

Ciudad Grande (Big City)

A film by Tuline Gülgönen and Ana Álvarez (2017).

Mexico City: Center of Mexican and Central American Studies and the French Embassy in Mexico. 31 minutes.

<https://ciudad-grande-documental.tumblr.com>

What we know of Mexico City, a megacity of nine million people, tends to be gained from socio-spatial descriptors: congestion, population, density, air pollution, crime. Yet here, in the 31-minute film *Ciudad Grande*, producers/directors Tuline Gülgönen and Ana Álvarez set out to show us how children observe and experience the city, through the eyes of five sets of children living in vastly different delegations of the city. In so doing, they show us poignant vignettes not only of the challenges of their lives, but also the opportunities and potentials of the city as a place for children.

The film is loosely organized into three sections that juxtapose children's experiences moving about, playing in public spaces, and experiencing nature in the city. Our entry to Mexico City looks like this:

Riding the bus through the maze of Mexico City traffic while reading aloud the advertisements and store names we pass by.

Chipping icy fruit treats with a wrench in a worn colonial courtyard.

Kicking a ball in a quiet street with the backdrop of dogs barking and the green hills above Iztapalapa.

Scootering through the tree-lined and cobbled streets of Coyoacán.

Roller-blading through the smooth tile halls of a high-rise, talking through a walkie-talkie to mom.

In the first five minutes, we see just how different these children's experiences are. The producers' technique of using drones to zoom in and out from children's experiences helps us to witness children's lives not only from the child's perspective but also from the urban context in which they live. These aerial views give a sense of the urban form, greenery, topography, and density of each neighborhood and help us relate this context directly to children's experiences of the city. This technique also helps us transition from one zone of the city to another. We leave the social play of children in a colonial courtyard playing a hand-clap game, laughing as they sing, "my school, my home, the WORLD!" and move to the isolation of life in the high rise with one girl peering through plate glass windows out at the megacity saying, "Here there is a swimming pool, two Jacuzzis, and a changing room." Through the plate glass, we see an empty pool; an outdoor courtyard with glass walls several stories high separates the development from its surrounding community.

What was documented in 1980 by Berg and Medrich—that children in more affluent neighborhoods within the city of Oakland, California, were more isolated in their play than children in a more degraded but socially networked part of the city—continues to be true in many cities today. In *Ciudad Grande*, we see this in the experiences of a child in the isolation of her high rise; children being escorted through streets, by bus, by car, by family members; and children who are able to move about on their own. These variations lead to different experiences of the city: watching the city through the windows of a bus; making a pretend call from the phone on the sidewalk as you pass by; playing ball with a friend until someone tells you “watch out: someone is watching you.”

There is no one city, only distinct experiences of it.

Producer Tuline Gülgönen has also studied children’s experiences of the street and public spaces with colleague Yolanda Corona. Together, they describe children in more affluent neighborhoods having significantly less independent mobility than children in a less affluent one. In *Ciudad Grande*, we experience these differences directly and profoundly.

In their research, Gülgönen and Corona (2015) also found that children’s ideal vision of the city was one with extensive nature. The aerial views in the film help us to see the greenery and topography of each delegation, and children’s small scale experiences of this nature: from the boys who hang a sign that reads “take care of the plants” next to a playground with a single bush, to the mature greenery of an expansive part in Coyoacán.

As the film comes to an end we are left with a profound sense of the distinct ways children navigate the city. The child in Coyoacán cries from his carseat: “I want to walk, I want to walk.” We see playground equipment decades old and abandoned amid the cars and traffic. We are left with a sense of the mysteries and diversity of a city as big, old, and complex as Mexico City.

This film is produced with little dialogue except for the words of the children themselves. There is no adult commentary or translation of children’s experiences into an academic language of children’s environments. It is not until the end of the film that we learn the names of the children and the districts where they live. By allowing us to experience the city along with these children, we see both the universality of children’s experiences and desires as well as the distinct character and affordances of each place.

The documentary, produced in Spanish with English subtitles, will be useful for scholars, planners, and designers interested in children’s experiences of independent mobility, safety, play, and megacities. As good art can, the film leaves you with rich imagery and questions to ponder. Perhaps the film’s only limitation is that it is not accompanied by more information about these places. The Mexico City novice may be left wanting more. But this is perhaps a good problem to have, and producer Ana Álvarez and colleagues (2006, p. 353) posed a series of questions that can apply to this film as well: *How do these images feed into your perception*

of the "authentic" place? What cultural dimensions do you recognize? To this list I would add: *What is universal to the childhood experience? What is specific?* For it is here that this film sits—providing us imagery of the city, authentic places that are very much distinct, and yet, through their elegant juxtapositions, showing us also what is shared amidst the beauty and plights of childhood.

Review by Victoria Derr

Victoria Derr is Assistant Professor of Environmental Studies at California State University Monterey Bay, where her teaching and research focus on the intersections between people and places, with specific interest in children and their environments, sustainable communities, place-based environmental education, and social justice. For more than 20 years, Victoria has engaged children, youth, and communities in participatory research in both rural and urban settings with tribal, Spanish land grant, and recent immigrant communities, and in international settings. She holds a masters and Ph.D. from Yale University.

References

Álvarez, A., Rojas Loa, V., & von Wissel, C. (2006). *Citamblers: The Incidence of the Remarkable*. Mexico City: Cultura sin Fondos.

Berg, M. & Medrich, E. A. (1980). Children in four neighborhoods: The physical environment and its effect on play and play patterns. *Environment and Behavior* 12(3), 320-348.

Gülgönen, T. & Corona, Y. (2015). Children's perspectives on their urban environment and their appropriation of public spaces in Mexico City. *Children, Youth and Environments*, 25(2), 208-228.

Directors' Response

Ciudad Grande (Big City) is a documentary that aims to portray the relationships children of different ages and social backgrounds have with urban public space. This work is part of a larger project called "Urban Public Spaces for Children in Mexico City," facilitated by the Center of Mexican and Central American Studies (CEMCA) and financed by the French Embassy in Mexico. The Urban Public Spaces project aims to unveil the status of children in the city through the study of the public spaces with which they interact. The first phase of the project consisted of research on public spaces for children in the city and an analysis of relevant policies and programs (Gülgönen, 2017). The second phase produced this documentary.

Big City follows children of different ages and living areas to show it is impossible to speak of a singular childhood experience of the city but rather of multiple experiences. The shooting of the documentary was based on previous guided tours led by the children themselves through the spaces they inhabit on daily basis. Some

of their comments through these guided tours were included as voice over in the documentary but apart from that, the documentary doesn't include direct interviews. It rather works in their perspectives visually. We found that the use of this audiovisual format allowed us to depict the different dimensions of children's daily life, which have to do not only with the physical and social conditions of space but also with the children's height—the level at which they can actually perceive their surroundings with their eyes.

We aimed to contrast this particular point of view with aerial shots of the city that allow us to frame these singular experiences into the social and spatial issues of the areas in which the children move. The use of shifting viewpoints also shows that a megalopolis has multiple facets and experiences: on one side, the profound social inequalities of a fragmented city and on the other, the different problems that contribute to the exclusion of children in urban spaces. The documentary also shows that despite all these obstacles, children have the capacity to turn the city into a space for play.

This film was screened for the first time in December 2017 to an audience of children, including those who participated in the documentary. Since then, it has been screened at different film festivals, universities, and professional symposia. It was also part of the international exhibition "The Playground Project," curated by Gabriela Burkhalter and presented at the Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn, Germany.

References

Bundeskunsthalle (2018). *The playground project*. Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland GMBH. Available from

<https://www.bundeskunsthalle.de/ausstellungen/playground-project.html>

Gülgönen, T. (2017). *Jugar la ciudad: Reimaginar los espacios públicos urbanos de juego*. Mexico City: CEMCA/Laboratorio para la Ciudad. Available from

<https://issuu.com/labcdmx/docs/jugarlaciudad>