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Children Are Natural-Born Urban Planners!

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Children are Natural-born Urban Planners!

Every child is capable of becoming an urban planner because children use their minds and bodies to understand the places they habituate. My interactive method taps into their experiences, emotions, and imagination through play.

From the dozens of interactive workshops I have facilitated with children, I have discovered that children are more knowledgeable about the natural and the built environment than typically accredited. Due to this discovery, I believe children should be part of the community engagement for planning projects, developments, and policies. Some examples of planning where children should be engaged are: parks, housing projects, or streets specially designed for children. Therefore, I have developed this interactive workshop method for parents, teachers, architects, urban planners and others to understand the spatial needs of children in the built environment.

The method is based on Design Based Learning (DBL) developed by Doreen Nelson, which teaches K-12 grade students math, science, history and other core subjects by the students' recreation of the world around them. By engaging students' motor skills, DBL promotes and inspires the learning and creative processes.

I have applied DBL to urban planning, and these are my findings from the dozens of workshops I have facilitated. Building three-dimensional model cities is an effective way of teaching urban planning because it encourages individuals to think critically about their urban surroundings.

By using their imagination and hands to build, children tap into their subconscious need to create and discover something about themselves, each other, and the environment. Children have an easier time building a solution than talking about a solution because model cities are inherently spatial. My workshops make it possible to engage this spatiality in rich and subtle ways that are not possible in other settings. Photos, maps, video and computer models are excellent at capturing various aspects of urban space, but not necessarily in an abstract manner. An interactive model allows people and children to physically engage urban space in a direct way with their bodies and hands, changing their viewpoint and posture, focusing and standing back, as well as touching and changing things. Unlike an architectural model, these interactive models are a site that people are invited into for interaction with the city and each other. The model is communal and provides a visual language that all kinds of people can participate in, regardless of typical barriers such as language, age, ethnicity or professional training. The model changes through

participation. New ideas and opportunities emerge that weren't visible at the beginning.

I give children autonomy to create their ideal world through playful urban planning outreach activities. These creations help inform us about their thoughts concerning the urban environment.

This approach also helps children express themselves in a visual, non-verbal context because, for children, the city is a visual and physical experience. It's dry, rainy, hot, cold, safe, unsafe, vibrant, and boring, so this is how we need to communicate urban planning to children. I attempt to capture the urban experience through my methods of engagement.

Children always construct the natural and built environments. Because children use their senses to learn about the world around them, the complexities of the built environment fascinate them unlike a home, classroom or enclosed space. Whether it is watching a garbage truck, climbing a tree, rolling down a hill, smelling flowers, or swimming in a pool, children use their senses. These discoveries are made by children; therefore, children take ownership of these experiences.

Interactive Workshops

The one-hour interactive workshop allows children to self-reflect by investigating the environment using thousands of small, colorful, vibrant, tactile objects that trigger their emotional connections to the built environment. Children connect and synthesize their experience by seeking and touching these objects.

As previously discussed, children can learn about urban planning through touch and play. Having children create ephemeral sculptures takes the emphasis away from a single, finite finished product and moves it toward an exciting process of reflection, creation, collaboration, and sharing that can serve as a model for creative problem-solving.

This probing exercise lets children investigate, discover, and explore their relationship with the built environment by arranging non-representational objects. They create small vignettes of their urban life or attachment to it. Children gain satisfaction from this process because they are able to translate memories, experiences and ideas from their mind into a physical form. As soon as children realize this connection, they often times have an epiphany and recognize they created their ideal space.

1. Set up

Workshops can be facilitated indoors or outdoors. Tables, chairs, or even the floor can be utilized. Each participant should be given a sheet of construction paper or small piece of cardboard on which to build. The

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objects/building materials should be placed where participants can easily access them. The objects should be clean, colorful, vibrant and interesting. Objects such as shampoo tops, popsicle sticks, pipe cleaners, yarn, cloth flowers, hair rollers, and plastic game pieces force children to be creative. Children project their ideas on these pieces. Green yarn becomes grass, blue poker chips become the ocean, and hair rollers become apartments or office buildings.

2. Ask a Great Question

Ask a question that each child is capable of answering, based upon their age group. Children may have a limited vocabulary and knowledge of the world, so complicated topics like world hunger are often times too difficult. Ask them to build their favorite place, park, or neighborhood, depending on the age of the children.

If the children are pre-K, we will have a discussion on "What is a city?" This question allows them to start thinking about their life in the city.

Inform them that a city planner builds parks, houses, schools, etc. The city needs places to sleep, work, and play. Relate city planning to their home and ask them if they would put their bed in the bathroom or their toilet in the kitchen. This joke gets them laughing but also illustrates the spatial order of the home. Once the children appear to understand this concept, tell them to imagine that, for the next 20 minutes, they will be a city planner.

The concept of a city might be expanded by asking them to think of what they do every day like walk to school, play with friends, or spend time with their families. Reinforce that there are no right or wrong answers. These vague questions also allow the children to develop their own solution.

3. 20 Minutes to Build

Similar to the breaking of a piñata, children will scramble and sort through the building materials. The thousands of colorful, tactile objects are like candy and trigger their emotional connections to the environment. By seeing, seeking, and touching the objects, the children's emotions are activated. This process mimics how children experience their environments.

Once the children secure their materials, they begin building. During this time, ask the children if they need any help. If they do, ask the children their favorite color, activity or what they are trying to construct.

During the twenty minutes of building time, children will self-reflect on their memories, needs and desires. They will reconstruct these places and activities.

4. One Minute Presentation

After the twenty minutes are up, each student will give one-minute presentations to the group on his or her project. They will state their name and explain their model. One minute is a good time limit because it allows everyone to participate and maintains the pace of the exercise. If a child is having difficulties presenting, ask the child to describe objects they used for their model.

The children will present their ideas by pointing to objects. The connection between objects and what they represent is fascinating to hear as they maneuver through their models. Some children will explain in great detail, tell a story or describe the model. The facilitator should take notes and photos of each presentation.

Since the children interject their own personal experiences, memories, and random thoughts of places real and imagined, the presentation becomes the most interesting part of the process. The presentation is powerful to watch as the participants explain with so much enthusiasm and conviction about their model, because their everyday experiences drive the process.

After each child presents his or her idea, the facilitator should synthesis back to the group to validate the child's idea. After the synthesis, the facilitator should ask for group applause and move on to the next child.

5. Group Activity

Before the group activity starts, allow the children to view the other models for a few minutes before dismantling. This process leads to the next exercise, where the children are placed in groups to build a collective solution.

The children are generally given the same question but will work in teams to solve it. The first exercise allows the children to develop an opinion about space that they can negotiate with their team. Ask them to combine their best ideas and start with a team discussion.

The children can be given twenty to thirty minutes, depending on the age group.

The children use this group activity to work together and connect their ideas through the objects; and since there are no limitations, everyone can participate. The children begin by combining their models together or starting from scratch. They can even create a name for their

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cities.

When the time is up, each team will present its solution for two minutes to the entire group. Each team should stand up around their model and begin by giving their names and name of their city. Each group can explain its solution by talking us through the model. After each group completes their presentation, the facilitator should synthesize the findings for the group, as well as take notes and pictures.

In addition, the floor may be opened up for questions from other children The team members may respond to the questions. Once they have completed their presentation, have them take a group picture.

After each group completes their presentation, the facilitator should synthesize the findings for the group and then open up the floor for questions from other children. The team members can then respond to the questions.

6. Synthesis

Once all the teams have presented its projects, the facilitator can synthesize the findings and ask the students what they have learned about themselves, each other, and the built environment. Generally, I have found that children are excited by sight, sound, touch, smell, and physical activities that engage their bodies.

Interactive City Models

I create interactive city models made from objects that are designed to provoke interaction from children. These large dioramas are designed to be read like a map and recreate the city's topography, urban form, major streets, and landmarks. Streets are labeled, as well as other landmarks, allowing a quick visual connection to the model.

Children are typically attracted to the interactive model by its size and collection of small, vibrant buildings. However, once confronted by the model, the viewers become the participants. The participants begin by observing the miniature vibrant landscape, but more importantly, the participants begin to understand and read the model as a place. The richness that stems from interactive planning with the interactive model comes when children orient themselves on the model with the help of street names, landmarks, and geographical features such as hills, beaches, or rivers.

Some children are fascinated by the design and construction of the small buildings. They examine the design of buildings, they touch and feel the grooves of the buildings they like, or they study the overall composition of the buildings and how they form streets and skylines. Once children

understand and personalize the model, they begin to interact with it and rearrange the pieces on the model in ways that reflect their ideas. From this point, the children project themselves onto the model.

The interactive planning process creates a safe space that is an equal playing field for all community members. This process mimics the dynamic and collective nature of urban life. These activities reflect how varied groups of players—children, adults, neighbors, and friends—interact to create a sense of place in cities and develop an agenda to improve it.

Because of their agility, interactive planning workshops simplify the planning process and help participants translate conceptual planning ideas into physical forms. This method taps into the public's creative thinking by allowing them the use of their hands to build small models of urban environments. These physical and visual tools help the public articulate ideas and needs regarding the neighborhoods and cities they live in. Not only are the models very mobile, but the events and people who participate are as well. On-site models are set up in parks, galleries, train stations, or on sidewalks at short notice. These spaces become impromptu public urban forums where everyone can participate by reacting and adding to the models.

Lessons Learned

The interactive planning method is based on pedagogy that children retain more information by engaging all their senses. By having children listen, talk, see, touch, and build physical models, they learn a great deal about urban planning.

By using non-representative objects, children are forced to be creative and not conform to the adult world. Often times, building toys and activities influence children to reproduce miniature cities by creating streets, stores, parks and houses. By not having these criteria, children are free to express themselves and are not confined to the world of adults. They create their own environments, which often do not resemble the adult world.

Throughout this exercise, the children investigate and discover their relationship with the city by arranging the objects. They create small vignettes of urban life. Children gain great satisfaction from this process because they are able to translate memories, visions, and ideas from their mind into a physical form.

The workshops bring children together to celebrate their common values of acceptance, caring, curiosity, learning, and responsibility.

The children learn that:

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- They have creativity inside them to solve problems.
- They can make something beautiful individually and communally.
- They can become more aware of the communities in which they live, play and learn.
- They have a role in shaping how and where they live and learn.

From this activity, children typically develop a new awareness and appreciation for the landscape around them.