

Fresh Eyes

by Stanley King

“No city is governable if it does not grow citizens who feel it to be theirs.”

This statement made by social theorist Paul Goodman 45 years ago is still startling today. The urban development process rarely seeks the opinion of children, yet children have a vital interest in the planning of the future.

Their concern first registered with me through my son and his friends who complained, in tears of distress and fury, that a bulldozer was wrecking their fort. Built in a vacant lot in territory they regarded as their own, they angrily demanded to know the rules.

As a result of this experience, I set about to find ways to bring children into the planning dialogue. Over many years I have developed a children’s workshop process. Its basic outline is this:

As an introduction I ask the children to create a city on a large sheet of paper on the wall. I relate and draw a story, beginning with a bare headland, showing children arriving by canoe and building a cabin. Another cabin is added for friends, then a store and the children start to draw in their own ideas. Very soon a crowded city materializes.

Viewing the mess, the children are asked if they would like to live there. They usually all chorus “No!” This sets the stage for them to draw what they would like to live in. The exercise demonstrates change, our responsibility for it, and our need for planning. Turning to the children’s own town we list on a time line the activities that would be desirable in a normal or special day. Children then create images of themselves in an activity scene. They each rate all the images in one of three categories:

- (1) I love it — go for it;
- (2) O.K. but needs more designing;
- (3) O.K. but belongs elsewhere.

The images that get over 50% ticks in the “I love it” column are displayed at the

adult workshop that follows and included in the design criteria that result from the workshop. The ideas are usually practicable: a drinking fountain on the main street, places for family picnics, safe pedestrian and bike routes — all humane ideas.

The whole process is brief, being completed in a half day, with two classes in the school gym. Teachers always respond enthusiastically, weaving the exercise into social studies, history, language and graphic arts.

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Children aged 9 to 13 respond well. Newly aware of the environment beyond the home, they perceive the streets, the parks, with fresh eyes and acute senses. The answers they produce are often not those that would occur to adults. For example, awareness of risk from traffic, from dangerous people or from design situations that pose a threat is more acute in children than in adults.

Though the design criteria improve with the children’s input, design improvement is not itself the main aim. More importantly, by providing their input into the process, children avoid the feelings of alienation that often occur when the familiar landscape is suddenly disrupted.

The enthusiasm of children whose voices are heard in the planning process is striking. When children are shown how to express their ideas, and see their ideas respected and included in the process their

attitude of angry alienation changes to a strong desire to participate and an urge to show other children how to participate.

Children talk years after of the workshop experience, saying they feel a sense of personal pride in the successful developments that involved them. This is the main prize. The participation of children lays a foundation for a higher community consciousness that is creative and vital, in which paradise is possible. ♦

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