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What Makes a Good City in Pre-schoolers' Eyes? Findings from Participatory Planning Projects in Australia and New Zealand

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ABSTRACT *Pre-schooler's voices are absent in urban planning and design. With the possible exception of playgrounds, there is limited knowledge about their experiences in and expectations for urban environments. This paper discusses pre-schoolers' aspirations and desires for aesthetic and accessible green spaces as well as social and physical connectedness. Although this age range has so far been limited in its ability to inform policy and decision-makers, it is argued that pre-schoolers have the capacity and capability of making valuable contributions to design. In the eyes of pre-schoolers, creating a good city means to live in a safe place full of diverse destinations in which they can become streetwise and socialize as part of society.*

Introduction

Urban environments are the home of an increasing number of children (Hörschelmann and Van Blerk 2012), but the majority of urban environments do not meet the standards for a child-friendly city, as outlined by Riggio (2002). For example, safe places in which to play and to explore the city, equal access to services and growing up in a healthy, sustainable environment. Contemporary urban dwellers have to cope with increasing traffic volumes, declining play and natural spaces, and the erosion of traditional (family) ties. There have been a number of studies reporting on primary school-aged children's or teenagers' experiences of learning, playing, working and living in these complex urban environments (Freeman and Tranter 2011; Chawla 2001). However, the voices of pre-schoolers are only a whisper in this context (for exceptions, see Lansdown 2001; Chawla and Rivkin 2014). A common finding in childhood studies is that children of all ages inhabit and transform urban spaces in "opposition to and in spite of urban policies" and planning processes (Hörschelmann and Van Blerk 2012, 157).

Young people craft their participation in urban environments and decision-making processes within the liminal spaces between the "public/private" and "formal/informal" politics of citizenship (Wood 2012). This is despite the fact that the rhetoric of children's formal participation on all issues affecting their lives has

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increased in the past 20 years. Policy-makers and planners are obliged through the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) to consult with children and seek their opinions and insights, and to view children as social actors in their own right. Though children have the right to a voice, their participation is often tokenistic and limited to older children and teenagers as well as being subject to adult control, censure and regulation (Hart 1997; Arnstein 1969). Thus, urban design or planning projects might be at best designed with children in mind, but children of all ages still have hardly any direct input (Freeman and Tranter 2011; Knowles-Yánez 2005).

This paper explores pre-schoolers' experiences in and desires for urban environments. It draws on two research projects committed to a right-based approach and informed by the sociology of childhood framework. The studies were undertaken in Dunedin, New Zealand, and Melbourne, Australia. The central aim of this paper is to draw attention to the insightful and valuable contributions pre-schoolers can make to urban design and policy discussions. Rather than viewing them as future citizens or citizens-in-the-making, the approach here builds on an understanding that focuses on children of all ages' right to be taken seriously as current citizens (MacNaughton and Smith 2008). It is contended that consulting with pre-schoolers enriches discussions on improving urban environments and making city life enjoyable and meaningful for all ages. In doing so, the authors wish to challenge widespread beliefs that children between three and five years old lack the capabilities and capacities to make valuable contributions to city planning and policy development.

This paper begins with a review of pre-schoolers' ability to provide meaningful and valuable insights when consulted on small-scale design and large-scale environments. This is followed by a discussion on children's rights to participate in research projects and decision-making processes. After the research methodology is outlined, three reoccurring themes in the findings are discussed, namely pre-schoolers' desire for safety, connectedness and nature. The paper concludes by reflecting on the attempt to view urban environments through the eyes of pre-schoolers and the therein resulting planning and policy implications.

Creating Better Cities with or Against Children?

Creating better environments for and with children should improve the quality of life of all citizens. Children have a unique view of the world in which they live. From this perspective, they can comment on and suggest changes. For example, Chawla (2001) found in the "Growing Up in an urbanising world project" that children value environments with high social capital and cohesion, while Palmer and Birch (2004) discussed children's concerns for healthy, sustainable environments. By including young people into planning processes more directly, their needs and interests can come to the fore explicitly; they can add creative solutions to existing problems and disputes or even bring issues to the fore that are outside the adult imagination (Driskell 2001). They can reveal what Ergler and Kearns (2013) termed the "ground truth" of young people's experiences and expectations. Although their views and ideas might challenge adult conceptions, children remind decision-makers that urban environments are made up of diverse, layered, and overlapping needs and experiences.

While governments, policy-makers and planners increasingly acknowledge the need to address children's political, legal and social rights in and through

policy, meaningful working relationships between different professions and young people are limited. Effective and realistic processes for participative consultations that go beyond one-off events and special initiatives and projects still need to be put in place, especially for children in the pre-school age (Freeman and Tranter 2011). Benefits of children's participation and citizenship power in local planning processes—if done properly and practised beyond symbolic measures—are manifold: they range from children's empowerment in a still adultist society to positive, democratic citizenship experience and education when children experience that they can affect the outcome of a decision (Arnstein 1969; Hart 1997; Freeman, Henderson, and Kettle 1999). However, professionals are often inexperienced and not well trained to work with children of different ages and abilities (even when they are willing to foster children's civic engagement); the majority habitually discredit children's suggestions and view them as incompetent and less knowledgeable citizens-in-the-making (Clark 2010). Hörschelmann and Van Blerk (2012, 159) address this misrepresentation and highlight that children might need guidance on legal matters and the nitty-gritty of planning policy, but they are able to judge "whether a planning project is likely to change their life for the better or worse". The present authors add to this statement that they can further challenge adult agendas and contribute ideas and experience that go beyond adult imagination. While the above statement refers to primary school children and teenagers, it is contended that even the very young can inform decision-makers from their point of view on their desires for and expectations of as well as experiences in living in an urban environment; their aspirations for a child-friendly city life. The authors base their contestation on a number of studies discussed below that hint, although in smaller scale settings, at pre-schoolers' capabilities and capacities to make meaningful and valuable contributions on issues affecting their lives.

Tracing Pre-schoolers' Capabilities: Moving Towards the Design of Inclusive Urban Environments

Research has shown that pre-schoolers offer valuable insights and recommendations for built and learning environments. For example, Clark (2010) showed that children aged three to four years could elicit through photographs they took on a guided walk around their early childhood setting (un)desired changes to their physical play environment. Pre-schoolers made connections to places they frequently visit with family and friends, informing researchers about possible ways to improve the current and future use of their play space. Clark's research shows that children's documentation of play environments can serve as a platform for discussing and creating inclusive play and learning designs. Similarly, McGrath et al. (2008) discuss how children can actively shape their learning experience and suggest changes to existing teaching styles and learning activities in a kindergarten setting when they are viewed as active citizens (see also Kinney 2005). By way of example, pre-schoolers proposed, "in the eyes of staff", fewer educational toys and the inclusion of more frequent fieldtrips that speak to children's interests, such as snorkelling. Despite initial hesitation, teachers put these recommendations into practice. The results were that teachers overcame their safety concerns and "old ways of doing" and children felt they were taken seriously and adults "actually listened". However, given the impetus of empowerment in early childhood curricular around the world, it is rather

surprising that Foote, Ellis, and Gasson (2013) need to stress that these approaches still seem rather the exception than the norm (with exceptions in Norway, Denmark and Italy). Likewise, Clark (2010) emphasizes—echoing the discussion above on the obligation for public consultation—that architects still design (play) environments *for* instead of with children. The majority of planning projects—or (unintentional) teachings styles in pre-school settings—lack a time frame that leaves enough space to develop appropriate communication channels to respect even young children as valuable and knowledgeable partners (Kinney 2005).

It is not only a challenge to find a common 'language' to understand and integrate the perspectives of all participating parties, but also to overcome the widely regarded view that children live always in the present. It is a view that implies that they lack the competency to combine present with earlier experiences and reflect in depth on their surroundings. Tuan (1977, 33) contributed to such an understanding when he highlighted that

> the child not only has a short past, but his [sic] eyes more than the adult's are on the present and the immediate future. His [sic] vitality for doing things and exploring space is not suited to the reflective pause and the backward glance that makes a place saturated with significance.

However, this view that children lack a sense of place, that they lack intense memories of and in places is out of line with more recent research (Clark 2010).

Children frequently recall positive and negative experiences of social activities and the built environment indicating environments of "saturated significance"—despite their "short past" (Tuan 1977). For example, one boy's aversion to a play space could be linked to a distressing event more than a year earlier in this place (Clark 2010). Another study interested in children's sense of place in their home setting revealed their ability to connect with and reflect on the meaning of place when they disclosed, for example, their bedrooms as an important place (Green 2011). Three year olds signalled emotional attachment to special places and suggested positively layered experiences of these places. Other research focused on young children's mapping abilities to understand their knowledge of and connection to their immediate environment. A commonly used method is to ask children to indicate on an aerial photograph their neighbourhood—or map out their play spaces—a process that requires them to be able to imagine and recall diverse spaces without being physically present in these environments (Blaut 1987; Blaut and Stea 1971). Pre-schoolers and first-graders are capable of identifying symbolic artefacts on aerial pictures and show an understanding of spatial representations (Plester 2004; Matthews 1985). Moreover, four year olds expressed concerns for global warming or deforestation when they were shown photographs of polar bears and jungles (Palmer and Birch 2004). They were able to make connections between the picture in front of them and documentaries they had watched or books they had read at home. Similarly, two friends in Kinney's (2005, 125) study connected animals living in the Amazonas to one of the children's family holidays. All these studies suggest that pre-schoolers listen to, learn from and connect with each other and adults. These studies show that children under five years already have a deep respect for their fellow human beings and surroundings that goes beyond current understanding of young children's capabilities. They connect the present with past experiences and have a layered understanding of places and people.

As pre-schoolers are active observers and listeners, it is concluded from these studies that despite the widespread apprehension about pre-schoolers' ability to provide valuable insights, children of all ages and abilities can share their experiences of living, playing and learning in an urban environment and can make meaningful contributions to planning proposals and to land-use decision-making processes to designing inclusive environments. They should be included in research designs more explicitly, which is in line with the premises to acknowledge the rights of all citizens regardless of their age or ability.

Right-Based Approaches in Theory and Practice: Discussion of Methodologies

Both studies took a rights-based approached to their research methodologies (Lundy and McEvoy 2012). Such an approach realizes the human rights of the participants and guides all activities conducted within the research. These activities should support the development and capacity of the duty-bearers (signatories of the convention, in this case education services acting on behalf of the New Zealand and Australian governments) and rights-holders (in this case pre-school children). Central to such an approach is the UNCRC (1989). This convention proclaims children's right to (among others) a voice in research, policy and evaluation including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds through any media they choose. The child's right to be heard as a process of participation is a crucial element in such processes. The concept of participation emphasizes that including children should not only be a momentary act, but also policies, programmes and measures should be developed in all relevant contexts of children's lives.

Supporting a rights-based approach to research with young children has been further influenced by United Nations General Comment No. 7, *Implementing child rights in early childhood* (2005) which encourages researchers, educators and policy-makers to seek the views of children under five years of age and to take these views seriously. Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (2013) urge readers to consider children's perspectives rather than just to impose readers' views and research methodologies on children. This is part of a wider ethical process of establishing a culture where children are seen as human beings in their own right, as worth listening to, where one does not impose one's own knowledge and categorizations before children have posed their questions and made their own hypotheses. For both research teams their rights-based approach methodologies were based on three key principles:

- Within the context of this article children have a right to have a say about the design and development of the urban space they live in.
- Young children are not future but current citizens within their community (MacNaughton and Smith 2008).
- Young children are competent meaning-makers and social actors who should be seen as participants, not objects of research (Alderson 2000).

The research presented in this article—involving children aged 3–5 years—was derived from two studies conducted in Melbourne (Australia) and Dunedin (New Zealand). Both projects worked within—as outlined above—a sociology of childhood framework that recognizes, documents and privileges children's perspectives (James and Prout 1997). Deploying multiple qualitative methods, this

paper explored social and physical components of and desires in pre-schoolers' desires for ideal cities.

The New Zealand study is located in Dunedin, a compact city of about 120,000 people in the southern part of South Island. To the east the city is surrounded by the sea and a harbour, while to the west the geographical area is defined by hills (Freeman 2010). The city has a thriving central business district (CBD) with a lively bar, café and shopping culture. However, the surrounding suburbs also have smaller shopping areas that comprise their community hubs. Numerous playgrounds, parks, fields and smaller open green spaces are scattered around the city and surrounded by freestanding houses or light industry. The university and hospital dominate the city picture physically and employment wise. The majority of city dwellers are of Pakeha[1] origin and a minority of Maori and migrants from all over the world (Census 2006), which is also reflected in the nine study participants aged 3–5 years.

Data collection, for which ethical approval was gained from the Human Ethics Committee at the University of Otago (13/146), took place in a central city kindergarten that mainly caters for middle-class, well-educated parents working close by. To capture the nine pre-schoolers' experiences of and wishes for an urban environment, the data collection was broken up into three different stages to ensure that children enjoyed their participation and the tasks were not overdemanding. In stage I, researchers visited the kindergarten on a number of occasions to develop a trusting relationship with the children through informal play. After these preliminary visits took place, the study was outlined to the children and their rights to as well as options for resistance to proposed tasks (e.g. leave and play in a different part of the kindergarten). Stage II comprised a formal discussion circle named by the children the "mat discussion". This half-hour activity introduced children to the project more formally. Children could share their experiences growing up in Dunedin; questions included, but were not limited to, "things they can do in the city, their common weekend activities, and fun/happy places in the city". This session was audiotaped and later transcribed. Stage III followed a few days later allowing children time to reflect on and make connections between questions asked and their everyday life. In this stage, the fourth author worked with the children individually or in pairs at a place they chose within the premises of the kindergarten. Children were presented with an empty green-felt board and asked to plan and build their 'ideal' city with small tiles representing city features. Most of the tiles were premade and informed by features and buildings children highlighted in the earlier sessions. However, when an element was not available children were encouraged to draw on blank tiles the features they needed for their ideal city. To ensure that children self-determined the building of their ideal city, they needed to ask for tiles instead of being presented with all available ones from the outset. During and after the city-building exercise, the researcher invited the children to comment on their city providing them with the opportunity to explain themselves and their ideas. These sessions were videotaped and later transcribed and the completed cities photographed. To analyse the data thematically, the researchers developed a coding frame for the visual and verbal data after reading the transcripts and viewing the photographs numerous times (Braun and Clarke 2006).

The Australian study is located in the City of Melbourne, capital of the state of Victoria, located in the south-east of the country. The city is one of 31 local governments in the Melbourne metropolitan area with a population of

approximately 4,248,344. The residential population as of 2011 was approximately 100,611 living across 11 suburbs, and around 805,000 people using the city each day through employment or tourism. The city resides on the land of the Kulin Nation made up of the Wurundjeri, Boonerwrung, Taungurong, Djajawurrung and Wathaurung peoples. The city's residential population is culturally diverse representing more than 140 nations. The 100 study participants aged 3–5 years of age live or attend a service provided within the City of Melbourne and represent the diversity of the city.

Ethical approval from the Human Ethics Committee at the University of Melbourne and permission to conduct research from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development was obtained. Data collection occurred at seven long-daycare centres, five playgroups and four libraries across the municipality representing a cross-section of socio-economic communities. Eight of the city's 11 suburbs/neighbourhoods—Carlton, East Melbourne, South Yarra, Southbank, Melbourne CBD, Docklands, Kensington/Flemington and North Melbourne—were represented. The Project Team used various methodological tools and strategies to elicit children's views about what it means to live, study and/or visit the City of Melbourne and what they need to feel safe, secure, grow and learn in the city. These tools were activity sheets, child surveys, children's photographs, children's video recordings, drawings, three-dimensional constructions and children's dialogue. Multiple tools were used to support children to be active participants in the research and accommodate and respect the children's varied skills and interests (MacNaughton and Smith 2008). Data collection was negotiated with each service to ensure minimal disruption to the day-to-day running of the services. Some services where educators had training and experience in consulting with children choose to work with the children and collect data with the children themselves without research assistance support. In other services researchers attended the services firstly to meet the children and talk about what the project was about, secondly to ask children to participate and discuss how that could occur, and finally to work individually with children in their own classroom or service. In the case of one long-daycare centre the children took the researcher out on an excursion to the local park to describe what they liked about that park and what they would change. The researchers transcribed the children's dialogue and took field notes during each session. Data were coded using pseudonyms the children chose. Like the New Zealand project, thematical analysis of the data was undertaken using a coding frame for the visual and verbal data. While it is acknowledged that the scale of the two projects was different, the authors believe that a combined analysis of findings from two environments in New Zealand and Australia added value to both projects creating interesting complementary and contradicting insights on pre-schoolers' 'good' cities.

Pre-schoolers' Experiences in Urban Environments and their Desires for (More) Liveable Cities

This section reports on the main themes found in both studies detailing pre-schoolers' experiences and their desires for (more) liveable urban environments by drawing on children's narratives, illustrations and ideal city models. One of the key findings in both research projects was that pre-school children have valid and important knowledge about the urban environment in which they live. While the children in the two projects lived in different communities and countries, they

identified key shared issues for (more) liveable cities. These issues either supported or limited their sense of belonging, their participation in the environment and their sense of well-being. In particular, this paper focuses on and interprets findings in relation to three intertwined themes of pre-schoolers' demand for safe urban environments, social and physical connectedness as well as aesthetical and accessible public green spaces.

Aspirations for Safe Urban Designs: Playing, Travelling and Living Safely

For a city to be considered friendly towards children, the positive aspects of the environment need to outweigh the negatives (Driskell 2001). These negative factors can include high traffic volumes, high crime rates and discrimination. As expressed in the Child Friendly Cities Initiatives Framework and the UNCRC, children have the right to a safe environment free from fear, crime or discrimination. The pre-school children in New Zealand and Australia identified many different safety features through the discussions and illustrations of their ideas. These included some standard features seen in playgrounds and well-known ones for enhancing road safety, as well as some very original and novel approaches to achieving safety. For example, James from Dunedin included a cave in his city to provide a safe retreat for its citizens in dangerous times (Figure 1). He explained that his residents can enter the cave should the city be invaded by wild animals. Having the cave, he reasoned, would make the people in the city feel safer. The level of protectiveness was also increased when his friend added a door on to the front of the cave that could be locked with a key:

> Constance: This is your cave?
> James: Yes, to hide.
> Constance: What do they need to hide from?
> James: From monsters, and bears and lions.
> Connie: I think that would be a good place to hide then.
> Tim: It is locked and here is the key.

Figure 1. James's monster cave.

While the presented example is more at the extreme end of children's desire for a liveable city, community safety plays an important role for children in both cities. Pre-schoolers not only demand safer roads and play spaces, as we discussed below in more detail, but also they require a genuinely safe environment. They want to live in an environment that feels safe for citizens of all ages and abilities (Chawla 2001).

For many children in both projects traffic safety was an important element to a good design to their model city, which was influenced by their experiences interacting with traffic in their city. The majority of the children travelled around Dunedin either by car or by bus and then they would walk with the parents, while the children in Melbourne identified the use of cars, walking, bikes and trams as modes of travel. While the number of children injured in road accidents has declined over the years, an increase in traffic levels in some urban areas has meant that parents feel the streets are not safe for children and they have to retreat indoors (Freeman and Quigg 2009). In turn this means children are denied the opportunity to become streetwise and to interact with neighbours and friends. Children in both studies showed a high interest in spending time outdoors, hence they included a number of safety measures that were often inspired by their observations made around the city. Children in Dunedin included in their model city footpaths to separate pedestrians and other road users such as trucks, but they also asked for traffic lights to direct traffic, no entry signs, car parks and finally petrol stations to prevent cars from breaking down and causing accidents on the roads. In Melbourne the most radical demand for a safer city outlined by one kindergarten group consisted of "no cars, only bicycles", which meant that roads should be replaced with bike tracks (see also Figure 2). However, the majority of children talked also about increasing the number of traffic lights, restricting cars and introducing speed humps to slow down traffic. By way of example, Ethan in Melbourne was concerned about crossing the street next to her house and posed a possible solution:

> Teacher: Is there anything that makes you feel not safe in Kensington?
> Ethan: Yes. In my street—next to my house—there's a bit of a dead end and it goes like this up and around and when I walk I can't see the motor bikes coming and sometimes I feel I might get squashed with the motor bike.
> Teacher: What do you think the people at the City of Melbourne should do about this problem to make you feel safe?
> Ethan: Well they can call the builders and come and fix the road with cement mixers and for them to make the road a bit more safe—like some traffic lights, so the motor bikes could stop and the people could walk across the road.

Although some children suggested banning cars from the city, the majority of pre-schoolers' embodied motorized traffic as part of the urban environment and did not question its existence. These children learn from an early age that the automobile dominates and shapes contemporary urban life (see also Mitchell, Kearns, and Collins 2007). Hence, it is not surprising that they have a desire for safer roads, crossings, and the separation of pedestrians and motorized traffic to reduce possible risks and ensure a joyful time when being out and about (Figure 2).

Children's desire for safe environments is also mirrored in their discussions of safe play environments. Josie in the New Zealand project identified a concern

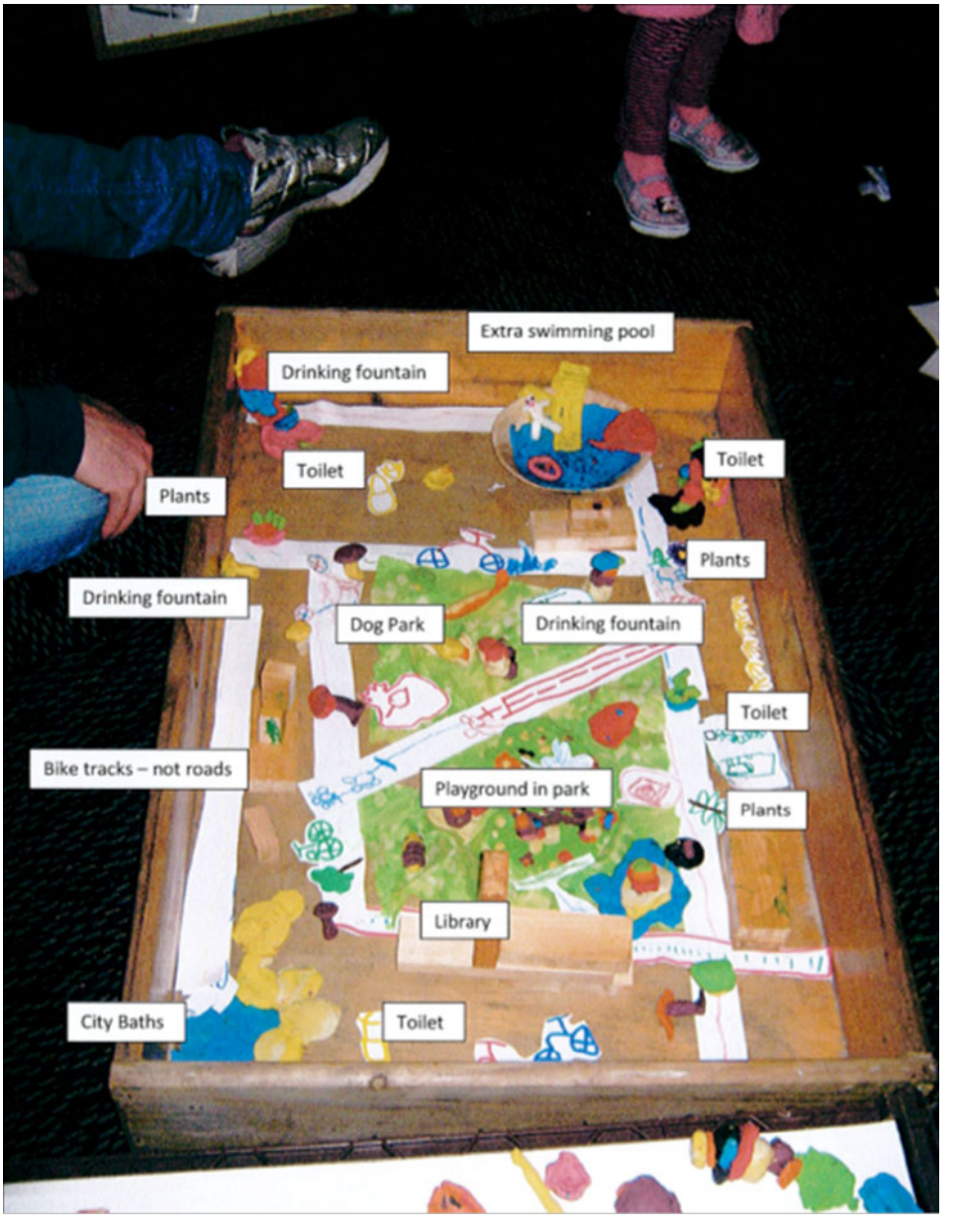

Figure 2. Example of Melbourne's children ideal city.

for playground safety during the model city building. She explained that the illustration of a playground shown to her was not very good because there was no sand or bark underneath the equipment "to break your fall should you have an accident". To address this concern she used some of the blank tiles provided to draw bark which would go alongside the playgrounds in her city (Figure 3). Parents invest considerable time into the safety of their children and this is often reflected in the knowledge children disclose about the 'appropriate' safety of play environments (Ergler, Kearns, and Witten 2013). It seems even pre-schoolers

become literate in the safety discourse and recognize playgrounds that do not correspond to contemporary safety standards. However, following Wyver *et al.'s* (2010) concern, the authors want to highlight that if environments become too safe it can impact on children's opportunities and abilities to play.

In the Australian study, Ben took photographs of the monkey bars at a playground close by to illustrate his disappointment at being too small to engage with his favourite play equipment (Figure 4). He explained, "I like the monkey bars but I can't reach them." Playground equipment is designed by adults and with most fixed equipment is not adaptable or flexible to meet the needs of the diverse age ranges that use the play equipment. In turn this means adults decide on the appropriate play 'height' of children using the equipment not to be accountable for possible accidents denying children to exercise their own agency; they forbid children to learn about their own boundaries from an early age, but children want to make their own decisions, as Ben indicated above (see also Gill 2007). These inflexible safety standards and non-adjustable equipment do not reflect children's desires and their interest in testing limits, rather they reflect the current safety dominated norms of society. A standard measure for safety is purposefully applied not just for the health and well-being of younger children but also to ensure officials are not accountable in the event of an accident. Such common practice reveals how adults navigate the complex interconnected rights of children's participation and protection and indicates that urban planners should not only reflect on and question common design practices, but also make their reasoning for implementation visible and negotiate decisions with the intended child users.

Desires for Physical and Social Connectedness

As citizens, children live mobile lives in which they wish to be as mobile as other urban dwellers. Demand for accessible spaces in the city also arises from the elderly, disabled and unemployed. Like children, these groups are less mobile in the city and are dependent on city spaces and services being accessible and in the pre-schoolers' eyes well connected. Children clearly demonstrated an understanding that the better destinations are linked, the easier they are accessible. In Tim's model city his "road leads from the houses to the shops" ensuring that his family can drive to a nearby fast-food restaurant to get something to eat (Figure 5),

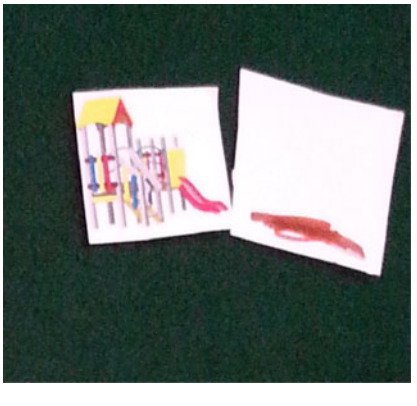

Figure 3. A safe playground.

Figure 4. The unreachable monkey bars.

whereas Maia stressed "[y]ou need to have lots of road in a city". She doubled up her lengths and road widths to give higher carrying capacity (Figure 6), which mirrors Josie's aspiration to reduce travelling time when she placed an airport in the centre of her town. These examples clearly indicate that children respond to the more mobile lives they are facing, but they also remind one that contemporary practices are not necessarily representative of the desired form of travel, but rather a response to time demands and they encourage one to rethink how urban design can positively influence the accessibility of destinations and services. Hence, it is also not surprising that emergency services (Fire, Hospital, Ambulance and Police) were placed physically close to dwellings; and ideal cities featured numerous destinations designed to occupy children in the afternoons and weekends such as movie theatres, swimming pools, stadiums, fields and parks. This contrasts with, and is in some cases a departure from, the traditional spaces that are associated with pre-schoolers, such as playgrounds or nurseries. The children looked forward to engaging with one another, especially in these unorthodox places, as Bella's or Ben's accounts detail (Figure 7):

> That's a picnic and that's all my family. That's my daddy and that's my brother and that's my mama, and that's me and that's my grandma.
> Constance: What do you do in the weekend Ben?
> Ben: I watch the rugby at night.
> Constance: Where do you do that?
> Ben: At the Stadium, if Dad gets tickets.

Spending time with family, teachers or caregivers and friends influenced their sense of well-being. Pre-schoolers clearly wished for a child-friendly city to offer opportunities for people of different ages to mingle outside the commonly known child-friendly places such a playgrounds. They wanted to "socialise as *part of* and *not apart from* society" echoing the aspirations of older children (Freeman and Tranter 2011, 15).

Designing for 'Wild' Experiences: Observing, Viewing, Listening and Participating in 'Natural' Public open spaces

The natural environment, be it the Bush, beach or meadow, has traditionally been a site for play and physical activity for children of all ages; natural environments

Figure 5. Road connecting houses with eatery.

Figure 6. Extra wide road.

Figure 7. Family picnic.

are the backdrop where children interact with and learn from each other. Therefore, it is not surprising that natural environments were dominant features in children's verbal and graphic accounts. Pre-schoolers referred to rivers, lakes, beaches and playgrounds in parks as important destinations on weekends. For instance, two children discuss the beach and nearby field as important places for their weekend relaxation:

Constance: Where do you go in the weekend?
Child 1: I go to the beach.
Constance: What do you do there?
Child 1: I like to collect shells.
Child 2: I play rugby and soccer at Ocean View Park.

This account exemplifies two important aspects. First, the inclusion of places visited with parents, siblings, relatives or friends clearly demonstrates that pre-schoolers can reflect in-depth on their immediate surroundings and recognize and voice important places with a 'saturated significance'. These special places go beyond their everyday experiences in their pre-school or home setting and are indicative of their capacity to be an active listener to their own feelings and positive memories. Pre-schoolers are able to recollect joyful places and activities. More importantly, they can express their desires for more such places when given the opportunity. The second aspect is related to the therapeutic value these natural environments offer in the pre-schoolers' eyes which echoes findings from studies with older children or adults on positive effects on people's health and well-being when spending time in natural settings (Wells and Evans 2003; Doughty 2013). Children seem to view the therapeutic value of these places both in relation to the activities in which they can engage such as collecting shells, "kicking a ball around" or taking the "dog for a walk" and in the aesthetic value of nature for an urban environment:

Constance: So, what would be the first thing you would put in a city?
Ben: We plant seeds in the ground so we can have trees.
Ruby: You can have lots of trees in the streets.

Ben and Ruby clearly state that natural features are the most important elements in their cities; planting trees was the first activity in which they would

engage as city planners before they even started to think about the built environment such as houses or streets. At first sight green cities seemed more appealing to all children. However, viewing the data more closely, children not only demand the greening of the urban environment, but also a more colourful appearance overall. Trees and flowers featured frequently in their discussions and drawings. The more colourful the better for children and other creatures to enjoy as Maia discloses while sketching red, black and yellow flowers "for the butterflies" (Figures 2 and 8). Zoe adds that she likes "to see the Tuis [native New Zealand birds] eating the flowers on the trees in my garden and at kindy". Plants have not only aesthetic value for pre-schoolers, but also a practical one as they attract animals and insects that children can watch and observe quietly; plants bring delight in an active (climbing, hiding, playing) and passive (observing) way (see also Fjortoft 2004). Hence, it is not surprising that a kindergarten group in Melbourne demanded "[s]maller trees and plants on the footpaths so that children can see them". Children are not only literally closer to the ground, but also they are closer to their environment and can inform, for example, planners from their perspective about necessary changes such as "more gardens and plants in the city—not just in the parks". They are able to reveal a genuine child perspective on the choice of vegetation in terms of height and colour city councils plant in parks or along footpaths as well as their location.

Conclusions

This paper contends that pre-schoolers have had limited opportunities to share their thoughts and ideas on experiences living in an urban environment (Smith, Alexander, and MacNaughton 2008; Stephenson 2003). Drawing from a sociology of childhood framework that has been embedded in a right-based approach, it challenges conventional processes and policies that fail to include the perspectives of young children. Pre-schoolers' wants and needs in the urban environment have historically been assumed by adults rather than being informed by them. It has been argued that overlooking the unique perspectives children can contribute towards

Figure 8. Colourful flowers.

making cities a more liveable and meaningful place for all ages is limiting. Rather than following conventional accounts that silence pre-schoolers outside designated child spaces such as their kindergartens or playgrounds, the case was put forward for young children's capabilities and capacities to be taken seriously. They can make meaningful contributions in a large-scale setting such as the city environment. Pre-schoolers can report on and combine their layered experiences of places to come up with interesting and often unorthodox suggestions for improvement (e.g. more flowerbeds at their height). By inviting children into the project and by seeing them as a valuable citizens in their own right, cities can become more inclusive places where everyone's visions are taken seriously.

While the empirical data provided resembles *and* extends existing studies with older children (Freeman and Tranter 2011; Hörschelmann and Van Blerk 2012; Chawla 2001), they also draw particular attention to the experiences, desires and ideas of very young children. It was noted that pre-schoolers raised awareness of three intertwined themes of safe environments, social and physical connectedness as well as more accessible and colourful 'natural' public spaces. In other words, they desire to live in a compact, socially inclusive city with a diversity of accessible (natural and built) destinations close to their home. In the eyes of pre-schoolers, accessibility encompasses road safety for their journey (footpaths, traffic calming, bike lanes) and peer as well as intergenerational encounters on arrival; they long for well-designed public gathering places that allow for miscellaneous, stimulating and creative play activities by themselves, with friends and family members. Designs therefore should take into account that children want to be a valued part of society and play among all other city dwellers instead of being 'fenced' into child-designated spaces. By addressing their desires more explicitly, the quality of life and their well-being can be enhanced at various levels from positive citizenship experiences to feeling well in a place. However, for this to be fully realized a few broader concerns that arose from this project must be raised and which should be addressed when (re)designing city spaces.

Playgrounds are an obvious example of a space designed for play. While children in this study enjoyed these spaces in particular to connect with friends, they also clearly indicated that playgrounds are only one of the many desired spaces in which children want to spend time. They indicated a desire for choice in their destinations (cinemas, parks, pools, shops) and determined their quality by accessibility and opportunities to engage with family and friends. They also clearly showed that they "can and do use any space as a play space" (Freeman and Tranter 2011, 115). In particular, the natural environment is more diverse than any play equipment. Children in this study enjoyed playing and being active in parks, the beach or their garden, which has positive implications for their health and well-being. In making cities truly child friendly, the type of vegetation (colourful flowers, low bushes) plays a role as well as the location of more natural environments and destinations within easy reach of children's home and pre-school setting. Children value the diverse opportunities that natural spaces offer. These environments satisfy their curiosity and interest in their surroundings and offer many opportunities to challenge their boundaries, develop experiences and confidence (Wyver et al. 2010). However, more attention is needed in balancing children's safety while enabling them to experience and learn from their surroundings through play.

Safety is important to all citizens, not just children. Dominant discourses position the very young child as innocent and in need of protection by adults. The

result is that adults (often parents and educators) make assessments about how safe the urban environment is for children to explore and engage with; they reduce children to the well-known and normative accepted places for children such as playgrounds or care centres. Where an environment is deemed unsafe then children are restricted from engaging with their surroundings or the setting is altered by adults to comply with their safety standards. These restricted environments are perpetuated by the risk-aversion discourses created by adults that have limited the possibilities for children's engagement within the community (Gill 2007). Further, they limit adults' capacities to consider that pre-school children have important insight into the thoughts about safety in their urban settings and ideas to create safer environments.

The specific implications of these two projects for urban design planning are, firstly, when developing or reviewing urban designs pre-school children's views should be included in the consultation plan along with other community members. Secondly, urban planners need to link with people working in community services such as pre-schools, maternal and child health centres, playgroups and childcare centres to seek support to facilitate children's sharing of ideas. Thirdly, consultation methodologies such as artwork and photography need to be included in the consultation and evaluation plan to support younger children to share their ideas with urban planners. Finally, timelines for the development of new or the regeneration of urban spaces need to accommodate adequate and ethical opportunities to introduce children to the urban space under consideration, for them to think about the implications for their engagement with the space, and to share these issues in a medium that supports this.

To conclude, this paper highlights pre-schoolers' capacities to evaluate and articulate what it means to engage in their urban environments. The children in these two projects shared key ideas identifying safety, aesthetics and connectedness related to the environment and posed interesting solutions to issues of concern. They raised questions about how young children are afforded opportunities to share their ideas and opinions in the design and evaluation of urban spaces and places showcasing how urban planners could or should consult young children about what supports and limits their engagement in their community. As such, for any research, policy development or planning (urban and beyond) project a key framework or protocol needs to recognize children of any age outside the discourse of the innocent child and to respect children as competent citizens. In any society that is committed to social justice this means that adults need to create spaces for children to talk and for adults to listen to children with care.

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Note

1. Non-indigenous New Zealanders.

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