



'Where Do Children Play?' Conference 18th November 2016 Goldsmiths University of London

This conference was organised to coincide with Universal Children's Day, the anniversary of the signing of the UN convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) on 20th November 1986, with particular reference to the child's right to play (Article 31) and the right to be listened to and heard (Article 12).

In the many developments that are taking place in London and elsewhere, it has been observed that children barely taken into account either by

- creating spaces which are suitable for them to live and play in or
- regarding them as citizens who have a voice.

In effect, children's rights are not being respected. As play is of major importance to the healthy development of the child, denying them suitable spaces to play becomes a health issue leading to among other things, obesity, lack of co-ordination and the ability to be creative and solve problems. This conference sought to look at what measures might be available to remedy this situation.

Background

The Alliance for Childhood is an international network of people and organisations whose aim is to raise awareness in society of the importance of a good and healthy childhood, promoting the development of human beings able to build a society based on a culture of peace, environmental sustainability and respect for all differences. Marion Briggs, UK co-ordinator and Giovana De Souza from the Alliance in Brazil worked together with Dr Roger Green, Director of the Centre for Community Engagement and Research (CCER) at Goldsmiths University of London to bring this conference about. The CCER are engaged in a number of community projects in the Deptford area. The aim was to bring together a wide spectrum of people who had a concern for this question to see to understand more about the issues involved as a springboard for action.

The conference was attended by 36 participants, including play workers, academic researchers, architects, a member of the GLA, undergraduate and post-graduate students and experts on play and children's rights.

The Conference

Dr Paolo de Stefani from Padua University is an international expert on the UN Convention. He set the framework for the conference by showing how these two Articles from the Convention work together, the one supporting the other. He concluded that the Right to Play is a neglected right, but that the Committee on Children's Rights has identified the obstacles to implementing this right; that the right to play and the right to participate/be heard should be addressed as a single package and their recognition is a remarkable added value of the CRC (and both are poorly implemented by most states); and this seems particularly important as a creative approach to participatory democracy seems especially urgent in most societies.

Amica Dall, an architect from the collective "Assembly" followed on by emphasising the right to play. She showed how her group took over public spaces with temporary structures and put on community events. She spoke about the right to public space and reclaiming that right. One of her projects was creating an adventure play ground in Glasgow. They have a project filming children in their play spaces in the UK and Japan which was shown at the Architecture biennial in Venice this year. It will have a public viewing at selected venues

Ragnor Behncke from Chile has a background of education and anthropology and is an advisor to the Chilean government on how to introduce play into the education system. He showed research

he undertook with Cambridge University on the bonobos, the playful apes, with Oxford University. He concluded that as a species have humans life long development and also need to have life-long play to be healthy.

Tim Gill, an independent researcher and author, showed how children's ability to roam has decreased dramatically over the last century, to the point where for most children the home is the limit of their free roaming space. One reason for this is the lack of public space. This has brought its own problems, not least an increase in obesity.

Penny Wilson described a project to build a play area in Tower Hamlets. With a grant of £20,000 she and the local community set about converting a neglected space in a housing development into a place where children can play and the community can meet. Through this co-operation, a space where members of the surrounding area felt engaged and part of a community was created. Meeting the needs of children and their engagement was key to the success of this venture. Betty, now 14, who grew up with this project, assisted Penny by sharing her experience as a 9 year old in an extremely eloquent way. For her, a project which took two months to complete, was a long time to wait.

Lizzie Bryant, storyteller, led the conference in an experience to recall childhood memories in order to enter into what it means to be a child and the qualities of life a child experiences.

Interspersed with the presentations was time for question and discussion, closing with a sharing of highlights and possible next steps.

Key Considerations

It was considered by all present that the conference was an enlightening experience though the quality of the speakers and the interactions which led to new connections being made.

Some of the points of understanding are:

- Children's rights need to be respected more, especially the right to play and the right to participate and be heard and respected as citizens
- Play is a basic need which must be expressed in order to grow up in a healthy way
- Public space and space for children to roam needs to be reinstated
- When it comes to community building and the creation of public space, children and consideration of their needs leads the way to bringing this about

Outcomes

- The question of making London a child friendly city will be followed up by the Alliance for Childhood in co-operation with others such as members of the GLA and Child in the City who are interested in finding ways to bring this about. This was the most important issue to emerge as far as policy and development changes are concerned. As the London authority sets about designing and building new homes for Londoners, the place of children must be a major consideration.
- The Alliance for Childhood will work with others taking part in the conference to create a play day/play week in 2017.
- A number of new initiatives will follow from contacts made

Funding

The conference was funded by donations. There was insufficient income from participants to meet all the costs, but we anticipate that our ongoing fundraising activity will raise enough to cover this.

Marion Briggs

1 December 2016