CHAPTER 3

Nordic child friendly urban planning reconsidered

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Introduction

In the Nordic countries children have high levels of independent mobility due to the merits of earlier planning regimes. Children's needs for outdoor places have been safeguarded by regulation, but today each community decides its own policies on the quality of their outdoor environments. What will the consequences be for children when the communities where they live choose differently? In this chapter, the strategies for child friendly urban planning in two Swedish cities will be described and discussed. We want to highlight the adoption of an inclusive strategy in which children's perspectives inspire urban planning. The history of child friendly planning and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child provide a backdrop to this discussion.

The publication of *Growing up in an Urbanising World* by Louise Chawla (2002) made us aware of the fact that most children will grow up in urban environments, and this includes the Nordic countries. Like many regions in the world, the Nordic countries are changing in fundamental ways in response to increased urbanization. Sweden is a sparsely populated country and the population continues to diminish in the countryside as people move into the big cities. The region where the capital Stockholm, with 890,000 inhabitants, is situated gains 35,000 people every year. Malmö, Sweden's third-largest city, with 350,000 inhabitants, is also growing but more slowly. In this chapter we will share our reflections on the relationship between city development and children from a Nordic perspective, by describing planning related to children in these two cities. In Malmö we find planning initiatives inclusive of and sometimes even inspired by children, while in Stockholm, children's perspectives more easily get turned into an obstacle and a problematic issue. When looking at the planning history of Stockholm, however, we see that once it was as child friendly as Malmö is today.

Researchers on children's environments have been asking if there is a place for children in the city when observing the strong densification taking place in many cities (Churchman 2003). The committee evaluating the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child acknowledges the general threat of urbanization to children's welfare, particularly in their ability to access spontaneous forms of play and to interact with their surroundings. UNICEF points to the concept of sustainable development as a means to 'boost' child health and children's rights (UNICEF 2013). Taking children's perspectives seriously implies involving children in planning processes and using insights and knowledge accumulated in the field of children's environments studies. Children need to be included in the establishment of sustainable planning regimes as they are directly dependent on the quality of their physical

surroundings for their development and well-being (Schultz et al. 2015). We also know that positive place experiences together with persons important to us during childhood have consequences for environmental concern and engagement in environmental issues later in life (Chawla 1998). Working with children in urban planning is one way for adults and children to share their experiences of place and contribute to society's long-term commitment to sustainable development.

The imperative of environmental experiences

The experiences of childhood have a strong influence on our later lives. From the beginning of life, we carry with us not only memories, but also fundamental ways of relating to and understanding the world around us. By attentively making use of and exploring our surroundings we develop ways to use the physical environment for both nourishment and the formation of identity. For our argument we lean on literature in developmental and environmental psychology relating children's environments to the wider issue of sustainable development. Children do have a powerful drive to be included in the life of their communities. Kaj Noschis (2008) describes the need for children to establish their own relationship to the city in order to one day want to play a role as active citizens. He describes how the "physical environment is precisely an occasion to observe, witness and take part in what is happening. And subsequently to reinforce or change it" (ibid., p. 5). Children who get good opportunities to become involved in city life will develop a relationship to their surroundings, which will increase their interest and concern for their community at large.

Noschis describes the city "as a very stimulating environment *for children in particular* because so many things are going on and happen, which children can learn from and build their identity on" (ibid., p. 3, his italics). For a child to establish a relationship to a large-scale urban environment is not an easy thing, however. This was shown in studies comparing the conceptions of the physical environment in children living in different kinds of communities: in small towns in the countryside and in big cities (Nordström 2010). Children living in small communities referred to specific experiences they had in that environment and to people living there, while children in urban settings referred to the surrounding environment in abstract terms. Sometimes the urban children referred to places of their imagination only, like the moon. They did not mention any people. The immediate everyday environment did not seem to carry any special meaning to them. The stories of the children in small communities, on the other hand, clearly manifested feelings of belonging. One way to interpret these differences is that children in small communities more easily relate to their physical and social surroundings and therefore have a richer environmental experience and understanding. Cele's (2013) study of adolescents' use of public places in cities illustrated how the capacity to relate to a larger social and spatial context increases with age. This finding highlights what a challenge it is to make urban areas accessible to all children's environmental needs and the relevance of specifying such ambitions in relation to their age, maturity and competence.

Noschis (2008) stresses the importance of "more frequent encounters between adults and children, as they have important consequences for the priorities when decisions are made as to town planning" (ibid., p.15). Children are important allies in the shaping of a sustainable urban future provided they get access to an environment in which they can develop their competence and commitment. Children's perspectives

on the environment do contain some universal characteristics due to their preferences for what is sensuous and what affords activity, but their perspectives also depend on the specific circumstances of their local community.

Children's place in society and in the city park

An early manifestation of acknowledging a child's perspective in Swedish urban planning was evident in the 1890s when it was decided that a play area should be located at the center of a new urban park, the Vasaparken in central Stockholm (Nolin 1999) (see Figure 3.1). Until then, play areas had been located at the outskirts of parks, away from the adult eye and adult activities. The Vasaparken is a symbol of a radically new attitude to children's role in the public domain, acknowledging children as urban dwellers and respecting their need to play.

Later on, in the 1950s, Sweden saw an impressive development of creative and diverse play areas like adventure playgrounds and 'splash ponds' in our cities, initiated by influential officials working for parks and by professionals in the field of children's education. A few of these early playgrounds in the central parts of Swedish cities remain, and in Stockholm even a number of staffed playgrounds continue to operate.

Child friendly cities before the concept emerged

Generally, children in the Nordic countries still benefit from the child friendly urban planning that prevailed for several decades during the last century, but to a varying degree depending on the extent of population growth. Most children in Sweden live in communities with an average of 30,000 inhabitants. Here many families with children live in spacious housing developments. The majority live in row houses or single-family houses, surrounded by a well-distributed network of greenery, with separate lanes for bikes and pedestrians and with playgrounds and sport facilities adapted for children of different ages, dispersed throughout the environment (see Figures 3.2–3.5).

Figure 3.1 A map of Vasaparken in Stockholm from 1897. This park was one of the first parks in Sweden to have centrally located playgrounds. The big open space in the middle of the map says "Open space for free play" and the small space to the left says "Play area for young children" (Source: Stockholm Council)

Figures 3.2–3.5 Staffanstorp. A typical neighborhood from an earlier planning regime with greenways that can be quite plain, but affording children high independent mobility by securing safe routes for transport and easy access to playgrounds and sports facilities (Source: Fredrika Mårtensson)

Recently we investigated children's independent mobility in one such community: Staffanstorp, in the south of Sweden. As many as 78 percent of the 10-year-olds traveled on their own to school by foot or bike and the average levels of daily physical activity were outstanding in comparison with international experience (Johansson et al. 2011). The children's activity diaries showed that many of them enjoy considerable independence traveling on their own to leisure activities or to carry out minor errands, and playing and hanging around with friends in the neighborhood after school. This confirms what we so far have assumed: that children's independent mobility still thrives in smaller communities, even if it has diminished significantly since the 1970s, when it was common that even toddlers were out on their own in housing areas.

The tradition of benefiting from nature

The many benefits of nature for children's play and learning have been a salient theme in Nordic research. In a review of research, Pia Björklid (2005) showed how the indoor environment was framed as problematic due to noise, lack of good lighting, bad indoor climate and other detrimental conditions, while the outdoor environment was usually framed as an environment with expected benefits for children's overall health and development in terms of being spacious places where children can play.

The benefits of nature in housing areas have been the subject of several studies over the decades. These studies have been conducted primarily in large developments

from the 1940s to the 1970s. In her dissertation, Pia Björklid (1982) showed that playgrounds were important places for children meeting and forming a community with peers. She also showed that children found their best play opportunities in the natural environment of areas surrounding the playgrounds. A few years later, in a report on the outdoor life of children and elderly people, Ulla Berglund and Ulla Jergeby (1989) showed how outdoor play sessions were a recurring activity in young children's everyday life. Safe and green outdoor environments filled a multitude of functions in the lives of families as places where children would play, recreate and meet other children and their parents. Studies have continued to demonstrate the benefits of green surroundings to children (Heurlin-Norinder 2005; Jansson 2010; Sandberg 2012).

A strong tradition in child friendly planning

Since the 1980s, Sweden has developed into a more liberal society with less planning regulation than before. Design and planning solutions were quite similar across the country from the 1940s to the mid-1980s, drawing on norms which had developed into a well-established practice of securing children's spaces. Today each municipality decides on its own what building policies to practice and what public spaces to dedicate for children's use, as well as what outdoor facilities to commit for schools and residential land use.

Stockholm once played a leading role in the promotion of good outdoor environments for children. During the present intense economic development in Stockholm, since the early 2000s, there has been and continues to be a strong interest in building and in reserving more land for building, at the expense of children's outdoor environments. The argument is that it is too costly to reserve as much ground for play spaces for children today as had been the custom.

From the 1940s until the early 2000s, Stockholm's children were lucky to grow up in a city with an abundance of open space and extensive green surroundings. There was a group of architects, town planners, politicians and researchers committed to giving children easy access to nature in well-designed residential environments with outdoor playgrounds and play spaces close to their homes, and an overall planning approach which afforded walkable distances to schools. Protecting children from being exposed to the increasing car traffic was also an important issue. Stockholm's child friendly planning influenced the planning standards for the whole country at the time. In landscape architecture it was called 'the Stockholm style', which meant carefully tended nature areas. In addition to well-designed housing areas, children were offered something called 'parkplays', which consist of play spaces with trained staff to take care of the children for a couple of hours, free of charge, every day and to provide children with toys, and even a snack. During this period Stockholm experienced a large number of people moving in from the countryside and the carefully planned and landscaped outdoor spaces served as a means to integrate the many newcomers into the city.

Breaking the tradition of child friendly planning: the case of Hammarby Sjöstad

Since the deregulation of the planning process in the 1980s, planning and building in Stockholm today happens in different ways on different projects. New approaches to city planning and development reflect the influence of a political majority with

strong liberal ideas and commercial interests, as in the case of planning the Hammarby Sjöstad development.

Hammarby Sjöstad is a large residential development designed for 20,000 residents, attractively situated near the center of Stockholm, close to city-district offices. Its construction started in 1998 and will be completed in 2017. As well as meeting an increasing demand for housing, the planners wanted the development to be an international showcase for Swedish competence in environmental technology and 'green' building (Becker 2015). Originally, it was predicted that the development would attract a population of mostly well-off, retired people. However, when the apartment construction was completed, it was apparent that many families were moving in. Families with children will always seek out new housing areas because of their need for more indoor space, and they will also expect outdoor facilities for their children.

Figure 3.6
"Revolt!" Landscape architects in Stockholm making an appeal against bad outdoor environments for children and against the lack of rules to secure children outdoor spaces (Article and photo by Annika Jensfelt, Arkitekten/the Architect, August 2015)

The lack of outdoor space for children in the Hammarby Sjöstad area has caused much criticism from families and given rise to problems for children (Karlsdottir 2012). Efforts have been made to improve the situation by building daycare centers and schools in facilities not originally designed for education. For example, playgrounds have been constructed on rooftops and small areas have been carved out of the limited space available to create tiny play spaces. These ad hoc responses have resulted in crowding in the few and small outdoor places which exist. Parents have reacted by taking their children to play areas outside of the Hammarby Sjöstad area into neighboring housing areas, or by moving away.

The failure of the prestigious Hammarby Sjöstad development to attract and retain families might be one reason why the Stockholm city planning authority has publicly admitted that child friendly planning is important, but when it comes to what constitutes child friendly planning and what will be the implications for each project, it still sees it as a matter of negotiation on a case by case basis. In a few projects, the possibility of requiring child impact assessments (CIAs) has been explored and sometimes successfully realized (see Nordström in this volume).

Public space planning in Malmö inspired by children

The glorious past of children's outdoor spaces in Stockholm, mentioned earlier, was the result not only of bright ideas, but of the determination of many knowledgeable and influential people with a clear political vision inclusive of children. In more recent decades, the city of Malmö has developed an inclusive planning approach, showing an interest in making the urban environment accessible and of good quality for children.

Malmö is a city in the south of Sweden surrounded by farmland, and the city with the least green open space per capita in the country. It was once a gloomy industrial outpost that since the start of the 1990s has been transformed into a vibrant city. Historically it has been known as the 'City of Parks', owing to the early establishment of large public parks such as the Pildammsparken, the site of the Baltic exhibition of 1914. The parks of Malmö are well used by children and their families. Families travel across the city to visit playgrounds. At 'outdoor preschools' children spend the whole day, all year round, outdoors in a park. In one park, Slottsparken, there is a gardener who invites school classes to care for garden lots 'of their own'. Malmö Nature School offers all schools in the community guided tours and advice on how wildlife habitats can support children's play and learning. Since 2010 more than 30 schools have been remodeled as part of a project on schoolyard greening (see Figure 3.7). Numerous research projects on the nature and benefit of green outdoor settings for children have been completed over the years (Grahn et al. 1997; Jansson & Mårtensson 2012; Mårtensson et al. 2009).

One explanation for the successful transformation of Malmö is the active role that planning and architecture have played. Important is a set of major investments: the Øresund bridge connecting Malmö to Copenhagen; the establishment of a university; and a new 'ecological' housing area by the sea (Bo-01, Västra Hamnen). Integrated with all this building, the public open spaces have been upgraded to better meet the expectations and ambitions of the community at large. It is not only the cityscape and the infrastructure that have undergone a transformation; even more importantly, the planning culture has changed.

Figure 3.7 Asphalt has been replaced by meadow at this school as part of a project of schoolyard greening (Source: Märit Jansson)

The joint visionary work of politicians, city landscape architects and planners has turned physical planning for children and young people into a driving force for local development. Ten years ago the city was one of the first to develop a long-term strategic program for playground development. In the collaboration between a former city gardener, Gunnar Ericson, and a young local resident passionate about skating, grand plans for a large skate park materialized. Over the years, the ways of collaborating with residents have been professionalized and new strategies developed for integrating social planning with physical planning and for communicating with the community.

Today the city is internationally recognized for its work on combining advanced social and ecological sustainability in building design and construction, alternative energy, and infrastructure systems. In 2010 the city set up a local commission to work strategically on social determinants of health and well-being. In a country where children's general overall health is ranked sixth in the world, according to UNICEF, the city of Malmö stands out as atypical. Many of its children are poor, overweight and showing low academic performance, with a third of the population being born in other countries. An initiative inspired by the work of the World Health Organization, led by Michael Marmot, resulted in the report *Closing the Gap in a Generation* (2008). An extensive body of writing and many workshops have been carried out by professionals in the community and experts from universities, to analyze the local situation and to make suggestions for the future. One report on children's health includes a chapter on children's independent mobility (Commission for a Socially Sustainable Malmö 2012b) and another is a special report on planning titled *The City's Spatial Impact on Health* (Commission for a Socially Sustainable Malmö 2012a).

There are now a number of planning projects in progress across the city, in which the municipality is searching for opportunities to use physical planning to help reduce segregation by supporting empowerment and social cohesion. In one disadvantaged

Figure 3.8 The 'Mat of the Red Rose' is designed to facilitate girls' active use of outdoor spaces and help link the suburb to the rest of the city (Source: Mariana Simici)

district, Rosengård, the plan is to improve pedestrian and cycling infrastructure to create favorable patterns of movement, increased solidarity and expanded social spheres. It presents a vision of a livable and dense city with a good mix of functions and with rich, well-connected, green infrastructure. The perspective of urban green space supporting active living and promoting health is well established in Malmö. Instead of thinking 'house in a park', a motto of Modernist city planning, one now argues for 'neighborhood in a park' and for making infill developments, changing larger roads into smaller-scale streets but keeping 'greenways' with lanes for bikes and pedestrians (Commission for a Socially Sustainable Malmö 2012b).

One of the projects to link the suburb with the city center, just a couple of kilometers away, is the creation of a new type of activity area for children and youth. The aim was to challenge the gendered character of outdoor spaces and especially challenge the dominance of boys using sports facilities. During the summer holiday, girls aged 13–19 years from the migrant population were invited to learn about planning in the municipality and to investigate the potential use of a place as an activity area that would be attractive for girls. The result was a centrally located place at a parking lot by a shopping center, called the 'Mat of the Red Rose' (Rosens röda matta), which consists of a stage with seating and music accessible from one's cell phone through a Wi-Fi system equipped with loudspeakers (see Figure 3.8).

Merits of earlier planning approaches with ongoing value

Nordic children's relatively active lifestyle and related well-being can be ascribed to the child friendly urban planning of an earlier planning regime. With a subsequent general deregulation of planning the quality of outdoor spaces has become a matter for each community and its governance bodies to decide. In this chapter, using examples from two Swedish cities, we wanted to show how children's perspectives on the physical

environment can be an inspiration to planning, particularly when it is also sensitive to cultural heritage and expertise.

Children's healthy and happy development requires not only play facilities but possibilities for them to explore the surroundings at large, step by step, on their own terms. The UNCRC can help us take children as urban dwellers seriously and acknowledge the responsibility of planning to safeguard children's free mobility and opportunities for independent action in everyday life.

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