

## Citizen Child: Play as Welfare Parameter for Urban Life

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Is urban development and planning an issue for philosophers? The most trivial answer would be: sure it is, as long as philosophers are citizens themselves. But there are also more specific reasons that should make urban life a worthy object of philosophical consideration. Some languages (like Italian and French) have the idiomatic expression “philosophy of governance”, which has analogous meaning to the English “philosophy of life”, only with reference to governance: therefore, paraphrasing the Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary (11<sup>th</sup> edition), we can translate the idea of philosophy of governance as “an overall vision of or attitude toward governance and the purpose of governance”. To take this idea seriously, we need to try to figure out what is (if any) our current overall vision or attitude toward governance and its purpose, and how this vision might help or get in the way of improving our life. Even if we do not share Plato’s idea that philosophers should be the rulers of the city (actually, I will suggest in this article that children might do a better job of it), it is important to involve them in the current debate on the philosophy of governance of our cities.

The city governors take decisions regarding practical aspects of people’s lives, such as transport, housing, services. These decisions interact with a basic problem concerning the happiness of the citizens, an issue that is essentially philosophic in nature. The city can tackle problems such as the traffic, the speed of city travel, the safeguarding of public spaces of priority importance, while sacrificing the needs of communication, social intercourse and serenity, in particular for the weaker citizens.

Conversely, it may give priority to ensure that children and the elderly have the right to play and to mobility, to seek security in solidarity and participation, to defend urban aesthetics as an inalienable right.

The mayor of Curitiba, in Brazil, said that he succeeded in equipping all the quarters of his city with public libraries and providing them with good books by *not* constructing one kilometre of motorway. To stress the fact that spending on children is not a mere cost but a true productive investment, Kofi Annan, United Nations Secretary-General, ended his opening address on 8 May 2002 at New York UN Special Session on Children by saying: «How can we fail, above all now that we know that each dollar invested in improving the conditions of children has a return of a good 7 dollars for society as a whole?». These, among others, are the decisions defining the philosophy of governance in our cities.

This leads to the main claim of this article: allowing children to play according to their needs (and in contrast to what is permitted by a city suited only to the needs of adults) guarantees healthier, more serene and more productive adults. In other words, play is indeed a key feature in urban policies. But *why* is it so? Why and how should children’s play be a relevant parameter in assessing urban policies? A tentative answer to this problem is presented in the following pages: I will start sketching the latest evolution (or rather involution) of urban structure and organization (cf. 1), emphasizing how this defines an environment which is basically forbidden and hostile to children, unless they are escorted by adults (cf. 2); I will summarize the impact of such an environment on children’s play, and therefore on children’s development (cf. 3), stressing the different criteria of spatial movement and fruition applied by children compared with adults (cf. 4), and the extreme danger of systematically isolating children from the experience of danger – a well-known paradoxical feature of modern education (cf. 5). Finally, I will propose a radical alternative to current urban policies, considering children and their play

as the main focus, rather than a marginal and unwelcome problem only to be faced as an afterthought (cf. 6), and I will present several concrete cases in which such an alternative has been put into practice by children and politicians together, and its effects tested and assessed (cf. 7). By way of conclusion, similar experiences seem to justify a moderate amount of hope for the future of our cities, in spite of their present, worrisome conditions (cf. 8).

### 1. Urban development: a short overview

The modern city was born by breaking down the mediaeval barrier separating the castle from the town itself, in which a hierarchical relationship was set up. In contrast, the modern city developed around a square, in a space that was shared, despite differences in social class and living conditions. Overlooking the square were the government buildings, the cathedral, the garrison barracks, the market square. The city was the focal point for people to meet and mix in. The urban space was shared, without different quarters for the different social levels: in the streets of the city the aristocrats' palaces, often designed by great architects, stood shoulder to shoulder with the humble craftsmen's homes. This alternation produced a town-planning pattern that resulted in the beauty of many European cities.

Over the past few decades, following World War II, the city seems practically to have returned to the mediaeval model: the rich historic centre has been emptied and has become the site of business and service activities, and is surrounded by new suburbs – more squalid and tougher than the older ones, a poor and sometimes wretched periphery, nondescript houses or shanties, which is dependent on the rich city for its survival. The rich centre is defended by the police, by closed-circuit monitors and by numerous private security firms.

The city has given up being a place of meeting and intercourse and has chosen as its new development criteria *separation* and *specialization*. The separation and specialization of space and skills: different places for different persons, different places for different functions.

The historic centre for banks, luxury shops, entertainment; the outskirts for sleeping.

Then there are places for the children, the day-care centre, the play park, the play centre; places for old people, the rest home, the centre for the elderly; places for knowledge, from the kindergarten to the university; specialized places for buying things, the supermarket, the shopping centre. Then there is the hospital, the place for the sick (Bozzo, 1995; Mumford, 1975).

### 2. Cities without children

Once we could hardly wait to get out of the house, as everything that we were most interested in was outside. The home was the fundamental place of security, primary needs and housework. However, it was necessary to go out in order to meet friends, to play, to go to the bar, the cinema, the library. And if there were dangers, and there were indeed, we had to be careful, as our parents used to tell us.

Today we can hardly wait to get back home, as the home is the place for rest, culture, family affection, communication. At home we have frozen food that lasts for months, a library, our CD collection, our favourite films, the possibility of talking on the phone or sending messages or photos over the internet or by mobile phone. The home is no longer an important but insufficient part of the wider reality of the city: it rather subsumes the city itself. It is no longer part of a complex ecosystem, but itself tends towards *self-sufficiency*, another important and disturbing feature of the modern city. A tendency towards self-sufficiency is displayed by the various parts of the city, from the home to the shopping centre.

In the past, doing the shopping meant following an itinerary, going to different places, meeting various persons, the same every day, so much so that every day we exchanged some gossip, a story or the latest news. Today to go shopping we usually travel from one part of the city to another, or rather to another smaller and efficient city, in which we can buy everything: the shopping centre. This city has guaranteed parking as so there are no cars, but it has streets and squares that are safe for children, for whom dedicated serviced spaces are often provided; here you can eat, do your banking, go to the hairdresser's and of course do your shopping.

A wonderful place, for many families, where they can arrange to meet and spend the weekend together.

Degradation makes the city impossible to live in and we defend ourselves by building safe protected places

where we can spend our leisure time in peace and quiet.

This is a constant tendency in today's city, which is consistent with the logic of separation and specialization: to create services and structures that are increasingly independent and self-sufficient. This is true for the hospital, the sports ground, the large museums and the university campus (Germanos, 1995; Taylor et al., 1998; Bauman, 2001).

Moreover, in recent decades, the city has become a kind of space that is practically reserved for automobiles. Automobiles have invaded the public spaces of the city, thus privatizing them, preventing them from being used by pedestrians or cyclists. The streets and squares are places of transit and parking for private vehicles and no longer public spaces whereby a group of private houses is turned into a city. The automobiles always occupy the ground level while it is the pedestrians who, in order to cross the road, have to step down from the pavements, descend into the underground crossings or climb over pedestrian bridges; automobiles, even though they have an engine, are always allowed to follow the flat road, at ground level. Cars impose their own logic on the city, their own aesthetics, their own "music". Our great cities are obliged to accommodate not only the automobiles but also the vertical road signs and the horizontal traffic signs on the ancient paving, thus visually polluting the historic monuments and centres (Garling, Valsiner, 1985).

All these changes happened in a very short time, because the city, through its administrators, has chosen as its typical citizen an *adult, male, working and car-driving* citizen. The city adapted to suit his needs, in order for the administrators to obtain the votes of this stronger ideal-typical citizen. In doing so they betrayed the needs and rights of those who are not males, adults, workers, or motorists. As a result, these cities are cities without children, where children are prevented from living experiences of fundamental importance for their development, such as adventure, research, discovery, risk, overcoming obstacles and therefore feeling satisfaction, frustration and emotion (Lynch, 1979)<sup>1</sup>. These experiences demand two fundamental conditions that are no longer available: *leisure time* and *shared public space*. It is difficult for children to go outside the home on their own, to seek playmates or to go somewhere suitable for playing with them. The real or alleged environmental

difficulties have convinced their parents that this city does not allow a child of six or ten to go out on his or her own, and so what used to be the children's leisure time has been turned into organized time dedicated to different activities inside or outside the home, in any case rigidly planned and usually having to be paid for. On the one hand, therefore, we have TV, the play station, internet, and on the other the various after-school courses of sport, art and foreign languages (Marillaud, 1991). And what about play? Children cannot play *by themselves* anymore. So that they can play, their parents escort the children to the local game park or to a friend's house or else invite their friends home. Adults constantly wait for them and supervise them. In this way, the most crucial feature of play is lost to the children: they do not have any *autonomy*.

### 3. In the beginning there is play

When we see our children so well dressed, so well nourished and capable of using such complex devices, speaking foreign languages at such an early age, and really able to play a sport, respecting the rules of the game and aware of all the tricks involved from their early years, we adults often feel that they are really lucky. They can do many things that we could not, partly because they did not exist at the time and partly because we could not afford them and also because our parents did not understand such things. It is true (we also reason) that our children cannot run, go wild, get dirty, do odd and often forbidden things, as we did at their age, but it is worth the sacrifice. Today they know a lot more, they are more intelligent.

A ten-year old girl on the Rome Children's Council, when discussing the different weight accorded in children's lives to the right to play and the right to education, aptly summarizes this adult idea when she says: «For our teachers it is important for us to go to school as it prepares us for the future, while play is something done only by children and so it is not worth anything».

Against this nonchalant attitude of adults, who have forgotten the value of their childhood experiences, play activity proves to have fundamental importance not only in the history of culture (Caillois, 1967; Huizinga, 1939), but mostly in the personal history of each woman and each man, since we have several evidences that play lays at the foundation of

individual development. In his play, the child lives an experience that is rare in life, that of measuring himself alone with the complexity of the world. With all his curiosity, with what he knows and can do, and with what he does not know and wishes to learn, the child confronts a world with all its stimuli, novelties, and fascination. For him, playing means each time carving out a piece of this world: a piece that will include friends, objects, rules, a space to be occupied, time to be managed and risks to be run. In total freedom, because what is impossible to do in reality, can be invented by imagination, free from the constraints and limitations of the actual world. "I am a mediaeval prince" a child may claim and from that moment on, if the other accept the pretence, it is possible to journey to another era and to respect its rules and conditions: the broomstick will be a horse for everyone, the ruler a dagger, the hut or tree or space under the stairs a castle (Garvey, 1977; Gombrich, 1971; Piaget, 1945; Vygotsky, 1966). This allows the literal meaning of *auto-nomy* to be realized, that is, the capacity of governing oneself without external guidance, but rather determining one's own rules of behaviour (possibly inventing them to the purpose) and then scrupulously fulfilling them.

It is precisely thanks to this complex interaction between freedom and rules that in the years of early childhood the most important things in the entire life of a man are learned. And no one can schedule or speed up this process without running the risk of preventing or impoverishing it. When adults become aware of such richness in children's play, they often come up with the idea of helping and fostering the process, e.g. by supporting their children with suitable teachings or didactic materials, as they have started doing with the so called "smart toys". This would remove the principal condition on which this wonder was based, that is, that adults should "let" children play. Children's play, before and outside the school, means "losing time", losing oneself in time, it means encountering the world in an exciting relationship, full of mystery, risk, adventure. It springs from the most powerful driving force known to man – pleasure. This is why the child can even forget to eat in order to play. Free and spontaneous play by the child resembles the greatest and most extraordinary experiences of the adult, such as scientific research, exploration, art, mysticism;

in other words, the experiences in which a man is faced with complexity, when he again has the opportunity of allowing himself to be transported by the great driving force of pleasure (Bateson, 1956; Bencivenga, 1995; Bruner, 1976).

The educational proposals, however necessary, involve a lower, less stimulating, and therefore less productive level, with a stronger emphasis on duty rather than pleasure. In the educational proposal the pupil is deprived of the excitement of the encounter with complexity and the thrill of autonomously carving out a part for himself. It is the adult that proposes to the pupil a portion of that complex world such that the required activity produces the desired learning safely and within the prescribed time. That piece of world loses all its fascination and mystery, and becomes incomprehensible, detached as it is from all the rest, and is useful only within the context of school, not in the broader framework of life.

Perhaps it is because of this link with duty that both study and work are regarded as 'ethical' behavior, while games and play, intertwined as they are with pleasure and fun, are trivialized as childish, unproductive, redundant. Perhaps this is the reason why children's play has recently become a privileged target for consumerism, hence somehow severed from its original peculiarities of gratuity and lack of practical purposes. Perhaps this is the reason why children rejoice and suffer from those same privileges and deprivations that make philosophers, artists, researchers and scientists rejoice and suffer. Because also in the case of those people society does not accept their activity to be autonomous, creative, free from practical gain and governed by the pleasure principle.

#### **4. Walking at leisure towards a spring of fresh water**

Let us try and follow two paths: that of a child who is walking hand in hand with an adult and that of a child who is walking on his own.

In the first case the child does not take any decisions, or rather, *cannot* take any decisions. If he tries to stop and pick something up, to change the itinerary, he becomes the target of the usual reproaches: "Don't keep stopping!", "Move on, or we'll be late!", "Don't touch it or you'll get dirty!". For the adult moving means going from a starting point to a destination in

the shortest possible time, without any incident or unexpected events in between. It is no coincidence that the systems considered the most efficient for travelling are the underground, the motorway and the airplane. These are systems with the smallest possible number of “distractions”, that enable you to get to your destination as quickly as possible. The actual route is a waste of time, and should be shortened as much as possible. People are prepared to spend a small fortune to reduce the four hour journey time between Rome and Milan by half an hour!

In contrast, whenever the child is on his own, he is able to make decisions: indeed, he has no remedy for the need to make decisions, otherwise he would have to go back home at once. At each step he must take different decisions, whether to continue, change direction, stop and look at something, pick up an interesting object. And each decision taken will have some consequences: if he stops he will have to carefully consider time, otherwise he will be late; if he picks something up he will have to hide it because his mother will disapprove; if he changes direction he will have to look out for signs that can help him find his way back – and these signs will have to be noted in reverse, just as they will appear when he is going back!



IN THE TOY SHOP

Each of these operations is a complex one, rich in cognitive, spatial and affective elements. In a simple journey from his own home to the greengrocer's, the child can discover different coloured stones, dry leaves, small animals, magazine pages with strange photographs (sometimes not “suitable” for him); he can change his itinerary, taking care not to get lost, and then he will have to explain to the greengrocer what he has to buy, pay for it, accept or refuse the fig he is offered, and finally return home. How many things this child will have to tell his mother! For the child, moving around is an itinerary made up of many intermediate points, each of them more important than the destination, which merely represents the end of the discoveries and of the adventure. Just the opposite of the adult.

«‘As for me’ said the Little Prince to himself ‘if I had fifty-three minutes to spend as I liked, I should walk at my leisure toward a spring of fresh water’» (A. de Saint-Exupéry, 1943).

These different modes of travelling of the adult and the child represent a fitting metaphor for explaining two different philosophies of life, two ways of dealing not only with space, but with time, social relations, learning and play. In order to play, children must have their “fifty-three spare minutes”: that is, free time, to use as they wish. In this time they can even experience the unbearable sensation of boredom, of not knowing what to do and having to do something to shake boredom off, with a friend, with an idea, a toy, inventing something. Time during which the adult must not, will not want to exert his authority or skill or even only his protective vigilance. Time that the child can *spend*.

And then you need a spring to walk towards. It is not important to actually get to the spring, but to follow an itinerary, an exploration, a search. This is why the space children need to play must be an unlimited spaced, not bounded, not impoverished, not designed specifically for playing.

A child a few months old should not be kept in his play pen; it is better to put him on an old blanket. Inside the pen he seems happy, with all his games near at hand, but he cannot go out, he cannot take risks... He can crawl off the blanket, and go as far as disappearing round the corner from his mother's vigilant eye for a moment: his first adventure!

And then one day he will go out the door and meet another child on the

landing, and play with him on the stairs. Go down to the courtyard together, and then on to the pavement. Later he will go with other children to the park near home and then further away, crossing the street, going to the square, exploring new places, further and further away. He will observe adults, imitate their activities, spy on the often strange working habits, their quarrels, their loves. In order to play a child needs a city, because the play environment must grow together with him (Prezza et al., 2000; Chawla, 2001).

And so these children's gardens, all identical, all carefully levelled and always provided with stereotyped equipment such as swings, slippery dips, merry-go-rounds or the latest wooden play devices, can only be inadequate. They are places that will always be the same and where children will always have to be accompanied to and supervised by their parents (Ader, Jouve, 1991).

### **5. The risk of never risking anything**

One important difference between being children forty or fifty years ago, rather than nowadays, is that in the past parents were often not around. In those periods of absence of adult control, children could have their most important experiences, encounter new things, obstacles, adventures, risks. In those periods, or at least in particular during those period, the children used to grow. They tried out socialization strategies with the other children: the shameful concession to be accepted by the older ones, the strange activities demanded in order to play with children of the other sex, the strength required to win and that necessary to lose. They tried out their own skills, each time subjecting them to increasingly demanding tests under the vigilant gaze of their peers. They savoured the satisfaction of having passed the test and the frustration at having failed<sup>2</sup>.

Nowadays adults are always there. This is the big difference. If it is not a parent, it is a teacher or else the coach or the catechism teacher or the library or play centre operator. If an adult is present the child does not run any risks (the adult is there on purpose to prevent this happening) and the child cannot even explore, discover, or surprise, since the adult is also there on purpose to explain, anticipate, and

reply (Blakely, 1994). Indeed children have not even anything special and unique to recount later, since everything they did during the day was in the presence of other witnesses and supervisors. This impossibility of testing the obstacle and facing the challenge, even when children feel that it is necessary to do so, leads to the accumulation of such need, a desire for emotions and risk that will tend to be satisfied all at once and with violence when autonomy is finally attained, when the little boy or little girl has been given the keys of the house or is driving a motor scooter. And *this* could be seriously dangerous and poorly educational. Indeed, the so called "dramas of adolescence" might well be an expression of the too long ignored needs of infancy. This vanishing of the experience of risk from children's lives is present not only in the more obvious field of physical skills and concrete experiences. It may be found also in the development of cognitive, emotional and social competence.

If the child cannot explore and investigate, he is unlikely to be able to cope with new problems, or to want to tackle them and solve them by himself; he is unlikely to want to experience the emotion of finding new, unorthodox, yet effective solutions. Piaget said that knowledge that is not constructed is of no use, but if the adult is always present it is hard to avoid asking him for help and accepting his responses, his truths (Tonucci, 1996). The school is based almost exclusively on this relation between who knows, and therefore teaches, and who does not know, and thus must learn.

In the social field, for a child nowadays it is almost impossible to experience the risk and emotion of meeting new children with whom to try out the delicate strategies of approach, of getting to know each other, and sometimes of rejection. His playmates are almost exclusively his class mates, his companions at the afternoon courses or the children of his parents' friends: friendships that are controlled and controllable by adults. It will not be easy for a little boy or girl, who has never been able to select their play companions, later to choose a life's companion when they grow up.

In the field of emotions, adults often feel obliged to back up and even anticipate the desires and requests of their children. This erodes the basic relationship

between so many things and experiences that are desired and dreamed of and the few that can be realized to the children's great contentment and gratitude.

If instead autonomy is acknowledged to be important for the child's development, in order to enable him to play and enjoy necessary experiences, the adults should step back: for a certain period each day they should not be around. Speaking with the children of the Children's Council of Rosario, in Argentina, about the need and right of children to be able to go out of the house on their own, a little nine-year-old girl said: «If they always hold me by the hand, one day they will have to leave me and that day I'll be afraid». And one of her companions said: «Adults should help us, but from a distance».

## 6. Starting over from the children

Children and adults make a very similar appreciation of urban reality. Both acknowledge that the city is dangerous, there are too many automobiles, which do not respect pedestrians, the pavements are dirty, in a bad state of repair and cluttered, pedestrian crossings are unsafe, and there are a lot of nasty people about. But the conclusions they draw are by no means the same. The adults say to the children: "Since these are the conditions that prevail in the city, you should stay home, and if you have to go out I will accompany you and wait for you". On the contrary, the children say: "Since these are the conditions that prevail in the city, they must be changed".

The children are not resigned, and cannot accept the trade-off of convenience and the possession of property against personal freedom. On the other hand, already at early age, children are capable of interpreting their own needs and contributing to changing their cities (Hart, 1997). It is thus worthwhile hearing what they have to say, requesting their participation, perhaps because in their name and for their well-being it is possible to ask adult citizens to agree to changes they would be unlikely to accept and promote for themselves, even though in theory they acknowledge their importance and urgency.

Since 1991 the international project *The Children's City* promoted by the ISTC-CNR (Institute of Cognitive Sciences and Technologies at the Italian National Research Council) has proposed to the city administrations to change

the parameters they use for assessing urban policies, switching from those of an adult, male, working, motorist citizen to those of a child. Metaphorically speaking, to lower their viewpoint to the height of a child so as not to overlook anyone<sup>3</sup>. The underlying assumption is simple but also revolutionary: a city that endeavours to be suitable for children is a city in which everyone lives a better life. The child, by expressing his needs, is a good representative of all citizens, starting from the weaker ones, such as the handicapped and the elderly. For this reason, he can be used as the paradigm for a new philosophy of city governance.

The project, adopted by several mayors, involves the city administration in a transverse fashion as it is not aimed at constructing more children's structures or services, but at truly changing the city. Today more than sixty Italian cities are part of the network, plus several Spanish cities and the largest cities in Argentina. Roma joined the project in 2001, taking on the role of leader city.

The *Children's City* project follows a two pronged approach: *autonomy* and *participation* of the children are the main focuses. Children's loss of autonomy was probably the most dramatic effect of the changes that occurred in city life over the past few decades, and this change has jeopardized their opportunities for play (Hillman, 1993). Giving children back their autonomy could be a good way of recovering the city and ensuring its survival. If children can go to school on their own, go out and play with their friends in the public spaces of the city, also the elderly, the handicapped and the citizens in general will again be able to enjoy the experience of walking and meeting people in the city. Moreover, an increased autonomy will have also a specific impact on children, through its effects on their play opportunities: only if a child is able to go out of the house, meet other children and enjoy play experiences with them without being under adults' direct control, will his play have the great capacity to involve him completely and lead him on to great achievements. Only in these conditions can play be completely fruitful and the toy become primarily a play tool, rather than a commercial fetish<sup>4</sup>. At the same time as the families decided that the city no longer allowed children to go outside the home, the great problem arose of how to spend their time – and how to obtain their forgiveness for this expropriation.

As usual, the most "suitable" response to parents

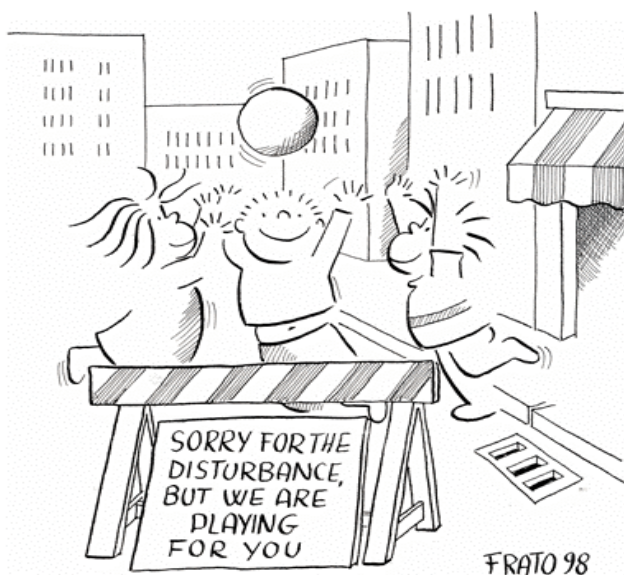


came from commercial production, which first opened shops dedicated solely to toys (fifty years ago they did not exist) and now actual toy supermarkets (Bencivenga, 1995; Kline, 1995; Sutton-Smith, 1986). But it went even further: it marketed toys, especially for the younger children, in drugstores, thus suggesting the Mephistophelian idea of “child equals sick person”.

In the *Children’s City* project, children’s participation must be deliberately sought after and desired as a correct application of article 12 of the UN Convention on children’s rights, which states that children have the right to express their opinion whenever decisions concerning them are taken, and that their views must be taken into due account. As the city administration is *always* taking decisions concerning also children, it is necessary to find suitable ways and means of hearing their views (Tonucci, Rissotto, 2001). It exists a long tradition, over 30 years old, originated in France, in which, to make children understand the functioning of the City Counsel, a sort of role-playing game is proposed. In those simulations, children form political parties, run for elections, nominate a major and a Counsel that work as their adult counterparts. Quite obviously, these proposals are exclusively educational, without any impact on the actual governance of the city. In contrast, the proposal

advanced by the *Children’s City* project is intrinsically political and avoids any hypocrisy and paternalism, such as those typical of the ‘small majors’ and ‘little administrators’ scenarios. On the contrary, here we have a group of children which gives well-thought suggestions and advice to the *real* major, who often listen to them and modify the city policies accordingly. To better appreciate the significance of this experience, it is useful to quote what the Mayor of Rome, Walter Veltroni, said addressing the children at the inauguration of the first Children’s Council of the city<sup>5</sup>: «I wanted this Council because I need your advice, your help. It can happen that grown-ups forget what it is like to be children. That they forget the things that are important and necessary for living this time of their lives and do not remember the dreams, desires and hopes they had when they had their whole life before them. Starting from today let us begin to work together on changing the city». From that moment on, the children began working to advise the mayor, to suggest ideas to him, to protest against what they did not approve. From that day on they began participating in the city’s governance. From that day on adults are often in trouble and cannot find suitable responses to the children’s requests, which are always justified and precise.

Other proposals exist for enhancing the participation and influence of minors in public decision making. For instance, it has long been debated the idea of the ‘universal vote’, i.e. extending the right of voting to all citizens since their birth. The vote of minors, according to these proposals, would be exercised by the adults in charge of them, e.g. parents, legal tutors, or exclusively by their mothers, as suggested by Philippe van Parijs (among others), to help re-equilibrating women participation to public life. This debate, born out of the speculation of few philosophers and political scientists, is become in recent years the subject of parliamentary motions, for instance in Germany<sup>6</sup>. Although I consider similar proposals quite interesting, in order to revive with new elements an exhausted political debate (Tonucci, 1996), I do not believe they answer adequately the right to children participation granted by the article 12 of the UN Convention, since here there would still be an adult in charge of taking decisions in their name and place. In contrast, the Children’s Council, if properly conducted, might serve to directly gather the minors’ opinions, without adult interference or guidance.



CHILDREN IN THE STREET



Now it remains to be discussed whether it is truly necessary to consult with children on the problems and drawbacks of our urban life, if such shortcomings are equally clear to all adult experts asked to work on them from several standpoints, both psycho-pedagogical, sociological, and in terms of urban planning. On the basis of the experience in the last 15 years, I believe it is possible to answer in the affirmative to this question, for at least three different reasons. First, children are capable of focusing on problems that adults are likely to disregard or minimize, such as the lack of time and places for playing, the paradox of adults' over-protection, the barriers against autonomous mobility for non-driving citizens, etc.; by listening to the children in urban decision making, such issues can achieve the degree of urgency they deserve. Second, political administrators can effectively use children's demands as a democratic leverage to induce adult citizens to consider and support policies with high short-term costs (compensated by long-term benefits), on the ground that "It is your children that are asking for those changes!". Third, real participation to city governance is the most direct and effective form of education to democracy for our children.

## 7. Experiences

Let us now examine few aspects of children's autonomy and their need to play viewed from their standpoint, through the proposals and requests that the children themselves have presented during several experiences of children's participation in the governance of the city.

***"We want this city to give us the permission to go outside the home".***

The prerequisite for children's play is that the children are able to go out of the home without being accompanied by their parents. The Rome Children's Council dedicated a whole year's work to this problem and in the final meeting held in June 2002 (in which, as it is customary, the Children's Council participated together with the Town Council, the Mayor and the other councillors), Federico, an 11 year old council member, summed up the work carried out in the following request: «*We want this city to give us the permission to go outside the home*».

This is a surprising request as a child can ask this permission only from his parents, who are the only ones that can grant or refuse it. But Federico knew that his parents refused him permission on the grounds that "the city would not allow it", so he went to the mayor and asked him permission to go outside the home. Ever since then Federico's request has become a working programme for the city of Rome, which is trying to find a way of increasing children's autonomy in such a large and complex city. The problem is important as it is related to one of most sensitive issues in current and future political debate, that of urban security.

The most common proposal for solving the problem of urban security is to increase the defences: more individual defences, from armoured doors to personal weapons; increased social defences, from the police to closed-circuit TV cameras in the streets. But these solutions have always proved ineffective and it is a fact that the United States, a country where investments in defence are far greater than elsewhere, continues to be a highly insecure country<sup>7</sup>. This conviction was shared by the inhabitants of several municipalities of Greater Buenos Aires, the great urban belt with a population of 8,000,000 surrounding the city of Buenos Aires. Tired of the continual violence and robberies to which their children were exposed, they decided not to demand a stronger police presence but rather *greater participation* by the inhabitants of the city quarters in order to safeguard the children on their home-school itineraries, in accordance with the indications of our *Children's City* project<sup>8</sup>. They obtained the involvement of tradesmen, senior citizens and ordinary people for the purpose of re-establishing a social surveillance over the children's itineraries. The promoters of the initiative have testified that criminal offences against children have since decreased by 90%. The proposal spread to numerous other municipalities and is taking hold also in the Federal Capital. This initiative repeated in Argentina is the same that is being proposed in many Italian cities: denoted as *Let's go to school on our own*, it involves allowing elementary school children aged six to eleven to go to school with their friends without being accompanied by adults.

These experiences arise out of the deep conviction that the presence of children in the street make the street safer. Children going to school, playing with their friends, reconstruct around them that concern

and solidarity of adult neighbours which has only apparently vanished from our cities. It is obvious that if everyone accompanies their own child, if the senior citizens and handicapped persons are locked up at home, everything is reduced to the private dimension and no one is obliged any more to care for the others. But if the children reappear, a new neighbourhood is set up which produces protection and security. The children are safe and the people are deeply committed and content. "It's great to see children going off to school on their own again", reported to me numerous inhabitants of the districts involved in the *Let's go to school on our own* experience (Baraldi, Maggioni, 2000; Risotto, Tonucci, 2001). While security and thus the possibility of going out is a prerequisite for children's play, two other necessary conditions no longer exist and thus the children demand them: *leisure time* and *public space*.

***Leisure time for play.*** With the children of Florencio Varela, in Argentina, we discussed whether the two articles of the 1989 Convention on children's rights – art. 28 stating the right to education and art. 31 stating the right to play – had the same weight in their everyday lives. It would be expected that, as they are two articles of the same law, they would have the same status, the same respect, the same consideration. Of course, the children claimed that this was not the case, that play is not considered important by adults and that they often do not have enough time to play, while it never happens that they lack the time to go to school or do their homework. Indeed, they claim to perceive the right to go to school mainly as a duty and the right to play as something that adults consider to be a waste of time. We therefore imagined that also the right to play should be considered a duty and proposed setting down the number of hours a child ought to play every day in order to satisfy this obligation. They were much amused by the idea that they could go to school one hour later or not go at all, if they had to make up for the hours they could not devote to play the previous afternoon because they had been busy doing their homework, or had to go with their parents to the supermarket. Framed in this way, the problem actually looks like a paradox: but if the initial premises concerning the importance of play are true, the proposal ought to be taken much more seriously. Play should be considered as a dutiful investment for society, not only for the future, as it is usually the

case, but for the present too: children playing in the city produce changes and improvement starting today, immediately<sup>9</sup>.

The children of the Rome Children's Council, having followed the same steps as their Argentine colleagues, involved their school friends in an investigation of the play-related problems encountered by children. The most serious problem was lack of time and the most frequently mentioned proposal for increasing play time was to reduce homework. The Children's Council therefore wrote an open letter to all the elementary schools in Rome asking their teachers not to give homework at weekends and during the holidays. The children stated their willingness, in these periods, to carry out several activities, but only the ones they want and without any supervision. The children are not pedagogists, so they do not express any opinion on the validity of homework or whether it is right or not to set it. They merely consider that the school should no longer take up all their time and ask that a (limited) part of this time should be given back to them so that they can play. However, Silvia, a 10 year old council member, expressed a personal opinion: «Homework and other exercises do not develop the imagination, while play does».

The request of the Rome children was given wide publicity in the media at both local and national level. Many experts expressed agreement with it and many schools are evaluating the pros and cons of conducting experiments based on their proposal.

***A public space to play in.*** The last necessary condition for being able to play, once it is possible to go out without supervision and there is enough leisure time to do so, is to have somewhere to go. We have already seen that children's game parks are not suitable places for such an important activity as play. In order to play, children need a space that can grow together with their capacity, their autonomy and their skills. A space that can accompany them during their development, which can offer them new experiences, new discoveries, new treasures. In order to grow up and to play, the children need the city – no more, no less.

In this regard the children of the Rome Children's Council made a disconcerting discovery: art. 6 of the Town Police Regulations reads as follows: «All play on public property is prohibited». In the belief that this article clashed with article 31 of the Convention

of Children's Rights which since 1991 is incorporated into Italian national legislation, they wrote to the mayor asking for the article to be amended. The mayor replied to the children acknowledging that their grounds for protest were just and promising to change article 6 of the Regulations. After this victory, the children on the Council took another step forward and wrote a letter to the administrative boards of housing properties in the whole city, inviting members to revise the regulations that often restrict or prohibit children's play in the vicinity of the buildings. The mayor declared his support also for this second request by the children and will possibly accompany it with his personal invitation addressed to the citizens of Rome. The protest of the Rome children could therefore have important consequences: it could mean the removal from public places in the city of signs banning play, open up a city-wide debate on children's right to play in the common spaces shared among different houses and blocks of flats. Hopefully, it will spread to other cities, since nearly all of them have local police regulations containing articles similar to the article 6 of Rome.

## 8. Conclusions

It is as though the city had forgotten its children, while it has done a lot for adults, and an awful lot for automobiles. It would seem to have done much also for children in the form of childhood services, but in fact day-care centres, infants schools, play parks and play centres are all spaces designed more for parents who do not know where to leave their children, rather than to satisfy the children's real needs. Indeed, in this city children cannot engage in their most important activity, in their real work, in the experience that more than any other will determine their future: playing.

A city cannot accept to be responsible for this severe deficiency. It cannot deny its citizens the possibility of exercising their rights, defined and enshrined in the laws of the land – and the right to play is guaranteed by article 31 of the International Convention of Children's Rights.

A city can allow its younger citizens to play only if it can restore its public spaces to their original function. Streets, pavements, squares and gardens must go back to being places of meeting and intercourse.

If the city is to succeed in doing this, so must its citizens, restoring to public use the stairs, halls and courtyards. In those spaces the children can go back to playing, to meeting with adults and in particular with the senior

citizens, who will again be able to go out of the home.

On Vesuvius, the Naples' volcano, once I was showed a moss that is able to colonize lava, the hard stone that covers the slopes after an eruption. This little plant is able to penetrate the lava and break it up, slowly transforming it into fertile soil where the grapevines that produce the famous Vesuvian wines can grow. Children may be likened to mosses covering our cities: by their presence and their games, by invading the public spaces, they are capable of modifying the short-sighted behaviour of us adults, forcing us to drive more carefully, to be more aware of what goes on around us, to show more respect for the environment in which we live and where our children and grandchildren will live.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>In this critical analysis we should never forget what significant improvements in life conditions (of citizens in general, and of children in particular) characterize contemporary societies, in comparison with previous social and economic systems. However, it is exactly in the light of such progress that we cannot passively accept the violation of primary rights described in this essay, which is mainly subordinated to selfish and economic interests.

<sup>2</sup>The importance of risk as a fundamental component of play experience has been stressed also in psychology (Bruner, 1976; Sutton-Smith, 1997), ethology (Spinka et al., 2001), and philosophy (Bencivenga, 1988).

<sup>3</sup>For a better understanding of the reasons, proposals and experiences related to the project, see Tonucci (1996; 2002) and the web site [www.lacittadeibambini.org](http://www.lacittadeibambini.org)

<sup>4</sup>See the remarks made in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century by John Locke concerning the advisability for children to build their own toys by themselves (*Some thoughts concerning education*, § 130). The same passage is also quoted by Paglieri, this issue.

<sup>5</sup>In Rome a Children's Council has been set up consisting of a little boy and a little girl, one from fourth grade and one from fifth grade elementary school (9-10 years), from one school in each of the 19 Municipalities. The council members are selected by drawing out of a hat and remain in office for two years. The Council meets once a month during school hours, for a whole morning. Twice a year, the Children's Council meet the mayor and the Municipal Council.

<sup>6</sup>A number of different scholars came up with similar suggestions in this respect, apparently in absolute autonomy one from each other. Among them, the Norwegian sociologist Stein Ringen, the American

political scientist Paul Peterson, the economist Alexei Bayer, the Italian economist Luigi Campiglio, and, some years before, Manuel Carballo at Harvard University. Several of those proposals are quoted in van Parijjs (1995), and most of them converge in the idea of a literal ‘universal suffrage’, such as to guarantee one extra vote for each minor.

<sup>7</sup> The terrible attack of September 11 made approximately 3,000 victims: in the same year, in the United States, 30,000 persons died in incidents caused by firearms (source: Mann, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> *Clarín*, the Argentine daily newspaper with the largest circulation, devoted several articles to this initiative. On 16 July 2003, in an article under the title “La gente se une para cuidar a los chicos camino al colegio” (People join together to protect children going to school) refers explicitly to the project *The Children’s City*, and estimates that a 90% reduction occurred in criminal acts after the entire neighborhood, tradesmen and elderly inhabitants mobilized to guarantee the safety of the children going to school in the Municipalities of Burzaco, Adrogué, Rafael Calzada, Martínez y Villa Adelina.

<sup>9</sup> Another relevant experience in granting children leisure time to play is the project *More play for everyone*, which led to the celebration of a “Play Day” in Rosario over the past 5 years involving both children and adults (Tonucci, 2002; Tonucci, Rissotto, 2001). The same project is currently under discussion by the Town Council of Rome.

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