
*'A country's identity consists in a significant part of its built up environment,
and the city is always pregnant with its future'*
Mie Svennberg, Architecture consultant, Gothenburg

There are historic reasons to the strong position of children in the Swedish society.

By the end of 19th century, Sweden was a mainly rural, weakly populated country; though with a long tradition of literacy, and a fairly high degree of social mobility. Poverty, even famine, in rural areas caused mass emigration and a demographic crisis. The first decades of 20th century brought about a rapid urbanization. Visions of a welfare state arose and gained a massive political momentum. Aesthetics and planning ideals of modernism, new pedagogical ideas etc, were largely adopted. Almost 200 years of peace have helped them to materialize. In the field of planning, both highlights and mistakes can be found on the path of this dramatic transformation into modernity.

Does the Swedish experience, to any degree, apply to a much older urban culture?

Are there general qualities, making an urban environment good for children (and, therefore, for anybody else)? Our own work, in both Swedish and Mediterranean city cores, tells us so. These qualities are often - not always - inherent in spatial structures of historic city cores. Still, trying to find, or reproduce, them on a visible "design" level is one of most common mistakes of our profession. We'd rather discuss them in terms of **appropriation**.

Children possess unique knowledge of the environment they live in. Adults often underestimate the meaning of apparently banal places and the importance of appropriating a territory. A good urban space must allow a social interpretation. Only a safely appropriated space can give a mental basis to face the world. What makes urban spaces possible to understand and take into possession? Stimulating to discover, share with others, influence, be proud of?

Children's spaces - architect's approach

Examples from different cultures and our own projects. "Multi-step" vs "one-step" privacy- and scale sequences. Consistency, accessibility, readable spatial orders. Materiality, sustainability, history.

Institutional strategies

Examples from Sweden. Council of Children's Environment, Children's Representative ("ombudsman"), Commission on Metropolitan Areas. Municipal programs. Designing political and planning processes to focus on children's needs. "Children's checklist" (Gothenburg). "Children's consequence analysis" (Södertälje).

Professional tools. Participation, inclusion and community outreach

Examples from Sweden. "Architecture consultant" (Gothenburg). "Children's Maps in GIS" - a mapping method for planning with children and youth. Miniguides - a one-day school program. "Mejeriet", Lund: a successful grassroots struggle for an autonomous youth culture centre. Construction playgrounds ("bygglekplats") - an "activist" approach?

We might feel pessimistic about our insufficient tools or means. But we should keep in mind the importance of a simple act of affirmation in itself. It will be an affirmation of the right to childhood. An interviewer asking questions about a child's environment will make the child to start asking itself. A new playground - of any quality - will be enjoyed for a while, and then, abandoned, inspire further explorations. The very investment in a place for disabled children will make their status to rise - no matter if it's the "Kulturcentrum Skåne" in Lund, or the "Lekotek" in Amman.

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References (a selection)

Gothenburg projects: <http://www.tryggaremanskligare.goteborg.se> (English version on a link)

Architecture consultant:

<http://www5.goteborg.se/prod/kultur/kulturforvaltningen/dalis2.nsf/vyPublicerade/06680DE00BAD915EC12571F400254A16?OpenDocument> (pdf download, English and Swedish version)

Children's maps in GIS: <http://www.sol.slu.se/publications/series.asp?nr=17#17> (English abstract)

Movium (Centre for the Urban Public Space) <http://www.movium.slu.se/english/main.cfm> (English introduction)

Flygelskolan (a montessori primary school) http://www.lund.se/default_43183.aspx (Swedish)

Mejeriet (a self-governed youth music- and culture centre) <http://www.kulturmejeriet.se> (Swedish)

Kulturcentrum Skåne (post-secondary theatre- and arts school for mentally disabled youth) www.kulturcentrunskane.com