

Placemaking with Children and Youth: Participatory Practices for Planning Sustainable Communities

Victoria Derr, Louise Chawla, and Mara Mintzer (2018)
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This is a rich resource for those interested in exploring young people's perspectives on their communities, based on several years of rigorous academic and practice-based research. It begins by outlining a solid theoretical argument for engaging children and youth in sustainable participatory projects, and goes on to present researchers and practitioners with detailed guidelines for realizing potential projects and affecting change.

Underpinning the importance of engaging children and youth in this participatory practice are two objectives: recognition of their rights under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and ensuring sustainability in urban development. These are both laudable and challenging aspirations, but as things stand for the future of the earth, essential. Recent figures on climate change present a very bleak picture for today's children and youth who will face the consequences of maintaining the status quo, and young people are acutely aware of this. In some cases, young people are asserting their need to engage in participatory planning programs so as to avoid what Greta Thunberg calls, "bad ideas that got us into this mess."¹

The publication of this book is timely, coinciding with these growing concerns around the future sustainability of the earth and a body of work advocating research on young people's everyday geographies and spatialities (e.g., Hackett, Proctor, & Seymour, 2017; Aitken, 2018; Smith & Mills, 2019), with a focus on the value of participatory practice in sustainable urbanism (Christensen et al., 2018). This discussion is manifest in urban planning programs such as ARUP's *Cities Alive: Designing for Urban Childhoods* (2017) and the Bernard Van Leer Foundation's *Urban95* program.

The book is framed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which outlines young people's participatory rights. Child Friendly Cities are identified as a template that gives expression to their rights under the Convention, while placemaking is defined as "the participatory act of imagining and creating places with other people" (p. 2). It is useful to attempt to offer some clarity on these concepts at a time when questions have been raised around how the Child Friendly City is interpreted by city authorities (Voce, 2018), and the objectives of those engaged in placemaking projects are being interrogated (Fincher, Pardy, & Shaw, 2016).

The ethics of conducting participatory programs are discussed in great detail with the onus placed on ensuring the empowerment of the participants. The book then shifts into the communities of children and youth, and readers are urged to begin

¹Thunberg speaking at COP 24, UN Climate Change Conference, Katowice, Poland, 2018

any project by developing an in-depth understanding of the local community with whom they are engaging.

The bulk of the book describes methods for participatory research and practice that are quite diverse, including arts-based practices from collage to video making and more traditional methods such as interviews and questionnaires. Working on site is encouraged and the methods here include child-led tours, "bioblitzes" and map making. Each process is described in considerable detail, ensuring suggested approaches are readily adaptable to prospective projects. Perhaps more use of digital technologies as a method for capturing young people's experiences might have been an interesting addition for today's generation.

The book describes case studies across six continents. The focus throughout is on sustainability, and the authors give space to projects that address climate change, transport, flooding and housing, as well as incorporate play and playfulness. Examples of successful projects range from children working to improve informal housing settlements in South Africa, to a participatory video project on responses to climate change in the Philippines. These discussions are vivid and thought provoking, and many of the more innovative methods presented offer scope for profound insights into the everyday lives of children and youth.

The authors do not shy away from acknowledging the challenges and difficulties of realizing the outcomes of participatory urban projects. The importance of allocating time, often many months and sometimes even several years, and of being aware that these projects are in fact dynamic and will evolve, is discussed. Readers are advised to avoid assuming participatory sustainable planning projects can mold to a "one size fits all" (p. 11) approach, and reminded that affecting change often meets with many obstacles. However, persistence is encouraged, as engaging children and youth who are listened to and "treated as valued guides" (p. 279) is a crucial step towards developing sustainable communities.

This book is an excellent guide to participatory sustainable planning, presented as a celebration of children, youth, the knowledge they have to share with us, and the possibilities for creating a more sustainable world when we work with them.

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Review by Jackie Bourke

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