourages young adult fans to take real world action in line with the themes of their favourite books; fun is at the centre of Slack's every effort, but he sees it as serious business. He practises what media scholar Henry Jenkins has coined 'civic imagination', empowering children and adults alike with the capacity to imagine beyond the status quo.

At the other end of the spectrum from civic imagination is the concept of learned helplessness – a phenomenon in which, in the words of Gary Evans, 'once you conclude there's nothing you can do about an adverse stimulus,

you stop even trying'. On page 20, Evans, a professor in the College of Human Ecology at Cornell University, surveys what we know about issues pertinent to child development in cities, from pollution to overcrowding to chronic noise exposure – the constant hum of a nearby highway, railway or flight path. The good news is that it's also possible to unlearn helplessness.

Any attempt to improve city life for children needs to start with a rounded understanding of what their life is now like – a practice called 'human-centred design'. On page 24, Marika Shioiri-Clark details her work in India, Nigeria and elsewhere to directly engage women and girls. As she puts it, 'you come up with ideas by meeting with real people and understanding a broad picture of their lives, what barriers they face, and where there are opportunities to make things better'.

That type of direct engagement is something that Deborah McKoy, Shirl Buss and Jessie Stewart (page 27) seek to impart to their students and through their own research with the Center for Cities + Schools at the University of California, Berkeley. They point out that 'while [young people] are willing and able to contribute meaningful insights about the places where they live, they are rarely involved in community redevelopment visioning and design processes.' That's something that can and should change.

For Monica Chadha (page 31), an architect by training, the greatest challenge is for urban planners to avoid being overly prescriptive as they design public spaces for children. 'Incomplete thinking about what children need', she warns, 'can be worse than not thinking about it at all, as it can lead to unexpected restrictions in circumstances that have not been properly considered.'

The importance of local nuance is also a theme taken up on page 34 by Peter Williams, Founder and Executive Director of ARCHIVE (Architecture for Health in Vulnerable Environments), who looks at the intersection between urban design and infectious disease. From tuberculosis in London to diarrhoea in Bangladesh, what needs to be done is well understood; the key to making it happen is to understand the interplay among local stakeholders and what resources can be leveraged.

How to get a billion-plus urban children off to a better start in life is a complex question that will require sustained effort from a wide range of stakeholders, from government and foundations to communities and children themselves. We hope the articles in this edition, and the discussions at the New Delhi conference, will make a useful contribution to advance understanding and action on the issues involved.

# 'People who grow up in a city that cared for them are more likely to care for their city'

An interview with Jagan Shah, Director of the National Institute of Urban Affairs, New Delhi, India

**The basics of what makes a city child-friendly are not new ideas: we have to think on the scale of neighbourhoods, because children tend to occupy their own universe of home, school and recreational spaces.** Photo • Jon Spaull/Bernard van Leer Foundation

**India's National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA) is a think tank attached to the national Ministry of Urban Development. It participates in consultations and serves as a sounding board in the formulation of policies. The NIUA's director, Jagan Shah, here talks to *Early Childhood Matters* about parks, planning and how 'smart cities' could help with child-friendliness.**

*Can you start by telling us about the NIUA's position on child-friendly cities?*

We're enthusiastic about the agenda of making cities more child-friendly, both as a worthwhile aim in itself and because many of the issues that make urban life difficult for children also make it difficult for other sections of society, such as women and elderly and disabled people. Making cities more child-friendly is an objective that cuts to the heart of many overlapping problems and doesn't just benefit children.

*How child-friendly are Indian cities?*

If you've ever visited an Indian city it's very unlikely that you would observe children playing in parks or walking to and home from school – all of these visual images you associate with a child-friendly city. On a scale of one to ten, I would say we're no better than a five.

You have only to compare a typical Indian city sidewalk to those of cities in other countries which have developed up to the point where they have done a better job of addressing the needs of children – to walk, rollerblade or ride a bicycle, or go out after dark without fear of their lives. These elements hardly exist in India, where pavements are often dangerous with tripping hazards, missing manhole covers, a lack of street lighting, and so on.

*With parks, is the problem that there aren't enough of them, or that they aren't welcoming to children?*
Children and women typically feel too threatened to enter public parks because they are often frequented by homeless people, and degenerate and delinquent elements. These potentially vital spaces are rejected by the majority of people, which is not healthy.

As for whether enough parks exist, it varies from city to city. We are fortunate in Delhi, for example, that the 1962 Master Plan specified a lot of parks. These still exist in middle-class areas – though, ironically, the middle classes who have managed to preserve them don't actually use them. In poorer quarters of the city, however, they have been encroached upon by development. In other cities, such as Bombay, there is a genuine shortage of parks.

*Is it that city planners in India have not been aware of the needs of children, or that cities in India have simply not, in general, developed in a planned way?*
It's that the planning system in general is just not effective. Planners have not been unaware of children's issues. The basics of what makes a city child-friendly are not new ideas: we have to think on the scale of neighbourhoods, because children tend to occupy their own universe of home, school and recreational spaces – these need to be locally provided, and the routes linking them need to be safe and short enough to walk or bike. Planners have known this for half a century – but in that time planning, in general, has been weak.

But I think that there is a deeper philosophical point here that we have failed comprehensively to address in Indian cities. And that is: how to make children grow into adults who feel a sense of belonging and civic duty – a sense of obligation to observe the rules and regulation of society. This is often not the case. Our cities seem to produce young people who are alienated and develop a sense of hostility and have difficulty with civic behaviour.

*How can making urban areas more child-friendly address this philosophical issue?*
Children require a nurturing environment, where they have confidence in the social systems that they are part of, and feel a sense of assurance and belonging. We have to think of cities as one of the modes by which civic behaviour and civilisation are perpetuated – people who grew up in a city that cared for them are more likely to care for their city. So, on a philosophical level, I see the child-friendliness of cities as a way to inculcate in young people the responsibility and reciprocity on which all democratic societies ultimately depend.

Practically, the most immediate way we can go about this is through nurturing community-led movements to reclaim public spaces for children and young people, as venues for health and recreation and especially for cultural events. Indian cities in general are short of infrastructural provisioning for the performing arts, and young people in particular suffer from lack of opportunities for cultural activities – especially now that the school system is becoming more regimented and less accepting of children's more spontaneous and creative needs.

*India is urbanising quickly. Is it easier to plan new areas of cities, or whole new cities, than to retrofit existing cities to be child-friendly?*
There are some new cities being planned, but they will take two or three decades to make a difference. And existing cities are expanding in a fragmented way. There are new elite townships, gated communities which are planned and have lots of green spaces – not that you ever see children using them, as they are mostly isolated in their bedrooms, using the internet.

But there is not much planning in new working-class neighbourhoods, which are messy and driven by the necessities and pressures of crowding and congestion.

*How, then, can child-friendliness be retrofitted into messy cities?*
Some needs can be met through technology, and India's aspiration to develop 'smart cities'– collecting and analysing data in real time to improve city management – could be a game-changer in making public spaces safer. These are not changes that will be visible every day – but when there is smarter digitised management

of public crime records, for example, we should see the streets start to become safer. At the moment many crimes against children and women are not reported and recorded, and if they are recorded they are not shared across other databases. Smart cities should help to get repeat offenders off the streets.

Smart cities will most likely have ubiquitous surveillance systems – something about which I have mixed feelings, but these might be a necessary response in the short term to the problem of reclaiming open public spaces. Transport management is another area where new possibilities will open up with smart cities – you can think of, for example, the way in which some US states mandate that overtaking of a parked school bus is prohibited because children may be trying to cross the road. Measures of this kind will help bring a sense of order.

Perhaps above all, digitised mapping tools in smart cities will help us to piece together a deeper understanding of what is happening in particular urban neighbourhoods and find local, customised solutions. It is still not clear to me exactly how the elements of smart cities will translate into greater child-friendliness – but the potential is there.

*'The most immediate way we can go about this is through nurturing community-led movements to reclaim public spaces for children and young people, as venues for health and recreation and especially for cultural events.'*

# The enduring legacy of playground designer Aldo van Eyck

Katie Crepeau, Editor, Impact Design Hub, London, UK

**From 1947 to 1978, van Eyck built a network of over 800 public playgrounds across Amsterdam. The first was for the neighbourhood of Bertelmanplein (above).** Photo • Amsterdam City Archives

**Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck designed over 800 playgrounds in Amsterdam between 1947 and 1978. This article identifies the three elements of his success and shows how organisations are using each of those ideas to create play spaces for today's urban children.**

In the years following World War II, Amsterdam went through a big transformation in its approach to urban planning and design. The then-unknown 'rebel' architect Aldo van Eyck began changing policy and planning from a traditional top-down methodology to one that was ground-up – and the youngest Dutch residents were the beneficiaries.

From 1947 to 1978, with the help of city planners, policymakers and residents, van Eyck built a network of over 800 public playgrounds across Amsterdam. This constellation of play spaces – deemed 'one of the best-kept secrets of the twentieth century' by architectural historian Liane Lefaivre – incorporated the youngest residents into the city's plan in a way never seen before in the Netherlands.

It is now nearly 60 years since van Eyck, aged 28, designed his first playground, for the neighbourhood of Bertelmanplein, Amsterdam. The playground remains unchanged to this day, giving people who first played on it as children a chance to sit on the same wooden benches and watch their grandchildren and great-grandchildren play on the same equipment.

The popularity and longevity of van Eyck's work is attributable to three main tactics: he designed each space with simple, replicable geometric components; he involved policymakers; and he utilised any and

all sites, no matter how challenging. As we will see, architects, designers and play space champions continue to use these tactics to create places for children to be part of urban environments in safety, around the world.

**Simple geometrical components**

Set in a block straddled by two main avenues and a canal, the playground in Bertelmanplein contains three simple elements: a sandpit at the centre, metal tube somersault frames circling it, and curved wooden benches for parents and passers-by to sit on. Another essential element, although often unnoticed, was a generous amount of open space. Rather than filling up the play area with endless equipment for children to play on, van Eyck provided open space for children to run, jump and skip.

As van Eyck designed more playgrounds, he added more geometric play elements to the kit of parts, such as hexagonal and cylindrical concrete stepping-stones and more complex climbing-frames in the shape of an arch or dome. In *Aldo van Eyck: The playgrounds and the city* (Lefaivre *et al.*, 2002), author and architectural historian Francis Strauven wrote:

> *Van Eyck paid special attention to the distances between the spokes to enable the children to clamber about in safety to their heart's content. He even tried out the possibilities and risks with the assistance of his own children.*

These additional elements remained based in elementary components of visual language – geometric shapes – whose power lies in the simplicity that evoked different associations for each child. Van Eyck objected to play elements designed to resemble animal or mythological creatures. He argued, in a lecture in 1962:

> *They are not real enough. A play object has to be real in the way that a telephone box is real because you can make calls from it … An aluminum elephant is not real.*

The simple geometric play objects he preferred provide children with an experimental playground to move with acrobatism and suppleness. Together with benches, hedges, shrubs and trees, van Eyck arranged the play objects together in constantly changing compositions for children throughout Amsterdam.

Today, the non-profit organisation Playground Ideas is using a similar methodology to create playgrounds in under-resourced communities in Africa, South-East Asia and South America. Founded by Australian Marcus Veerman, who built his first playground in 2010 in Chiang Dao, Thailand, Playground Ideas' team members have since helped build over 500 playgrounds using simple elements made with locally sourced materials including discarded tyres, timber, rope and metal tubing. Playground Ideas' online design library[1] has over 180 play objects that communities around the world have used to create their own play spaces.

Although this library is far larger than van Eyck's, the variety of elements allows for more communities to develop their own play spaces based on the resources available. Playground Ideas has an online five-step manual on designing playgrounds, which is being turned into a 'drag-and-drop' playground designer tool, to be released soon. This accessible set of resources will enable more communities to create their own play spaces even if they do not have access to an architect, designer or planner.

**Ground-up popular support**

Back in 20th-century Amsterdam, van Eyck did not achieve the tremendous feat of building 800 playgrounds on his own. After returning from university in Zurich, he joined Amsterdam's Department of Public Works, which gave him access to policymakers. At the time, the ground-up approach to planning was avant-garde and van Eyck was in the minority, but he was able to use the small scale of the playgrounds to make incremental changes to city planning more generally. In time, he converted even his fiercest opponents into ground-up policymakers.

Van Eyck leveraged post-war attention to the importance of childhood and won the support of the city's residents to expand his playgrounds programme. Buried in the thick piles of the Department's drawings and

correspondence are letters from residents, recording years of positive and negative reactions to the playgrounds: 8 letters in 1953 (by which time van Eyck had built 27 playgrounds), 30 letters in 1954 (about 41 playgrounds), 52 letters in 1956 (about 103 playgrounds), and so on. Among these letters the requests for new playgrounds far outweigh the small number of objections. With the support of residents pouring in and policymakers being won over, Amsterdam became peppered with play spaces that were easily accessible, safe and loved by the new generations.

Today in America, the non-profit organisation KaBOOM! is using a similar ground-up approach to transform neighbourhoods in all 50 states. In 1995, 24-year-old Darell Hammond read a story in the newspaper about two local children who suffocated while playing in an abandoned car because they didn't have anywhere else to play. Hammond realised this tragedy could have been prevented and decided to do something about it. Using his experience in volunteer leadership, Hammond built his first playground in October 1995 in south-east Washington DC, and hasn't stopped building playgrounds since. Officially founded in 1996, KaBOOM! has raised more than 200 million US dollars, rallied over a million volunteers, led hands-on construction of over 2000 playgrounds, and sparked a movement across America for children's right to play.

KaBOOM! offers an online project planner similar to that of Playground Ideas, and has developed the 'Map of Play'[12], a play space finder and a way to identify where play spaces are needed. Similar to van Eyck, Hammond has learned to involve people and leverage relationships with them – from local authorities to residents and children, and even the First Lady, Michelle Obama.

**Envisioning transformation**

Aldo van Eyck did not seek out cleaned-up, empty sites to build playgrounds. From junkyards to dumps along Amsterdam's famous canals to bland plazas, van Eyck used any and all sites to host the new play spaces. This is where an architect's skill in envisioning transformation and designing each play space to fit a unique site helped make the network of playgrounds possible. An exhibit at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam showcased a remarkable series of before-and-after photos displaying how previously derelict lots were reshaped into dynamic places filled with children. By bringing the children out from their homes, the streets and squares in Amsterdam were injected with exuberance and life, essential energy for recovering from the stressful, dark period of war.

Today, a rising population of architects and designers are working in under-resourced communities around the world, where their skill in envisioning transformation is essential. The architectural practice TYIN tegnestue, led by Norwegians Yashar Hanstad and Andreas Grøntvedt Gjertsen, has worked in Thailand, Burma, Haiti, Uganda, Norway, and Brazil. Having witnessed a variety of living conditions and developments, TYIN partners with communities to design appropriate structures that respond to the needs of local people and utilise resources and skills found near each project location.

One recent project success is located in the neighbourhood of Klong Toey – Bangkok's largest and oldest informal settlement – where TYIN worked with a group of students and local residents to build a public playground and football court in a narrow lot. Given the dimensions of the site, the architects decided to maximise the vertical space by building an airy two-storey structure enclosed by an array of iron latticework and wood slats. They outfitted the structure with elements to sit, swing, and climb on, while leaving an open space for football, basketball and other games. Using locally sourced and reclaimed materials, the structure was built by the local inhabitants and has become a beloved part of the community.

With the accelerating pace of urbanisation putting more strain on space for people to work, live and traverse, van Eyck's imaginative approach to providing infrastructure for children in urban environments is more crucial than ever: keep plans simple and replicable; involve civilians and policymakers; and use any and all sites. Van Eyck did not see high-density living as detrimental, but rather as an opportunity to reduce distances from

everyday facilities. The fast-growing cities of Africa and Asia in particular may appear to pose more difficult challenges than van Eyck faced in 1947 Amsterdam, but organisations like Playground Ideas, KaBOOM! and TYIN tegnestue show how his ideas can continue to help children to thrive in modern urban environments.

*'Today, a rising population of architects and designers are working in under-resourced communities around the world, where their skill in envisioning transformation is essential.'*

**Reference**
Lefaivre, L., Roode, I and Fuchs, R. (2002). *Aldo van Eyck: The playgrounds and the city.* Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum.

**Notes**
1 The Design Library can be accessed on the Playground Ideas website at: http://www.playgroundideas.org/DesignLibrary
2 The Map of Play is available at: http://mapofplay.kaboom.org/

# 'Families are beginning to reclaim city centres'

An interview with Lia Karsten, Associate Professor in Urban Geographies at the University of Amsterdam/AISSR, Netherlands, and Honorary Doctorate in Educational Science at Uppsala University, Sweden

**Lia Karsten researches the changing relationship between cities and children. Here she talks to *Early Childhood Matters* about the historical evolution of childhood in cities in The Netherlands, the experiences of children growing up in high-rise Hong Kong, and how urban families are reclaiming city centres, with a growing number of places allowing for 'public parenting'.**

*How is urban childhood changing in the Netherlands and beyond?*
There are two interesting trends. First, my historical research shows that there has been a change in discourses about the nature of childhood. Children used to be seen as resilient, whereas today they are primarily seen as vulnerable. So in the past it was common for children to play outdoors on their own, but nowadays it is seen as good parenthood to supervise your child in urban public spaces.

Secondly, families are beginning to reclaim city centres. Cities and children have long been seen as mutually exclusionary concepts. Cities belong to the public sphere, whereas children are seen as belonging to the private sphere – that is, the family and the home. When you think of cities, you think of concrete; when you think of childhood, you think of green spaces. And so on.

That is changing with the rise of 'YUPPs' – young, urban professional parents – who are actively choosing to live in city centres, rather than taking the traditional route of moving out to the suburbs as soon as they have children. In response, you see services for children springing up across urban areas: bars and restaurants which traditionally catered only to child-free clientele are now providing play areas for children; there are stores that cater for children; there are leisure centres where families can go together or children can go after school. These establishments are on the rise in cities across Europe and also in parts of North America.

*Is this reclaiming of the city centre largely a middle-class phenomenon?*
It is effectively only middle-class families with two incomes who have the disposable income to frequently outsource the domestic tasks of shopping, cooking and washing up by going to a restaurant. Interestingly, when you look at urban families eating out together and the growth of leisure areas for urban children, you can see an echo of the old feminist ideal of communal kitchens and local childcare – but these have gone from being feminist ideals to expensive lifestyle choices. Cultural capital is giving way to economic capital.

Despite working-class parents being indeed more limited in the activities they can afford to do with their children – and sometimes also being more time-pressed – they are not immune to the first trend I mentioned, of supervising their children more and limiting their freedom of movement. I found in my latest research (publication forthcoming) that working-class parents, too, are spending more time with their children than they have ever done before.

*What are the effects on children of spending more time in the company of their parents rather than playing without supervision?*
One unfortunate consequence is the weakening of social capital. As children spend more time socialising in the company of their parents, and in settings chosen by their parents, the other children with whom they come into contact tend to have parents who are from the same kind of class and background. In contrast, children of previous generations, playing unsupervised in the streets, would encounter a broader social range of their peers. This has been criticised by many scholars in the field of children's studies, including myself.

Having said that, I believe that as researchers it is our task to explore not only what has been lost, but also the positive aspects of what has become new practice. It is sometimes overlooked that it's not only children's ability to form relationships with their peers that we should care about. The ability to form intergenerational social relationships, with parents and other family members, is important too. Taking care of your child in public has come to be seen as a way to establish an identity as an involved parent, construct a sense of family identity and cement family ties through public parenting.

**In the Netherlands families are beginning to reclaim city centres.** Photo • © Stephan Gabriel/Lineair Fotoarchief

*You use the phrase 'public parenting' – what do you mean by that?*

For example, consider the bars and restaurants in gentrified urban areas that cater for families. In a recent study my colleagues and I observed how families behaved in ten such restaurants in Amsterdam (Karsten *et al.*, 2013). We found that parents use the opportunity of mealtimes in a public place as an opportunity to demonstrate to children how they should behave. Good behaviour during the meal – sitting down, taking part in conversation – is rewarded by parents allowing their children to play in the restaurant's play areas or, for example, on an iPad. The parents in turn use this time to talk, or to check their smart phones. Fathers are as likely as mothers to be involved in public parenting.

*As well as your studies in the Netherlands, you have also recently looked at middle-class urban childhood in the high-rise environment of Hong Kong. What did you find?*

I did my research (Karsten, 2014a) specifically among English-speaking middle-class families in Hong Kong, where the high-rise environment is combined with both parents typically working and a parenting style that is very much focused on achievement and preparation for a highly competitive jobs market.

What I have found is that the children of these families hardly play outdoors. Of course, in large part that's because high-rise Hong Kong is not the easiest place from which to get access to the outdoors. But there are some differences in how the built environment facilitates outdoor access. Children are more likely to play outdoors if they live in smaller, enclosed estates with good facilities. Even then, children are normally supervised rather than allowed to play on their own. Usually they are accompanied by a domestic helper employed by parents who are both working full-time.

Another reason why there is so little outdoor play, however, is that middle-class parents in high-rise Hong Kong typically see their children's personal achievement as being extremely important, which leads to children of primary school age having a heavy burden of after-school extracurricular lessons and activities. These leave no time for 'just' playing.

*Did you find that parents in Hong Kong don't appreciate the value of play for young children?*
On the contrary, many of the parents I spoke to during my research were concerned not to be seen as overly demanding parents, putting their children under too much pressure. But they also explained that children need to develop a 'portfolio' of achievements to stand a chance of getting accepted by a good school, and playing doesn't count. So what parents often do is define the after-school lessons as being 'playful', to try to legitimise to themselves the heavy schedules their children have.

*The aspects of life in Hong Kong that you've mentioned – high-rise living, competitive parenting – look likely to become more common as the world continues to urbanise and with the growth of middle classes in the emerging markets. What advice would you have for city governments?*
I believe this is an area where further research is necessary, especially including the perspectives of children themselves, which unfortunately I was not able to do in my Hong Kong study; sadly, the children and parents were just too busy to schedule any time to participate in the research together. Which illustrates my first recommendation – that encouraging work–life balance for children should be high on the agenda of global cities.

Secondly, also high on the agenda should be the creation of green, open play areas that entice children to want to be outdoors. To take an example from close to home, in recent years the district of Amsterdam where I live, Middenmeer, has become much more child-friendly in its public spaces in response to demand from families: the neighbourhood park has been renovated, and there are new playgrounds and broad sidewalks. I showed in a recent study (Karsten, 2014b) how these locations have become extensively used by middle-class families to demonstrate public parenting, bringing private family life into public space.

While this is a positive trend, the danger is that living in neighbourhoods with such pleasant public spaces soon becomes unaffordable except for relatively wealthy professionals, and urban gentrification benefits only kids with middle-class parents. So my third piece of advice is that we have to look for ways to reclaim the city for children of all social backgrounds, and repair the weakening of social capital that comes from the increasingly class-based segregation of how urban children socialise with their peers.

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# The Bureau of Re-Funification

An interview with Andrew Slack, Co-founder, Harry Potter Alliance, Somerville, MA, USA

**Children need opportunities to show civic leadership. Cities lack opportunities for fun. Combining these ideas, Andrew Slack of the Harry Potter Alliance (HPA) – which uses fiction and fantasy as a point of entry to encourage civic engagement – describes an experimental 'Bureau for Re-Funification' in Washington DC, and developing plans for a global urban 'Funvolution'.**

'Children are our future', you often hear people say, and it always surprises me that they think it's a positive statement. What does it imply? If children are the future, then grown-ups must be the present and the elderly must be the past. In other words, adults of working age are the centre of existence; the young don't matter yet, and the old don't matter any more. Nowhere is this depressing attitude more apparent than in our cities.

Last year I spent a week working with a small group of children in Washington DC, in partnership with the Smithsonian EdLab. We took the kids to Union Station and asked them to observe and make notes. What did they notice? The most common observation was this: Union Station is not a place that is welcoming for either children or the elderly. The EdLab director asked them, 'Well, who is it welcoming for?' One of the kids pointed to the adults in the room: 'You guys! It's all made for business people. Not us.'

This led to some discussion about how kids and older people have a lot in common. Shel Silverstein sums it up poignantly in his 1981 poem, 'The Little Boy and the Old Man':

> Said the little boy, 'Sometimes I drop my spoon.'
> Said the old man, 'I do that too.'
> The little boy whispered, 'I wet my pants.'
> 'I do that too,' laughed the little old man.
> Said the little boy, 'I often cry.'
> The old man nodded, 'So do I.'
> 'But worst of all,' said the boy, 'it seems
> Grown-ups don't pay attention to me.'
> And he felt the warmth of a wrinkled old hand.
> 'I know what you mean,' said the little old man.

It's not only young and old people who suffer when cities are stripped of opportunities to stop and smile, or to pause and rest in comfort – when cities are reduced to being merely places for business, or busy-ness. Grown-ups suffer, too, from a depletion of spirit, from feelings of depression and anxiety, alienation and angst.

So we began a conversation about how our cities might be made more welcoming for both kids and elderly people, with comfortable places to pass time, and opportunities to have fun. With a nod to the language of DC, we decided that we would spend the rest of our week together being the Bureau of Re-Funification.

### The Harry Potter Alliance

The Bureau of Re-Funification needs to be understood in the broader context of what my organisation, the Harry Potter Alliance, is trying to achieve. My background is in comedy, and I became interested in the power of storytelling to promote social change. An example: in 1988, the Harvard School of Public Health asked for the help of TV networks to popularise the concept of a 'designated driver' – the person who commits to stay sober when going out for a drink with friends. Writers of shows such as *Cheers* agreed to weave the phrase into their storylines, and it became part of the cultural mainstream.

More recently, the show *Will and Grace* has been credited with helping to change the zeitgeist on marriage equality. Now that gay and lesbian marriage is not only legal but uncontroversial in many US states, it is remarkable to think that just ten years ago, during the 2004 US elections, the issue was considered to be politically toxic. I think of these as examples of 'cultural acupuncture'. The theory of acupuncture is that inserting a needle at just the right point can transform the flow of energy in the body. Stories can do the same in culture, sometimes with astonishing power and speed.

However, the storytellers of our society – professionals in creativity, from scriptwriters to comedians and even advertising agencies – tend not to interact much with the professions of compassion (charities, therapies,

**We began a conversation about how our cities might be made more welcoming for both kids and the elderly, with comfortable places to pass time, and opportunities to have fun.** Photo • Courtesy Harry Potter Alliance

spirituality) or with those who dedicate themselves to trying to change the system (professional activists, foundations, elected officials). So how can we break down the walls between those areas of work?

While thinking along these lines, I fell in love with Harry Potter. In my mid-20s, I encountered the world of fandom for the first time: when I'd grown up, in the pre-internet era, fan groups existed but barriers of entry were higher and the groups themselves were considered to be uncool. Now immersion in a fictional or fantasy world is both easy and popular; the Harry Potter fan website Mugglenet, for example, was started by a 12 year old and soon getting over 100,000 visitors a day. As I explored this virtual universe, I realised that young fans of Harry Potter were becoming writers, self-publishing fan fiction; they were becoming broadcasters, putting out podcasts; they were becoming athletes, devising and holding tournaments in Quidditch, the sport played in the books; they were becoming musicians, composing and singing songs from the perspectives of Harry Potter characters.

But nobody was making connections between the world of Harry Potter and our world, the real world. There are many parallels, from race and sexual equality to habeas corpus. In the book *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (Rowling, 2003), Harry's friends create an organisation called Dumbledore's Army, to fight for justice. I started saying to my fellow online Harry Potter fans: if Harry lived in our world, do you think he'd be content just to talk about how cool it was being Harry Potter? Wouldn't he take up a cause – say, climate change, or Darfur?

Those conversations struck a chord and led to the Harry Potter Alliance, which I co-founded with my comedy partner Seth Soulstein and Paul DeGeorge from the punk rock band Harry and the Potters. The HPA now has 300 chapters on six continents, through which Harry Potter fans have donated 120,000 books to libraries around the world, sent five cargo planes of emergency supplies to Haiti, and much else.

**Education and urban design**

These are examples of what happens when you nurture what media scholar Henry Jenkins calls the 'civic imagination'[1] – the capacity to imagine beyond the status quo. Naturally, it is not just the Harry Potter stories that present an opportunity to use fiction and fantasy as entry points into engaging with the world, rather than as a means to escape from it. *The Hunger Games Trilogy* (Collins, 2008–10) can be used to inspire action on economic inequality. We can point out that Superman, who embodies the American ideal of fighting for truth and justice, arrived in the USA as an undocumented immigrant. And so on.

Indeed, the Bureau of Re-Funification idea was conceived by kids wearing superhero capes. We had been analysing the movie *Batman Begins*, and talking about what problems the kids would want to fix if they had superhero powers.

On the last day of the week, the kids – in superhero costumes – decided to draw in chalk on the sidewalk outside Union Station, to brighten the place up for a day at least. As they did so, something wonderful happened. A group of older children from around the world, who were in DC for an educational camp, asked what was happening and decided to join in. Soon, the sidewalks around Union Station were brightly decorated with the word 'love' in many different languages. Passing adults stopped and smiled. Our kids were giddy with excitement, because they saw that they had opened up a space that positively changed others.

We soon learned that the Bureau of Re-Funification idea commanded support among a remarkably diverse range of groups – from leftist progressive activists to civic media wonks and regular people, our social media feed rapidly filled up with ideas about making cities more fun. We heard about playgrounds for older people; musical trash cans; bus stops where people can wait on swings; fountains where you're not only allowed but encouraged to paddle and splash; elevators with two moving handrails, the lower one at child height; public tree-houses; community gardens; pedestrian skywalks; and countless others. I recalled the 'art cafes' of my own student days: spontaneous acts of creativity and kindness, such as peeling and juicing oranges on the sidewalk, and giving away the juice to passers-by while making designs out of the peel.

We have now accumulated many such innovative ideas which could be championed by children, photographed and posted online to inspire others; in many cases they would elicit media coverage, which begins a virtuous circle. We are currently looking for backers to develop the Bureau of Re-Funification into a global urban Funvolution movement, an online network curated by kids, with local cells swapping experiences and ideas for actions in their own cities. Having fun is an idea all kids can get behind; it can give them opportunities to show civic leadership and improve the urban experience for everyone.

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**Note**

1 'From cultural jamming to cultural acupuncture: fan activism and the civic imagination' was a talk given by media theorist Henry Jenkins at Stanford University Humanities Center on 27 May 2014 (available online at https://thecontemporary.stanford.edu/henry-jenkins-fan-activism-and-civic-imagination).

# 'Cumulative risks need comprehensive responses'

An interview with Gary Evans, Elizabeth Lee Vincent Professor, College of Human Ecology, Cornell University, New York, USA

**What we need to get better at is not just how we address issues related to children's physical environments, but how we address them together with related risk factors.** Photo • © iStock.com/Danijela Pavlovic Markovic

**Gary Evans is an environmental and developmental psychologist interested in how the physical environment affects human health and well-being among children. Here he talks to *Early Childhood Matters* about the current state of evidence on risk factors such as noise and crowding, and how multiple risk factors add up to dramatically worse outcomes.**

*Why should we be interested in children's physical environments?*
There's a lot of evidence that poverty – or low socio-economic status (SES) – is bad for children's health and development. But what exactly is it about low SES that's bad for kids? There are many factors, among them the kinds of physical environment that are often associated with poverty.

*What are some of the ways in which poverty translates, through the physical environment, into worse outcomes for children's health and development?*
For a broad overview, you can think about this in five categories.[1] First, there are the effects of hazardous materials in the environment – heavy metals, inorganic solvents, pesticides – which, by and large, better off kids are obviously less likely to come into contact with. Exposure to too much lead in early childhood, for example, is associated with outcomes such as lower IQ, and increased impulsivity and aggression.

Second, noise. I'm not talking here about noise levels high enough to cause hearing damage, but chronic noise exposure – say if you're living next to a busy highway, railway or under a flight path. There's some evidence of lower cognitive functioning in babies who grow up in households where it's impossible to get

away from the noise. There is evidence that parents in noisy households are less responsive to their kids, and teachers in noisy schools are less patient. And many studies have shown that noise causes deficits in reading acquisition.

The third issue is crowding. I'm talking about crowding within the home, not the city – the issue is not whether you're living in a busy city, but how many people there are to a room inside your home. Crowding is associated with children becoming withdrawn or aggressive and can reliably elevate physiological stress such as blood pressure.

Fourth, the quality of housing and neighbourhoods. Among the things the evidence tells us here is that different kinds of housing are suitable for different types of people. If you're a young, child-free professional, for example, then living in a high-rise apartment might suit you just fine – but there's evidence that it's socially isolating if you're bringing up a child, especially if you're a single parent. And there's evidence that children living in poorer-quality buildings get sick more often.

Finally, school and daycare quality. The evidence points to smaller and better-maintained schools, with adequate heating and ventilation and so on, being associated with better outcomes for kids.

*How robust is this evidence across cultures? Are we talking about research predominantly in wealthy Western countries, or also in the developing world?*
Certainly on the effects of noise and crowding, we have enough evidence to generalise – there's research from many countries and it's robust across cultures and nationalities. Interestingly, there are cultural differences in what is perceived to be 'crowded' – living, say, five to a room may be seen as normal in some cultures and unacceptable in others – but when you look at the relationships with children's mental health and cognitive development, there is no difference.

But some other variables are indeed primarily studied in a Western context, which is ironic as we know least about places where the situation is worst. Almost all research on housing quality, for example, is from places like the USA, the United Kingdom, Scandinavia or Australia – and even the worst-quality housing in these places would be seen as pretty good in some other countries. So we're missing knowledge about actually most of the spectrum here.

*In your work you look at cumulative risk. Broadly, this is the idea that being exposed to one or two of these risk factors might be survivable, but the more risks you're exposed to, the worse it gets.*
That's right, and it's often the case that low-SES kids are exposed to many of these risk factors at once. As the saying goes, when it rains, it pours.

*How do you measure cumulative risk?*
It is challenging. Ideally what you'd want to do is compare how one spectrum affects outcomes on another spectrum. Say you want to look at the quality of housing and the quality of neighbourhoods, to understand the effects on kids of growing up in a poor-quality house but in a good neighbourhood or in a good-quality house but in a bad neighbourhood. You would draw the slope of how quality of housing affects children's outcomes, and do a statistical interaction to see how that is changed by the slope for neighbourhood quality.

Now say you want to study family turmoil, too – good house, bad neighbourhood, stable family; bad house, good neighbourhood, dysfunctional family, and so on. All these things are on a spectrum, and it starts to get pretty complex to figure out how they work together. Now add a fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh variable. The complexity gets out of hand really fast. Even if you've got a big enough sample to do the statistical work, it becomes very hard to conceptualise and articulate the findings.

So instead we use what's called an additive model. Rather than looking at a spectrum, you choose a cut-off point above which you say that the level of exposure is high enough to qualify as a risk factor. And you give those cases a score of 1 for that risk factor, and the others a score of 0. Then for each child you add up how many risk factors they have.

Clearly there are some downsides to this, as you're simplifying shades of grey into black-and-white. But actually it works pretty well, and it unambiguously shows that as you add more risk factors, the outcomes for kids get drastically worse.

*What's at the cutting edge of research in this field? How are these models getting refined?*
If you think about how a child in an urban environment moves through the day, you can see how there might be overlap among the different risk factors – waking up in a house to noise from traffic, walking along air-polluted streets to a school with crumbling walls and inadequate ventilation, playing in rubbish-strewn streets, trying to do homework in a crowded room, and so on. This kind of scenario is understood to some extent in academic terms through models such as Bronfenbrenner's (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), but we're behind the curve on getting to grips with what it means in practice.

There are now lots of technological tools like GPS that we can use to better capture this ecological concept of children's experience by tracking them over time. It could be a rich area of research to use the monitoring possibilities of new technologies to inform our theories on cumulative risk.

*And how much do we know about the psychological mechanisms through which these risk factors translate into worse outcomes for kids?*
What's really interesting is that the adverse outcomes may, in fact, to some degree come from the coping mechanisms kids use in response to the risk factors, rather than the risk factors themselves. That sounds counterintuitive because you'd think that coping is a good thing, but what's adaptive in one context can become maladaptive when it's generalised.

So think about how you might respond to finding yourself constantly surrounded by other people, as for instance if you're living in a crowded home. One coping mechanism might be to withdraw, and at a practical level that makes sense given the stress of your immediate surroundings. But what if that withdrawal then becomes your habitual way of dealing with other people?

To take another example, studies of adults in Southern California show that people who've lived for a long time with the smog of Los Angeles actually stop noticing it – their perception changes, making them less able to discern pollution in a photograph. Again, it may generally be adaptive to stop noticing aspects of your environment that are always present, but then logically if you stop noticing something you're going to be less inclined to try to do something about it.

*So it's possible that a generation of kids growing up in smog-affected cities in, say, China might grow up inured to air pollution?*
It's a frightening notion. On a similar note, I wonder the same thing about how we communicate with children about climate change. We might unwittingly create a sense of helplessness, in which they grow up believing there is nothing they can do about their future.

There is a lot of evidence, from studies that started with Martin Seligman (see, for example, Seligman, 1967, 1975), that learned helplessness can be a reaction to environmental problems like uncontrollable noise. Once you conclude there's nothing you can do about an adverse stimulus, you stop even trying – so you don't notice if the situation changes in such as way that it does become possible to do something.

But it is also possible to unlearn helplessness. In animal studies, for example, physically taking animals and showing them how they can respond had the effect of shaking them out of their learned helplessness. This would be an interesting area to study in further depth in relation to how children respond to factors in their environment such as uncontrollable exposures to crowding and noise.

*We've talked about cumulative risk factors in the physical environment. What about cumulative protective factors? As the environmental risk factors are often correlated, are there resources that could potentially ameliorate multiple risks?*
This is another area where we need to understand more.

We already have good evidence that access to natural, outdoor space has many benefits. Another candidate is having a more walkable environment, with less traffic congestion. That could have influence over many outcomes – obesity, health problems from air pollution, encouraging outdoor play.

*Do you see evidence that politicians and city planners are taking an interest in these areas of work?*
I think more are realising that it's simply inefficient not to be interested in the public expenditures that mount up over a child's lifetime because of inequality in childhood.

Unfortunately, public bodies tend not to be set up to look at problems in a holistic way. We're learning that risk factors interact and add up to dramatically worse outcomes, but each of those risk factors tends to be addressed in a siloed way – one public body addresses drug abuse, one looks at childcare, one concerns itself with urban planning, and so on. So what we need to get better at is not just how we address issues related to children's physical environments, but how we address them together with related risk factors. Cumulative risks need comprehensive responses.

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**Note**

1 For further information on these points, see Evans (2006).

# Human-centred design and the need for new ideas

Marika Shioiri-Clark, Global Fellow, IDEO.org

**It is always an eye-opener to talk to people about their daily experiences, with a view to coming up with ideas for design.**
Photo • Courtesy Marika Shioiri-Clark

**The process of finding ideas for improving urban design so that it caters for the needs of children has to start with understanding what children and families want from their cities. Drawing on her experiences with IDEO.org and the Nike Foundation, Marika Shioiri-Clark shares ideas from India to Nigeria and the United States, and discusses how design teams might solicit ideas from people who are not English-speaking or internet-connected.**

At the time of writing, I am en route to Tanzania and India to trial an innovative approach to gathering people's thoughts on the latest OpenIDEO Amplify challenge[1]: how might parents in low-income communities ensure that children thrive in their first five years? This is Challenge Two in a series of ten that Amplify will be presenting in the coming months, in a programme funded by the UK Department for International Development which invites ideas on the most urgent challenges facing the billion people living in extreme poverty around the world. The best ideas will receive seed funding and design support.

Challenge One was about how we might make low-income urban areas safer and more empowering for women and girls. The five ideas that qualified for funding and design support have recently been announced: training for women setting up small-scale local childcare businesses; training women leaders as 'community concierges' to spread information and build support networks; peer-to-peer education among men and boys on gender-based violence; holiday camps for schoolgirls to provide training on life skills; and a school for girls in a red-light area[2].

These five Funded Ideas were among over 500 submitted to the challenge. On a research trip to India and Nepal, for example, I heard about proposals for 'walking buses', in which women could coordinate the timing of their routine journeys on foot between different points in the city, so that they could travel in numbers and minimise the chance of abuse. Another suggestion, in Islamic areas where women worry about road traffic in badly-lit areas at night, was for reflective stripes on burkas.

It is always an eye-opener to talk to people about their daily experiences, with a view to coming up with ideas for design. I heard about mothers, for example, ensuring their girls always carry safety pins when travelling on public transport. The reason? To jab a man with them if he tries to take advantage of the crowded space for inappropriate touching.

However, these kinds of insights can be difficult to tease out when you are appealing for ideas to be submitted online, and making that appeal in the English language. While internet access is spreading quickly in the developing world, it still misses large swathes of the population we are trying to reach. Hence the project in Tanzania and India, which we hope will be part of a larger project to include a wider range of the population in designing solutions for this second challenge.

**Local-language hotlines**

The idea we are trialling, which is based on a model we saw used in Delhi to campaign against violence on buses, involves an automated phone response system: many of those who lack internet access to submit their ideas in writing still have access to mobile phones. A hotline number will be publicised in the local language through community radio and television. Contact will be free of charge, as the system will immediately return calls.

Callers will then hear a two-minute drama illustrating the specific topic on which we are seeking responses – for example, 'What are your hopes and dreams for your children?', 'Where do you go for advice?' – following which they will be invited to record their message. A team of volunteers will then transcribe the message, translate it into English and post it on the website. If the message receives comments, volunteers will record an audio version of the comments in the local language and send the caller an SMS inviting them to hear them. At the halfway stage in the project, we have already received over 1800 responses from callers in Tanzania and India.

Only by getting as much input as possible from people who actually live in the locality can you hope to come up with ideas that work there. In a separate project for the Nike Foundation in northern Nigeria, for example, I researched ideas for creating safe spaces for girls. From spending a lot of time talking to girls and understanding what their daily life was like, it became clear that any idea would stand a chance of working only if it had the support of parents and community members and chimed with the strict Islamic culture.

Parents didn't like the idea of a club for girls, for example – something that would serve a valuable purpose in giving them an outlet other than school and household chores, and enabling them to learn life skills. But when I proposed framing much the same idea as a 'marriage preparation class', it was enthusiastically accepted.

Safe spaces for children in cities don't have to be physical spaces. Another idea was the forming of a union for the many girls who work as hawkers, selling items on the streets. Hawking has its positive aspects: the girls are earning money and learning how to be entrepreneurs. But it is stigmatised and unfairly associated with prostitution, meaning that these young hawkers often feel ashamed and isolated. A type of union membership could help to legitimise the activity by giving the girls an identifiable numbered vest to show that they are part of a network, and providing access to a phone number that they could call for help if a man tried to take advantage of them. Unfortunately, this idea may be seen as too radical to have a chance of implementation, at least in the traditional northern Nigerian context.

**Parenting where parents are**

The importance of understanding the daily lives of the people for whom you are designing spaces or interventions applies just as strongly in developed countries as in the context of developing countries. With IDEO.org and the Bezos Foundation, I worked on looking for ways to help low-income parents in the USA to engage more with their preschool-age children.

From talking to these low-income parents, it became clear that parenting advice that doesn't take account of their circumstances can be positively alienating. We heard of parents who had been told by healthcare professionals that they needed to spend an hour a day reading to their children. Lacking either the time or often the literacy skills to do this, these parents concluded that the healthcare professionals understood only middle-class parenting paradigms and because of that their advice couldn't be trusted in other ways.

To avoid this unfortunate situation, we need instead to emphasise the spirit of the advice – engaging with your children, something you can do with a book but also in other ways – and to find ways in which engagement can be incorporated into activities these parents are doing anyway. Shopping is one example: there could be signs in Walmart suggesting a game to play or a song to sing, related to products in that aisle. Another possibility is the laundromat, a place where parents and children often spend a lot of time waiting – the children get bored, and that makes the parents irritable. Could we find ways to set up play centres in urban laundromats, with suggestions for parent–child activities, thereby turning the waiting time into an opportunity for parenting with a capital P?

What all these ideas about kids and cities have in common is the concept of human-centred design – you come up with ideas by meeting with real people and understanding a broad picture of their lives, what barriers they face, and where there are opportunities to make things better. Cities can be large and overwhelming if taken as a whole, and human-centred design is a powerful tool to remind us of their real purpose: to serve the parents, children and families living within them.

**Only by getting as much input as possible from people who actually live in the locality can you hope to come up with ideas that work there.** Photo • Courtesy Marika Shioiri-Clark

**Notes**

1 Amplify challenges are described on the IDEO.org website, at http://www.ideo.org/amplify
2 Read more about these Funded Ideas at http://www.ideo.org/field_notes/announcing-our-funded-ideas

# Blueprints for hope: engaging children as critical actors in urban place making

Deborah McKoy, Executive Director; Shirl Buss, Y-PLAN Creative Director; and Jessie Stewart, Research Specialist and National Y-PLAN Director, Center for Cities + Schools, University of California, Berkeley, CA, USA

**Third- and fourth-grade elementary school students have been contributing their ideas to the redevelopment of their community in San Francisco, using a methodology known as Y-PLAN (Youth-Plan-Learn-Act, Now!). This article explains the process and describes the ideas the children have come up with – and how key areas and insights are being incorporated into the new community design.**

'I can come up here in my tree house at night and lay down and look at the stars and be peaceful.' This is what Donte Jones, a fourth-grade student at Malcolm X Academy (MXA) in San Francisco, dreamily imagined a few years ago when he presented his scale model of a tree house to students, teachers, community members, civic leaders and local developers as part of his overall vision for creating public spaces within the HOPE SF housing community, about to be built adjacent to his school. The vision was cultivated during a school year which adults said was a 'good year, because we only had a few lock-downs' (due to shooting in the neighbourhood).

Donte was a participant in 'Y-PLAN Elementary: An Architecture Think Tank', where over 175 third- and fourth-grade students have been investigating questions and issues related to the redevelopment of housing surrounding their school for over 6 years. This work is part of a larger, city-wide redevelopment strategy called HOPE SF, which aims to transform the Bay View and other painfully neglected parts of San Francisco into vibrant, healthy communities. Driven by public funds from federal, state and local levels, HOPE SF is the nation's first large-scale public housing revitalisation project to invest in high-quality, sustainable housing and community development while also enabling current residents to stay in their homes, replacing them 'one for one' rather than demolishing them wholesale and displacing an entire community.

Young people often constitute more than half of a public housing neighbourhood's population, and while they are willing and able to contribute meaningful insights about the places where they live, they are rarely involved in community redevelopment visioning and design processes. San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) decided to partner with the UC Berkeley Center for Cities + Schools (CC+S) to bring the Y-PLAN civic engagement and educational strategy to the Bay View. Through the Y-PLAN methodology, CC+S engaged young people of all ages in mapping out the assets and challenges of this Bay View neighbourhood and began to work with the local elementary school to see how the schools could be directly involved in re-visioning a new, opportunity-rich community.

### The Y-PLAN methodology

Grounded in over a decade of educational research, the Y-PLAN methodology's well-defined yet flexible process of critical inquiry builds the capacity of young people to contribute their own data and insights to the planning and policymaking process.[1] It also builds the capacity of civic leaders to value and use the insight of young people to create better plans, policies and places (McKoy *et al.*, 2010). The Hunters View project is the first large-scale effort applying Y-PLAN to elementary schools recognising the critical role young people of all ages play in redesigning and re-imagining their communities (Buss, 2010). Y-PLAN has five core components, all of which have been adapted for elementary-age students for the Malcolm X project.

*1 Authentic civic client*

For the ongoing project at Malcolm X the students have been engaged as 'co-researchers', working directly with civic leaders from the Mayor's office, school district, HOPE SF and the developer, John Stewart Company. They have worked with professional architects, landscape architects and planners who have had the power to listen to and act on their ideas. Together, the students and adult partners are continuing to address this question: 'How can young people help the Hunters View HOPE SF housing developers forge stronger connections between the school, the neighbourhood, and the larger community?'

*2 Focus on place making and the built environment*

Y-PLAN engages students in a critical analysis of the places where they live. Students are examining and finding solutions to critical community issues through the lens of

**Some of the community resources students identified as being most important to integrate in their neighbourhood were: library and tech resource centre; performance space/theatre; places for creative expression and inspirational public art; art galleries and community gathering places.** Photo • Courtesy UC Berkeley Center for Cities + Schools

elements of the built environment: housing, transport, public space, and schools, services and amenities. This place-making initiative has required reciprocal learning between adults and young people and has driven another key question: 'What are some of the ingredients that will make the Hunters View neighbourhood a healthy, sustainable and joyful community?'

*3 Y-PLAN 5-step methodology of critical inquiry*

As students moved through cycles of the five-step Y-PLAN Roadmap they have learned civics by doing civics. The students have engaged in research about their school and community through mapping, interviews, observation and analysis. The Y-PLAN methodology is modelled on the participatory planning process and scientific method, including problem definition, community research, generating visions for change, and presenting evidence-based solutions for a client and panel of authentic stakeholders with the power to act on young people's ideas.

*4 Academic fit*

Y-PLAN projects are aligned to academic goals and designed to equip students with experience and tools for career, college, and community readiness. At Malcolm X each year the teachers and facilitators have crafted the Y-PLAN curriculum to augment academic learning objectives focused on applied mathematics, sustainability, and cultural influences in design. The programme has created a context within which to honour students' voices by creating opportunities for oral and visual presentation and respectfully showcasing their drawings, models, and artefacts in a public arena.

*5 Social justice and equity focus*

Y-PLAN projects change the status quo by opening traditional avenues of power and decision making to young people and community members who tend to be left out of the city planning and decision-making process. Racial and economic inequalities are deeply

rooted in the Bay View. Through Y-PLAN, young people are recognised as critical actors in transforming current conditions and interrupting deep and historic patterns of inequality.

**What students wanted**

Over the years, the students have generated eight main ideas to make public spaces in the new community child-friendly, safe, accessible, healthy, sustainable and joyful.

*1 Artistic and safe gateways and pathways*

Each year, as a top priority, the students have lobbied for the creation of safe, artistic, and delightful routes to connect their home environments to local resources, businesses and the school. These public corridors would be alternatives to the street and would include both footpaths and bike paths to be used during and after school hours. Inspired by Michelle Obama's 'Let's Move' campaign, the students have been excited about promoting healthy, active living. With this goal in mind, their proposals for pathways include exercise trails, featuring places to move, work out, stretch, walk, run, or lift. They also could incorporate fun and adventurous elements such as a swing, mazes, rock hopping, or innovative playground elements made from recycled materials.

Student proposals also included gateways to mark and frame special places such as entry points into the school, views of the San Francisco Bay, or access routes into Hunters View. Their proposals for gateways included creative and artistic features. For example, gateways into the school could symbolise the entry into the realm of learning and knowledge. Gateways into Hunters View could represent pathways and connections with the larger community.

*2 Vegetable gardens, fruit orchards, flowers, trees*

Using the 'edible schoolyard' at Martin Luther King Middle School in Berkeley as a model, the students are interested in incorporating fruit and vegetable gardens, fruit orchards, and decorative flower gardens into outdoor open spaces. The goal is to create a source of locally sourced healthy food and to add restful places of beauty to the everyday environment. These gardens could contain fruit and vegetable beds as well as flowerbeds, and orchards. The students included signage, fences or walls around the garden areas with 'super graphics' promoting health messages and featuring images of fruit and vegetables.

*3 Heroes Wall, walkway or sculpture*

Over the years during our sessions many of the students have been inspired by images we showed them of the Heroes' Wall at Jefferson High School in Los Angeles. This wall features images of famous people from the community who attended that school. In between their photos are mirrors so that the students can envision themselves as heroes as well (either now or in the future). Malcolm x student proposals have included a Heroes Wall, walkway, or sculpture featuring images of local leaders, national icons, and historic figures such as Malcolm X, Ruby Bridges, Sojourner Truth, Michelle and Barack Obama and Sonia Sotomayor. Their proposals for the Heroes Wall also include spaces for images of their teachers, fellow students, and alumni of the Malcolm X Academy.

*4 Natural and wild places for play and enjoyment*

The students have been excited about the possibility of creating 'wild spaces' or natural elements into the park settings or open spaces within Hunters View. These could be places of adventure and play, but also places for reflection and refuge. Naturalistic settings to explore and find sanctuary might include: water features; large rocks for landscaping and free play; wooded areas; an outdoor amphitheatre using the natural topography of the site; or even an adventure playground. One group of students proposed an observation tower to offer students special views of the San Francisco Bay.

*5 Gathering spaces and reflective circles*

While the students' proposals have often focused on activity and play options, they have also included the desire for places of refuge, rest and rejuvenation. Some of their design ideas have included quiet outdoor gathering places, resting places, nooks and sweet spots off the

beaten path, including tree houses, and clubhouses. They have envisioned these as areas for quiet reflection, observation, 'looking at the stars' and reading. Additionally, inspired by Danielle Diuguid of SFUSD's Education Outside programme, the 2014 group proposed including a 'reflective circle' as a place for students to come together as a group to resolve conflicts, discuss issues, and participate in community meetings.

*6 'Education outside' learning labs*

Over the years the students have proposed tree houses, clubhouses, and other outdoor learning labs as special places for people of all ages to relax, play and learn. These would be places to congregate and enjoy, but also could be retrofitted to demonstrate principles of sustainability. The proposed 'buildings' would illustrate and teach how to capture the energy of the wind and sun, harvest and conserve rainwater, and use earth and plants as both food and building insulation. They would showcase green building features such as windmills, water conservation strategies, solar panels, living roofs and walls, and recycled materials. These outdoor learning labs would also be accessible, inclusive, maintainable, and would encourage active living and eating nutritional foods. The 2014 group collaborated with Diuguid to generate proposals for a more formal outside learning lab, where Education Outside workshops could be conducted.

*7 Intergenerational places for games and sports*

While it wasn't the highest priority for the Hunters View community development, many students in the Y-PLAN Think Tank have emphasised the importance of having clean, green, safe and accessible places for playing group games within the community. They have expressed the sentiment that there should be some dedicated and flexible spaces where people of all ages can play informal games, and some organised sports.

*8 Linking housing, school and community resources*

Finally, the students – especially those in the first 2 years of the programme – expressed the need to integrate community resource nodes into their residential neighbourhoods, and in turn to link those nodes to the school. Some of the community resources they identified as being most important included: library and tech resource centre; performance space/theatre; places for creative expression and inspirational public art; art galleries and community gathering places. As the plans for Hunters View have evolved, the students have seen some of this happen already. As Hunters View continues to take shape, more recently they have focused on how to link those resources to the school as well.

**Progress and next steps**

Inevitably, it has not been possible to incorporate all of the students' ideas. While the developers loved Donte Jones's tree house idea, for example, they had to explain that because of 'risk management' constraints it had to be rejected. Nonetheless, many of the ideas about open space, wild space, places for picnics and barbecues, and public space have been partially incorporated – although scaled down to fit the budget. The fruit trees and sustainable plants that they recommended have been planted as part of the original landscaping budget. We are currently working with the developers on incorporating students' ideas about gateways, pathways, and a Heroes Wall.

Y-PLAN has been a totally new experience for the developers and their team of planners and architects, and they are eager to expand it. It offers a powerful case study about reciprocal learning between adults and young people, and authentic community engagement. Above all, as students critically analyse the places in which they live, they learn the process by which places get transformed and the important role they themselves play in that transformation process.

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**Note**

1 For more information on the Y-PLAN methodology see: http://y-plan.berkeley.edu

# Designing spaces that users can define

Monica Chadha, Principal, Civic Projects LLC; Founding Director, Impact Detroit; Co-founder, Converge: Exchange; Adjunct Associate Professor of Architecture, Illinois Institute of Technology, USA

**Children playing in the Crown Fountain at Millenium Park, Chicago.** Photo • Courtesy Andy Tinucci

**Comparing her experiences of living with children in Rome and Chicago, architect Monica Chadha concludes that culture and social norms may be more important than explicit rules in making a city child-friendly. Making a link with the Reggio Emilia approach to the design of early childhood centres, in this article she asks what are the implications for thinking about urban design.**

In theory, it is always welcome when those in charge of aspects of urban life explicitly consider the needs of children. Paradoxically, however, incomplete thinking about what children need can be worse than not thinking about it at all, as it can lead to unexpected restrictions in circumstances which have not been properly considered. Four examples from my home city of Chicago – two positive and two negative – help to illustrate the point.

To start with, the examples of overly prescriptive policies. Some years ago I wanted to explore the city with my small twin girls using public transport. The Chicago Transit Authority has a policy of welcoming strollers on the city's buses, but only when they are collapsed before boarding. While this works well when each child is accompanied by an adult, it makes life difficult for one parent with two children. My only option was to carry the twins onto the bus in their car seats, and leave them there while I got off the bus again to collapse the stroller.

The second negative example also comes from the city's public transport. When the girls were older, we started to get around by bike. The city's transit policy is to welcome bikes on trains, but with a limit of two bikes per train car. In other words, the twins and I could take our bikes on the train only if I were willing to leave one young child, or bike, in a different car.

In contrast, the most positive aspects of parenting young children in a cosmopolitan city have involved rules that don't explicitly consider children at all. Over the last couple of years, Chicago has introduced cycle lanes on the city's roads, separated from traffic by bollards and often by a row of parked cars. These lanes were not explicitly informed by the needs of children, and make no special provision for children – but they have the effect of making life much easier for the urban parent than the aforementioned child-specific policies.

My final example concerns my and my children's favourite place in Chicago: Crown Fountain in Millennium Park. Opened in 2004, designed by Jaume Plensa and executed by Krueck and Sexton Architects, the fountain is a black granite reflective pool bounded by two glass brick towers that project video. Intermittently, water cascades down the sides of the tower or spouts through the 'mouth' of local residents whose faces are projected onto the towers. This space has become a place for families to gather. Kids sit around, or run about splashing. They stand under the fountain and get soaked, or walk around the edge and observe.

I believe the key to the fountain's success is that when it was commissioned, it was not with the intention of it becoming such a gathering place. Had it been designed as a pool for children, it would have been bound up with the kind of rules and regulations on usage that typically apply to playgrounds, and are designed to minimise the possibility of parents litigating against the city in case of accidents. It is precisely because the fountain wasn't programmed explicitly for children that it has become a place where children are drawn to play. We are left to explore and interact with a piece of art, defining our own experiences.

**Culture and social norms**

These insights are easier to explain than to operationalise in design thinking, because they come down to culture. When my children were young, I had the opportunity to spend 4 months with them in Rome. Here I encountered a different relationship between the city and children, in which nothing felt overly prescriptive, but everything felt welcoming to explore. We drew with chalk on cobblestones, ran around piazzas, played in small parks and discovered place after place that was an adventure for a child.

The most instructive contrast was the public transport system. Except in extreme rush hour, when buses were more crowded and tempers more frayed, I invariably found drivers and passengers were patient, understanding and generous in helping me to navigate public transport with the girls. There were no rules about strollers – just a general sense that children were citizens, too, and needed to be cut some slack as they partook of city life.

Naturally, there are trade-offs involved. It takes more time for an adult to get on a bus when accompanying small children and a stroller – so how do you balance the needs of individual travellers and the wider public? There is an analogy with disabled people, who also have special needs on public transport. In most cases a strong social norm has evolved that able-bodied passengers sitting close to the doors are expected to offer their seat when an elderly or handicapped passenger boards the bus.

No doubt there are instances in which this social norm breaks down. But would it really be a good idea to try to define specific rules, along the lines of the collapsed-stroller policy? You could set aside a specific number of seats on the bus, say, for passengers who use walking aids – but what about passengers who don't use walking aids but are still in more need of a seat, such as heavily pregnant women? What happens when more disabled passengers want to board than there are designated seats available?

The risk is that making rules explicit could weaken the more vaguely defined but powerful norm of deferring to those more in need. Something similar applies to children. Rather than trying to be prescriptive about every circumstance in which a child may interact with an aspect of urban life, we need to think about ways in which we can nurture an urban culture in which social

norms are welcoming of children's often unpredictable needs.

**Implications for architects**

As an architect, I try to apply in my own work the principle of not being overly prescriptive, and designing spaces which users will be able to define. In particular, I've worked with the Reggio Emilia approach in the design of early childhood centres. Founded by Loris Malaguzzi in 1945, this approach to education celebrates the self-guided potential of the child. The philosophy encourages self-exploration and the guiding principles focus on the natural development of the child and the relationship the child has with their environment. Values include the sense of belonging to a community.

At Ross Barney Architects, our design of the Louise M. Beem Early Childhood Center at the College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn focused on self-exploration and discovery. We lowered windows and turned them into nooks. We gave the youngest kids floor to ceiling windows facing the playground. Each classroom exited directly to the outdoor exploration areas. We made mounds out of bunny grass to roll on. Even the teaching observation rooms had two-way mirrors that were dropped to the floor so kids could crawl up, touch and see themselves.

The point was to consciously refrain from creating spaces with predetermined uses, as far as possible, and instead to allow for exploration. The Reggio Emilia philosophy parallels the broader urban environment in which I believe children can thrive. Our public spaces should be places where kids can explore freely and feel a sense of belonging – and sometimes the most limiting environments are those consciously designed for children.

# 'Interventions must be low-cost, low-tech, and paired with a public health message'

An interview with Peter Williams, Founder and Executive Director, ARCHIVE Global, New York, USA

**The evidence that concrete floors reduce diarrhoea (second-biggest cause of death among under-5s in Bangladesh) is very solid. It's one of those things the world has known for a long time, but hasn't yet found the will to act on.** Photo • Courtesy archiveglobal.org

**ARCHIVE (Architecture for Health in Vulnerable Environments) Global is a non-profit organisation working worldwide to improve housing for health. Founder and Executive Director Peter Williams talks to *Early Childhood Matters* about using design to tackle malaria in Cameroon, diarrhoea in Bangladesh and tuberculosis in London, and the importance of understanding local nuances in finding solutions that can be scaled up.**

*Why did you choose to focus your organisation on the relationship between urban design and infectious disease?*

There is ample evidence linking all kinds of physical and mental health issues to living conditions, but some of those issues get more attention than others. If you go to a meeting about the urban design – child health nexus in New York, for example, you'll tend to find the talk is about obesity. That's a big and important issue, and 'active design' has a role to play: think of, say, the way staircases in tall buildings tend to be hidden out the back, rather than made into an attractive feature of the building that encourages people to take the stairs instead of the elevator.

But the danger is that other important issues get overlooked. Frankly, we're not saying anything new in pointing out the link with infectious diseases – it's been known for decades. Where we're trying to make a difference is in getting people to take it more seriously and to adapt solutions for local specifics. It's a sad reality that most diseases that kill under-5s are preventable, and many of them are strongly influenced by living conditions. Until governments, international organisations and big foundations address head-on the

need to change paradigms in urban design, we're not going to see the kind of progress we want.

*What are some of the ways in which you're using design to tackle infectious disease?*
One of our projects is in Yaounde, the capital city of Cameroon, a country in which half of all deaths in children under 5 are due to malaria. The usual response to malaria is to distribute bed-nets, but we found that in practice most people weren't using them. So we're looking at ways to stop mosquitoes from getting into houses, by screening windows, doors and eaves. Of course, this has to be part of a systemic approach that looks also at conditions outside the four walls of the home, like adequate drainage to prevent stagnant water in which mosquitoes can breed. The project has screened 120 houses so far.

Another example: many houses have dirt floors, which are breeding grounds for bugs that cause diarrhoea, hepatitis and typhoid. We have a project in Bangladesh called 'Health from the ground up', which is working to replace mud floors with concrete floors in 500 houses by next year. Diarrhoea is the second-biggest cause of death among under-5s in Bangladesh, quite apart from the cumulative effect that repeated bouts of illness have on children's physical and mental development. The evidence that concrete floors reduce disease is very solid. It's one of those things the world has known for a long time, but hasn't yet found the will to act on.[1]

*How much does it cost to put down a concrete floor? Is it something the average Bangladeshi who lives in a mud house can afford?*
As with many pilot schemes, it is expensive to begin with, but the hope is that as the issue gets increasing attention, people will find ways to bring the costs down. In our project, it's currently costing just under 400 euros to replace a dirt floor with a concrete one, and we're asking families to contribute around a tenth of that. But we're also working with BRAC University to see how we can bring the cost down by including local waste products in the concrete mix. We're confident that we can approximately halve the cost in the next few months, as well as contributing to local waste management in the process. Specific solutions that reduce costs will always differ from place to place, which is why it's important to work with local institutions. More generally, as demand for any product grows, entrepreneurs have the incentive to look for ways to make it more affordable. A major part of our work is to get involved with families and communities to help them understand why it's a good idea to have a concrete floor, say, or to screen their windows. We're already seeing in Cameroon that the market is responding to demand we've helped to create, with some local entrepreneurs setting up in business to make and fit screens. Ultimately this has to be affordable and self-sustaining, rather than relying on grants forever.

And it's not only health benefits, by the way, which give homeowners an incentive to improve their properties by doing things like laying a concrete floor. A house is an asset, and it's often easier for people to access small loans and other financial services if they can add value to that asset. That's a motivation that shouldn't be underestimated.

*So you see the way to scale up as being through increased awareness and demand, rather than through governments imposing the kind of detailed building codes we see in developed countries?*
I'm generally an optimistic person, but I'd be surprised if in the next 20 years you'd see all new houses in a country like Cameroon being built with screens as standard because of a government building code. While I'm an architect myself and I believe architects add value, the reality is that the vast majority of homes worldwide – certainly over 95% – haven't been built with the input of architects, and that will continue to be the norm.

I see the kind of work we're doing as work communities should be doing for themselves, rather than requiring government oversight. Interventions must be low-cost, low-tech, and paired with a public health message. And we need to be working with governments to try to make sure that what we do is consistent with their strategies. One of the most important areas where governments can help is tenure. In Cameroon, for example, we've been engaging to persuade the government to drop plans to

demolish houses in a slum area, and instead to work with the residents to help incentivise and enable them to improve the quality of their residences.

*You can't expect someone to invest in screening their windows or laying a concrete floor if they're worried the authorities might demolish their house.*
And that's not the only common threat to tenure. In many countries, sadly, tenure is gender-specific. If you're a woman and your husband dies – a situation that's all too common in many African countries that have been ravaged by HIV/AIDS – then you can lose title to your land.

Land tenure is a really complicated issue in many countries; there's often no central register of land rights – it varies hugely from culture to culture. You may have some formal practices, laid down under law, which grant land rights – but there are also often traditional laws and customs accorded by tribal chiefs, and other customary ways in which people get tenure.

Even in the same community, some people may have legal tenure while others don't. One of the requirements we have for a household to take part in our projects is that they are able to show proof of tenure. That's necessary to protect our work, but it's always a source of sadness when someone isn't able to take advantage of the opportunity. The issue of tenure is a global one that requires bold leadership, but sadly it isn't going to be resolved any time soon.

*You also have projects in developed countries – in the London boroughs of Brent and Newham, and in Camden, New Jersey. What are the issues there?*
In Brent and Newham the issue is tuberculosis – they have the highest rates in Western Europe, and the quality of housing is a factor in that. Damp, poorly ventilated and overcrowded houses provide breeding grounds for disease to spread. Camden is one of the poorest areas in the USA, and the issue we're tackling there is asthma. In households making less than USD 35,000 a year, nearly 17% of children suffer from asthma; in households making USD 75,000 or more, that figure is under 8%. Factors associated with poor-quality housing – dust mites, rodents, inadequate ventilation – can be important triggers for asthma. And it's a problem with far-reaching implications: for example, about 12 million school days a year are lost because of asthma.

Some of the living conditions can be staggering. In our London project I met an Eritrean woman who had sought asylum in the UK from fighting in her home country. The local council had placed her in privately rented accommodation, a studio flat, and as soon as you walked in you could feel how thick and damp the air was. Her ceiling was literally black with mould – it seems there was a toilet leaking in the upstairs flat. We asked if she'd complained to the landlord, and she said she had – but all he did was paint over it, which of course does no good whatsoever.

*This, presumably, is an area where there really is a role for government.*
I'm not always in favour of looking to legislation for solutions, but there needs to be an adequate system in place to hold landlords accountable for the quality of the accommodation they rent out. There's a common perception that social housing, or council housing as it's called in the UK, is the worst-quality housing around; but in my experience, it tends to be much better maintained than some private rented accommodation.

As always, part of the issue is awareness – we held a workshop for 400 tenants in London in 2010 on the relationship between relative humidity and respiratory disease, and the actions they can take to minimise the problem, such as opening windows regularly and drying wet clothes outside. And we encourage them to take up the issue with landlords: in London there are associations of private tenants which can be a force to be reckoned with. As always, it's a matter of understanding the nuances of who the local stakeholders are, and how they can make a difference.

**Note**
1 More information on ARCHIVE's projects can be found at: http://archiveglobal.org/

**Bernard van Leer Foundation**

## Investing in the development of young children

The Bernard van Leer Foundation funds and shares knowledge about work in early childhood development. The Foundation was established in 1949 and is based in the Netherlands. Our income is derived from the sale of Royal Packaging Industries van Leer N.V., bequeathed to the Foundation by Dutch industrialist and philanthropist Bernard van Leer (1883 to 1958).

Our mission is to improve opportunities for children up to age 8 who are growing up in socially and economically difficult circumstances. We see this both as a valuable end in itself and as a long-term means of promoting more cohesive, considerate and creative societies with equal opportunities and rights for all. We work primarily by supporting programmes implemented by local partners. These include public, private and community-based organisations. Working through partnerships is intended to build local capacity, promote innovation and flexibility, and help to ensure that the work we fund is culturally and contextually appropriate.

We also aim to leverage our impact by working with influential allies to advocate for young children. Our free publications share lessons we have learned from our own grantmaking activities and feature agenda-setting contributions from outside experts. Through our publications and advocacy, we aim to inform and influence policy and practice not only in the countries where we operate but globally.

In our current strategic plan, we are pursuing three programme goals: reducing violence in young children's lives, taking quality early education to scale, and improving young children's physical environments. We are pursuing these goals in eight countries – Peru, India, the Netherlands, Israel, Uganda, Turkey, Brazil and Tanzania – as well as undertaking a regional approach within the European Union.