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## **Listening to 'Generation Jacobs'; A Case Study in Participative Engagement for a Child-Friendly City**

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## ***Children, Youth and Environments***

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Guest editors: Lia Karsten (University of Amsterdam) and Willem van Vliet (University of Colorado).

### **LISTENING TO 'GENERATION JACOBS'; A CASE STUDY IN PARTICIPATIVE ENGAGEMENT FOR A CHILD-**

#### **FRIENDLY CITY**

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#### **Abstract**

This paper reflects on the enduring value of Jane Jacobs' *Life and Death of American Cities* in the context of Child-Friendly Cities. This is explored through a project in Belfast which has engaged primary school children in how they understand their local environment. This shows that while children can effectively contribute to policy debates, there is a need to express this in a way that can be more effectively assimilated into planning debates. The paper reflects on this experience, suggesting that 'Generation Jacobs' could be used as a rhetorical device to frame children's needs in a way that can be better understood by the planning profession.

Keywords: Children; Planning; Participation; Jane Jacobs

# LISTENING TO 'GENERATION JACOBS'; A CASE STUDY IN PARTICIPATIVE ENGAGEMENT FOR A CHILD-FRIENDLY CITY

## **Introduction**

Jane Jacobs' *'The Life and Death of Great American Cities'* (Jacobs, 1961) continues to have a deeply symbolic and inspiring effect on thinking about the planning of urban environments. In this paper we review Jacobs' work in relation to Child-Friendly Cities and argue that explicitly associating her ideas with this concept can help invoke principles of inclusion and align children-orientated approaches with broader movements for progressive urbanism. We suggest that this can be usefully encompassed in the term 'Generation Jacobs', which can be used as a rhetorical device to promote planner's attention to the needs of children. In order to elaborate our argument, we draw on recent experience in Belfast in Northern Ireland and discuss an initiative that has attempted to engage with local children as part of a broader approach to encouraging a Child-Friendly City. We review how this project aligns with the concept of 'Generation Jacobs' and conclude by reflecting on its value for securing cities that can better support children and young people.

## **'Generation Jacobs' and children's participation**

The idea that contemporary urbanism can better serve the needs of different demographic groups has acted as a strong critique of the exclusive nature of western cities. This has been particularly true of the idea of Child-Friendly Cities (CFC) which UNICEF regards as being '... the embodiment of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* at the local level, which in practice means that children's rights are reflected in policies, laws, programmes and budgets. In a child friendly city, children are active agents; their voices and opinions are taken into consideration and influence decision making

processes'<sup>1</sup>. This makes a powerful claim on city governance, demanding that it should explicitly address children's participation, in a context where they are often unnoticed or seen as being incapable of effectively contributing to urban policy-making. There are strong educational and civic reasons for why children should be included in decisions over land use planning (Day et al. 2001) with Freeman and Vass (2010) noting that these can be distilled into two main motivations: to better understand children's lives so their needs can be better taken into account; and to directly engage them in the development process. However, the fact that urban areas are seen as 'adult-places' coupled with assumptions by planning authorities and professional planners over who has an interest in planning tends to lead to the exclusion of children from the very idea of public participation and reinforcement of the idea that 'adults know best' (Knowles-Yánez 2005). These all conspire to make children invisible or, at best, marginal to the decision-making processes that shape the areas in which they live and will grow up to manage. Although many planning authorities in the UK accept that they should engage with children (e.g. Wood, 2015), examples of *effective* involvement of children in planning are still the exception, many decades after this was first highlighted (Horelli 1997).

The effects of the marginalisation of children from the governance of the built environment is reflected in the ways in which the fabric of our cities increases the risks or physically excludes children from certain activities or limits them to particular locations. There is a substantial body of literature that has sought to describe the myriad ways in which children are constrained by living in an adult world, including the impacts this has on independent mobility (Flynn et al. 2011), the way they use public space (Elsley 2004) and the neighbourhood (Christensen and O'Brien 2003) and how they perceive landscape (Roe 2006), safety (Bromley and Stacey 2012, Wyver et al. 2010) and the amenities created for them (Veitch et al , 2007). Urban living also exposes children to a range of risk factors induced by the physical nature and environmental performance of the built environment, including negative consequences of poor air quality (Pénard-Morand et al. 2010), reduced opportunities for

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<sup>1</sup> <http://childfriendlycities.org>. Last Accessed 22/12/14.

physical activity (Moore et al. 2010) and poor access to services and community assets (Benson et al. 2012). Clearly many of these issues are further heightened in cities of the Global South with much greater risks attached to urban living in general (Tanner 2013).

This has resulted in a long tradition of calls for greater involvement of children in civic life, which Francis and Lorenzo (2002) suggest fall into seven different 'realms': advocacy ('planners for children'), romantic, ('children as planners'), needs ('social scientists for children'), learning ('children as learners'), rights ('children as citizens'), institutionalization ('children as adults') and proactive ('participation with vision'). This provides a useful way to understand how children's views can be fed into decision-making, with differing approaches operating consecutively. This has led to a substantial variety of approaches to participation (Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2009), often originating from adult approaches (Fraser 2002) but amended by considering factors such as the age of the children, the type of engagement activity and links to decision-making processes (Percy-Smith, 2010). This has included mapping (Moore 1990, Freeman and Vass 2010), child-led tours (Loebach and Gilliland 2010), inter-generational design charrettes (Sutton and Kemp 2002), urban simulation (Beckett and Shaffer 2005) and a range of other visual methods (e.g. Briggs et al. 2014), including Mosaic, which focusses on knowledge generation, rather than knowledge extraction (Clark 2011). As noted by Knowles-Yanez (2005) the dearth of systematic longitudinal studies of cases of children's participation makes it difficult to draw out examples of good practice so there has been a continual sense of "reinventing the wheel", although a range of inspiring case studies exist (e.g. Day et al. 2011).

However, Horelli (1997) highlights that participation with children (and indeed any other group in society) needs to be guided by both *normative* and *explanatory* theory, to ensure robust process and outcomes. Relevant *normative* theory seeks to define optimum aspects of both *substantive* (i.e. ideas around the 'best' type of environment for children) and *procedural* aspects of engagement (i.e. how citizens, including children can most effectively contribute to planning decisions etc.). In the case of

children's participation, *explanatory* theory explores *why* an environment shaped by them may lead to a more enriching or healthy lifestyle, *why* children should be motivated to participate or *how* to translate children's preferences into planning decisions. This is an important insight when considering how children relate to the built environment, the assumptions about the benefits and processes of engagement and how those who are responsible for planning decisions make sense and take account of the outcomes of children's participation. The idea of 'Child-Friendly Cities' has a strong high level normative vision at its heart. The key aim of this concept is to operationalise the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNICEF 1989) and UNICEF's initiative reflects nine building blocks that relate to different dimensions of governance that can influence children's lives, including legal framework, budgets and advocacy processes. The first building block is: '*Children's participation: promoting children's active involvement in issues that affect them; listening to their views and taking them into consideration in decision-making processes.*' (UNICEF 2004, p.4). These building blocks are then implemented and monitored through UNICEF's various self-assessment tools and governance check lists<sup>1</sup>. While this has provided a mechanism through which national states, municipalities and other institutions are able to adopt the idea of 'child-friendliness' (e.g. European Network of Child-Friendly Cities, Child Friendly Leeds<sup>2</sup>), the normative component of UNICEF's framework relates primarily to governance and policy and does not provide an effective explanatory basis for translating such governance principles into the actual physical form of cities. Therefore while the framework gives life to the *rights* of children, it does not do so in a way that is not easily conceptualised by planners and other built environment professionals; yet they are often blamed for ignoring children or lacking the competency to assimilate the views of children into their decision-making.

We suggest that the work of Jane Jacobs - particularly her 1961 masterpiece '*The Life and Death of Great American Cities*' - could provide both an important normative *and* explanatory basis for

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.childfriendlycities.eu/EN-CFC/page/2877/>; [www.leeds.gov.uk/childfriendlyleed](http://www.leeds.gov.uk/childfriendlyleed). Last accessed 5.1.2015

motivating planning professionals to align their decisions to promote Child Friendly Cities. We propose this because Jacobs is recognised as one of *the* most important urban thinkers and has had far-reaching influence through her calls for 'people' to be the prime object of analysis when considering how cities function (Hirt et al., 2012, Hospers 2006). Indeed, her work is so well known that an extended appreciation and critical discussion is not needed here. However, it is worth emphasising her particular important insights around how people's daily lives and routines are central to the relationships with the places in which they live, rather than the aspirations of the planners. In her world, chance, diversity, and even a bit of chaos, come to play very important roles in making prosperous cities.

Although Jacobs' inclusive conception of community means that she had little motivation to single out the needs of an individual group like children, she does make some specific comment on their needs. For example, she observed how planners decided what children needed, without really understanding the way they interact with the city, or asking them what they wanted (i.e. a normative model with no explanatory basis). Instead she recognised that children required a wide variety of spaces in which to play and learn and that this was best provided by informally accommodating children's needs by including them within – not apart – from the daily lives of adults and the broader community (i.e. both a normative and explanatory-led approach). She specifically notes how sidewalks play an important role in 'assimilating children', largely based on the benefits of socialising their behaviour through mixing with adults, rather than segregating them in the 'enclosed park enclaves' (Jacobs 1961 p.90) of housing schemes. Her discussion of the place of children in cities reflects her broader calls for a more progressive planning that is inclusive, embraces complexity, celebrates diversity and does not seek to control every aspect of urban life. The value Jacobs places on flexibility of approaches to meet the specific needs of individual communities sits well with Child-Friendly approaches, helping to encourage experimentation and imagination in navigating and learning from the built environment.

Although *'The Life and Death ...'* was written some years before the idea of public participation became enshrined in statutory planning processes, let alone specifically involving children, she makes a strong case for basing planning decisions on localised, community-situated knowledge. She also stresses how planning should be as inclusive as possible, led by people who really care about an area, such as residents (Stockhard 2012). As indicated above, we would suggest she also offers both a strong *normative* vision of people-orientated urbanism and the types of urban form through which this can be expressed (i.e. cities as inclusive, diverse and localised communities) and a persuasive *explanatory* theory for how planning needs to support urban vitality by accommodating the intricate and varied needs of different social groups, including children (i.e. recognising cities as problems of 'organised complexity', p. 454). We believe therefore that her work has the potential to provide the normative and explanatory frame for Child-Friendly Cities, called for Horelli (1997), above.

The value of using Jacobs as a way of articulating the needs of Child-Friendly Cities is further strengthened if one considers that *'The Life and Death...'* has become one of *the* most influential texts on planning and urbanism, translated into six languages and its concepts applied throughout the world (Hospers 2006). It has attracted nearly 12500 citations on Google Scholar<sup>3</sup> and in 2009 Jacobs was voted as the top urban thinker in *Planetizen* by an 'impossibly wide lead'<sup>4</sup>. Unusual for a work with such a high profile, her work has attracted only isolated critiques, such as those highlighting the negative social impact of gentrification (Zukin, 2010) or expressing a tiredness of the hagiography that has grown up around her work (Manshel 2010). Although there have been long standing concerns that Jacob's work implies a degree of environmental determinism (Gans 1961), recent research on the environmental correlates of health supports some of her claims (Saelens et al. 2003). Given the esteem of Jacobs' work, we suggest that explicitly linking the normative and explanatory concepts

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<sup>3</sup> <http://scholar.google.co.uk/> Citation count at 22/12/14.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.planetizen.com/topthinkers> accessed 05/01/15



expressed in *'The Life and Death ...'* with the idea of Child-Friendly Cities offers a significant opportunity for more firmly embedding this within the discourse of planning theory and practice.

To actively operationalise these links we suggest that we should encourage planners to view current children as being part of *'Generation Jacobs'*. We propose this as a potential way of framing how the needs of children can be aligned with Jacobs' ideas of humane, progressive urban form and processes. As such, we propose this offers a way of more effectively embedding the concept of Child-Friendly Cities alongside aspirational concepts well-understood by the planning profession.

We now explore these issues in the context of Belfast, Northern Ireland.

### **Belfast as a Child-Friendly City**

Belfast is the capital of Northern Ireland, with 282,000 residents, 19% of whom are under 16<sup>5</sup>. Belfast is perhaps best known as being the epi-centre of the 'Troubles' which lasted from the late 1960s into the 1990s, during which the city suffered from high levels of ethno-religious violence, entrenched sectarian segregation and enforced inter-cultural boundaries. This compounded Belfast's challenges of de-industrialisation and has severely compromised economic prosperity and investment (Plöger 2007). This has clearly had a profound influence on the children of 'The Troubles' (Cairns 1987, Muldoon 2004) and had a major impact on children's movement, cognition and later life chances. Within the most deprived communities, these effects have continued into the post-peace era while children in more affluent areas have been able to take the advantages that have come with improved economic and social circumstances (Murtagh 2011, Murtagh and Murphy 2011). Although children in Belfast have largely good health, 15% of children aged under 16 report a long term condition or

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<sup>5</sup> Demography statistics, NISRA, available at <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/default.asp42.htm>. Last accessed 5.1.2015.

disability<sup>6</sup>. Similarly, educational attainment is also generally good with over half of school leavers in the final year of compulsory education achieving at least five good qualifications<sup>7</sup>, although specific groups, such as Protestant boys, are performing much more poorly. The well-being of children is, of course, strongly influenced by the unequal distribution of affluence, with many parts of the city suffering significant levels of deprivation resulting in 33% of children and young people aged under 19 living in low income families<sup>8</sup>. Indeed, 7% of children live in households with no one in employment and 11% of households in the city are lone parent households with dependent children. Obesity is also a growing issue: 22% of children in the first year of education (aged 4-5) are overweight or obese, rising to 29% of children in Year 8 (aged 11-12)<sup>9</sup>.

'The Troubles' has also left its mark on the institutions of governance, including weak local government, poorly coordinated public services and an overtly technocratic approach to land use planning (Ellis 2001). Indeed, it is only during 2015 that key local government functions (including planning) are being returned to direct democratic control of local councils, having been suspended in 1972 in the face of sectarian abuse. This has had a profound way in which planning, health and children's services have evolved in Belfast and opened opportunities for non-statutory agencies to take a lead in driving innovative projects and setting policy agendas. This has included specific voices on children's rights such as the Commissioner for Children and Young People<sup>10</sup> and Playboard<sup>11</sup> who lobby, research and promote play for children in Northern Ireland. A further example is Belfast Healthy Cities (BHC)<sup>12</sup> a partnership organisation that works to improve health and wellbeing for people living and working in the city. The organisation provides the link between governance

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<sup>6</sup> As above

<sup>7</sup> i.e. General Certificate of Secondary Education passes at grades A\*-C, source as above

<sup>8</sup> This is defined as households with an income <60% of median, or in receipt of key benefits.

<sup>9</sup> Child Health System, Northern Ireland Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, available at <http://www.ninis2.nisra.gov.uk/public/pivotgrid.aspx?dataSetVars=ds-4239-lh-63-yn-2008-2012-sk--2-sn-Investing%20for%20Health-yearfilter-->. Last Accessed 23 November 2014.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.niccy.org/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.playboard.org/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.belfasthealthycities.com/>

institutions within the city and the World Health Organization European Healthy Cities Network, a grouping of nearly 1000 cities committed to creating healthier communities and tackling inequity. The work of BHC focuses on facilitating inter-sectoral collaboration, building capacity, sharing evidence and demonstrating new concepts and innovative approaches. In recent years it has actively promoted Healthy Urban Planning (Barton and Tsourou 2013), which encompasses inclusive approaches to decision making, including the engagement of older people and children (Barton 2009). Children's health is particularly sensitive to their environmental quality of their surroundings, including access to open space (Potwarka et al. 2008), air quality (Schwartz 2004) mobility (Schoeppe et al. 2013); issues that they rarely have any opportunity to influence.

BHC initially focussed on capacity-building within key statutory agencies (such as those responsible for urban regeneration and land use regulation) and collating a local evidence base that could help translate the principles of HUP into effective local practice. Given the acute challenges faced by those children living in deprived neighbourhoods of Belfast (see above), the interface of children and place was identified as a priority for encouraging more progressive approaches to planning in the city, encouraging cross-sectoral cooperation and demonstrating the benefits that could be secured through healthy urban environments. It soon became clear that the wishes and needs of children had never been specifically incorporated into formal decision-making processes. In an attempt to address this, BHC launched a number of initiatives, including *Children's Voices: A Charter for Belfast*, which identified issues related to children's' environments, including open space and traffic management. The Charter unlocked a variety of other projects in which a range of bodies engaged with child-friendly initiatives, including the private sector Belfast City Centre Management partnership with children's needs being incorporated in the forthcoming Belfast City Centre Regeneration Strategy and the Northern Ireland Public Health Agency's sponsorship of Belfast Healthy Cities' child friendly places programme as part of a city wide focus on family friendly activities (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** The child friendly places programme of Belfast Healthy Cities also includes pop up events, here pictured at Belfast City Hall. Source: Belfast Healthy Cities.

However, in the promotion of the Charter, it was clear that there was a barrier in translating the principles of child-friendly environments into specific policy responses, particularly by those involved in urban planning. This appeared to be related to the way planners perceived children's needs being peripheral to the main business of plan-making and planning regulation, further frustrated by the dominant professional planning culture. The reasons for this largely relate to the technocratic style of planning that has dominated planning in Belfast over past decades, with locally-elected politicians isolated from the decision-making process and instead, this has been controlled by civil servants with a specific perception of 'the public interest' (Ellis and McKay, 2000). The fact that planning

responsibilities have been distributed across a number of government departments has also meant that institutional fragmentation has further hampered more holistic approaches to policy-making. It was also clear that the concept of a Child-Friendly City was also poorly understood by those involved in the key statutory agencies, particularly in planning and that strong demonstration projects were needed to align the needs of Belfast's 'Generation Jacobs' with statutory planning strategies.

### **Shaping Healthier Neighbourhoods for Children Project**

A key initiative for exploring the benefits of promotion child friendly places in Belfast was the *Shaping Healthier Neighbourhoods for Children*<sup>13</sup> project, which aimed to identify ways in which children's views could be more effectively heard in policy and decision-making processes. The project involved children in a three-stage process through which they were introduced to the ideas of healthy urban environments, then undertook a process of photo-elicitation of their local environment, followed by a facilitated exploration of the issues that this raised. The project was piloted in 2011 and developed into a citywide initiative in 2013. The participant group was children aged 8-11, having been identified as the one having the most limited opportunities to engage in decision-making. A supportive environment was also identified as particularly important for children of this age, as they are beginning to develop a degree of independence, but remain largely tied to their immediate neighbourhood (Villanueva et al., 2012).

#### *Methodological approach*

The project focused primarily on areas of higher deprivation, as engagement of children from such communities has been particularly limited while they have the highest proportion of children. An invitation was extended to all schools within the 20% most deprived areas within the city; school

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.belfasthealthycities.com/shaping-healthier-neighbourhoods-children>

willingness to participate then became a key factor. The final criteria were a need to reflect the community and geography of the city; a minimum of two schools were chosen from the east, west, south and north parts of the city. This resulted in the involvement of 11 primary schools and one after school club (in an area where the primary school had closed down) with equal representation across the two main communities (i.e. Protestant and Catholic). All but one of these were located in areas of relatively high deprivation.

In total 400 children aged 8-11 participated in the project. All schools were co-educational and classes had a relatively even split between boys and girls. Less than 10% of participants belonged to minority ethnic groups, reflecting the overall low proportion of minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland. This age group was selected as the key participant group as a review of literature indicated that very limited engagement with primary school age children has to date taken place in relation to research and decision making on planning and regeneration. The built environment topic also fitted well the 'World Around Us' element of the Northern Ireland primary curriculum, which for this age group incorporates aspects of subjects including geography, history and science.

The project sought to adapt the *Photovoice* method (Wang and Burris, 1997), which uses photography and art to create an environment suitable for and attractive to children of all abilities. Photovoice originated a participatory research technique in public health to engage communities, promote critical discussion and relate concerns to policy makers. Like other related photo-elicitation techniques, it has been shown to be effective when working with vulnerable groups, and for recording views of people seldom heard publicly. There is also some evidence that the use of photography in research can contribute to a sense of empowerment among participants (Pritzker et al. 2012, Hennessy et al. 2010) and as noted by Luttrell (2010, p.225), photos can act as a 'useful metaphor for thinking about how we read our social worlds, construct ourselves in relation to others, and express matters of the heart'. Furthermore, conversations about the images captured by children can prompt deeper conversations

about things that matter to the children (Rogers, 2012) and thus generate insights than may not be gained from other methods (Nic Gabhainn and Sixsmith 2006). The teachers involved in the project also noted that it supported team working, critical thinking and problem solving; all key cross cutting elements of the curriculum.

The use of photographic methods requires specific ethical considerations (Wang and Redwood-Jones, 2001) including protection of privacy and representation, in addition to those faced when working with children, although participatory research itself can help overcome some of these ethical, given that they are far more in control of the data and its interpretation (Thomas and O’Kane, 1998). In this case, these issues were discussed during briefing sessions with the children, although consent of the children and their parents was brokered and secured directly by the schools involved.

The project consisted of three separate one hour sessions, delivered by Belfast Healthy Cities’ staff over 3-4 subsequent weeks in class during the ordinary school day. The first session was an introduction to the concept of healthy urban environments and explored how the children’s local environment shaped their lives, using semi-structured group discussions, based around a number of topics but led by the issues raised by the children themselves. The second session was the focus of the initiative and engaged children in assessing their environment through photo-elicitation, based on Photovoice (Wang and Burris, 1997). A briefing session was given on how to use the cameras and the children encouraged to capture what was important to them about their local environment, without too much direction given by facilitators. In 14 groups disposable analogue cameras were provided to each child, the remaining three classes worked in groups of 3 using tablet computers. A 30 minute walk was then undertaken in the local neighbourhood; routes were planned by the class teacher who led each walk. Participants were instructed to take photographs of elements of their environment they found welcome and positive, or elements they found negative, unpleasant or difficult to deal with (see Figure 2). As the aim was to take a child-led approach, instruction in relation to what to photograph

was kept to a minimum; instead facilitators concentrated on ensuring participants remained focused on the task.

For the final session, photographs were developed and were brought back to the group in both hard copy and electronic format. The photographs were used as a basis for posters and electronic presentations, which were developed in groups of 4-5 children and highlighted key issues – positive and negative – identified during the walk. In addition, groups were encouraged to use art and text to describe what they would like to see in their area. Facilitators supported this process using a semi structured approach to clarify children’s thinking, but care was taken to avoid direction and focus on a fully child-led approach. Staff from BHC then talked through the posters with each group, with children asked why certain images were included and were prompted to explain the significance of different features and how these may effect their daily lives. Attention was also placed on listening to the way children negotiated between themselves on how best to explain importance of different elements of the built environment. Key points of these discussions were recorded in note form by the facilitators and coded to align with issues raised in the healthy urban planning literature.





*Figure 2: Participants in Shaping Healthier Neighbourhoods for Children project. Participants were eager and keen to share thoughts and observations. Source: Belfast Healthy Cities*

The project concluded with a celebration event in Belfast City Hall, where each participating group presented one poster to an audience of senior policy and decision makers including the Minister of the Environment in Northern Ireland, Belfast Deputy Lord Mayor and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People. The work presented was selected by each class; the method for selection was chosen by the class teacher without intervention from the facilitators.

There are of course a number of limitations to this research, which included teachers being present for safety purposes on the guided walk and restrictions set by the schools on the time available for the group discussions. As noted by Wang and Redwood-Jones (2001), phot-elicitation has risks attached to the representation of what images are captured and perhaps more significantly, what is left out. We should also acknowledge that both these issues may have been influenced by the children's perception of what the researchers and their teachers wanted. Nevertheless, the project

did produce a rich collection of images of what the children liked and disliked about their environment and in turn this stimulated deeper discussions about the influence they thought they had, or did not have of the way their neighbourhood was shaped.

The project was further extended in 2014 through a survey with all schools in Belfast, facilitated by the local education board, targeted at 7-14 year olds and which has received 1200 responses. The survey was adapted from the Spectrum tool (Barton and Grant 2006), which asked participants to rate neighbourhood features such as open/play space, safety of roads and street lighting. It also asked a series of open ended questions on children's priorities for their neighbourhood. At the time of writing (January 2015) analysis of the survey is pending but initial findings suggest that it corroborates findings of Shaping Healthier Neighbourhoods for Children and other initiatives are being developed on this basis.

### *Findings*

The children responded well to the initiative, were enthusiastic about being asked for their opinion on their local environment and demonstrated a strong understanding of how this affects their lives. As the focus of the project was engaging children in qualitative assessment of their environment, it was not considered appropriate to undertake quantitative analysis of the children's work. Rather, these findings are based on observation by the project facilitators, their coding and general analysis of the posters produced as the project end result.

A key finding from this project was that the issues and priorities identified by children had a high degree of similarity from locations across the city. The main priority, identified in all posters produced, was access to green and open space that enables children to play and socialise with a degree of independence. Although we did not set out to make direct links to Jacobs' observations from New

York fifty years ago, the children involved in the project did express concerns that were recognisably comparable to those made in *'The Life and Death ...'*. For example, the children highlighted a preference against the strict land zoning of play and preferred flexible semi-natural space, while formal play areas were seen as discouraging imagination and stifling other activity. The posters also emphasised a wish that children should be allowed to use all available, suitable space, as a way of integrating into the 'adult world'. In one area, children highlighted the value of green verges and strips left over between housing blocks, as these were considered to offer both independence and safety. This touches on the importance of city spaces as arenas of socialisation as noted by Jacobs – yet participating children still felt they were seen as a nuisance in an adult world, further discouraging them from spending time outdoors. This reflects findings from existing work on children's independent mobility (Villanueva et al. 2012).

In all groups, participants highlighted a strong concern for cleanliness. Litter was seen as a key issue that made the environment unwelcoming; issues with dog mess were highlighted during all walks and in all posters. This was reflected in all of the posters produced. Graffiti divided views more clearly: during group work discussions, some children felt all graffiti indicated an uncared for space, while others felt that when done appropriately, graffiti can add character: "you can see if it's done properly, if it's just scrawls then it's not good" (Girl, aged 10). In discussions, it was clear participants also felt dirty streets indicated lack of local pride and a cause for concern.

Traffic was the third key issue raised on all walks and in all posters. A key priority identified, mentioned in all classes, was better provision for walking and cycling and better traffic management. For example, participants presented ideas for alternative parking provision. Children noted how cars parked on the pavement forced them to go onto the road to get around them. Another finding was that children are aware of and able to express how the built environment affects their life and health. For example, five of the participating schools were located in inner city areas characterised by very limited open space.

The work of children in all of these schools emphasised the limitations lack of green and open space on their free and active socialising and play. Children in schools located in more suburban areas highlighted issues with high speed traffic, including parental concern limiting outdoor opportunities and actual traffic incidents or near misses. The concept implicitly invoked in group work discussion by most children was that of home sphere or 'territory'; within these areas; children felt free to engage in their own activities but also felt sufficiently close to home and family to be safe. Indeed, safety concerns raised in discussions appeared to orientate towards 'bullies and troublemakers', rather than 'stranger danger'. In relation to traffic, discussions as well as posters highlighted children's empathy with older people and parents with prams; references to grandparents and younger siblings having difficulties negotiating traffic were observed in in over half the groups.

The final key finding was that younger participants (8-9 year olds) were notably stricter in their approach to dealing with identified issues. About half of all participating classes were in this age group, and posters produced in these classes tended to highlight a wish for more enforcement of traffic regulations, including parking. This reflects findings from existing literature on children and active travel (Zwerts et al. 2010, Giles-Corti et al. 2011). Work in the older age group classes (10-11 year olds) put more emphasis on a need for space for socialising, highlighting a gradually changing needs and priorities.

These insights primarily draw on the idea of identifying children's needs and concerns (i.e. 'social scientists for children', as discussed by Francis and Lorenzo 2002), but the views of the children also showed a proactive dimension (i.e. 'participation with vision', *ibid*). For example, the children offered a range of ideas for currently unused or derelict spaces and buildings, which were seen as both valuable assets and potential targets for anti-social behaviour. Ideas included refurbishing buildings and returning them to their original use, but also identified new and 'meanwhile' uses; indoor play

spaces were a particularly popular option for this. Community gardens were popular ideas for derelict outdoor spaces; the particular attraction was that they provided attractive social and meeting places.

### *Reflections*

The *Shaping Healthier Neighbourhoods for Children* project provided a valuable opportunity for engaging with children around issues of the built environment and its findings have been disseminated to a range of statutory agencies, including those responsible for planning in the city. The project clearly highlighted the degree of knowledge children have about the area in which they live and learn, and how this helps shape their lives. It particularly demonstrates that children have the capacity to suggest creative solutions for the built environment, with priorities of enabling social connections, active play and imaginative daily living. The findings tend to align with those of other researchers who have used similar approaches, such as Rogers (2012), who found children's key concerns were with reducing crime and anti-social behaviour, environmental stewardship and enhancing local amenities. The participating children showed a strong sense of belonging and indeed pride in their area, reflecting the place-based nature of children's lives (Barton 2009). The findings of this particular project also appear to suggest that major costly infrastructure projects do not feature at the forefront of children's minds and thus responses will have limited demands on city budgets.

### **Giving Voice to 'Generation Jacobs'**

This paper has explored some of the theoretical perspectives on children's participation and reflected how this is related to Jacobs' *'Life and Death ...'*. It has discussed the potential benefits of reframing child-orientated approaches to planning under the concept of 'Generation Jacobs' as a way of articulating the principles that underlie Child-Friendly Cities in a form that is more readily assimilated by the planning profession, recognising that while children's participation remains marginal, Jacob's

ideas of an inclusive, human scale approach to planning is firmly recognised as part of the planner's credo. The last section has described an innovative project aimed at exploring children's views of their local environment and facilitated an approach for presenting these to city decision-makers. These have been undertaken in specific and rather unfavourable conditions where institutional arrangements and professional orientations have hampered the emergence of more progressive and holistic approaches to planning and participation. This context has created opportunities for a local partnership, Belfast Healthy Cities, to work within existing institutional gaps to promote a number of innovative projects that have been successful in both engaging and empowering children from across the city and presenting the outcomes of the participative process to those with real influence over planning decisions. It is possible to make a number of observations of the experience of this process of children's participation.

Firstly, as a body of literature now testifies, it is clear that sensitive and carefully planned engagement processes can result in giving children an effective voice over how they would like to see their environment change. This highlights the cognitive abilities of children to understand how they interact with their surroundings and the consequences of particular spatial configurations or poor environmental attributes. These are all clearly important characteristics that planners seek in engaged citizens, but also underlines the knowledge that is being omitted from most public participation exercises. It is clear that children need different opportunities and processes through which to articulate their views. Presented with such opportunities, it was striking how the views of children in regard to their assimilation in spaces of the 'adult city' and their desire for informal, integrated places of play aligned so closely with the points made in 1961 by Jane Jacobs.

While the Belfast example highlights how child-focussed activities can effectively support the realm of 'children as citizens', the experience of BHC also shows how these can contribute to the realms of 'children as learners', 'children as planners' (i.e. proactively seeing opportunities for change) and

advocacy (i.e. 'planners for children'). Although highlighting the multi-dimensional benefits of children's engagement is not particularly novel, it is worth discussing how each of these realms can be used to mutually support each other and how this needs to be more overtly embedded in the design of children's participative activities. For example, children are clearly only going to be able to offer proactive ideas on their local environment if opportunities for this are weaved into the participative exercise and perhaps crucially here, that there is a clear mechanism for taking the results from the engagement process and feeding them directly into the decision making process. This highlights particular needs of advocacy; even the most effective participative exercise requires a bridging mechanism from the world of children's engagement to that of the rationality of the policy process. Here, it became clear that the role of BHC as a non-statutory partnership body helped to create space for innovate in children's engagement (coupled with having access to those with leverage in the planning system (not least the Minister of the Environment himself). This emphasises the need for effective advocacy of children's views, beyond the findings of participative exercises.

It is here that the concept of 'Generation Jacobs' becomes a useful rhetorical device, as advocacy groups need to have the ability to appropriately frame children's concerns and articulate the importance and value of their inclusion in the decision-making process. As shown in the discussion of the literature above, children's concerns will remain marginal to mainstream planning practice as long as planners and other professional groups involved fail to see how these can align and contribute to their policy goals. Indeed, over the last decade (at least) debates over planning in Northern Ireland have tended to be dominated by its contribution to economic growth, rather than its participation or inclusion, despite a strong voice for children's rights, such as the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY). Therefore we do not see the issue as strictly one of advocacy alone, but perhaps more appropriately as one of translation – of concepts from one arena (i.e. children, community development) to another (i.e. the formal planning committee). It is here that we think the concept of 'Generation Jacobs' may prove valuable by framing children's concerns as a mainstream and revered

planning concept. In so doing 'Generation Jacobs' creates an effective form of communicative rationality for embedding children's needs in the policy process.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has sought to link the influential work of Jane Jacobs with the need to promote the idea of Child-Friendly Cities, with particular reference to how children's views are taken into account in the land use planning system. It has noted that a lack of systematic review of case studies of children's participation has hampered the development of a robust body of good practice and that there is often a lack of clarity over the specific realm around which children's engagement takes place (advocacy, learning, rights etc, as discussed in Francis and Lorenzo, 2002). The paper has particularly focussed on the observation by Horelli (1997) that a coherent approach to children's participation in civic life should be more firmly grounded in clear ideas of the best type of outcomes or processes (normative theory) and more clarity of why or how certain interventions may result in better outcomes (i.e. explanatory theory). This paper has suggested that Jacobs' work has potential to provide both this theoretical frame and a way of articulating the values underlying Child-Friendly Cities in a way that can be more readily assimilated by the planning profession. These ideas have been explored in the context of a range of innovative initiatives to bring children into the planning process in Belfast. This has highlighted a number of explicit lessons that includes the crucial role of advocacy in articulating children's views to decision-makers and the need for sensitive approaches to engaging children, using participative processes designed to align with their cognitive abilities. It has also shown that, as Jacobs' suggested, children do have a desire to be assimilated into the 'adult' urban world and that they can effectively contribute to policy debates through the range of realms previously described by Francis and Lorenzo (2002). We take this experience as an endorsement of how children's participation and the advocacy of issues raised by them can have resonance with statutory agencies if they can be framed in ways that align with institutional rationalities. This is way we think a call for 'Generation



Jacobs' can help wake up the planning profession to the possibilities of children's participation and help breathe new life to our great cities.

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