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## Play Street – Design for children in local environments

My aim for this thesis is to research the situation for children living in urban areas and to design a product concept that will improve their situation in the outdoor environment. An important motive for doing the project is to directly link theoretical and practical research with product design. This paper focuses mainly on the action research phase of the project, the methods used and how successful they were.

There is a general concern that children are spending increasing amounts of their time indoors. Children are accused of being lazy and are said to prefer video games and television to play. Overweight has become a common problem among children and teenagers due to decreased physical activity. At the same time the outdoor environment is perceived as increasingly dangerous and not safe for children to manage alone. Heavy traffic and the ever present fear of dangerous people have made parents more worried and prone to control their children's whereabouts.

The ideal childhood environment is for many people in Scandinavia the safe, little countryside village, as portrayed in the books by Astrid Lindgren, with unlimited access to nature and freedom for children to move around alone. For many adults today the childhood environment, rural as well as urban, of the fifties and sixties comes closest to this ideal, despite the general poverty after the Second World War. Why is it then that we in our wealthy society today, can not give children a safer and more stimulating environment to grow up in? What is different? What does it mean to be a child growing up in an urban context today?

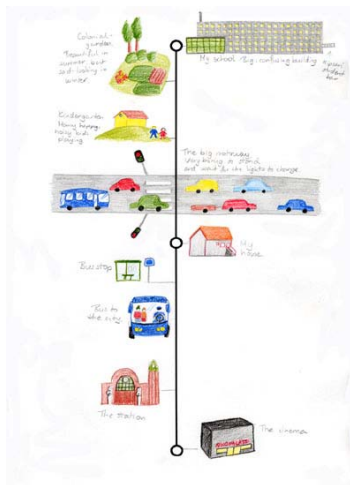
There has been very little focus on children's situation in the city although there are some initiatives and programmes, such as "Gatetun" in Norway, Pihakatu in Finland and Home Zones in Great Britain, but these projects are rare, probably because they are too expensive to implement for most city councils but mainly because there is little willingness to give priority to children. The aim must therefore be to design a product system that would be inexpensive and easy to implement, but still of a quality and standard that allows for children's play.

For the theoretical research of this thesis I have studied areas such as history, sociology, developmental and environmental psychology as well as urban studies and city planning. The action research was done in the form cultural probes. Cultural probe research is a form of artistic

self-documentation method where the user is encouraged to share information about their lives. The reason for using probes in this project was to acquire information through a method that is appealing to children. It encourages the children to share personal information that they would hesitate to give in other situations. The aim with the probes was to get inspiration for the design as opposed to statistic data. In order to understand the children's background I have also done interviews with parents. This way I can get more systematic knowledge about how the children's time is organized, how they use the environment and what their restrictions and allowances are.

## The development of the probes

I worked with two groups of children for this study. The first group was a class of nine year olds at the English School in Helsinki and this was supposed to be a pilot study for the research. Each child was given a package with a map and eight cards with pictures on one side and a related question on the other. The questions had to do with the children's local environments and how they used and perceived this. The language had to be clear for the children to understand the questions without being too child-like or either guiding. Some of them were less direct and the questions could start with: "Tell me about...", to try to keep the topic as open as possible.



The map was included to get the children to record their environment. The distances or details were not important, just the things that were of importance to them like things they were afraid of or that they liked. To make it easier the map was to be drawn along a line that was already marked on the paper and the children were to draw a path they go daily or often such as the way to school or their friends house. On the back of the paper I made my own map over my environment along the same line. This was done to make it easier to understand what I wanted and also to tell the children something about my life.

The cards were in A5 format so that they would be big enough to draw on or write a longer text. The children were encouraged to express themselves in the way they wanted, either by writing, drawing, storytelling or a combination of these. They were also told that they could choose not to answer the cards if they did not want to and if they wanted to reveal secret information, it would be kept secret.<sup>1</sup>



“What did you do with your friends last summer?”

“Tell me about your favourite place.”

The second research with the Swedish School was done on the basis of the research with the English School and the cards had been redesigned based on this. The number of cards was reduced from eight to six cards and the packages did not include a mental map. Instead they included cameras that the children would share and questionnaires for their parents.

## Results from the English School

In the first research with the English School it was obvious that they enjoyed making the maps. The result of this task was however less successful. There were more drawings of streets and houses than specific places and things that would have meaning to them. Although many of the maps were really well drawn with lots of details, they were more like conventional maps without any specific information and conclusively not appropriate for this kind of study.

On the cards most of the children chose to write simple answers as in a questionnaire rather than tell stories or draw drawings. This is probably because this is the clearest way of communicating without misunderstandings. Although hoping for a variety of results, this was probably also the easiest way for me to understand as well. Another explanation might be that there were rather too

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<sup>1</sup> For information on the background of the probes for this research see: Gaver, W., Dunne, A., Pacenti, E. "Design: Cultural Probes", *Interactions*, Vol.6, issue1, pp 21-29, 1999.

many cards. One fear was that the children would use the pictures as examples instead of inspiration and just write what they saw on the card. Apart from two of the cards, the majority of the answers were about other things and some of them quite far away from the pictures. For example on the card *“Tell me about your favourite place”* one child wrote *“In the sand trail at our cottage because one can draw with the feet in the sand”*.

The cards showed that contrary to current beliefs, these children play a lot outside and more traditional games are important in their culture. These activities exist alongside more commercial and technology based activities. There was a good balance between the more contemporary so-called, “unhealthy” activities and the more “politically correct” ones. I think this shows that the children were not trying to just please me as an adult, but answer honestly about how they actually spend their time.

One of the most successful cards was the one about *“the street where you live”*. The answers showed that the main concern was having friends living in the same neighbourhood. It was also interesting to note how many of the children that had nothing to say about the place they live. One explanation is that these children play less outside in their neighbourhood than they do in school. The children in the English School come from the whole Helsinki region and not just the schools vicinity. This was interesting to note; they do not know the neighbourhood because they do not have any friends there.

For example from the “street where you live”-card, there were quite a few interesting comments such as *“I live in a very quiet street. It’s so quiet – nothing.”* This is a strong statement and gives me a clear aim for the project; the street needs something that makes things happen. Another comment that caught me was *“The asphalt is smooth so it’s good to go with kickboard.”* It is tempting in urban design to integrate beautiful cobble stoned surfaces, but this is less appropriate for children’s play which often incorporates playing with different kinds of bikes, rolling skates and ball games. It is also an idea to provide for these kinds of activities in the street by demarcation and safety from cars.

The comment about the sand trail at the summer cottage was a true inspiration. It thought it would be interesting to incorporate different ground surfaces that would be functional and emotional zones. Sand is soft and mouldable and can be a contrast to asphalt and for instance, grass and water. A recurring theme in the answers was water and activities like water fighting. I wanted this to be central in the design because water has a potential both as an aesthetic feature as well as a play opportunity and a practical installation, for instance for car washing; pleasant, practical and fun.



### Results from the Swedish School

The group had two cameras at their disposal and they could take four photos each. We made lists of who were to use the camera when and who they were to give it to next. I was very sceptical to how well this would work and whether so young children would be able to arrange this without a teacher organizing it and reminding them. Whereas the cards were returned after one week, the cameras were not returned until three weeks later. This delay was also due to winter holidays. It was hard to tell how many children actually got to use the cameras as they could choose how many of the four photos they took and since half of them did it together in groups. How many actually did it is less important than the quality and variety of the photos, and that aspect was successful. This part of the research was also successful because the children enjoyed doing it so much. I got feedback from the contact teacher saying that they had a lot of fun taking the photos and arranging the project in between themselves. The trust put in them by giving them the cameras to work with, and the excitement in telling about themselves by taking photos probably inspired the children to do the work so well. The photos were impressive and it was clear that the children had planned where to take them and when. They were taken with friends visiting and brought along to the sports club, to the playground and places in the city. Although of varying quality (as they often are with disposable cameras) they showed a variety of places and situations that gave a good impression of the children's environment.

The cards showed that the children in general play a lot outside. Only one child mentioned exclusively an indoor activity (computer games) when asked what games they play with their friends in their neighbourhood. Traditional rule games like Kirkonrotta (an advanced form of hide-and-seek) and cop-and-thief were popular. Also just being outside was mentioned, like hanging around talking and going to the park. It is evident from the answers about where they meet their friends, that there is a need for meeting places.



Most of the children go home to each other after school or they play in the school yard. Some mention that they go to the city. Unless the schoolyard playground works as a proper meeting place for children, they have no public meeting place. Also, a school yard can never become “theirs” as it belongs to the school and how it is shaped is decided by the teachers and the school authorities.

Unlike the children in the English School who almost all were afraid of something, hardly any of the children in this study were afraid of anything. A couple mentioned drunken men, but other than that there was nothing. This is difficult to interpret. It could mean that they don't really understand the dangers that surround them. It could also mean that they genuinely feel in control of their environment and understand what is going on around them. The children in the English School on the other hand, have less contact with the local environment but more fears.

The question about what they did last summer gave positive and varied answers. Some of the children explained about games they had invented themselves, both rule games and pretend games. Several mentioned water as part of their games. Other than that there were “traditional” games like playing football and building a cottage. Only one child mentioned play involving a tool and that was a trampoline. One child had fun jumping from “rocks and things” and in this lays a design opportunity. Rocks “and things” could become tools in different kinds of play as well as giving the children opportunity for movement and development of body control. It also confirms that playing with basic tools can be just as memorable and fun as playing with an expensive trampoline and that the elements in Play Street can be simple elements giving lots of pleasure.

When asked about their favourite place or secret place one of the girls answered very logically that she could not tell because it was secret! Others seemed to trust the confidentiality and told they had secret places such as a cottage in the forest or in a snow cave. It would be difficult to design secret places as these usually are invented by the children themselves. I tried to think of

opportunities for hiding places for Play Street, but it was difficult to accommodate for this kind of practice in such a small and open environment. One child mentioned the local park as a favourite place. This was because of the variety of activities one could do there in summer and winter, but also because it is close to where this child lives and because there are good hiding places. I decided that accommodating for play in summer as well as in winter would be central to the design solution.

I found the research to be rewarding even though it would have been interesting to test a more conventional user research method to see how this worked in comparison to the probes. The probes are difficult to interpret and analyse and the preparation and process is time consuming. Yet I believe that for this research they were appropriate and successful. It confirmed a lot of the notions I already had from my theoretical research and gave me new ideas that probably would not have come from ordinary interviews. It also showed that children need places to be that are equally challenging and safe and that their needs are far from satisfied. There is a demand for proper design of the micro-environments between the buildings which are the spaces that children and adults experience and use in their daily lives.

The design concept:



