

Let Children Help Design our Cities.

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Published in *Raise the Hammer* (November 27, 2007). Italian version is a chapter in the book *NO ALLE ARCHISTAR: IL MANIFESTO CONTRO LE AVANGUARDIE*, Libreria Editrice Fiorentina, Florence, Italy, 2009.

Here is a simple criterion for human design: Shape a city around our children.

Our society is suffering on many counts from a re-orientation away from living structure. The answer to choked cities is not sprawling suburbs, as was wrongly assumed after the Second World War.

Suburban geometry has turned out to be fundamentally anti-life. It is stifling in practice, even as it looks superficially nice: clean air, in many cases green, spacious, etc. But there is an essential quality missing, and it has to do with the geometry itself.

Without getting into theories of urban structure, here is a simple criterion for human design: “Shape a city around our children”.

Assuming that the interior of a house is designed to be friendly to a child (which more often today is not so, but that is another story), look at the immediate exterior of the house or building. Can a child go out of a door and play safely in the environment? Can he/she explore without the parent fearing for its safety? Can a child go anywhere on their own?

No. A child is imprisoned within their house or fenced-in back yard. In our beloved suburbs, the fact that the geometry gives priority to highway-sized roads precludes any sense of safety for our children.

So much for the annual upkeep of front lawns, bushes, curbs, speed bumps. Those elements are either fundamentally hostile to children, or they include band-aid solutions after the fact.

But planners still refuse to change the codes to allow a genuinely child-friendly built environment. In most cases, they have absolutely no idea of how to achieve that.

At the other extreme, the most inhuman environment for children is the skyscraper. Isolated from nature up in their upper-storey prisons, children lose all contact with nature and human reality.

In his excellent book *A Pattern Language*, Christopher Alexander already gave the criterion of a four-storey limit for apartment houses, based upon the distance children can successfully interact with their friends and parents. In fact, Alexander based many of his patterns upon children’s sensibilities, but no one paid much attention.

Architecture and urbanism willfully embarked in the past several decades on designs that isolate and diminish the children's world to within one house or one room. Eastern Europe has several generations of persons who had their childhood wasted by living in monstrous high-rises.

What is to be done? This brief note does not pretend to give the answer, but here is a starter. Grab a child (your child, or a nephew) by the hand and walk the project lot before even putting pencil to paper. Explain to your youngster that he/she needs to tell you exactly what is necessary to build there so that it is pleasant to play exactly where you two are now walking. (Also, try to imagine being that age yourself, if that is possible.)

Where is a tree, a paved footpath, a low wall for playing alongside and for sitting on? How about a gazebo here, for climbing up? None of these "useless" urban pieces should be placed on a plan by the architect — they wouldn't know where to put them, and even if built, will remain unused.

A picture emerges that is totally distinct from the urban fabric we build nowadays. No wide roads, lots of footpaths, densely packed. Low walls, little things, connections. Houses that are oriented very differently from today's suburbia.

Gone are the dangerous intersections, crossings, giant urban visual objects so beloved of post-war planners. Gone are the prison-yard concrete playgrounds, as the entire urban space becomes a playground.

Even the useless expanses of lawn: ask the child where he/she wants to have lawn to run on. Certainly not everywhere — "No, we don't want lawn over there, we will never go over there to play" — but in very specific places, and it must go there and be protected by the surrounding structures.

The reader ready to quit this letter will say: "Nonsense; no one has ever built such a city". Well, sorry, but much of the built urban fabric is built exactly in this manner. The developing world has cities, both traditional and informal, that exemplify what I'm talking about. Not that they are designed that way consciously, but simply because they have evolved in that direction.

If those poor people can do it, why can't we? Perhaps because we are too rich, too arrogant, too caught up with ridiculous and destructive ideas of modernity, too dependent upon mechanization, too proud to admit we have destroyed our cities, and too proud to learn from poor people who may be starving but have a better urban sense than we do!

Why are our societies so totally, obsessively, child-unfriendly, whereas the favelas of the world are great for playing in? Granted, we don't want the open running sewage or disease, but I'm talking about the geometry. They got it right.

Are we capable of learning? You would be surprised at the blockage to learning that very intelligent people manifest because their mind is full of geometrical images of modernity. It is a fanatical conviction, and you cannot fight dogma with reason.

The continued survival of the species depends upon our children. Surely, we need to build our world to optimize their experience? Not doing so goes against all religions as well as reason. Images of modernity compete (and have displaced) humanity's connection to the higher order of the universe.