# Antipode Cities: Primal Urbanism

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## Abstract

*This field report describes the Antipode Cities Project, which aimed to connect Earth's most geographically distant cities with collective cartographies made by local children. For the project, the author and art gallery staff conducted a series of map-making workshops on opposite sides of the world with children ranging from five to eight years old. The children's cartographies showcased a sort of natural urbanism, a trait that could be called "primal urbanism"—an innate perception of the city as a place that could be transformed by projects to alter its shape and form. The Antipode Cities Project, with the aid of different Chinese and Argentinean institutions, organized a research field trip and a series of workshops to compare Qingdao, China and Buenos Aires, Argentina—two cities that are at the exact geographical antipode from each other. This field report describes the conducted activities, perspectives and outcomes along with considerations about the pedagogy behind the concept of antipode cities from children's perspectives.*

**Keywords:** children, cartography, workshop, city, urbanism, collective, Qingdao, Bueno Aires

## Introduction

The project "Antipode Cities" aimed to connect the Earth's most geographically distant cities with collective cartographies made by local children. An *antipode* is the geographical feature that links the Earth's surface's most distant points. As water covers more than 70 percent of the planet's surface, generally the antipode of a land mass point falls in the sea on the other side. However, there is a collection of antipodean cities—cities that have another city in their exact opposite geographic location—as listed in Table 1.

**Table 1. Major antipodean cities**

| Cities | Countries-Regions | Latitude and Longitude |
|---|---|---|
| Asuncion / Taipei | Paraguay, South America / Taiwan, Asia | (-25.266, -57.391) / (25.105, 121.597) |
| Buenos Aires / Qingdao | Argentina, South America / China, Asia | (-34.365, -58.224) / (36.633, 120.270) |
| Bucamaranga/ Jakarta | Colombia, South America / Indonesia, Asia | (7.073, -73.071)/ (-6.125, 106.504) |
| La Coruña/ Christchurch | Spain, Europe / New Zealand, Oceania | (43.221, -8.234) / (-43.525, 172.639) |

The main argument behind using geographic antipodes as a starting point to make collective cartographies was the potency of their geographical extremism. The antipodean cities were united only by their ultimate distance, and this led to a vast array of singularities, similarities and of course, differences. This notion was especially stimulating for children; in attempting to describe their city to hypothetical children on the other side of the world, they were able to think about their own cities as a whole unit, often for the first time. Similar approaches to researching cities and children are found in numerous field studies (Al Arasi, 2013; Lanciano et al., 1998; Simpson, 1997). The activities described in this report shared similarities with these studies, especially in their practical workshop approach and how they used the children's urban space drawings to highlight city shapes, forms and configurations.

With this in mind, I designed a series of map-making workshops with children as protagonists and conducted them in the antipodean cities of Buenos Aires, Argentina and Qingdao, China.

This specific set up, a pair of antipodean cities, allowed participating children to link two different urban spaces in a common narrative. The concept of "otherness" was established as a trigger element and the concept of "antipodes" was used as a framework to signal differences and similarities, among other features. This way of understanding urban space related closely to the children's first approach to their own city, in what could be labelled *primal urbanism*: *an innate perception of the city as a place that could be transformed by projects and alter its shape and form*.

Established on similar properties was the early 20th century Modern Architecture Movement's concept of "initial sketches" (Banham, 1980; van den Heuvel, Mesman,

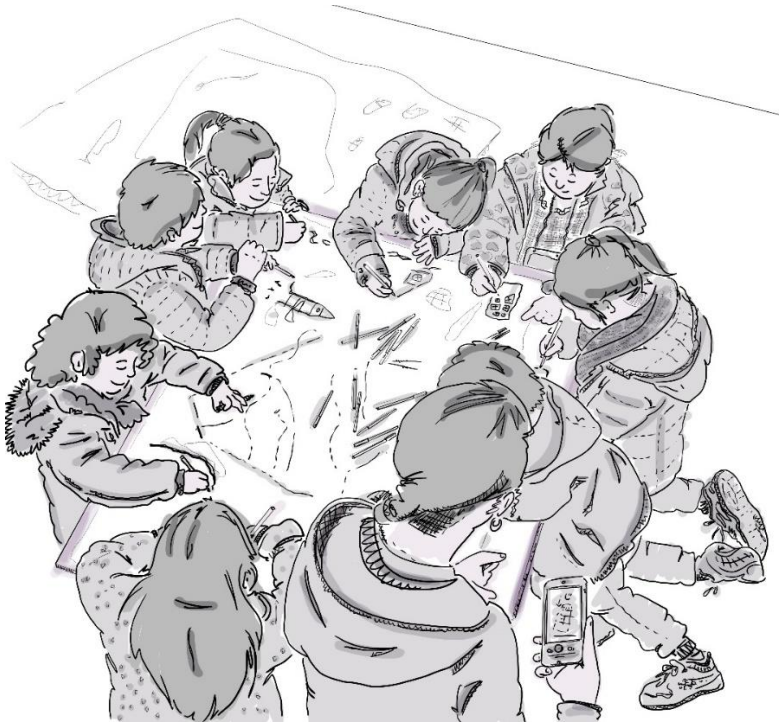
Quiste, & Lemmens, 2008). The influential modernists' projects always started with drawings composed of comparable elements akin to the primal urbanism maps I refer to here. These initial maps or designs were very expressive, had little to no detail, and employed symbols and phrases to point out measures, materials and sizes. The maps were built by emotional connections and iconic representations of the city and closely resembled a professional planner's first draft metropolitan masterplan. The specific nature of this kind of cartography is what allowed the researcher to link these drawings to the primal urbanism trait found in children's drawings. Children's cartographies made in this project's workshops exhibited diverse graphic structures of various scales and sizes.

This field report describes the project development, perspectives, outcomes, and tools to conduct similar research workshops in pedagogy, urbanism and urban studies related to children and youth.

## Workshops on Opposite Sides of the World

Supported by local facilitators, I conducted the workshops in Qingdao, China in February 2018 and in Buenos Aires, Argentina in September 2018. I held three workshops in Qingdao and two in Buenos Aires, and a collective map was produced at each one (Figure 1). In total, almost 100 children participated. In Qingdao, the workshops were held in the GINGKO Art Gallery and in Buenos Aires, in the Espacio Cavallero Art Gallery.

**Figure 1. Children in Buenos Aires drawing during their collective map-making experience**



Sketch drawn by the author

The participating children ranged from 5 to 8 years old, and they regularly attended visual art programs in their respective cities. Qingdao's participants attended an art school operated by the GINKO Art Gallery and the Buenos Aires children were part of a city council artistic education initiative that conducted similar drawing gatherings on regular basis.

Three workshop days were held over three weeks in Qingdao, and two workshop days over one week in Buenos Aires. The group numbers were designated by the partnering institutions. In China, several groups of ten children participated in the activity each day, while in Argentina two groups of 40 children each were transported from their schools by the local government. All of the workshops lasted one to one-and-a-half hours and two facilitators per group were present to engage with the children and conduct the workshops. The methodology used to record the workshops was observational, both in film and in situ; in each art gallery a photographer documented the workshops and a video camera was employed to record part of the activities. I also directly observed the workshops.

In overview during the workshops the researcher/facilitators showed films to the children (participants) of the opposite antipode. In Qingdao, casual videos of Buenos Aires city streets and building landmarks were in constant loop on a television located in the gallery lobby. In the Buenos Aires workshops there were two televisions located in the art gallery hall, one showing footage of Qingdao streets, people and buildings and the other one displaying footage of the Qingdao children working on their maps. Before the workshops started, each children's group was told about their antipodean counterpart by the facilitators who used the images to talk briefly about notions of distance, geography, cultural differences, time and architecture.

Facilitators gave a small verbal introduction as described in the workshop guidelines and interacted with the children regarding geographical features using a world globe. Children in both antipodes recognized that the world had a spherical shape, a knowledge that they seem to have acquired culturally (from adults, book illustrations, magazines, internet drawings, movie pictures and TV cartoons). Furthermore, the majority of the children identified their own country on the globe and a substantial number placed their cities on the map.

Then, the facilitators talked about the concept of antipodes, specifically Qingdao and Buenos Aires, and asked the children a series of questions to introduce the notion of similarities and differences between the cities. Some of the questions were: What similarities could they find? What differences could they find? Are antipodal children's houses like ours? And their monuments? How about their streets?

In order to get familiar with scale and to begin to engage with the context, the facilitators asked the children to draw on a common sheet over a city map. The following questions guided the activities and were part of the facilitator's instructive talks to assist the children during the workshops: How did the children visualize their city? Which urban elements were of iconic significance for them? What did

they first notice? In what ways could the drawings be utilized to improve urban projects aimed at young inhabitants?

**Figure 2. Collage of Chinese children working on the Qingdao map**

Photos by the GINGKO Art Gallery staff

Next, facilitators explained the activity and instructed the children to draw what they believed represented their homes, streets, schools and nearby parks, among other urban sites. The children mainly drew sketches of their own homes, schools and their respective streets. The team then asked the children to choose where to locate these items and provided an A1 size sheet of tracing paper over the city map for that purpose. Facilitators expressed this was one of the first times the children had seen a map of their city. The children didn't seem to be confused by the irregular shape of the political and natural borders and limits, but were rather amazed by them and even replicated fragments of the underlying map over the tracing paper. The participants located their drawings (with help from facilitators and family) and redrew several streets with colors and variously weighted lines. Note that in the introduction facilitators had asked the children to draw inside the city's grid, and almost all of the participants followed this instruction. The children

used a wide variety of color and weighted strokes, and the vast majority of the drawn works were colorful compositions.

At the end of each workshop, the facilitators invited the children to talk about their work and those of the other participants, and advised that their work was going to be shown to children of their own age in the correspondent antipodean city. The children were enthusiastic about the notion of their drawings being exhibited on the other side of the world and asked for more information about the antipodal city and their fellow children.

## Perspectives and Outcomes

The drawings on each cartography were both analyzed individually (if there were added names, different colors or diverse stroke weights) and by context (in terms of articulation to other figures, if the drawing followed the same topics or line connections with neighboring diagrams). The considerations shared in the children's perspectives below are directly taken from the cartographies made in the workshops in both cities. The workshop's results, the collective cartographies, illustrated urban space. spatial notions from the children's perspectives, and a series of reflections on the drawings are also shared below. Furthermore, with children's drawings as a starting point, it was possible to identify comparisons between them and the concept of primal urbanism as discussed in the following outcomes section. In this analysis I employed my own experience as part of urban design teams, where iterative stages of collective drawing play an important part in separating project design layers.

**Figure 3. Youth during the Buenos Aires activity**

Photo by Michael Kramer

**Children's Perspectives**

The children appeared amazed by their own drawings and claimed to have made a series of discoveries. Highlighted among them were:

- *The world has another side.* Planet Earth, "despite" its roundness, has opposite sides. The notion of antipodes inspired the children, and they asked questions about the antipodal city and its inhabitants and stated that the other city "must be different" from theirs as it looked "inverted on the map."
- *The city is below our feet*. The children realized there was a sort of correspondence between the antipodal cities. Below Qingdao city, deep through the Earth's core, there was an urbanization called Buenos Aires, unknown to the Qingdao children. Likewise, way below their Buenos Aires neighborhood, children could find a Qingdao neighborhood. This notion allowed children to identify that even if the place was unknown to them, there were other people outside their own space. They started to identify their urban space as something that could exist similarly in another part of the world. They expressed this notion as the feeling of their feet "walking below other feet."
- *The antipodal children*. The children realized the antipodal city was not abandoned or unoccupied, but rather, full of people: youth, adults and other children just like them (Figure 4). The concept that on the other side of the world there was a city filled with children simultaneously thinking about them, I believe encouraged the participants to think about how they represented their own city in their drawings.

**Figure 4. Youth during the Buenos Aires activity looking at a video of the Qingdao workshops**

Photo by Michael Kramer

**Outcomes**

The children's cartographies were not only a beautiful constellation of mixed techniques, but also a vast overlapped surface where hundreds of spatial representations communicated with each other. Although this was a collective children's map, the correspondent morphogenetic cartography resembled the properties of those first drawn on a master plan. This was the inherent primal urbanism aspect of the fieldwork; I argue that even at a young age, people may perceive the city as a space that can be transformed.

The drawings exhibited a palimpsest of different layers, from which specific workshop outcomes could be retrieved:

- *Landscape/Architectural*: The children drew iconic buildings, like Qingdao's St. Michaels Catholic Church or Buenos Aires' Obelisk, repeatedly through the maps employing different sizes, scales and textures (see Figures 5 and 6). The children also depicted their own houses or apartments. Qingdao's children's drawings depicted (mostly) governmental buildings, while Buenos Aires' children's most-illustrated constructions were football fields.
- *Urban/Cultural:* The participants distributed housing areas and green areas similarly in both cartographies, illustrating the notion that cities are composed of different sectors with diverse densities. However, Qingdao's children linked more buildings and spaces to specific roads and avenues in the maps, while Buenos Aires' children did not specifically reference these.
- *Psychological/Emotional*: Children added phrases, names and other written references next to the drawings that consisted mainly of their homes, pets, schools, friend's houses and restaurants that served their favorite foods. Children's representations of their city and urban spaces rendered an illustration full of color, emotion, wide strokes and phrases that emphasized their intent to translate reality into a navigable cartography.

**Figure 5. Qingdao children's drawing details**

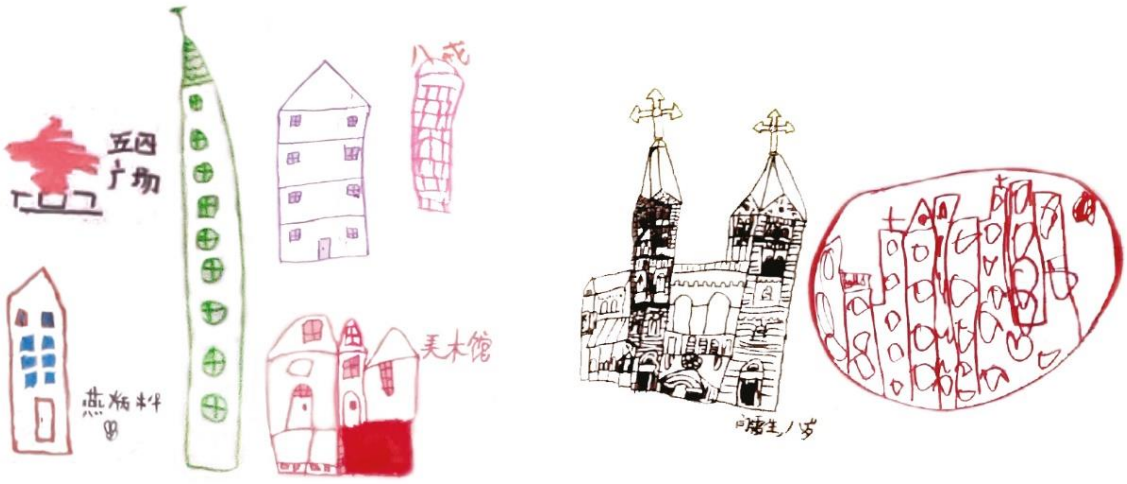


**Figure 6. Children's drawing details from the Buenos Aires activity**


These outcomes support the notion of primal urbanism and depict an idea not only of how the city was portrayed by children, but also of how "urbanism before the project" existed for the children: over time, cities present a fertile field of constant transformation.

## Recommendations for Conducting Similar Projects in Cities without an Urban Antipode

A similar project could be conducted in a city without a ground antipode. Most cities have a sea spot as an antipode; what seems today as oppositional—a dense city compared to a landless water body—could in the near future be a parallelism. Scientific studies (Kulp & Strauss, 2019; Williams, 2013) predict that, due to climate change, in less than a century most coastal cities (and a vast number of riverside cities) could be under water. Like their antipodes, the majority of the workshop participants' metropolitan areas may be represented as a blue spot on the map in the near future.

One possible approach for this kind of workshop could be for "designers of tomorrow's urban adaptations" to integrate this scenario as soon as possible. There is a chance that with sufficient awareness and worldwide efforts, environmental damage can be reduced. Explaining how climate change impacts cities and the way to mitigate its effects could be explored in a series of creative steps, then displayed in collective youth cartographies.

For better development of a city-sea antipode pair workshop, some additional guidelines could be followed:

- Discuss with youth the scientific models of climate change by postulating a possible future in which sea level rise could cover and/or modify their city coast or surrounding location.
- Work as a team with youth to develop possible solutions to the city's habitability for future generations.
- As additional information about the planet Earth's geometry and geographical conventions are shared, the youth participants could focus on the visualization of their city's antipode from a planetary perspective and the notion of scale could help them to think globally about local issues.

While the workshop is conducted the participating youth could gain key notions about the diverse cultural and geophysical landscapes of the planet. Some questions during the activity to boost creativity and trigger drawings and graphic structures could be: How would everyday life be in your future climate affected city? Which regional customs could subsist? Which ones would have to change irremediably? What monuments or buildings would continue to stand? Which ones would have to be modified? How would the city as a whole change if that scenario happened? What new structures and buildings would be necessary to keep the city functioning?

## Conclusion

Even though the map-making process in this project combined different disciplines such as art, science and culture, the activities described in this report relied mostly on the basic human notion of spatial awareness of our surroundings and the innate desire to transform them (Bremne et al., 2016; Wohlwill & Heft, 1987). Workshops like the ones conducted by the Antipode Cities project could help us understand how children and youth approach their cities as a malleable territory to acquire

better tools for engaging in learning scenarios. Furthermore, the idea that children can see their urban environments as a layout in which to materialize their spatial notions as "primal urbanism" can impact the way we engage in creative processes in professional city master plans. If there is a specific cultural system trait that inherently responds to urban spaces, differentiating them from other kinds of spaces, could we consciously access this to make cities more livable and enjoyable? There is evidentiary support in these realms; however, for similar design studies to contribute to learning outcomes (Jung, 2015; Spencer & Blades, 2006) more research is suggested to better understand the potential impacts of studying "primal urbanism" and how it could potentially be used for design and pedagogical projects.

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