The Culture of Children's Play – Theoretical and Methodological Considerations for Analysing the Culture of Play and the Role of Playgrounds Particularly in Slum Areas of Mumbai

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ABSTRACT

More than 60% of Mumbai´s inhabitants live in slums and more than 50% of them are children. Play is highly limited and lacks a high socio-cultural value. This paper is about how to study but also generally about the culture of play and the role of playgrounds within the megacity to understand the importance of playgrounds for the development of children and their communities. The described research approach and its realization are an inspirational starting point to develop an innovative design tool for sustainable playgrounds. The paper contributes to theoretical and methodological discussions concerning the analysis of cultures of play and play spaces open to all children irrespective of their upbringing and background.

Keywords: *culture, play, children, playgrounds, social space, participation, Mumbai*

INTRODUCTION

Mumbai is one of the most densely populated cities in the world, with an estimated population of 22 million people in 2015 (Spies, 2016). Population is expected to rise until 2020, reaching nearly 24 million people; by some projections, the city could even be the world's largest city in 2050 (Urban Age, 2007). It is a global city which affects the urban structure, not only economically and socially, but also physically (leading to a kind of 'global city construction' for international investors and the global community, according to Weinstein, 2009). Mumbai serves as India's financial capital, housing one of the largest stock exchanges in the world (with regard to transactions) and the headquarters of major banks (Bhide, 2014); as home to the Bollywood film industry, it is also the centre of entertainment in India. Its urban economy is mainly service-based; simultaneously, it is the city with the largest slums, which strongly contribute to the economy as they are powerful sites of production (Bhide, 2014). More than 60% of the people live in slums (Spies, 2016) – and more than 50% of them are children.

Poverty is an urgent issue, even taking the relatively low standards of measuring poverty in India into account (Bhide, 2014). According to Urban Age (2007), two kinds of slums exist: "authorised," in which the municipality takes care of providing basic services, and "unauthorised" slums, lacking a lot of basic infrastructures. Space in these unauthorised slums is extremely limited within the children's homes, and time schedules at schools are tight and learning pressure is high. There are no "alternative" spaces and hardly any healthy community areas within their neighbourhood.

Generally, slums or informal settlements are still an urgent political and social issue in cities of the developing world, though their growth and situation vary according to the local context (UN Habitat, 2016). According to UN Habitat (2016: 14), the percentage of urban population living in these areas decreased from 1990 to 2010, while the number of slum dwellers in the developing world increased considerably between 2000 and 2014 (881 million in 2014). Furthermore, the report states that many of these cities are still not able to provide sustainable physical and cultural spaces or socio-economic

opportunities for all. In these areas in megacities of the developing world, possibilities to appropriate and use space particularly by children are often limited. Safe and well-equipped playgrounds for children, which should be – amongst others – basic infrastructure in these areas, are lacking.

At present, there are a few safe playgrounds and green spaces within the megacity of Mumbai but the majority is reserved for privileged inhabitants. Slum schools and authorities lack not only space and funds, but also the knowledge needed to create a sustainable environment for the children and to develop play facilities. Furthermore, the administrations of the schools do not recognize the value of physical education and creative play. They do not find the need to equip the school with sustainable play spaces.

Even if it is considered, the play facilities lack imagination and are very generic. Moreover, the maintenance of the infrastructure and installation of playing facilities are given to local contractors of the community. These contractors neither have education in building construction nor formal training. Thus, the quality of the executed work is low. Hiring architects or experienced contractors is beyond the scope of schools´/ communities´ finances. In addition, most of the public areas in slum communities are unclean and unhealthy spaces which are not well kept by the community. Little or no funds are available for playing facilities as inspiring spaces for children.

Despite such conditions, there is space to play but most of these even tiny areas are dumping yards. The children are enthusiastic to play. Since most of the playgrounds and play spaces are reserved for the privileged, these children play in spaces where hygiene and safety is questionable, such as narrow streets, terraces, courtyards, foot paths, parking lots, dump yards, railway tracks etc.

In order to foster play for children and to provide safe and well-equipped playgrounds in the most densely populated slum areas of Mumbai, it is necessary to improve the understanding of factors determining cultures of play of children and, hence, to develop better evidences for building playgrounds. On the one hand, analysing the cultures of play, including the role of playgrounds, means understanding the interplay between physical and social space on a theoretical level. On the other hand, realizing evidence-based planning for

playgrounds means including children into the planning process, thereby thinking about methods of participation of children. This paper contributes to theoretical and methodological discussions concerning the analysis of cultures of play and addresses mainly the following two questions:

- What is the role of space and the interplay between physical and social space in structuring the cultures of play?
- What are innovative methods of including children into planning and research processes?

BACKGROUND

Aspects Concerning the Analysis of Cultures of Play in Mumbai

Significant for playing and the play element are the availability of (public) space and the culture of a society. The experiences of children in their childhood and play differ from one context to another, whereby the socio-cultural and socio-spatial context, geographic boundaries, social class, ethnicity, race, religion and gender can often explain this differentiation (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015; Scarlett, 2005). In the Mumbai context, particularly, religion and gender are main socio-cultural determinants for playing and should be especially taken into account in the research of cultures of play. According to Bhide (2014), gender is one of the key elements of fragmentation in the city as women are disadvantaged, e.g. concerning work condition, but also the lack of social infrastructure.

Generally, historically developed socio-cultural structures and processes (norms, values, practices) characteristic for urban societies in India are influencing how children think about and do play. Gaskens & Miller (2009) showed through comparing two completely different cultures that children's play is influenced by cultural assumptions and practices concerning how play is seen and evaluated in the society, the composition of playgrounds, and cultural norms related to expressing emotions. Interestingly, they found out that children's play is – amongst other factors – influenced by the "extent through which their daily lives are anchored in the reality of differing levels of adult demands and accommodations" (Gaskens & Miller, 2009: 12). So play is socio-culturally structured through general cultural values, the beliefs and roles of parents, behaviour around

children's play, the role of children and particularly girls in society. In another study, Morris (2009) shows how games mirror traditional notions of gender roles in society, an important aspect when we try to understand the relation between culture and play. Understanding gender differences in the culture of play, in the use and perception of playgrounds and the development of playgrounds is very important in empirical research in the context of Mumbai.

However, these socio-cultural characteristics are refracted by other social structures, most importantly socio-demographics, like ethnicity, age, family structure as well as socio-economic determinants, like income and education level of the parents.

Furthermore, the special situation and welfare of children in the developing world has to be taken into account, though these situations differ between countries. Generally, often national and urban measures to foster economic growth and simultaneously to cut back social spending seriously constrain the possibilities of local authorities to provide piped water, schools, housing, day care facilities and playgrounds, particularly in the expanding slum areas of big and mega cities.

In the meantime, some NGOs and governments have switched from a mere "lack" perspective to a more positive one, focusing on direct interventions in their livelihoods and seeing children as full participants in such projects. Lacking services for poor children in slum areas leads to an increased presence of children in streets. A lack of specialist knowledge to develop facilities for poor children to play in these areas is a further characteristic of the situation of children in these neighbourhoods (Nieuwenhuys, 2004: 208).

Contrary to this perspective, for inhabitants, their neighbourhoods are vibrant livelihoods. Dwellers have an immense knowledge about how to develop their environment. This has consequences for the type of research done in these situations: research has to be low-cost, adaptive to the local context, directly intervening through involving children and other local actors as participants and being on site.

Participation of Children in Planning and Research Processes – General Remarks

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNHCR, 1989) Article 31 states the right of the child to engage in play. Additionally, Article 12 clearly formulates that children have the right to be informed, to be heard and to express their ideas in matters relevant for their lives. Hence, children have the right to participate in the (adults´) decision-making processes. Still, the development on this right is extremely unequal in the world.

A child can be defined as "a human being in the early stages of its life-course, biologically, psychologically and socially" (James & James, 2012: 8); the definition of a child is deeply rooted in the culture of a society, so it can vary across contexts. Age can be one factor to further define a child, but experience is more important.

Children develop and have competences in dealing with places like playgrounds, so they should be included as experts in designing and planning their environments, to put it into a nutshell as 'place makers' (Derr, 2006). According to Rissotto & Giualini (2006: 85), children have the following skills which are important for designing their places, particularly playgrounds: knowledge of physical characteristics and their function, ability to evaluate places and to define their potentials. So to include them in designing processes means increasing the effectiveness and usefulness of designed objects.

This could be done through different approaches of participation, ranging from "advocacy, romantic, needs, learning, rights, institutionalization, and proactive" (Francis & Lorenzo, 2002), whereby according to Francis and Lorenzo (2002), the proactive is the most promising approach because it is suited best to satisfy their basic needs. Including children into design and planning processes means increasing their competences in using and appropriating space.

Participation of children in designing play elements and planning playground avoids the development of playgrounds only for children, which is mainly done through the eyes of adults. This could lead to playgrounds which are seen by children as very restrictive and not attractive. Contrary to this, participation enables the development of spaces like playgrounds by children (James & James, 2012). Furthermore, some studies clearly underline the positive correlation between participation in planning processes and the well-being of children. Participatory projects provide poor children with spaces in which they can experience the world

differently and build up stronger identities (Groundwater Smith et al., 2015: 86).

Practical Experiences, Motivation and Personal View Concerning the Development of Playgrounds

In Mumbai the NGO Anukruti[1] (hindi: small, creative spaces) was founded by me in 2013. As an architecturally inclined organization, Anukruti has developed unique playgrounds. In all projects of Anukruti, I have seen that the space for children is extremely limited within their homes, their time schedule at school tight and the learning pressure high. In informal communities, the built environment has a significant impact on the mental health and development of the community, especially children. That´s why Anukruti´s work happens on the very micro level through small interventions within the community itself, but with a great social impact not only for the children using the space. It is appropriate to develop even the smallest spaces within the children´s communities to provide them a personal space to play and meet.

It is not only about the built environment and revitalizing neglected spaces such as dumping yards or micro-left over spaces but also how children and their community must be involved and play an essential part of each and every planning process: Together, we identify even the smallest leftover spaces within neglected neighbourhoods and slum schools which are in most cases dumping yards. Together with the community, we clean up these unhealthy spaces and transform them into "Urban Flowers". These innovative play spaces have become social hotspots not only for the children, but also for their parents as community spaces.

We have already converted eight micro defunct-spaces into modern, safe and healthy playing areas using sustainable and recyclable materials. Together, we identify, renovate the infrastructure, design and execute play spaces. For instance, we created the first tree house in one of the densest slums of Mumbai. According to the available space within the school courtyard, we built a protecting multi-functional play area with an activity space, reading area with swings and a climber. The "Flower" acts like an additional micro play and community space in the school – very much needed by children living in cramped conditions.

I realized not only the lack of open spaces for recreation, especially for the "invisible" young dwellers of the city, but also experienced some obstacles. It is hard to find space because it is very controlled, especially in the dense informal settlements. Communities are afraid that space will be taken away from them and they do not usually understand the importance of play for their children. I also saw there is much more to handle – not only to build a stable structure, but also to deeply involve the community to make it sustainable.

I strongly see the need to understand the culture of play on the complex spatial and social levels within the city fabric to make a significant impact on the mentality of the people in the education sector, community and government who need to reinforce the notion of safe play for children. Through my recent experiences, I have realised that many important factors have to be understood and researched for Anukruti and other organisations to make a larger impact to the concerned communities. In particular, I feel that Anukruti is now looking for many answers before it can proceed and make the difference it has envisioned. It needs to create an evidence base for the development of physical education facilities for all children.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES FOR ANALYZING CULTURES OF PLAY

Childhood and Space

The lack of playgrounds and the non-inclusion of children in developing spaces is problematic from the perspective of "childhood studies" (Alanen, 2014; James & James, 2012; Mills & Mills, 2000) which basically state that children have to be seen as experts for actively producing and using their physical environment. Spencer & Blades (2006) argue that the daily lives of children are fundamentally spatial, that they learn through using the resources, norms and values of the social spaces they live in. This aspect has also been taken up in newer childhood studies, in which a 'spatial turn' is mentioned (Hengst, 2007: 96). Kogler (2017) hints to the recent development of a socio-spatial childhood research, in which perception and appropriation of space are at the core of research.

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[1] www.anukruti.org

From my point of view, this is an important argument which has to be explained in more detail. In order to understand the cultures of play and the role of playgrounds within these cultures, it is necessary to have an idea about the interplay between playgrounds as physical spaces and the cultures of play which basically are mirrored in social spaces. The so called 'spatial turn' in childhood research means that space is not seen as something naturally and objectively given, but as being produced by the children perceiving, using and hence appropriating space. Social space is relational space which is constructed through the relations between human beings, the natural environment and material things. So space has no objective character, but is produced through these relations, which are furthermore determined by the interplay between structure and agency.

The famous French urban sociologist Henri Lefebvre also conceptualizes space as relational and social space: "(Social) space is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products; rather, it subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity – their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder" (Lefebvre, 1995: 73). For him, space is basically a product of specific relations of productions and social relations. Space is both product and medium of social relations. In order to understand the production of space, Lefebvre refers to three dimensions of this production process: spatial practices (concrete daily behaviour of people in space, which is perceived through our senses; this is also the 'perceived space'), representations of space (planning concepts, theories, visualizations etc.; this is the 'conceived space'), and representational space (or 'lived space', which is felt by people; includes emotions, atmosphere, myths, symbols etc.). These three dimensions can only be analytically separated as they are strongly interwoven in daily practices. So no dimension has a priority compared to the other dimensions mainly because space is simultaneously perceived, conceived and lived. So social space is produced through spatial practices (materiality), thinking (representation) and living/experiencing (representational space).

Taking up Lefebvre's considerations concerning the production of space certainly helps for understanding how children are producing 'their' playgrounds as social spaces. Playgrounds are produced and created by children and other actors through their spatial practices (e.g. the use of certain material play elements, interactions between children), their ideas about how to use these playgrounds, but also the spatial concepts developed by planners or assessments of the children's parents of these playgrounds (these different representations of space could be contradictory) and the experiences and feelings of children when using these playgrounds (fears, joy, etc.). Furthermore, in childhood studies, social spaces are more and more seen as a kind of bundling of subjective living worlds of the children (Kogler, 2017), which shows both a constructivist and relational understanding of space and mainly points to the 'lived space' elements of social space. Particularly younger children do not see space as a kind of geographically demarcated territory, but they perceive them as inter-subjectively created constructions and social spaces.

PLAYING AND PLAYGROUNDS

Particularly through play, children can appropriate space and learn how to handle socio-spatial situations. Homo ludens signifies the playing human and implicates that the human being learns through the play element (Huizinga, 1938). Play provides freedom and opportunity. Play helps children not only to learn to make decisions of their own but also helps them to negotiate differences and to develop new skills through observation and experience. Through play children learn and develop, so it is fundamental for childhood (Smith, 2000). Smith mentions five areas of children's play: children as active players, as learners (intrinsically motivated learning includes problem-solving, creativity and development of language), as emotional beings (children learn how to express and cope with emotions), as social beings (learning how to build good relationships with others, developing social skills, learning form others and understanding their place in the world), as autonomous players. According to James & James (2012) play serves the following functions: role learning, cognitive problem solving, developing motor skills, developing social relationships, improving health.

Providing well equipped and safe playgrounds for children contributes to their individual learning processes, to strengthen their identification with their environment, to enhance their competences in terms of

appropriating space (Cunningham et al., 2003; Fatke & Schneider, 2007; Olk & Roth, 2007; Tekinbas & Zimmermann, 2005). Furthermore, this contributes to develop local communities most of all in social terms (well-being, security, social cohesion, identification, development of skills). To create a playground participatory triggers subsequent actions with authorities and communities to make a change. According to Kogler (2017), appropriation of space could mean dealing with and reflexively using the environment, expanding the space of action, changing spatial arrangements and enhancing the competences. Furthermore, exciting and open places strengthen the emotional and cognitive development of children. They support the development of imagination and the feeling for personal control as well as an understanding of being part of a community.

Playgrounds often provide the same play elements, but children use them differently as planned or not. They create new games using these elements in a different way, which mirrors their ability to appropriate space (Kogler, 2017). From the children´s perspective the quality of playground spaces is not only determined by physical infrastructures, but more through the possibilities to play and through accessibility.

Innovative Methods of Participation of Children

Within childhood studies, children are more and more seen not as research objects, but as a research subject: children actively take part in constructing their own lives and the societies they are living in. Furthermore, it was recognized that children should participate in producing sociological data (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015; James & James, 2012).

Participatory action research (PAR) with children is a promising way to realize these ambitions. The main aim of PAR is encouraging children to reflect, explore and act upon their environments and to enhance their ability for self-determination (Nieuwenhuys, 2004). PAR means co-developing the reality of children through participation and including their experiences, emotions, imagination and thinking. Researchers (adults and children) regularly engage in mutual dialogue in different phases of the research process. PAR respects local practices and enables to reflect the daily lives of children. Social oppression and domination of certain social groups can be

counteracted as PAR methods rely on sharing powers which is particularly important for poor children living in slums in cities of the developing worlds. Furthermore, involving children in research means securing success of low-cost interventions (playgrounds). Nieuwenhuys (2004: 219) mentions that PAR can be best used within NGOs as they make sure that "results are put into action".

A multi-methods approach should be applied for analysing the cultures of play using PAR. The following methods are in line with it and are very promising for analysing and understanding the culture of play and the playgrounds from children's perspective with respect to age, gender, religion, social background (family, income, education) and community they belong:

- Participatory observation of play in selected playgrounds: this is a good method to understand how children appropriate space differently according to their socio-cultural background because all actions and interactions and the use of symbols and material things on playgrounds are interpretations by children. It can be observed how children use the playgrounds and the elements of play.

- Conversations with children at play: this is a fruitful method to reconstruct how children perceive their space of play, why they use it and how they assess it. If asking them during play they can give an immediate answer about what they do and why they do this or that. The conversations should give children space to articulate and to tell stories linked to their actions, interactions and situations at play.

- Drawings and mental maps with children: this is very important as drawings are central elements of daily actions for children. Drawings show a representation of spatial elements and reflect the experiences made by children using space. Mental maps are basically perceptions of space, but they are also a way to show feelings concerning the use of certain spaces.

- Planning workshops: this gives power to the children and enables them to formulate wishes concerning the structure and the elements of playgrounds. It is both a way to get information from children and to activate for the planning processes which finally

contributes to a better acceptance of playgrounds by them.

PAR with children must also take into account: taking responsibility for the children as researchers, balancing participation and facilitation and providing spaces of the agency of children (Nieuwenhuys, 2004).

As already mentioned above, doing participatory action research with children in the developing world means to refer to low-cost, locally adapted and creative approaches (Nieuwenhuys, 2004). This reflects an approach which has already been realized by Anukruti.

CONCLUSION

For the analysis of cultures of play and the role of playgrounds it is certainly necessary to work with a theoretically grounded concept of space. The concept of social and relational space developed by Henri Lefebvre offers ways to better understand the production of playgrounds as social spaces by children. Cultures of play are strongly influenced and structured by the three dimensions of the production of space: spatial practices by children which are determined by socio-economic (income, education) and socio-demographic (gender, age) factors but also by elements of the physical built environment (locational aspects, material structure of the playgrounds, infrastructures); representations of space by children but also other actors; representational space which is the space felt and lived by the children.

The idea of the production of space by children implicitly has consequences for planning, developing but also realizing playgrounds as children are seen as the 'makers' of their spaces. All planning processes but also the realization of projects have to be conceptualized as participatory processes. Basically, if children are not only heard but also given a voice in processes of planning playgrounds, children will appropriate and use these spaces later. Furthermore, this process contributes to enrich their competences. Through using a participatory and bottom-up understanding of planning children from different social backgrounds can be reached. Particularly children from socially disadvantaged and poor families can be activated and hence strengthened concerning their competences. On the one hand, children are directly affected by the implementation of places of play as actual users. On the other hand, they benefit later as

young persons or adults from these built structures (Kogler, 2017). On the micro-scale possibilities to participate enable to spur individual educational processes and strengthen the identification with their worlds of living. Of course, these issues are very important in the context of planning and realizing playgrounds in slum areas. But every kind of participation of children in planning spaces certainly only make sense if the produced knowledge is really taken up for constructing or re-constructing these spaces, and not hindered by regulations or adults-oriented definitions of functions (Kogler, 2017).

For the analysis of cultures of play the combination between the theoretical perspective of social space and participatory methods of research and planning is promising. It not only fosters the empowerment of the not really heard voices of children but also provides a better theoretically and methodologically grounded knowledge in planning and design processes about how to build spaces generally but especially in slum areas of a megacity like Mumbai.

Everything is about community participation otherwise social design is not sustainable. This paper is a starting point for a broader discussion and to find new inspiration for even more sensitive, innovative and thoughtful designs for playgrounds and community spaces.

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Martina Maria Spies holds a PhD in architecture, is a designer, builder, activist and urban researcher using sociological methods. Her phd was an architectural-sociological analysis of five selected places in the informal settlement Dharavi. In 2013 she founded the organization Anukruti, which builds playgrounds on vacant urban sites within slums in the megacity Mumbai. She has gained experience in international offices such as Shigeru Ban in Japan, COSTFORD, B.V. Doshi and Hasmukh Patel in India. Between 2013 and 2016, she worked as the research manager for the project "Ground Up – A Dwellers'Focused Design Tool for Upgrading Living Space in Dharavi, Mumbai" in one of the highest density and largest informal settlements in the world. At Studio X Mumbai Martina, in cooperation with

Columbia University, was the successful curator of two international exhibitions called „Dharavi: Places and Identities", which brought four neighbourhoods in one of the most complex informal settlements alive and "Let's play! Children as Creators of Informal Play spaces "show casing the culture of play in India for the first time.