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Revealing hidden dimensions of place experience in primary school aged children.

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ABSTRACT

The everyday local environment of incidental spaces routinely encountered by children is an important contributor to their social development and general health and well-being. There remains, however, a significant loss of connection between children and outdoor settings and this is increasingly raised as an issue that may have long term implications. It is now recognised as important that the voices of children should play a pivotal role in the arrangement and content of their spatial realm and that achieving this will require new ways to understand children's perceptions of place and how this contributes to individual and social development. This paper outlines UK based doctoral research to develop a range of participatory tools to facilitate exploration and analysis of the spatial experiences of primary school age children with particular reference to their perceptions of outdoor places they encounter in their daily life patterns.

Keywords

Participatory tools and techniques, routinely encountered outdoors, children's place perceptions.

INTRODUCTION

'parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child...'

Children's participation as recognized in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Hart 1997).

The everyday 'local environment' (Thomas and Thompson, 2004, p.3) or 'incidental spaces' (DTLR 2002, p. 47) routinely encountered by children is increasingly highlighted as an important contributor to their social development and general health and well-being (Thomas and Thompson, 2004). Evidence suggests, however, that there remains a significant loss of connection between children and outdoor settings and that this may have long term implications (Worpole, 2003). Ken Worpole, author and commentator on open space and social issues, highlights this by synthesising current government and community initiatives in this field, placing the importance of providing for, and giving voice to, children in policy, planning, design and management of public open space within the Urban Renaissance agenda. His report, *no particular place to go?* "...seeks to make clear that planning for play, and the need to create safe street networks and spaces for young people and children, is a pre-condition of a healthy community life and 'liveability'." (Worpole,2003,p.4). Issues that appear to emerge from this aspiration especially prominently include the notion that it is the environment routinely encountered by children that should receive particular attention because this is the realm of a vision of the 'walkable community' advocated, for example, by the DTLR (2002). The environment in this context is understood as a continuous network of varying spaces that form the routine, and usually subliminal, backdrop of daily life. Research has shown that this is how young people often inhabit public space, as a series of stopping points in a

continual process of wandering through neighbourhoods (DLTR,2002,p.31). “In this context, public space is defined as being the continuous network of pavements, streets, amenity land, parks, playing fields, town squares, forecourts and curtilages (e.g. railway station forecourts, or retail car parks) and other paved open spaces, which children and young people use in the course of their daily lives, and which make up that familiar territory of place and attachment so often beloved in the literature of nostalgia in every generation.” (Worpole,2003,pt 1,p.3). It is now thought to be essential that the voices of children should play a more significant role than they currently do in the arrangement and content of these spatial realms and that this should focus on developing ways to understand their own notions of place as an essential component of individual and social development (Titman,1994; Worpole,2003).

In this paper we recognise two essential obstacles in the way of achieving this effectively. The first is that traditional techniques employed by environmental design professionals tend to offer solutions that privilege aesthetic expressions, technical resolution and physical features, and are often driven by budgetary considerations or project auditing requirements. Frequently lacking is sufficient consideration of the experience of place and the potential this has to promote positive behaviour and a sense of emotional wellbeing. Secondly is the issue of how to effectively engage with children to draw out in meaningful ways how they themselves feel about the places they use rather than simply the way that their parents, teachers, carers, architects and landscape architects etc., think they do. Practitioners do consult, sometimes using complex participative techniques as evident in many regeneration projects to school grounds design (Adams and Ingham 1998). Unfortunately, this all too often falls into a category of public consultation that Henry Sanoff has called pseudo-participation (Sanoff 2000). Here, opinions and views are asked for and records are made, but then somehow they remain unheard when it comes to the real process of change. The resulting solutions are often unsustainable because they hold little relevance to the lives, habits and feelings of those who have to use them.

This paper outlines research, ongoing at the time of writing, which aspires to breach these obstacles, giving voice to children through the development and application of a range of participatory tools in a longitudinal study to explore and analyse outdoor place experiences of primary school age. The research draws from aspects of environmental psychology research, especially those relating to the development of place theories, which argue that it is experience of place that matters most, rather than what it looks like, for example (Canter,1977; Tuan,1980, Proshansky, Fabian and Kaminoff,1983). Although as yet provisional outcomes of ongoing research we will present and discuss emergent findings that appear to be important to the development of a child’s awareness of where they are in relation to their surroundings and what this means to them.

THE FIELD RESEARCH

The origins of the study outlined in this paper lie in a programme of practice based fieldwork to improve school grounds begun in 1999 and funded largely by the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB). These projects variously required some form of participation to meet funding objectives but these often stressed object, function or budgetary driven outcomes with a lack of emphasis on how children would actually experience the places that were being made for them. A tendency to overlook, undervalue, or at extremes conceal the experiential content of outdoor place making has long been recognised as a limitation in approaches to environmental planning and design and it is frequently held responsible for producing solutions that lack social relevance and human value (Norberg-Schulz, 1971; Alexander, 1977; Hillier and Hanson, 1984; Thwaites and Simkins, 2007). Attempts to overcome this have spawned a multiplicity of participative methods, consultative practices and so called community empowerment in planning and design processes. There are many notable successes, of course, but far too often well meaning intentions follow a pattern where the participants are assumed to have a role of recipients of professional opinion and knowledge rather than being a fundamental part of an informed reciprocal process of learning, exploration and development. Against this background this study set out to try to establish the foundations for deeper levels of participant engagement recognising the act of participation itself as fundamental to the process of successful place making.

To achieve this the study focuses on the journey taken between home and school as an example of a type of spatial continuity that children experience routinely and frequently and that over time may have a significant impact on how they come to understand and recognise their neighbourhood, its wider setting and their own sense of location and that of places important to them within it (school, home and friends, for example). In this context the school run is understood as a largely sequential mosaic of incidental spaces through which they pass by various means most days: this broadly corresponds with how the DLTR (2002) has conceptualised outdoor environment from the perspective of children. A key objective of the research is to find ways to see and read the experiential dimensions of these spaces and to use this capability to gain insight into children's perceptions of some aspects of their neighbourhood and its vicinity.

Three primary schools were chosen to be involved in the study, located in the North East of England and North and South Yorkshire (UK) each representing either an urban, sub-urban or rural location. The study design was approved by a University Ethics Committee and informed consent sought from parents and guardians of the children as well as the children themselves. The study focused on children from years 3 (7 and 8 year old) and year 6 (10 and 11 year old) at each school. A core sample size of 10 per year group was sought with a balance of gender within each year group and school. Letters were sent to parents via the school explaining the project aims and outlining methodology and this was followed by group discussions at each school with potential participants to

confirm that the children were willing and consented to be involved in the study. A participant group of 68 children was ultimately identified to take part. All names referred to in this paper are assumed for illustrative purposes.

It is important to note here that the selection of participant schools primarily reflects issues of researcher accessibility to the study sites, the willingness of schools to participate and other ethical considerations related to working with potentially vulnerable participant groups. These factors meant that it was considered prudent to select schools with which we had an already established working relationship or were known to associates. As the principle focus of the study was to develop and explore the application of methods and processes for effectively engaging with young children in relation to their place perception, rather than, for example, comparing place perceptions between age, socio-economic, geographic, or other variables, this was considered an appropriate and achievable approach. Nevertheless, convergent themes did emerge from the application of the various methodological tools and although the findings we describe later in the paper are provisional, as the study is yet to conclude its final phases, and are particular to this participant group, there is some developing consistency with other studies of children's place perceptions. Whether, and to what extent, this holds for other participant populations, such as older children or adults, or those in different physical and socio-economic circumstances will require further research beyond the scope of this work. We are however, confident that the kind of longitudinal and multi-method approach advocated here has potential for beneficial application with a wider range of participant groups and especially those that are traditionally under-represented in processes of planning and design decision making.

The research paradigm adopted in this case was primarily qualitative to reflect the subjective nature of place experience. The overall approach was informed by the principles of Grounded Theory which identifies the components of a structured way to develop new concepts and theory from the sequential coding of data derived from direct observation (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The term 'grounded' here refers to the importance of allowing concepts and theoretical insights to emerge directly from the phenomena being investigated, rather than using the study context as a means of confirming or refuting pre-existent theories, for example. This provided a basis from which to design a programme allowing a consistent method to be applied at each school over three phases of data collection, but would allow the detailed content and application at each phase to evolve and be informed by the previous phase following evaluation and reflection. This is an important methodological principle that allows for the exploration of themes as they emerge during the process and also to allow for adjustments to be made that may make the children participating more at ease, for example.

Against this background the field exploration evolved as a longitudinal study beginning with a process of semi-structured interviewing around predetermined

topics that would guide conversation with the children and allow new questions and insights to evolve during the discussions (Pretty, Guijt et al. 1995). The establishment of discussion themes evolved from pilot work, similar to an ethnographic interview (Flick 1998 citing Spradley 1979), previously carried out to test the efficacy of different methods of engaging children and, particularly, the processes, questions and prompts that they would more readily understand and respond to. In this case themes were categorised into three areas of interest: *physical objects and features*, focused on what children liked or did not like about their surroundings; *human experience*, which involved encouraging memories of what they noticed and felt on the way from home to school; *place making*, which looked at how places became distinguished through game playing and other activity. These earlier studies focused on school grounds improvement projects and were later refined for a wider public consultation project about the role of place perception as an influence on the sense of identity in a North Yorkshire, UK village community. This provided an opportunity to develop interview themes relevant to a wider neighbourhood context.

The second site visits involved cognitive mapping and drawing techniques, again previously explored in field trials and found to be effective in finding out how people view their surroundings (Wates 2000). The technique has been used in urban design methodology perhaps most notably to demonstrate how a city's imageability can be expressed by individuals (Lynch 1960). The significance of people being able to understand their environment and be able to mentally map it is a prominent component in the development of place perception (Downs and Stea 1973). Additionally such maps are effective where there are cultural or communication problems which can be the case with employing conventional methodologies due to the age and limitations of understanding of the study group (Wates 2000). It was also evident from the first phase that, because of the diversity of the group, account should be taken not only of their ability to communicate their thoughts but also of their preferences for how they may express them. This draws from work examining preference of learning styles and in particular the work on experiential learning by Kolb (1984) and Honey and Mumford's (1992) version of the learning cycle both of which identify individual preferences in engaging with learning experiences.

In this second phase, children were asked to complete two drawings; the first was to map their existing neighbourhood experiences responding to prompts, for example, 'this is what it is like outside, where I live, on the way to school and at my school'. They were also asked to draw themselves in the picture doing what they liked doing best outside and at a preferred location. Whilst the children drew they were engaged in conversation to about what they were drawing and why. The second drawing was an aspiration for their neighbourhood involving a technique developed specifically for this study called a 'wish picture', a synthesis of two methodologies. The first of these, a word picture, is a technique developed in architecture by Christopher Alexander and his colleagues to reveal experiential dimensions of places in the planning and design process by

describing the quality of sensations and experience that places would deliver in advance of thinking about the physical structure and spatial arrangement in detail (Alexander et al,1995). Because of the word pictures limitations in its application with younger children due to their less developed written communication skills, an adaptation was developed to combine this methodology with a wish poem, a visual variation of the semi structured interview (Sanoffa 2000); (Sanoffb 2000). The resulting pictures became children's aspirations for their neighbourhood. Perhaps inevitably the outcomes tended to bias towards drawings of objects and features, but with the use of semi structured interview techniques a richer picture was able to be revealed about the experiential qualities of the places they had visually created.

Emergent outcomes from coding analysis arising from the first two phases of the work would then be used to inform a final phase of data collection, in planning at the time of writing, and will involve adaptive photo elicitation. As part of the evaluative process as the field research has progressed, a set of provisional themes has begun to emerge as significant from the data collected. As a consequence it was possible to identify broad categories within which the emergent place perceptions of the children involved could be grouped, giving a structure to the final phase of the work. The themes identified related to: place or object specific experiences; feelings and emotional significance; social networks; and imagination and temporal aspects. The use of photo-elicitation in this context reflects findings from the first two phases that appear consistent with themes cited in Aitken and Wingate (1993) who define a conceptual structure called a Leitmotif code from a self directed photographic study. Aitken and Wingate's code of children's place perception is built around the four themes of built environment; natural environment; dynamic/action; and social relations. The resulting code and themes from this study will be structured along similar lines as a Leitmotif code and then will be tested by offering a number of neighbourhood relevant images to the children to test their preferences and the conceptual relationship between the images and code. A more detailed account of this multi-method approach and the contribution that each element makes to the overall project follows in the next section.

Phase 1: Individual Semi-structured Interviews

The interviews for this first phase were conducted on a one to one basis in the company or proximity of a known adult. The children were first put at their ease by using a game, called *people, place and movement* to find their home on a plan of their wider neighbourhood area and then mark it with a model house. This technique, an adaptation of the Neighbourhood Initiatives Foundation "Planning for Real" methodology (NIF,1998), where three dimensional modelling helps participants to understand graphical representations of their local environments. This gave the subsequent interview a sense of orientation focused on a known and familiar place. In addition to identifying their home, children also marked their school and indicated their typical mode of transport between and whether they were alone or with others, choosing from a variety of

images to match their mode of transport. The images varied from a variety of private cars, to buses, taxis and also included silhouettes of people on bicycles or walking. The silhouettes of people walking were also variously composed from images of children arriving at schools and included groups of children, children accompanied by an adult, children with more than one adult and children with adults and siblings. Once the appropriate silhouette or vehicle had been chosen from the image sheet, it was inserted into a clip and placed by hand on the plan (figure 1). This approach was intended to provide both a means for the children to actively engage with the process in a manner familiar to many of them through playing board games and some of their classroom activities, and recognise the likelihood that social issues as well as method of travel might play a significant part in the children's perceptions of place.

The interview was focused on five themes: routine activity; imagine and remember; nearly there yet?; outside at school; other places outside. For each theme a series of prompts was established from the pilot work and following the initial *people, place and movement* game the prompts were used to guide conversation. To establish the routine activity patterns the children were firstly asked to indicate what route they took to get to school, if the route was always the same and if not what the reasons were for the alternatives. This process was repeated for the way home to see what differences arose from the experience of the route the opposite way and also to try to see if there were any differences related to the mental orientation of being homeward bound instead of school bound. Themes then led to discussions centred on routine activity and an 'imagine and remember' game to establish what was noticed on emerging from their home and along the route to school. They were asked to try to imagine they were getting ready for school and coming out of their house, from which door they left and what was the first thing they noticed on coming out of their house. The children were then asked to talk about things they noticed on the way to school, what they noticed and where, and why this was memorable or significant. They were asked if they stopped or paused on the way and if they regularly met or noticed people on the way and if so where that would be. They were also asked about where they felt they were approaching school, where they felt they had arrived at school and what they noticed when approaching and arriving. Whilst describing the route to school they were encouraged to move the silhouette along the route to school on the map, to represent themselves on their journey. Following themes relating to the school run, the children were asked to talk about their experiences of the external school environment, with prompts asking where they went outside at school, what they did there and what they liked and disliked. To widen the scope of the place perception, the same questions were asked of the local environment around where they lived and if they had a favourite place to go.

These sessions were all voice recorded for the purpose of subsequent evaluation and throughout the process it was notable that children seemed to be better engaged with the interview process if they had a physical task to do, rather than

simply responding passively to questions. An important characteristic of this approach to engaging children was that it is an empathic approach. This is variously described in the context of student centred approaches to teaching as “a mode of human contact” (Egan, 1990, p. 123), “putting yourself in their shoes” (Wheeler and Birtle, 1993, p. 34) and being understood from their own view point rather than being evaluated (Kirschenbaum and Henderson, 1990). This was fundamental to building trust between the researcher and study group and generally worked well. In the second visit, though, to make the children more comfortable, data collection took place in pairs or small groups to provide an element of familiarity and mutual support for the more reticent.

Phase 2: Paired or Small Group Mapping and Drawing

The first phase began to reveal interesting insights into the spatial experience of the children’s everyday activities. However some of the children did not appear as engaged as others and the unfamiliarity of talking to a relative stranger on a one to one basis may have contributed to this. Following evaluation of the methods and listening to recordings of the interviews it was decided to carry out the second phase in pairs or small groups to introduce a form of peer support. This had obvious pitfalls since it was possible that this might generate an element of peer influence, but this was felt to be acceptable because it would be ultimately balanced with the personal and individual stories that had emerged from phase one.

The second phase developed from the interviews by focussing on activities related to and developed from cognitive mapping (Ingold, 2000; Hart 1997; Clark and Moss 2001; Romice and Frey, 2003). This involved children graphically expressing their neighbourhood experiences of place. Through their choice of what they drew and where it was located in relation to other features and places a further layer of insight into the place perceptions of the children could be achieved. The children were asked to make a map, or draw a picture entitled ‘This is what it’s like outside; where I live, and on the way to school, and at school.’ They were encouraged to start from home as the most familiar place from which to orientate themselves and proceed if they were on the journey to school. The production of the drawing was used as a generator for discussion about what they chose to represent and why. Once they had done this they were then asked to complete their drawing by adding ‘This is me, doing what I like doing best and where.’ Some children drew themselves in more than one location, most added an expressive face to their image indicating a particular mood they associated with what they had drawn. The drawings included places they liked as well as those disliked, and again an explanation for this was sought and the resulting discussions recorded so that transcripts could be taken later. This first drawing was intended to reveal details of the way the children felt about and used their existing surroundings. A second drawing was then produced by the children to reveal their aspirations for their neighbourhood, and was given the title; ‘This is what I would like outside to be like: where I live, and on the way to school, and at school.’ Some children chose to draw a sequential journey of

various places and experiences, whilst others drew one specific place that they felt either required improvement or that presently did not exist in their locality. Again on completion of the drawing the children were asked to draw themselves: 'This is me, and what I would like to do outside, and where I could do it.' Again some drew themselves with an expressive face associating their sense of place with a particular mood.

Evaluation of the first two participative phases began to reveal a set of emergent themes relating to the children's place experiences, these included:

- Place or object specific experiences
- Feelings and emotional significance
- Imagination and recollection
- Social networks

These themes were not mutually exclusive and it seemed evident that the children's experience could relate to a combination of any or all of them in various ways. The extent to which these themes appeared emphasised in the provisional findings from the children's work began to suggest that place perception may be generated or sustained in some way by these themes as mechanisms whereby sense of place becomes embedded through routine life-patterns. Indeed that sense of place may be rooted in a complex synthesis of objects and locations, their emotional associations and social significance, along with mental projections that are purely imaginative. Further analysis of the first phase of participation was facilitated by the compilation of a Leitmotif code (Aitken and Wingate, 1993). A Leitmotif has origins in music where a theme is said to be dominant or recurring. The use of an adaptation of this as a coding framework in this study enabled the categorisation of recurring themes revealed in the children's conversations and drawings which could be composed into a set of generic themes each with a number of typologies and their sub-categories. Following evaluation of the recurring themes the following tables are examples of the developed code for the generic themes relating to objects and places. These have two typologies: the built environment and the natural environment, each having a number of sub-categories derived from the recurring themes (tables 1 and 2). The following material describes some of the characteristics of these in more detail.

Theme One: place and object specific experiences

The children variously described experiences of particular places or objects, and two typologies were identified consistent with those cited in Aitken and Wingate (1993). One of these is categorised as the built environment and has a complex range of sub-categories some of which included domestic, institutional and commercial buildings. Others, for example, related to vehicles, landmarks such as statues, street lighting or even cctv cameras. Retaining and boundary features were consistently prominent in the children's spatial experiences and in some instances the minutia of detail of buildings appeared significant such as rainwater goods, windows, and in the streetscape changes in the paving patterns or types was also, for some, a defining detail of place. A second typology related

to elements of the natural environment with sub-categories derived from recurring themes which included: wildlife, the weather, trees and plants, leaves, flowers, grass and domestic animals, for example. Coding could be either positive or negative. Examples of negative experiences included places perceived to be misused manifest in the presence of graffiti or in vacant buildings because of their neglected appearance. Zoe, for example, expressed her dislike of a building near her home: "There's this big thing near where I live... it's got smashed windows, it's a big building next to the sheds. It's been there over a hundred year, and there's a glove in one of the windows. I don't like it because it's scary, there's holes in the roof and pigeons go in it. It's got a thing outside with mud in it and weeds..." Zoe drew this place in her neighbourhood map. When asked to complete her aspirational drawing, Zoe re-drew the building as a swimming baths with a bright Mondrian-esque façade. She included flowers in the planter she had previously described as the "thing outside with mud". She included the sun, a rainbow, and in this picture herself with a happy face as opposed to the sad expression she had drawn on her face in the first image, which also included rain, lightening and the infamous pigeons and glove (figure 2). Zoe's feelings of dislike and aspiration are further intensified by using the dark clouds and lightening matching the dismal façade, to the happy sunshine, rainbow and bright mosaic of the new swimming baths, which was also a desirable addition to her neighbourhood. We could therefore presume that the maintenance and care lacking in the first picture, manifest at a variety of scales from the appearance of the whole building down to small details of the glove, pigeon, muddy planter and dog faeces may have a significant impact on what stands out, and therefore characterises, her routine place experience.

Theme Two: feelings and emotions

The importance of feelings and emotions emerged from coding of the field work data as an influential factor in these children's place perceptions and also had positive or negative typologies as well as a third typology of temporal aspects. The positive typology was evident in a number of comments and in many cases alluded to pleasurable or comforting experiences such as having adventures, challenges, being excited or a feeling of wellbeing from watching. "long grass swaying" on a windy day, for example. Driving through a long arch of trees that on a sunny day is fun "like an electric light going on and off", or having a favourite place to go such as colourful flower beds and "the feeling of hope you get from them, even when there are no flowers on them, because you know they will come again". Another seven-year-old girl's favourite place was described as: "the prairie, it's got loads of trees that are really huddly, which cover you." (Simkins and Thwaites 2006, p.27). Negative feelings included being bored in places, scarred (which was also a positive feeling to some) and of being watched. This was particularly evident in one example where Jack described his journey home from school passing a CCTV camera on the corner of a building and how he always looked the other way: he disliked the feeling of being watched and felt it intrusive.

Theme Three: imagination and recollection

Many children had stories or imaginings about places or objects. One girl, for example, described her journey home past a green trough from where she said horses drank. When further discussion about the place ensued it was revealed that she did not actually see the trough from the path she walked and had never seen a horse drinking from it, but when she passed nearby she imagined that this happened there. For her the boundary between the real and the imagined had melded in this example suggesting that, for some children at least, sense of place transcends the physicality of what is actually there. Another girl passed a large old building on the way to school which she called the broken hospital, because her grandma had told her that it used to be a place where people were cared for before it became derelict. Recalled experiences related to places reminiscent of other places, people or actions, such as the view of water reminded Paul of going to the beach and looking for crabs in the rocks. Although further phases of research are required to investigate this further, the implications for designers of the built environment are potentially highly significant. It begins to suggest that places and objects which, to a professional eye, may appear unimportant and possibly even neglected or broken can be elevated in the perceptions of local children for whom they take on an altogether different, and completely hidden, dimension of significance.

Theme Four: social networks

This aspect of the code had two typologies: social aspects and dynamic actions. The social aspect was manifest in many children's experiences and some children related almost all place experience to interactions with other people; from the people they noticed when they came out of their house to those passing on buses or in streets, to their friends waiting in school playgrounds with parents. Emma's place experiences, for example, were heavily focused on social networks and she explained the map of her journey to school in terms of a sequence of locations populated by people she knew or recognised. "There's a bus stop where all the teenagers wait for the bus to go to the high school..... This is a crossing, it's not a real crossing, but it's where everyone crosses, so for me it's a crossing. This is a rock, it's a square rock, and everyone climbs on it, and this road is important to me because it's where I meet friends walking from the next village. My best bit, is this green bit, this is me on the green, when I have friends coming to my house or walking back from school, we play on the green, on the rock or just tig or something. It's very open and you can sit on the rock, stand on it or climb it, because I like climbing. This is me – happy!" For Emma her experiences were almost exclusively contextualised in a social network frame. She discussed her favourite place in the school grounds to be a particular bench, configured in the shape of a 'C', and preferred to the other benches arranged in a straight line as they did not afford the opportunity to talk to friends for any length of time. It is therefore apparent that the spatial configuration of this seemingly incidental place is important because of its capability to support social interaction. Paula had a slightly different perspective on social networks that also related to emotional aspects of the code. She described her dislike of a particular

alleyway as its width did not allow for her to walk side by side with her friend. She felt that as they could only walk one in front of each other and she or her friend felt uncomfortable as they would not know who was behind them, and if they met someone there was no room to pass. This experience demonstrates the need for designers to take much more account of the experiential aspects of space use when determining the proportions of features like footpaths etc, instead of simply the measurement of human scale. Emma's story also included examples of the dynamic actions component of the code in her explanation of the significance of the rock for climbing and the green for playing tig. For many children simple activities, undertaken with friends, associated with incidental features of their outdoor environment provided enjoyment, rather than complex structures specifically designated for play, which for some were boring after they had been used for a while. Changes in levels, surface materials, steps and low walls all promoted dynamic actions, whilst open spaces of various sizes and trees were seen as places to play various games from tig, football, climbing or balancing.

CONCLUSIONS

The research employs a variety of qualitative participative techniques and the value of the longitudinal study and grounded approach enables reflection and refinement at each phase of data collection whilst maintaining a consistency across the study groups at each phase. The reflective process of evaluating the methods allows for development and refinement to test assertions from the previous phases. One of the interesting things to emerge from the research to date is the importance of using a multi-method approach. This appears to be because each method of data gathering seems to add a further dimension of difference in the detail which contributes to the development of a fuller and more complete picture. This is somewhat different from conventional multi-method research methodologies such as those where the aim is to use different methods as a way to verify experimental results by showing a consistency for each method used. Here, it is not consistency that is sought but difference. Each method used reveals a subtly different layer of information which contributes to the resolution of a wider whole: a fuller image of place perception. In this way revealing the spatial characteristics of place perception is rather like gradually increasing visual resolution in a pixelated image. Using only a single method to obtain information about children's experience of places they use will produce data related only to that specific method of inquiry: the resulting image is necessarily partial, or lacks clarity (figure 3). The variety of techniques also attempts to engage with the children as individuals with preferences and individual needs rather than a collective whole. The Leitmotif code demonstrates a complexity and fine grain of place perception that is often experienced by adults subliminally but would appear more significant to children's daily encounters with their local environment. If we are to appreciate this realness of place from the perspective of children then we not only need to give them a voice, but we also need to be able to listen to the voices appropriately and understand them.

Not only do these examples illustrate that places significant in the routine lives of young children do not always correspond with conventional professional, or even adult, priorities, but also that there is a risk of loss rather than gain if this fails to emerge during site and user surveys. This is not to say that such places should necessarily always be preserved, or that beneficial opportunities for the children might not arise from proposed improvements. But we can only learn the real significance of place attachment if we adopt methods to engage with children that are capable of revealing the subtlety involved in how children assign meaning to place through informal and sometimes highly clandestine social activity frequently overlooked by conventional methods. In other words we have to be able to see the child's experiential landscape (Thwaites and Simkins,2007) and understand its significance to the life and well-being of that child. Although this study is yet to be completed, the experiences that are beginning to emerge from the application of these methodological tools and techniques may serve to highlight how, for some children, places and objects can take on a significance that for adults may only be appreciated subliminally or become accepted over time because the pressures of daily routines. Although it is beyond the scope of this study, it is interesting to speculate that such place perceptions, apparently driven by a synthesis of small detailed observations that become associated with certain moods, feelings and atmospheres, may hold for other populations in society. Elderly people, particularly those with significantly restricted mobility, or those in institutional care, may, for example, find their environmental experience shrunken to an extent where small details, possibly overlooked by a conventionally mobile adult with the distractions and priorities of a busy life, may once more take on a heightened significance in life satisfactions.

Figure 1: identifying place, people and movement.



Figure 2 Zoe's drawing of a place in her neighbourhood she disliked, and her aspiration for it.



Figure 3 The Gradual Emergence Of The Realness Of Place Through Multi-Method, Longitudinal Research

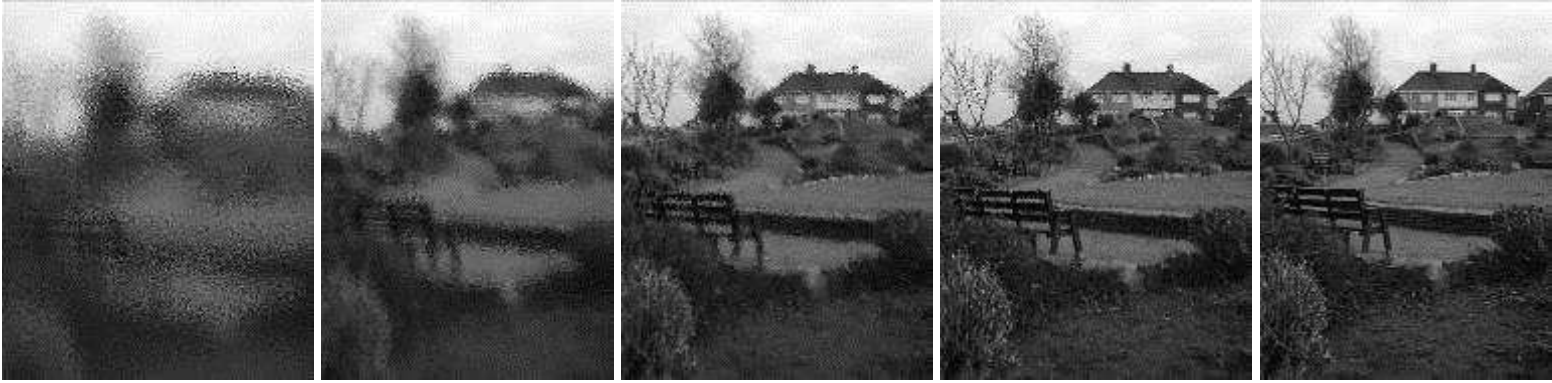


Table 1 Leitmotif coding for the generic theme Object with typologies and sub-categories.

Generic theme: Object			
Typology: Built environment		Typology: Natural environment	
Ob1	Access points	On1	Animals
Ob2	Boundaries	On2	Anthropological
Ob3	Building details	On3	Climatic
Ob4	Buildings negative	On4	Geological
Ob5	Buildings commercial	On5	Private space
Ob6	Buildings domestic	On6	Public space
Ob7	Buildings historic	On7	Topography
Ob8	Buildings institutional	On8	Vegetation
Ob9	Landmarks	On9	Water
Ob10	Open spaces		
Ob11	Pedestrian movement		
Ob12	Play equipment		
Ob13	Sport related		
Ob14	Street		
Ob15	Transport		
Ob16	Vehicular related		

Table 2 Leitmotif coding for the generic theme Place with typologies and sub-categories.

Generic theme: Place			
Typology: Built environment		Typology: Natural environment	
Pb1	Access points	Pn1	Topography
Pb2	Boundaries/enclosure	Pn2	Boundaries/enclosure
Pb3	Built form enclosure	Pn3	Geological
Pb4	Building details	Pn4	Animals
Pb5	Buildings negative	Pn5	Public place
Pb6	Buildings commercial	Pn6	Water
Pb7	Buildings domestic	Pn7	Private place
Pb8	Buildings historic	Pn8	Climatic
Pb9	Buildings institutional	Pn9	Vegetation
Pb10	Landmarks		
Pb11	Open spaces		
Pb12	Pedestrian movement		
Pb13	Play equipment		
Pb14	Stopping/resting		
Pb15	Sport related		
Pb16	Street		
Pb17	Transport		
Pb18	Vehicular related		

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