My Space: Livable cities, public art, and healthy child development.

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Introduction

One goal of a livable city is that it fosters healthy development in its youngest citizens. We have expanded the boundaries of existing scholarship to combine research from architecture and planning with child development and education with the goal of developing a deeper understanding of the myriad factors that enhance the social, physical, economic, educational, and cultural infrastructure that are the cornerstones of livable cities. Our work examines the nexus between public art, education, child development, and the urban planning process, by considering the ways in which children participate in the planning process to develop public art, children’s use of these spaces, and the cognitive, social, and educational benefits that result from engagement in process and outcomes.

In this paper, we specifically argue that the built environment that contributes to a child friendly city provides opportunities for children to: (1) Participate in cultural and social events and (2) Express their opinions on the city they want (www.childfriendlycities.org). We will make the case that these two goals can be achieved by allowing children in public space to both observe and create art and to give them an opportunity to voice their opinion about the public art provided for their enjoyment (e.g., murals on school walls) and about the kind of artwork they like to engage in. In fact, whenever a policy focuses on children, it is important that it also involves their participation and input (Bartlett 2002; Bridgman, 2004; Chawla 2002; Lynch, 1977). We selected children’s art because it is a manifestation of children’s imagination and creativity, it provides aesthetic value to a city and children’s experience in the city, art work itself has developmental benefits for children, and it offers an accessible vehicle for them to engage in community decision-making and planning.

Child Development: The antecedents of the advantages of art for children’s development.

Research in education and child development makes clear that children’s development is enhanced by their engagement in fantasy and imagination. Imaginative and fantasy-prone children tend have greater emotional regulation (Lindsey & Colwell, 2003), positive forms of coping with stress (Goldstein & Russ, 2000-2001), and emotion understanding (Taylor, Carlson, Maring, Gerow, & Charley, 2004). These emotion skills and capacities are, in turn, associated with more positive peer relationships and social competence in early childhood (Schmidt, Demulder, & Denham, 2002), school-age (Spinrad, Eisenberg, Cumberland, Fabes, Valiente, Shepard et al, 2006) and even adolescence (Murphy, Shepard, Eisenberg, & Fabes, 2004).

Psychological theory has long suggested that imagination, in all forms, has more than direct emotional, and indirect social, benefits. These theories suggest that make-believe play is educational during the early school years. According to Vygotsky “in imaginative play, the child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior” (1933/1978, p.102). Fantasy or make-believe play encourages children to set new goals and challenges that fit with their own level of development which appears to facilitate cognitive development (Kraft & Berk, 1998).

Research has begun to provide evidence of this. For example, Richards and Sanderson (1999) demonstrated that the use of imagination may help children to set aside real world knowledge (belief bias) and imagine how reality could have been different if past events had, themselves, been different. That is, imagination may facilitate counterfactual reasoning. The results of their study indicated that use of fantasy/make-believe cues improved young children’s ability to engage in deductive reasoning when solving incongruent syllogisms (e.g., fish in trees, sheep on bikes, dogs driving).
Runco and colleagues (1998) point out that creativity involves actual behavior, motivation, drive, imagery, and imagination in addition to an actual product. The crucial element is openness to experience and the ability to view concepts from another’s perspective. This is a part of the ability to engage in fantasy and use one’s imagination. Thus, it appears that fantasy and imagination are related to creativity concurrently and are predictive of future forms of creativity. To illustrate, Hoff (2005) found that children in the 4th grade with an imaginary companion also scored higher on two different measures of creativity. Russ (2003) describes data showing that measures of children’s fantasy play and imagination in early elementary school predicted divergent thinking in high school. That is, children with high scores in imaginativeness and fantasy play in first and second grade had higher scores on measures of divergent thinking abilities in the 11th and 12th grades. In fact, creativity and imagination are often closely related to one another and enhancement of one is likely to lead to enhancement of the other (see Hoff, 2005; Russ et al., 1999).

A review of the research (Smith & Mathur, 2009) shows that imagination and creativity can and should be used in the classroom to enhance children’s learning and motivation. Often, the easiest way to do this is through the use of art, both as something to be experienced and something to participate in.

In the early years of a child’s education, picture books and books with illustrations provide more that decoration and visual pleasure. Goodwin (2004) points out that pictures in children’s books, like words, express meanings. The meanings expressed then need to be interpreted and understood in the broader context. Taking it a step further, to interpret and understand picture books without words requires a level of comprehension and vocabulary that is both advanced and complex. Arizpe and Styles (2003; pp. 125) suggest that:

“…. Children reveal an ability to put themselves in the artist’s head to imagine how he wanted the reader to react by creating images that inspired humor, fear, and other emotions. Children are also able to go inside their own heads to describe what they are thinking and feeling as they read a picture….. the children’s critical comments and observations suggest how their metacognitive skills can be developed and built on in order to help them become more critical and discerning readers.”

Children’s experience of art also may improve their spatial skills and sense of color and shape (Lin & Thomas, 2002). Other research suggests that children’s experience of art can lead to active storytelling, a chance to use their vocabulary and demonstrate their knowledge of an event or experience as they describe and interpret what they see (Styles & Bearne, 2003). MacRae (2007) has shown that visual representation (art) may be used as a mechanism for thinking about the world rather than as just a vehicle that represents a an already existing and unitary reality.

Children’s experience of public art can also help them to understand important issues in society or for their own health and well-being. For example, the Kentucky Psychological Association had local sculptors create a series of 3-ft-high heads made of fiberglass. Local artists were then asked to come up with designs that would promote healthy living. These fiberglass heads, as a form of public art, were then placed in seven different sites across the community to reach a large and diverse audience (Meeks, Moore, & Edwards, 2006). As follow-up, the heads were used in elementary schools to help to teach the health curriculum. Children, at the conclusion of the health unit created their own heads to illustrate what they knew about health.
Experience with formal art can also teach children, as well as their teachers and parents, how visual arts lead us to question, rather than dictate, our perception of the world around us (MacRae, 2007). When the Manchester City Art Gallery opened up its doors to learning experiences for children, it provided children with a series of ‘touch’ experiences where they were taken around the gallery and allowed to feel a series of contemporary sculptures to better understand the varying textural qualities of different materials. This also lead to a discussion with children about why the children could touch some objects but not others (MacRae, 2007), leading to a greater understanding of why social rules, in general, exist.

Also in England, Children’s Laureate, Quentin Blake helped create a National Gallery exhibit titled Tell Me a Story (Blake, 2001). Viewers, especially children, were provided with a list of artists and paintings that had the potential for generating stories. The pictures also appeared on the Gallery’s website. In both cases, viewers were invited and encouraged to create stories about the painting. One major goal of the project was to provide validation for children’s interpretation and imaginative responses to the painting; thus, finished stories were published on the web. This experience had the added benefit of improving children’s literacy and writing skills as well as helping them to use their imaginations to solve problems (e.g., what is happening in this picture, why). A similar project, also in England, called The Visual Path’s Project helped children connect text with illustrations and images to enhance both creativity and writing skills as well as to learn to use multiple modes of communication (Grigg, 2003).

Children’s creation of their own art also has many developmental benefits. Merleau-Ponty (1978) strongly asserts that experience is the core of our knowing. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy tells us to put the process of composing and (re)composing at the heart of the creative process. Being able to create something, incorporating all of one’s senses, stimulates the mind to explore the available environment. Emphasizing the role of the senses in the singular experience of things, mediated by dialogue with others, is an approach that has the potential to access unlooked-for connections and alternative ways of thinking (MacRae, 2007).

Examples of this abound in recent child development and education research. To begin, Lodge (2007) found that children’s drawings of their conceptions of learning helped them to form a better understanding of what their own definition of learning is. Lodge also noted that the drawings provided a starting point for children and teachers to reach a common definition of learning. It should be noted that the subjects of the drawings were quite varied and covered all aspects of the classroom experience: self and social relations in learning, the physical environment, learning activities, and learning and behavior.

Children’s drawings can also be used as a way to understand how children perceive themselves. Similarly, children may use their drawings to help them figure out who they are and how they fit into the social world (Ahn & Filipenko, 2007). Children’s drawings of their fantasy worlds also provide insight to how children have interpreted media and cultural influences. In essence, their artwork allows them to clarify their understanding of media they are exposed to and the culture that they reside in (Gotz, Lemish, Aidman, & Moon, 2005).

Participation in art programs can improve children’s self-esteem and social skills. One community arts program (Wright, John Alaggia & Sheel, 2006) located in six sites across Canada demonstrates these findings. The 9-month program was theater based but included visual arts (mask-making, set-design and painting) and media arts (digital filming and editing). Evaluation of
the program showed that children gained enhanced artistic skills, greater self-confidence, and improved social skills (team-work) and conflict resolution skills.

Academically, art participation and art curriculum appear to lead to improved academic outcomes for children of all ages. Some national findings from the United States suggested that children participating in school arts programs became more creative, had better social skills, lower drop-out rates, and high levels of academic achievement (Catterall, Chapleau, & Iwanaga, 1999). Heath and Roach (1998), using the same database, found evidence that students participating in school arts programs were significantly more likely to participate in math and science fairs and have significantly better school attendance.

There are, of course numerous explanations for these findings. One logical one is that students who participate in activities they enjoy are less likely to disengage from school (Rutter, 1983). But, it is also possible that engaging in art helps refine children’s academic skills. For example, we know that children who create highly detailed drawings tend to have better memories for material they learn in the classroom (Chen, 2003). It is also clear that children may use drawings and art to help them explain what they already know or think they know and then incorporate in new material that they subsequently learn (Paquette, Fello, & Jalongo, 2007). In studies of teaching and the use of students’ imagination, we have found that tapping into children’s imagination can help them learn curriculum ranging from understanding tables (Leahy & Sweller, 2005), to an ecological biosystem (Rockow, 2007) to algebra (Sriraman, 2004). It is not illogical to assume that art may help children learn course material by helping them make connections and solve problems.

The Argument for Art in Public Spaces

Initially it would seem that schools and museums are the places to provide children with art experience. However, the sad reality is that No Child Left Behind (2001) has left little to no time or resources for encouraging children’s imagination and creativity in our public schools. Furthermore, budget cuts, especially in the State of California, have left schools with no choice but to eliminate their arts programs. Furthermore, many children do not have readily available access to public museums or to after school or community based but with restrictions art programs. Thus, it is our argument that public art and places to engage in art can do what schools and museums and community programs cannot do for a large segment of the population under 18 or it can supplement and enhance what is being provided for children. Furthermore, in the case of children from diverse backgrounds, their conceptions of art may vary based on cultural attitudes. Public art may provide an opportunity for them to express themselves in ways that reflect these differences, and it may also serve as a site of transition that enables them to develop a comfort level with their community that then fosters other platforms for involvement in planning.

There are many ways that this can be achieved in public space. de Vries and colleagues (2007) demonstrated in a study of six cities in the Netherlands that children’s level of physical activity is associated with certain modifiable elements of the environment. It may be logical to assume that children’s engagement with art (both experience with and participation in) may also be increased by modifying the built environment in public space.

The literature on urban planning and children highlights the value of using public art to engage children in the planning process thereby legitimizing their right to participate in the community. Before examining the literature on planning and public art, it is necessary to take a
step back and briefly consider the broader scholarship on children and planning. Although most land use planning processes exclude children (Knowles-Yanez 2005; Simpson 1997) a growing body of scholarship demonstrates an increased awareness of how and why children should be enfranchised into planning discourse and planning action (Knowles-Yanez 2005). Both communities and individual children benefit when children participate in the planning process.

The literature contains many examples of participatory processes to engage children in the built environment, much of it focusing on either the U.K. or U.S. Examples include conducting surveys (Mullahey, Susskind, & Checkoway 1999), participating in charrettes (Race & Torna 1998), and working in community gardens (Lawson & McNally 1995).

Numerous arguments exist in support of increased youth participation in planning. Checkoway Kameshwari, and Finn (1995) argue that youth should be viewed as community resources and that their involvement should transcend tokenism. Youth should be expected to contribute to planning and decision-making. Some of the earliest and most influential literature on planning identifies youth involvement as a rights-based issue. The 1989 United Nations General Assembly Convention on the Rights of Children (CRC) focused sharp attention on valuing children’s voices in the planning process (Bartlett 2002; Chawla 2002). The underlying theory in this approach contends that children should be participants in the process because the decisions affect their lives.

Enhancing the rights-based discussion are the findings that children are exceptionally capable of cogently observing and analyzing their communities and offering feasible policy approaches (Buss 1994; Talen & Coffindanfer 1999). Gallagher (2004), for example, found that children are able to evaluate the environments in which they live, present solutions to the problems they identify, and successfully advocate for positive change in their communities.

Children’s understanding of the built environment can be evaluated using different methodologies. Lynch’s (1977) Growing Up in Cities Project, supported by UNESCO, was extremely influential in evaluating different techniques for better understanding children’s perceptions of the built environment. He studied children in four countries to identify their varying perceptions of the cities and identify ways for planners to work with children in a meaningful way. Moore (1990) (missing reference) looked at how children’s play can develop an environmental understanding in children whereas Loukaitou-Sideris (2003) used a combination of interviews, photo journals, observation and other methods to evaluate children’s environmental knowledge.

Communities benefit from youth participation due to the inclusion of a sizeable constituency, and equally important, youth experience numerous benefits when they become engaged in planning activities in the built environment. In their review of the literature, Checkoway et al. (1995) found that individual participation in planning produces numerous positive psychosocial outcomes ranging from social and civic consciousness to enhanced self-esteem. It can also enhance academic achievement. Chawla (2002) also identifies some of the positive outcomes of involving children in planning as equal participants including developing a lifelong interest in, and concern for, the well-being of their involvement, valuing children’s experience, and becoming active participants in democratic decision-making (Chawla 2002). Frank’s (2006) case study analysis considers youth capacity in urban planning and indicates that as part of their participation in planning, youth gain concrete planning skills and knowledge.
about their communities in addition to increased enthusiasm and confidence building. This, then complements their ability to impact the community in positive, tangible ways guided by feasible approaches that reflect youth preferences.

Concomitant with the diversity among children is variation in the types of youth participation. Checkoway et al. (1995) identified numerous forms of youth participation encompassing social action, community action, and community advocacy. Public art is a frequently used, and often times successful vehicle for bringing students into the planning process and furthering their engagement in the built environment.

Public art has been particularly effective when used in communities with socioeconomic diversity. Hall and Robertson (2001) call for public art to be used as a tool to represent cultural difference and to do so in a way that does not emphasize iconic outcomes such as a monumental sculpture or even a building, such as the Guggenheim in Bilbao. Public art is political (Sharp Pollock, & Paddison, 2005) and it is not just a powerful medium for self- and communal-expression, but it can be either inclusionary or exclusionary when used as part of a broader urban redevelopment strategy.

Breitbart (1995) demonstrates the value of fostering participatory public art for children through urban environmental education. Her case study of the Banners program in a disenfranchised neighborhood in Holyoke, Massachusetts demonstrates children’s ability to assess their urban environment and then devise strategies, via public art, to make improvements. Her work illustrates the potential of environmental education to empower youth leading to their enhanced feelings of community ownership. Breitbart’s research has many applications for the following case study from our own research in San Diego. We consider a unique public art and youth education program located in a multi-racial, low income community in southeastern San Diego. Writerz Blok illustrates the efficacy of educating and empowering children to enhance the built environment in productive and safe ways using culturally appropriate art. In this case, the form of art is graffiti.

From Tagging to Education and Empowerment: A Case Study of Writerz Blok

Graffiti is often viewed as a form of vandalism, not an art form. Our case study of Writerz Blok illustrates how graffiti was not only embraced as an art form, but it was used as a way to provide a safe physical space for youth in a low income community to express themselves in a productive fashion. Writerz Blok is located in the Diamond District of Southeastern San Diego. The Diamond District is comprised of ten distinct and heterogeneous communities. With a population of approximately 88,000 people, the Diamond District is a multi-ethnic, multi-racial neighborhood with a median income of approximately $40,000. Located several miles to the southeast of downtown San Diego, the neighborhood has suffered from decades of neglect and disinvestment as reflected in its physical, economic, and social deterioration. While it was once a relatively stable neighborhood of predominately African American homeowners, it is now home to a large population of Latinos, Filipinos, and Laotians, many of whom are unable to afford homeownership.

One of many reflections of the neighborhood’s neglect was the preponderance of tagging and graffiti as a result of active gang activity. Graffiti was prolific and served as a visible reminder of the dysfunction of the neighborhood. In the late 1990s and early part of 2000, two men devised a strategy for redirecting the graffiti activity. What began as a relatively informal program, evolved over the years into a highly respected program. Victor Ochoa, a well-known
Chicano painter/muralist and activist in the Chicano art movement, and Brian Lagemann, a graphic artist, started the precursor to Writerz Blok, a program called Graff Creek. Chollas Creek runs through the center of the Diamond District, and Lagemann and Ochoa decided that this was a good place to provide taggers with a safe place to tag and produce their graffiti. Ochoa and Lagemann were motivated by the desire to neutralize the graffiti and stop vandalism while allowing the youth to express themselves through their art. Every Wednesday the two men provided free paint for the taggers. The free paint was the incentive to draw participants, and Ochoa and Lagemann purchased hundreds of dollars of paint on a weekly basis. With approximately six volunteers, Graff Creek provided a safe space for fifteen to forty people on a weekly basis. The participants ranged in age from preteens to adults. The effort was quickly successful and made an impact in neutralizing the graffiti in unwanted locations, redirecting it to a safe space, and reducing the vandalism.

Word of mouth helped the program expand. Within a short period of time, the number of weekly participants increased to between 60 and 100 people. After the first location in Chollas Creek became too small, a second site was identified. To provide enough space for the graffiti, temporary canvasses were built out of simple A-frames. Graff Creek was designed to be a legal and safe space, for engaging in graffiti. Taggers active outside of Graff Creek had to deal with threats to their personal safety. Fear of arrest was largely insignificant, whereas concern for physical safety was paramount. Ochoa, Lagemann, and their volunteers looked at participation in Graff Creek as a privilege and established rules for participants to observe.

Graff Creek, eventually renamed Writerz Blok quickly outgrew its second space necessitating a larger and permanent location. In 2002 Writerz Blok secured a building in the heart of the Diamond District, across the street from its original location. With over 10,000 square feet of exterior art space, Writerz Blok provides a safe space for neighborhood youth to engage in an art form that expresses their cultural heritage. The space is informal and comprised of large panels where youth can come during the day to work on their art (see Figures 1 -4). The participants understand that their work isn’t permanent and will eventually be painted over by the someone else. Integral to the long-term success, it also received its primary financial and technical support from the Jacobs Center for Neighborhood Innovation.

The Jacobs Center for Neighborhood Innovation is one of the leading organizations in the Diamond District committed to supporting local community economic revitalization and development. The JCNI is the operating arm of the Jacobs Family Foundation that was established in 1988 by Joseph Jacobs, who owned a successful engineering consulting firm, which he established in 1947. The Jacobs Family Foundation began as a traditional foundation and engaged in conventional grant making. Over time, however, Jacobs and other members of his immediate family acknowledged that deep and lasting community change required a new model of philanthropy. With a desire to promote holistic community change and the grassroots level, the Jacobs Family Foundation restructured its approach and embarked on a new direction that moved away from programmatic funding in favor of organizational support for entities that embodied the mission of the Jacobs Family Foundation.
Figure 1: Writerz Blok murals

Figure 3: Writerz Blok mural

Figure 4: Mural of Joe Jacobs, founder of the Jacobs Foundation.
With its retooled mission, the Jacobs Family Foundation embraced the principles of what is now known as embedded philanthropy. The foundation was interested in finding a community in which it could serve as a partner in holistic community development. Through a discovery process that included some preliminarily partnerships that ultimately were not in alignment with the foundation’s goals and objectives, it ultimately identified a community in which to embed itself. The foundation selected the Diamond District.

The foundation realized that in order to broker and negotiate the partnerships required to support comprehensive community development, it would need to establish an operating arm. Thus the Jacobs Center for Neighborhood Innovation was established in 1995 and moved into the neighborhood in order to serve as an active partner in its revitalization. The JCNI framed its approach with the dual objectives of building the physical and social capital that would enable the neighborhood to grow itself. JCNI was looking to actively partner with the neighborhood.

JCNI is divided into fourteen different “teams.” Each team is comprised of staff members, community members, and community partners. JCNI refers to this as their “integrated network of stakeholders” (JCNI President’s Report 2007). The teams are designed to address every facet of the neighborhood’s social, economical, physical, and cultural needs. As such, there are teams for physical development, property management, asset management, social fabric, evaluation and policy implications, and strategic direction. Central to all teams is the philosophy that resident participation is an essential component and all programmatic efforts should be planned with, not for, the community. Youth development is one of these teams, and it is under this umbrella that Writerz Blok was placed.

JCNI has afforded Writerz Blok a significant amount of flexibility in developing its programming. The goal is to empower the program to evolve based on perceived needs and opportunities in the community. The program is directed by two men from the community, Sergio Gonzalez and Jose Venegas, who were among the first two volunteers to assist Ochoa and Langemann. These two men began working for the program when they were teenagers. The philosophy they instill in the program is the desire to provide a program that is beneficial to the larger community as well as the youth population. Writerz Blok has been successful in legitimizing a youth-oriented art form that is most typically views as a menace as opposed to an asset. It provides a safe space where neighborhood youth and others from outside the community can create their art in a conflict-free zone free of violence. This outdoor gallery provides a rich tapestry of the youth’s artistic visions. One might argue that Writerz Blok co-opts the youth by placing them in one physical location. However, this outdoor space is one of many locations used by Writerz Blok.

As the program continued to expand its leaders have channeled their entrepreneurial spirit in ways that continue to strengthen the program. In 2003 they purchased a second-hand silk screener and now have a successful silk screen business with clients from both within and outside of the neighborhood. This business seeks to further mainstream graffiti art and develop business models to support its growth.

One of the most notable aspects of Writerz Blok is its educational outreach efforts. It recently developed an after school enrichment program at one of the local high schools. Venegas and Gonzalez worked with the police department to identify neighborhood youth in trouble or at risk, and the idea was to constructively channeling their energies in a way that resonated with their interests. The resulting program is entitled “Graffiti Art and History.” The program
educated youth about the history of graffiti, presents it as a legitimate art form, and then provided the students with opportunities to work on their art. They did not have a model to follow, so Gonzalez designed his own curriculum and taught the class. Although he did not have a background in education, his knowledge of graffiti and his insights into the youth they hoped to attract to the program, enabled him to develop a successful program. The first class had twenty participants who attend two classes a week for six weeks. As part of the class, students were able to paint murals on the high school buildings. The program enabled them, as well as the administrators at the school, to appreciate graffiti as an art form and to treat it as such by using this form of public art to enhance their school environment. The program has been so successful that the San Diego Unified School District wants to adopt the curriculum and utilize it at twelve other schools in the district. As with the larger mission of Writerz Blok, the after school program is designed to legitimize and empower youth with an interest in graffiti art and to learn how to channel their art into an acceptable vehicle for public art in the neighborhood.

The Writerz Blok program serves as an instructive example of the nexus between livable cities, healthy youth development, the larger planning process, and public art. The program successfully redirected a public nuisance, vandalism, into a form of legitimate and enriching public art. By creating safe spaces in which to situate the graffiti, the program’s directors created safe spaces in the neighborhood for at risk youth who might otherwise experience problems with the law and/or gang activities. The development of an after-school enrichment program for neighborhood high school students further demonstrates the ways in which this culturally acceptable art form was used as a method for educating students about art history in general, and graffiti art in particular. The program has value in that it has enriched public spaces in the neighborhood as well as the lives of individual neighborhood youth. For healthy cities to thrive, all segments of society must be engaged and have opportunities to participate. As our review of the literature demonstrated, youth are often ignored, despite their innate potential to make meaningful contributions to process and outcomes in community planning and well-being. Writerz Blok is a step in this direction. As our research continues, we intend to further explore the impacts of this program on its participants. Based on the literature, one might surmise that participation in Writerz Blok might serve as the first stage in a larger empowerment process that further engages the youth in community issues. Moreover, given the research on education and child development and the benefits of art experiences, we would expect the youth participating in this program (and others like it) to gain in skills beyond leadership and empowerment. These abilities are likely to include positive social and emotional development, as well as improvements in school motivation and interest and academic success. Future research will consider the convergence of these effects.
References


