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Placemaking with children and youth: participatory practices for planning sustainable communities

Victoria Derr, Louise Chawla, and Mara Mintzer. New York: New Village Press, 2018

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Children's participation in all levels of planning, from neighbourhood projects to international initiatives, is important because children, who are both the present and future residents of these places, often feel unheard and isolated in their communities. Through experiences with youth participation in place creation in the United States, Mexico, Canada, South Africa, the United Kingdom, the Philippines and other places around the world, Derr, Chawla, and Mintzer have created a manual for researchers, educators, government officials and urban planners to include the voices of children in urban planning in order to guide the work of those seeking to create child-friendly and sustainable cities. *Placemaking with Children and Youth: Participatory Practices for Planning Sustainable Communities* is largely based on the work of the Growing Up Boulder project in Boulder, Colorado, in the United States and the Growing Up In Cities UNESCO effort that was revived after the Conventions on the Rights of the Child was adopted by the United Nations in 1989.

Chapter 1 makes a case for child participation in placemaking, while Chapter 2 provides steps for establishing programs and principles for sustaining them. Because people are mostly concerned with and are able to offer experiences from their local places, effective participatory planning focuses on these local concerns, which may then be scaled to regional, state, or larger issues. The authors suggest that when creating a program or partnership to start by identifying an existing community leader such as a university faculty or student, or city planner, then other community partners such as schools, art and culture organisations, and municipal departments. The program can then create a structure, including goals and a mission statement, leader, funding, and formal agreements. When the program is ready to implement a project, identify children who can serve as reliable partners, garner resources and financial support, build capacity, begin working with children, and communicate ideas. Principles for sustaining these programs are laid out and highlighted in an example from Quebec, Canada, in addition to the Growing Up Boulder examples. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child guide the ethics of these programs, which are laid out in Chapter 3, in areas such as preserving the voice of the child with minimal influence from adults and inclusion of traditionally marginalised populations. Chapter 4 emphasises the importance of conducting background research about the community, such as the demographics, historical information, interviews and observations, before beginning a participatory program with children.

The next three chapters provide examples of how to elicit child participation. Chapter 5 outlines the materials needed for a variety of art-based activities, the ages for which each activity is appropriate, and prompts that can be used to engage children. The participatory methods in Chapter 6 include surveys, interviews and focus groups. The authors also include several tips for

conducting interviews with children of different ages, methods for moderating focus groups, examples of different types of surveys, and how to communicate the data and findings from these methods. Child-led tours, children's photographs and mapmaking are some of the methods described in Chapter 7, which involve taking children into the city. In all three chapters, several narratives and images of the many presented participatory processes in the United States, Mexico, South Africa, Ireland, and Kenya show how some of the methods have been implemented. The variety of these examples is helpful in showing appropriate ways to involve youth of different ages, different cultures, and different settings.

Chapter 8 offers multiple examples of types of workshops and community events, and provides examples of children involved in improvements to local transportation, landscaping, and revitalisation of a town square, as well as promoting awareness through social media campaigns and visits with city officials. The workshops and community events described include children's input into city planning, and many provide opportunities for dialogue across generations. Some of the events can also create a venue for children to speak directly with city planners. In some cases children invited adults to their school or other community spaces where they were presenting projects about city planning. Collaboration with adults may also occur at community festivals, community improvement or art projects, or in experimental changes to the community. Giving children opportunities to testify at public meetings or to collaborate with adults on a project provides opportunities for children to develop speaking and other interpersonal skills, as well as to learn about local civic processes.

Chapters 9, 10, and 11 provide options for how to synthesise the work done in the placemaking activities through analysing ideas, communicating the findings, reflecting on the experience, and putting a plan into action. Examples of annotations, simple counts, and coding and sorting are all described as potentially appropriate analysis methods. The authors provide details of strategies for recording methods and results of various placemaking activities, such as having children communicate their findings through reports, posters, news articles or the project website. The importance of both formative and summative evaluations when determining the effectiveness of a program is highlighted, and some featured projects utilised outside evaluators such as a university faculty to conduct a summative evaluation. Interviews, photographs, and questionnaires are some of the evaluation methods described in Chapter 10. Chapter 11 describes the actions that resulted from many of the projects highlighted throughout the book. The variety of projects produced diverse actions, such as turning informal play structures into more formal and safer play structures, the incorporation of children's requested trails and trees into municipal plans, and training for healthcare professionals working in a children's hospital. While the reflection of the placemaking could easily become an overlooked part of this process, or done without children's voice, Derr, Chawla, and Mintzer emphasise the importance of reflecting on the goals of the project and continuing to involve children in this part of the process.

Including children in projects that allow them to have a voice about the places where they live is an important practice for those seeking to create child-friendly and sustainable cities. Derr, Chawla, and Mintzer provide many examples of how to design and implement these types of projects. *Placemaking with Children and Youth: Participatory Practices for Planning Sustainable Communities* clearly describes various aspects of projects for different situations and children of different ages. It would have been helpful if the book's focus on cities was accompanied by some examples of placemaking in less urban areas. Many of the actions that resulted from highlighted projects did not go beyond presentations of children's ideas with community stakeholders and did not always show whether those ideas were ever put in place. The book describes such positive projects and engaged communities; it is hopeful that these actions will ultimately lead to child-friendly improvements in the cities featured. The book is organised in a way that makes it easy to find information about specific aspects of placemaking, with an abundance of examples accompanied by pictures and resources for a variety of ages and contexts. The authors see children as

important stakeholders in their communities and acknowledge that the work of involving children's voice in policy decisions can be a long process. Therefore, they have provided a useful resource to support anyone interested in developing a strong placemaking project. The book aims to support the development of more widespread inclusion of children in their community development.

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