

# Beyond adult-centrism

Advancing children's rights and well-being through participatory urban planning: A case study of Southeast Los Angeles

---

Meredith Abood

Urban and Environmental Policy Senior Comprehensive Project

Occidental College

May 2009

## Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary:</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Introduction:</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>The Need for a Rights Based Framework:</b> .....	<b>8</b>
A rights based framework.....	8
American social conditions that prevent a rights based framework .....	9
<i>A protectionist approach to childhood</i> .....	9
<i>An adult-supremacist ideology:</i> .....	10
<b>The results of a protectionist, adult-centric perspective:</b> .....	<b>13</b>
An incomplete understanding of children’s well-being.....	13
Urban planning that perpetuates adultism.....	14
<i>Individualistic, single-family housing:</i> .....	15
<i>Isolated play spaces:</i> .....	19
<i>Car-oriented transit planning</i> .....	21
<b>Moving Forward: Advancing children’s rights through participatory urban planning</b> .....	<b>24</b>
Acknowledging children as capable agents for change .....	27
Including children in research and consultation:.....	28
<i>Guidelines for participatory research and consultation with children and youth</i> .....	29
<i>A tool kit of child-friendly approaches and techniques:</i> .....	29
Involving children in meaningful decision-making.....	32
<i>Conclusion:</i> .....	36
<b>CASE STUDY: SOUTH EAST LOS ANGELES</b> .....	<b>38</b>
Why focus on Southeast LA? .....	38
A child “unfriendly” city: socio-spatial marginalization in Southeast LA.....	43
<i>Social marginalization:</i> .....	43
<i>Spatial marginalization:</i> .....	46
The absence of children’s participation .....	51
<i>Government Commissions and Councils:</i> .....	52
<i>Foundations/Funding sources</i> .....	56
<i>Community Development Corporations:</i> .....	58
<i>Grassroots Organizations:</i> .....	60
<i>Findings: Children’s participation in Southeast LA</i> .....	64
<i>A power analysis</i> .....	65
Recommendations for greater children’s participation in Los Angeles.....	67
<i>Adopting a more strategic approach to children’s participation:</i> .....	67
<i>Recommendations for organizations to institutionalize children’s participation:</i> .....	69

## Executive Summary:

“Why do adults have to control everything”, a child asked the author of the recent Time Magazine cover piece entitled “The Case Against Over-Parenting” (Gibbs 2009). This question has become the central framework in the growing Child-Friendly Cities movement and the global effort for greater child participation. Yet it is a question rarely considered in an American context.

The Child-Friendly City’s movement, initiated by UNCIEF after the adoption of the Declaration on the Rights of the Child, explicitly recognizes the rights of children to express their opinions and have those opinions acted upon. In relation to urban and community-based planning, this recognition has led to more inclusive participatory planning methods that actively engage young people in changing the built environment.

The United States’ refusal to adopt the convention reflects the Nation’s predominant misconceptions of children as either vulnerable and helpless beings devoid of rights or capacity or reckless criminals in need of reform and discipline. This protectionist perspective combines with an adult-supremacist ideology that positions older people as the ultimate authority figures and children as mere objects of their control. As a result children are effectively silenced from the decision-making processes and have no agency in their own lives. With regards to the built environment and community planning, adult-centric decision-making favors adults’ misconceptions at the expense of children’s actual needs. Because of this socio-spatial injustice, there is a great need for more meaningfully and inclusive child and youth involvement in the participatory planning process.

This study analyzes Southeast Los Angeles within the broad framework of a Child-Friendly City and primarily focuses on children’s ability to participate in community planning and decision-making. The study begins by addressing the socio-spatial marginalization of children in the area and then seeks to analyze organizations’ current attempts to involve young people. The organizations in this study include government bodies and councils, foundation and funding groups, community development corporations, and grassroots, non-profits. My research findings reveal that Southeast Los Angeles (and the City more generally) have low levels of children’s institutionalized participation, and the City and County government provide little in the way of funding and support for organizations working with children. The youth participation that does exist only includes teenagers, not younger children and most participation centers around advocacy for service provision and programs, not on reforming the built environment. Furthermore, a power analysis reveals that most organizations with high power have little children’s participation and most organizations with meaningful children’s participation have very little power. As a result, children continue to be marginalized in the built environment and have no opportunity to voice their perspectives or ameliorate their conditions. I conclude my research with

recommendations on how to advance children's participation both at a systematic city level and within individual groups and organizations.

## Introduction:

Put your hands on top of your head and stay silent and still until I tell you you can move.” It was my first day volunteering at an after school program in Southeast Los Angeles and I watched helplessly as the director shouted at a hundred children aged six to eleven because they had been talking. “We’re going to do this for fifteen minutes unless I see anyone talking and then it’s another half an hour,” she yelled. And so the children remained silent, still, and with their hands on their heads as the director counted down the remaining time, “10 minutes, 8 minutes, 5 minutes....”

Shocked by this hyper-disciplined environment and blatant subordination, I remember thinking, “they’re just children.” And then I thought, “No, they are not just children, they are human beings”, making me question her oppressive treatment even further.

Later as I drove home, I saw a young teenager standing still with his hands behind his back as the police violently patted him down. And it struck me that the only difference between the children with their hands on their head and this teenager with his hands behind, was three to four inches (depending on the size of the head and hands). In both instances, the young people remained voiceless, disempowered, and subjugated; in both cases they gave up a piece of their dignity and self worth.

This oppressive treatment of youth is inexcusable, especially in a society that espouses freedom and democracy. Americans must begin to view children as more than mere passive objects of adult authority and control. We must acknowledge that children’s hands and heads can achieve far more than just carrying out adults’ orders and demands. We must adopt the philosophy that children can and should become participatory members of society and make influential decisions about their lives, their environments, and their communities. If included and empowered, children can transform their neighborhoods into more livable, playable, and sustainable spaces – spaces that honor the needs of all people, regardless of size or age.

City and local authorities throughout the world have recognized children’s status as equal citizens have adapted the community planning process to honor young people’s needs for space, autonomy, and meaningful participation. Much of this recognition originates from the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which formally recognized children’s participation as a fundamental human right. Based on the Convention, UNICEF launched the Child Friendly City Initiative aimed at guiding city and local authorities in better honoring all of the rights of the child in an urban context. “A child friendly city” UNICEF declares is “a city where the voices, needs, priorities and rights of children are an integral part of public policy, programs, and decisions. It is a result, a city that is fit for all” (UNICEF 2004). In a child-friendly city, children don’t use their hands to show obedience or compliance. Their hands are too busy constructing models of a city planned for their

needs, writing land use policy recommendations in a youth council meeting, or simply throwing around a baseball in a street free from traffic. A child friendly city honors children's rights to be present in public and private spaces, their right to actively research and define their current conditions, and their right to meaningfully participate in transforming their built environments.

While various international initiatives have utilized children's participation as a means to create more sustainable and just cities, in Los Angeles and throughout the United States children have little to no voice in the planning and design of the environment surrounding them. As a result, the built environment fails to recognize children's needs or desires and provides spaces that act counter to young people's well-being

Children make up one-fourth of the population in Western Nations, and in many neighborhoods in the United States (particularly low-income areas) children constitute over a third of the residents. In democratic countries that claim to represent all citizens, there is simply no justification for the typical exclusion of children in the community planning process. While young people are important in nearly all decisions and policies, children are particularly relevant to issues relating to the built environment. This is because children spend much more time than adults using public spaces, playing on the street, and interacting with their direct neighborhood. They are also more dependent on walkable, bikeable, and transit friendly resources. Whereas adults live in more compartmentalized environments marked by commuting, consuming and transit in the private automobile, children have more limited mobility and a greater desire to discover and explore their surroundings. - For children "their local environment- what it offers or denies them - is their world" (Chawla, *Growing Up in an Urbanizing World* 2002, 119)

By the time they finish high school, US children will have spent only 11,000 hours in the classroom and approximately 65,000 hours outside of it, meaning that the majority of their time is spent in their individual home or within their direct neighborhood (Medrich 1982). According to Van Vliet (1983) the public space in children's neighborhoods act as a vital fourth environment next to home, school, and playground and because of this, the quality of the environment within two streets of the front door is critical to the happiness and health of children (Wheward and Millward 1997). Through spatial interaction and continued play, children develop physically, mentally, emotionally and socially and begin to conceptualize of themselves, their community, and their place in society.

As children gain the freedom and courage to move and expand their range, they have historically taken over informal spaces such as abandoned lots, railroads, or old industrial areas. However, as planners redevelop these spaces, children experience a loss of play space that often is not replaced by any other sanctioned areas for play. Spaces become forbidden, sterile and unwelcoming to children (Hart 2001). Furthermore, because streets primarily accommodate cars instead of people, children are unable to move freely and exert autonomy. With limited space to move freely, play, and interact with others, children risk greater feelings of boredom, alienation, depression, and violence (Chawla, *Growing Up in an Urbanizing World* 2002). Children's anti-social behaviors like vandalism and trespassing, are often

attempts to have some impact on their environment and seek out stimulation not provided in legitimate means by the adult (Ward 1978).

Although children are more relevant in urban planning, the majority of administrative action or planning decisions only consider the working adult. "It is always a matter of satisfying his needs, neglecting or trampling on the rights and needs of the majority of the population" (Tonucci and Rissotto 2001, 213). Simpson (1997) found that cities' comprehensive plans make very few references to children beyond formal institutions such as schools or day care centers and fail to address the countless other ways children interact with their communities and environment. Furthermore, interviews with planners both in the United States and Australia found that the majority of planners have little professional knowledge about young people and have not considered how to systematically address their needs and desires in the planning process (Knowles-Yanez 2002).

Italian leaders have explicitly rejected this adult-centered orientation and as part of the Children's City Project mayors and city administrators changed their point of reference and took the child rather than the productive adult citizen as the parameter. This created a new philosophy in city management that "chooses the smallest as a guarantee for all." (Baraldi and Emilia 2005) These forward thinking planners and politicians argue that building a child friendly city not only satisfies the needs of children, but also creates a more community-oriented and sustainable city for all residents.

This paper begins by reviewing literature related to children and the built environment and examining how current American ideologies related to young people restrict children's participation. I then detail how an adult-centered perspective on children's well-being leads to a built environment that perpetuates adult control at the expense of children and youth. Following this analysis, I suggest that a participatory urban planning process that engages children can lead to more inclusive communities that advance the rights and well-being of all people. Based on this conceptual framework, I will then use Southeast Los Angeles as a case study to illustrate how children's socio-spatial exclusion is a result of an adult-oriented system of planning that fails to consult with young people or involve them in a decision-making process. Based on my findings, I will present recommendations on how to systematically increasing children's involvement in policymaking and how to better integrating children's perspectives in organizational structure and operations.

# The Need for a Rights Based Framework:

This section of the paper begins by discussing a right-based approach to children's well-being developed and implemented by the United Nations. I then move on to argue that America's refusal to ratify the CRC and the general reluctance of American policy-makers to include children in the political processes reflect a protectionist and adult-centered attitude towards youth that prioritizes parental rights over the rights of children and restricts young people's ability to participate in their communities.

## A rights based framework

In 1989, the United Nations took a significant stance on intergenerational equity and passed the "Convention on the Rights of Child" (CRC) requiring countries to act in the best interest of all children. By 1997, 191 countries had signed on to the convention making it the fastest and most broadly accepted human rights convention in history (Bartlett, et al. 1999, 5).

This convention has become a quintessential element in advancing children's rights and participation because it not only acknowledges children's need for defense against abuse and exploitation, but it also recognizes children as active agents in their lives and environments and as "protagonists of their own rights" (Hart and Schwab 186). The right-based approach articulated in the Convention creates a two-sided analysis of children's well-being - "On one side, protection preserves the integrity of the child. On the other side, participation preserves the child's dignity" (Chawla, *Evaluating Children's Participation: Seeking Areas of Consensus* 2001).

Because most children live in or near major cities and cities have the greatest power to directly impact the quality of life of their residents, the United Nations launched the Child Friendly Cities Initiative in order to promote the implementation of the CRC at the level that would have the greatest impact on the daily lives of children worldwide. The Child Friendly City aims to secure the right of all young citizens to

1. Influence decisions about their city
2. Express their opinion on the city they want
3. Participate in family, community, and social life
4. Receive basic services such as health care, education and shelter
5. Drink safe water and have access to proper sanitation
6. Be protected from exploitation, violence and abuse
7. Walk safely in the streets on their own
8. Meet friends and play
9. Have green spaces for plants and animals
10. Live in an unpolluted environment



11. Participate in cultural and social events
12. Be an equal citizen of their city with access to every service, regardless of ethnic origin, religion, income, gender or disability.

Currently, the United States and Somalia are the only nations in the world that have failed to sign the CRC– a fact that Barack Obama called embarrassing during his presidential campaign but has yet to change.

The US’s lack of support for the Convention and subsequent Child Friendly City movement restricts policy and legislation from reflecting the needs of children, but it also limits the ability to advocate and organize around children’s well-being. In most countries, the CRC has now transcended a set of legal guidelines and become a vital tool in education, outreach, and advocacy surrounding children and youth. For instance, in Italy the CFC framework provided a strategy to promote participation with children in changing their living environment and provided for a more active role on the part of the local government to ensure the visibility of children on the political agenda (**Invalid source specified..** It has, as Bartlett states, become a platform for action” (Bartlett 1999, 6). In opposing children rights at an international level, the United States removes this vital platform for potential action.

## American social conditions that prevent a rights based framework

The United States failure to sign the Convention, general unwillingness to recognize young people’s contributions, and reluctance to involve young people in decision-making reflect two predominant societal ideologies. The first is a protectionist approach to childhood that fails to recognize children’s agency and ability and the second is an adult-supremacist mentality that further marginalizes young people in all aspects of their lives.

### A protectionist approach to childhood

In the United States adults characterize children and youth as the passive victims of poverty, broken families, unsafe streets, failing schools, or intolerable living conditions. In this understanding, children are assumed to have no competence or ability and must rely on adults to advocate on their behalf. In this perspective, the children’s physical, moral, and social needs become the responsibilities of the caretaker and adult society not the children themselves (Wyness 195).

A protectionist approach to childhood presents a very limited understanding of children’s needs, and while it may provide children with basic economic rights and protection from abuse, it fails to honor children’s civil rights to self-determination and democratic participation. Furthermore, protectionism fails to consider the needs of children to feel included in society or have autonomy over their lives. The notion of children as vulnerable entities in need of protection and defense recognizes children only as “citizens in the future” or “adults in the making”,

(Torres 2009) and vastly overlooks children's current importance and place in their community.

Recently, an explosion of articles in popular journalism have questioned and condemned the protectionist approach to child rearing and advocated for a new "free-range" movement that embraces children's independence and autonomous mobility. Leonore Skenazy spearheaded this movement after she let her 9-year-old ride the subway alone (with a map, a metro card, a \$20 bill, and quarters for a pay phone) and was subsequently named "America's Worst Mother" (Gibbs 2009). Skenazy and her followers argue that protectionism creates a culture of fear, passivity, and public disengagement, and inevitably makes children feel dependent, isolated, anxious and alienated (Cadzow 2004:40).

They argue that with constant media sensationalism and television shows like "Law and Order Special Victims Units" and "Without a Trace", parents believe that if they let their children out of their sight for even a second their children will be instantly abducted and killed. This has contributed to a "faddish, hysteria" that has become an economic gold mine for the media, says David Glassner, author of the *Culture of Fear* (2000). During a focus group for "20/20," parents said things like, "I won't let [my son] go to the restroom by himself" and "I do not let [my kids] go out by themselves in the yard, not even the front yard" (Stossel 2007). Yet the chance that a child will be abducted or murdered is one in 1.5 million and American cities are safer today than they ever have been. Since the 1990's, crime in cities has decreased, yet the percentage of kids walking or biking to school dropped from 41% in 1969 to 13% in 2001 (Gibbs 2009). Death by injury has dropped more than 50% since 1980 but parents lobbied to take the jungle gyms out of playgrounds and free play time for six to eight year olds dropped 25% from 1981 to 1997 as homework doubled (Gibbs 2009).

As a result of this hyper-protectionism, children in the United States are "strapped into the backseat of a family sedan chauffeured to and from school, soccer practice and piano lessons...like pampered prisoners – cosseted, constrained and constantly nagged" (Cadzow 2004: 18). And the only escape children can have is in a "computer generated world where free play is always possible" (Cadzow 2004: 18).

## **An adult-supremacist ideology:**

As previously mentioned, adults think of children as innocent and vulnerable objects in need of constant protection and defense however, once children reach adolescence, adults' protectionist attitude often turns into one of criminalization. After around age 12, adult society reconceives of children (particularly children of color) no longer as helpless pieces of property, but instead as reckless criminals devoid of any sense of responsibility or understanding of their lives. As a result, young people are driven out of public space either through explicit police harassment or more covert means of discrimination such as the "Mosquito Anti-Loitering devise" which "dispersed" groups of teenagers away from public and private spaces by emitting intolerable high pitched, ultrasonic sound waves that only teenagers can hear.

In the protectionist and criminalization mentality, adults control the process of relegating children and youth to low-status positions. The constructed identities of the “vulnerable child” and the “criminal youth” thus act interdependently to justify systems of adult supremacy and the control of adults over children and youth. Kurt Iverson argues that through the conception of the vulnerable child, adults can seemingly innocuously exaggerate risk and threats and prioritize and legitimize interventions that violate the basic human rights and dignity of other children and youth (Gleeson and Sipe 2006, 53).

Scholars and activists have just recently begun to think of children as a disempowered group oppressed by adult supremacy and adultism. Delgado defines adult supremacy as “the fundamental belief that adults have the moral authority to control youth” (Delgado 2008, 29) and Bell defines adultism as “the inherent belief that adults are the ultimate experts on young people – their issues, dreams, anxieties, and abilities.” Bell (1995, 1) furthers this definition of adultism stating that it is the “assumption[s] that adults are better than young people and entitled to act upon young people without their agreement.” This adultism is evident in the US’s refusal to sign the Convention on the Right of the Child.

The primary opposition to the Convention is that it will erode the rights of the parents to exercise authority and control over their children. In one oppositional article written by the National Center for Home Education, the authors claim that allowing children “freedom of express” will “essentially give children the right to listen to rock music, watch television, and even have access to pornography” and that “freedom of thought, conscience, and religion” will “give children the right to object to their parent’s religious trainings and participate in religious services of other cults” (Klicka and Estrada 2007). Why exactly parents are so afraid of children exercising autonomy over their lives is unclear, however, it is evident that parents believe that their rights as adults supersede those of children.

Instead, of valuing children and young people as equal members of society with meaningful and important perspectives, adults continue to think of children as extensions of their property and consider anyone under the age of 18 less worthy of civil rights and liberties. It is precisely this attitude towards young people that led the United Kingdom’s Children’s Rights Office to declare children as a “disenfranchised group of ‘nearly citizens, with no public voice’ (Matthews 15) an identity which creates and reinforces their socio-spatial marginalization. The adult supremacy structure not only exists within the family and private sphere, but within the governmental and public scheme as well. As Bronnicksen argues, “The government echoes the structure of the family: adults, and only adults, get to make the rules. The breadth of rule-making power that adult government grants itself is almost unlimited. It elevates traditional parental authority to law, giving youth a status much like property. Yet, when the state does take an interest, parents’ rights of private ownership are superseded, with the justification that youth are property (“resources”) collectively owned by all adult citizens.” Bronnicksen (2002, 5). Thus, Children, like women and African Americans in the past, remain pieces of property (either of their family or the state) devoid of civil rights, liberty, or respect.

***Conclusion:***

Unlike the adult-centric approach, a rights-based approach does not view children as passive recipients of aid or mere victims of adult behavior and environmental failure. Nor does it make any false distinction between “vulnerable children” and “dangerous youth”. Instead, it recognizes children’s capacity and autonomy to make decisions about their own lives and communities. In order to move forward as a more participatory and inclusive society, the United States must move beyond protectionism and paternalism and adopt a more rights-based approach that respects, honors, and values all children, not just their parents.

# The results of a protectionist, adult-centric perspective:

The two interrelated ideologies of protectionism and adult-centrism discussed previously negatively affect children and their communities by defining children's well-being only through an adult perspective and by pursuing subsequent land-use policies that fail to meet children's needs.

## An incomplete understanding of children's well-being

Protectionism coupled with adult-supremacy has led to an incomplete picture of children's well-being that relies on quantitative data describing children, rather than qualitative data from children. Children's "well-being" in Los Angeles and the United States more generally, primarily addresses children as "growing bodies with health concerns" or "growing minds with educational needs". In characterizing children's health in this way researchers imply that children are only significant in their role as eventual adults or as "citizens-in-training" (Frank, 2006), an approach that fails to recognize children as human beings in and of themselves who are worthy and deserving of recognition, support, and empowerment. Furthermore, the limited understanding of children's well-being prioritizes physical health over emotional wellness and fails to address the built environment's role in children's lives. Without understanding how the environment impacts children, city planners and policy makers will continue to create cities that are unwelcoming and hostile to young people.

In Los Angeles, the Children's Planning Council develops a yearly Scorecard to conclude on the well-being of children in the City. In 2008, the report defined well-being using five categories: 1) good health, 2) safety and survival, 3) economic well-being, 4) social and emotional well-being, and 5) education and workforce readiness. The report included primarily traditional indicators of physical health and safety including birth weight, obesity rates, and asthma rates, instances of child abuse, neglect, or domestic violence, and felony arrests for children aged 10-17. Yet, as the Council reported, the social and emotional well-being indicators still need further development. Currently the Council defines social and emotional well-being by the percent of children 0-5 with difficulty finding childcare, library story time attendance, hours of TV watched, number of children in foster care, and number of youth in the judicial system.

The scorecard's limited indicators do not include any qualitative data collected by children, they do not have any data related explicitly to the built environment such as access to parks or open space, and the concept of "health" only includes physical conditions and not mental indicators such as depression, anxiety, or suicide. The CPC created the scorecard to broadly answer the question "What do we want for our children?" (McCroskey 2007) Yet this paternalistic sentiment does not allow for or prioritize the question of "What do our children want for

themselves?” And it suggests that community development and good urban planning are irrelevant to the individualistic, capitalistic, and bodily approach to well-being.

Not only does the protectionist approach to well-being prioritize physical health over mental health, it positions the individual as separate from the community, and takes a neoliberal approach that uses economic growth as the main tool in achieving and addressing well-being. As the national report on well-being explicitly states, “The well-being of children depends greatly on their economic circumstances and material well-being of their families” (13). Yet various studies have indicated that wealth alone does not bring happiness and that Western children living in upper-middle class suburbs often suffer from higher-rates of suicide, depression, and anxiety (Stanley 2003, Gleeson 2004). Because protectionism prioritizes individuals, it ascribes little value to the emotional benefits of social networks and participation in vibrant and cohesive communities. Furthermore, the notion that a child’s well-being depends on the family’s economic conditions fail to recognize that the economic conditions of the neighborhood and community impact children’s lives more than the individual conditions of the family does.

A report from The California Endowment together with Policy Link entitled “Why Place Matters” focuses on how low-income communities, not just individual families, suffer from disproportionately negative environmental factors such as poor air and water quality and have less access to healthy food and safe open spaces (Bell 2007). In addition the report finds that concentrated poverty reduces access to jobs and quality education. This report includes a different definition of individual well-being, one that is grounded in the community context. Yet this report characterizes children as passive subjects of unhealthy environments rather than active agents in creating vibrant and healthy cities. For city planners and policy makers to move forward and adequately address children’s well-being they must move beyond the traditional and limited dichotomies of child and adult, individual and community, and body and mind. Most importantly, researchers and advocacy groups must consult with children and allow children and young people to set the agenda on how to achieve well-being.

## Urban planning that perpetuates adultism

As discussed in the previous section, adults limited conception of childrens’ well-being results in a perspective that prioritizes individualism and family economic status and fails to integrate children’s well-being within a greater framework of community wellness. Much of this misrepresentation is due to the fact that children are not involved in the consultation process. Similarly, urban planners create spaces supposedly with “family” interests in mind but never consult with children and often ignore their presence entirely. A study conducted by Simpson (1997) found that cities’ comprehensive plans make very few references to children beyond formal institutions such as schools or day care centers and fail to address

the countless other ways children interact with their communities and environment. Furthermore, interviews with planners both in the United States and Australia have found that the majority of planners have little professional knowledge about young people and have not considered how to systematically address their needs and desires in the planning process (Knowles-Yanez 2002). Children and young people's absence in urban planning leads to cities and neighborhoods that primarily reflect the misguided assumptions of adults rather than the actual well-being of children.

According to an extensive global survey conducted as part of UNESCO's "Growing Up in Cities" research, children, despite racial, national, and economic differences, have similar criteria of what constitutes a good place to live (Chawla 2001). Children identified specific indicators both social and physical that create positive environments and those that create negative spaces. Children want **social integration** and **to feel welcome and valued** in their communities. They want their community to have a **cohesive community identity** expressed through things like art and festivals. They want a tradition of community self-help that leads to more empowered citizens, and they want to **feel safe and free to move** throughout their neighborhood. In terms of physical qualities, children want **peer gathering places**, a **variety** of activities where they can shop, explore, play sports, and pursue interests and hobbies, they want **safe green spaces**, the provision of basic needs, and the security of land tenure.

Under a protectionist and adult-centered mentality, adult-centered urban planning has failed to meet children's criteria for a good city. Instead, they have alienated young people from the rest of the community; created isolated areas designated only for children's use, and robbed young people of their autonomy and independence. Sterile, single-family homes, homogenous and segregated playgrounds, and car-oriented transit planning are just three examples of how current city planning feeds into adults' misguided protectionism and adult-centric attitudes. Each of the following sections will question an assumed adult-centered approach to planning for children and then provide a case study of a more child-centered alternative.

## Individualistic, single-family housing:

Typically, the only time adults formally recognize children's presence in living spaces is through a process of "child-proofing" the household and removing any potentially harmful elements. The term "child-proof" does, in fact, correctly describe the relationship between most children and their residential areas. Just as waterproof jackets repel water, sound-proof walls suppress sound, and fireproof buildings resist fire, many housing developments in the United States effectively repel, suppress, and resist children. This is largely due to the fact that adults, driven by their individualism and fear of public spaces, have made the privatized single-family homes (complete with a sterile, flat front lawns) the norm for most housing developments. This suburban housing model is in fact a central element of the "American Dream" and a supposedly ideal place to raise a family.

However, contrary to adult assumptions, various studies indicate children's displeasure at the suburban style of housing that centers on the individual rather than the community. In a working group between architects and pre-school children, Tonucci and Rissoto documented children's perspectives and reported that children argued, "Homes should not be either large condominiums with lots of apartments or single family cottages. In large condominiums people are afraid of others and stay shut up in the house; in a cottage you do not need others and end up being just as lonely." (Tonucci and Rissoto 2001; 417) Instead, these children proposed that houses have a few apartments organized in block units so that it is easy to get to know all of their neighbors. This recommendation illustrates children's desire for a cohesive community and more intimate communal spaces, not individualized isolation or privatized spaces.

Because of their greater desire for community space and human interaction, children tend to favor housing in mixed-use areas where they can not only interact with the greater community, but also exercise autonomy and independence over their lives. Research regarding the impact of the built environment on children's school conduct grades in East Little Havana, Miami revealed that young people who lived in purely residential blocks, and not mixed use commercial areas, had a much greater likelihood of doing poorly in school. The report concluded, "The built environment may be a mechanism for community-based intervention to enhance children's classroom conduct." The researchers further argued that mixed-income housing enhances children's well-being through an increase in social capital and greater community monitoring and supervision (Szapocznik, et al. 2006). However, what the researchers failed to consider was that children might have performed better in school because they felt happier and more included in society, which gave them the confidence and affirmation to increase their academic achievement.

More qualitative, youth focused studies have found that children simply prefer land use variation and enjoy having a greater diversity of people to see, places to go, and things to do. Talen and Coffindaffer (1999) used an educational drawing tool to examine children's conceptions of neighborhoods and their environmental design preferences. They found that children preferred areas of mixed residential and commercial use to homogenous residential areas because of the activity, stimulation, and social interaction offered by diverse land use (330). Lennard suggest that reason for this preference is because mixed-use development and more commercial activity give children a greater sense of community and safety, "[Seeing fellow residents] gives meaning to public realm and recognizing familiar faces such as local business owners helps children recall past experiences and memories" (Lennard and Lennard 2000, 34).

Most housing developments are not only isolated and lonely; they are also sterile and boring. For whatever reason, adults have typically adopted the belief that a "good neighborhood" is one that is nicely manicured, controlled, and homogenous. But this adult perspective, for the most part, does not appeal to children. According to lead Architect Luciano Pantaleon of the Coriandoline: Housing for Boys and Girls project, "The home for children has to be a beautiful and fascinating place... The house must be able to receive and accommodate the emotions and feelings of children who, when they dream, dream in color." (Coriandoline 2008) Homes, he



argued, must be full of imagination, excitement, and interest, not homogeneity, control, and order. According to Hart, the same is true for the natural environment surrounding homes. "Commonly the most valued spaces for children are those which have been forgotten by planners and other adults. Ironically, the best landscape for children is often one which has been left to the power of nature...these are the qualities systematically removed from all new residential areas" (Hart, *Wildlands for Children: Consideration of the Value of Natural Environments in Landscape Planning* 1982).

In lower income areas, where residents do not have the economic privilege of creating homogenous sterile spaces in the suburbs, adults often "protect" their homes by adding bars to the windows and intimidating fences to keep out intruders and draw a visual line between the private home and the public street. This fortification often keeps children locked within their homes either because of the child's own fear or because of stringent adult control. During a participatory planning project in Italy, a pre-school aged boy told the architects that he wanted to live in a "transparent" house where he could see everything. Tonucci and Rissoto characterize the child's love for windows and transparency as a protest against the fortress homes young people are forced to live in, homes that teach them to be afraid of others and stifle the children's burning desire to "look outwards, go outside, and be seen." (Tonucci and Rissoto 2001; 417).

Adults' concerns with safety are valid and important and children certainly need to be protected against violence and crime. However, safety does not necessarily mean increased police presence and greater surveillance (in fact, often that kind of "safety" creates protection for some children at the expense of the criminalization of others). Safety can instead become a community defined, community enforced ideal that through inclusion and respect creates shared and usable spaces. As Cooper and Sarkissian argue, "the best and cheapest technique of security planning is creating a viable and caring community or residents organized to protect themselves" (Cooper and Sarkissian 1986). This can be accomplished both through architecture and planning as well as community-based management and control. This approach to safety reinstates children and residents not as victims of violence, but as participatory agents in their own protection.

Architecture and planning can effectively create more "defensible spaces" or spaces in which residents and inhabitants become the key agents in ensuring their security. The theory of defensible space postulates that the physical characteristics of residential settings impact and influence criminal activity (Newman 1972). Defensible spaces can prevent criminal activity through well-lit streets, front porches, placing windows that look out onto the street or shared courtyards, open and well-lit entrances to individual dwellings, and the creation of more inviting public space. Since defensible spaces depend upon shared community surveillance, any environment that encourages people to move beyond the interior of their dwellings and into shared open space creates a safer community. This perspective varies significantly from the traditional notion of housing safety that depends on high fences and gates, barred windows, and alarm systems that instill children with an unhealthy and often over-exaggerated fear of their neighbors and their community. To achieve this community-centered solution adults must question

their assumptions of what constitutes a good community and who belong within it and work more collaboratively with all residents, especially youth.

### *Correggio: A Case Study of the World's Most Child Friendly Housing Development.*

Shockingly, not all housing in the world centers on adults and their needs. In Italy, a constructive cooperative in the small northern town of Correggio spent ten years designing and constructing a housing development that would honor every whimsical, playful, and imaginative need of the child. The effort was part of a larger town strategy to become a place “for inhabitants” rather than “for habitations”.

The project started in 1995, and involved child psychologists, teachers, and 700 pre-school children all working with architects, engineers, surveyors, builders and carpenters to design living spaces that met the variety of children’s emotional, psychological, and imaginative needs. Through a four-year creative research process, children declared that they wanted a living space that was transparent, hard on the outside but soft on the inside, peaceful, playful, decorated, intimate, and magical. Certainly no easy task for an architect.

The architects expressed the challenge of creating spaces that honored children’s needs and desires, but that didn’t turn into fantastical playgrounds only for their use.

“On the one hand we could have fallen into the trap of creating something banal - houses that looked just like all new houses, with token ‘corrections’ providing superficial concessions. On the other hand we could have gone to the opposite extreme and end up creating a sort of fairytale playground which had no meaning as a part of the town. We wanted to create an area which could be exploited and enjoyed by the whole community, but which used children's experiences and needs as a parameter for quality.”

They succeeded and were able to capture the imagination and magic desired by children through architectural and decorative detail, large windows, vibrant colors, and interactive features that encouraged childhood creativity while also appealing to adult sensibility.

Each house has a specific and distinctive theme. For example, the Flower House is decorated both with real flowers and invented ones like a song-stem (a flower that sings). The Transparent House is made with large windows instead of walls so residents can “see all the white magic when it shows”. Living in Coriandoline is truly a sensory experience. Even the landscaping engages all senses through the deliberately fragrant, tactile, and tasty planting choices. In this community, lamps transform into glowing birds, roads into slithering snakes, garages into monsters, houses into colorful confetti.

Children are encouraged to play everywhere, In Coriandoline, children are allowed to play in all the communal areas, including the garages, which double up as covered playground areas and inside the apartment blocks there are slides alongside each flight of stairs and distorting funfair-style mirrors on the walls.

This project, which involved children in every part of the planning and construction process, created a living space that facilitates community, play and creative interaction. It did not, unlike most housing for adults, cater to the individual, adult led, single-family home's need for order and control. Whereas family housing typically considers adults who have children, this project considered the family to be children who have adults.

### Isolated play spaces:

In the United States, the majority of adult planners and parents think of children's ideal play and recreation spaces as fenced in play structures with plastic slides and monkey bars. However, as Hart argues, "to a young child the idea of a playground is ridiculous in the first place. The whole idea of being taken to a place to play is almost an oxymoron. Children want to play everywhere," (2007). The assumption that play should occur only within a designated space merely reflects how adults' need for order, safety, and control further determine urban land-use at the expense of children. Tonucci and Rissotto explain how the compartmentalization of modern urban planning has led to a "Sandbox city" composed of "fenced-in spaces designed with specific functions and set up for children and them alone" (Tonucci and Rissotto 2001: 410) "In the sandbox city" they argue "nothing unexpected happens, the perception of its space is immediate and it terminates in the very instant in which it is perceived, security is achieved through a clear-cut separation of the inside from the outside" (Tonucci and Rissotto 2001: 410). This sandbox city alienates children from the rest of their community and removes young people from participating in public space use.

Several research studies investigating children's play preference conclude that children would rather play in streets, sidewalks, back alleys and empty lots than in formally designed playgrounds segregated from the rest of the population (Moore 1985). However, because public spaces such as streets, plazas, and parks fall outside of adult's control these spaces "are seen as a problematic influence on the socialization of children" (Visscher 2008, 605). As a result of their paternalistic and protectionist ideology, adults have forced children to surrender their valuable public spaces to adult-oriented commercialism and the private automobile.

The history of playgrounds in the United States centers far more around adult control and authority than on children's actual well-being. Before the advent of playground in the nineteenth century, children were able to find recreational opportunities in outdoor spaces and spent more time in public squares, local shops, and residential streets. At this time, children had virtually free reign and their play space consisted of the entire town and surrounding area, not a fenced in lot with plastic equipment. However, during the industrial revolution as children began working in factories, open outdoor spaces became increasingly rare. Social reformers and philanthropists became increasingly concerned with children's idle "fooling around" and increasing presence in city streets. These well intentioned adults feared the negative socialization that could result in such freedom and autonomy (Luken 2009, 27). Starting in the late nineteenth century, adults such as Maria Kraus-Boelte, the first kindergarten teacher in America, claimed that

“American children must be taught how to play” (Luken 2009, 28) and social reformers began constructing spaces specifically designed for children’s use (Chaudacoff 2007, 113).

These new spaces, which included static play materials such as slides and jungle gyms, arose primarily out of adult’s increased worry regarding the hygiene and safety of the City and their newfound desire to “protect” and “occupy” their children. At this time, children’s play was prescribed and dictated by a “playwork” and used as a means to socialize immigrants and further Americanization and social control. Therefore, as Cranz write, “at the same time [playgrounds] presented an alternative to the drudgery of factory work and city life, they responded with an equally rigid an ordered system to supposedly offer respite” (Cranz 1982, 63).

With the raise of child psychology in the early twenty century adults began to recognize the importance of play as an essential activity in children’s growth. However, as Luken argues, “because play was so important it was often not left to children to decide for themselves, rather adults took charge of determining what types of games, toys, and environments could inspire the most productive use of play time” (2009, 31). Children’s voices were and continue to be absent in the entire discussion of the “proper playground” or “conducive playspace”. Playgrounds have instead stemmed from adult’s fears of children’s delinquency and their desire to shelter children from city life/. To this day, this mentality has only resulted in children’s greater alienation from their community and in spaces that treat children as passive recipients of adult’s chosen games, toys, and environments.

As a result of their adult-centric history, playground today remain isolated spaces that cater only to a very narrow conception of play. Traditional playgrounds primarily provide spaces for motor activity and motor activity only, thereby inhibiting more expressive and creative forms of play (Danacher, 1991) and restricting opportunities for children to socialize with their peers (Alexander, 1997; Ader and Jouve, 1991). In the traditional playgrounds, children use the equipment primarily as the adults intended – slides for sliding, swings for swinging, ladders for climbing, and thus have no power or opportunity to creatively and imaginatively shape their own play experience.

### *The Adventure Playground: An alternative to the sterile, static norm*

The failures of the traditional playground have given raise to an innovative model for play design called the “adventure playground”. Adventure playgrounds originated after World War II when a Danish landscaper noticed that children preferred to play everywhere but the playground, particularly in the dirt and lumber from the post war rubble. He realized that children would rather design and build their own equipment than play with preexisting structures and came up with the ideal formula for a new adventure playground: Earth, fire, water, and lots of creative materials. Adventure playgrounds often give children access to tools such as hammers, saws, nails, shovels, etc and materials like water, rocks, sand, foam, textiles, cardboard and allow their ingenuity and creativity to flourish. For example in an adventure playground in Tokyo, children build dams in small streams of water, construct playhouses, and cook simple meals on fires with the play workers and

parents (Bartlett 142). Like Tokyo, every adventure playground has hired play workers who assist kids in learning to use basic tools, answer questions, and ensure safety. However, because the playground acknowledges and affirms children's freedom of imagination, the play worker cannot direct or dictate any activities.

Although adults also invented adventure playgrounds, adventure playgrounds give children the full autonomy to invent and create whatever they like, however they like. In comparison to traditional playgrounds, adventure playgrounds also facilitate greater sharing and cooperation amongst children. "Children spend a great deal of time building structures, and doing so requires the help of their peers. Children converse to a greater extent with other children at adventure playgrounds than in conventional and contemporary playgrounds. At an adventure playground children learn to negotiate their relationships" (Sutton n.d.). This negotiation reflects a kind of informal participation in spaces that cannot be achieved under the constant supervision and control of adults. Ideally children's informal participation and space use could occur in all parts of the city from public streets to open plazas to commercial districts, however, the adventure playground is a good start in creating at least one place where children feel autonomous, empowered, and capable.

## Car-oriented transit planning

For the most part, American streets cater entirely to the needs of the car. With the exception of narrow sidewalks and an occasional bike lane, the car has nearly exclusive rights to the road. For children, who cannot legally drive, car-oriented transit severely curtails their ability to move in the city. But children have transit needs just as adults do. They need to get to school, the park, friend's houses, and they don't want to have to constantly beg an adult for a ride. When children are able to independently navigate and explore the city, they feel more empowered and autonomous, develop a stronger connection with their community, and are less prone to anxiety and depression (Malone 2007; Tranter and Pawson 2001; Hillman et al 1990; Short 1989; Ward 1977). Children who do not have the ability to autonomously walk and cycle in their neighborhoods have less knowledge of their environment, less developed social, motor, and analytical skills, and fewer local friends and acquaintances (Prezza et al (2005, 437).

Children and youth are also more vulnerable to the built environment than adults. Research has shown children under the age of six or seven are significantly less capable of localizing the sound of an approaching car or in predicting the speed at which it is moving. (Ward 1978). And because children desire to play in the street, walk to school, and bike around their neighborhood, increased traffic limits their lives far more than it affects the lives of other people.

For children more walkable and bikeable streets can dramatically assist in their ability to get to school by themselves, enhance their access to resources such as libraries and shops, and facilitate greater social interactions with other children. In an Italian focus group where children gave their recommendations to make streets better, a school-aged girl said, "Pavement should be wide enough for a whole family to be able to walk along them abreast" (Tonucci and Rissotto 2001; 415). In a

similar focus group in Barcelona, Spain a young boy argued that, “Bicycles are more democratic than motor cars because everyone can use them, even children, while to drive a car you have to be old enough, have a license and lots of money; besides, the motor car is dangerous and causes accidents, pollutes the atmosphere and is very noisy.” (Tonucci and Rissoto 2001; 415). Both of these comments illustrate how children conceptualize of public spaces as a space for the community and family to be together- the location of a true democracy.

Streets should not only better reflect children’s basic need to move safely, but also their desire to play, socialize, and hang out. “The street truly can be a dwelling place for children, but for this to happen on all streets we may have to start perceiving them as places to be not just places to pass through.” (Cooper & Sarkissian 115) For children and youth, streets can function as communal environments where they can “be seen and see others on an informal basis” (Zeisel and Welch 1981). However, because adults have dictated transit only to the needs of their automobiles and not to the safety and well-being of children, streets remain privatized spaces that fail to meet the democratic needs of all members of society.

Recently, throughout the United States, children and youth have resisted adult’s control over streets and launched musical and cultural movements to reinstate their place in public spaces. For instance, in the early 2000s, young people in Oakland launched the Hyphy Movement, a musical sensation that focused on high-energy beats and block-parties-esque social gatherings called “side shows”. These young people, denied of places to socialize and interact with their friends, forcefully retook the streets by blocking off entire roads, parking their cars, blasting music, and essentially, having a party. While adults focused on the liability and danger of such activity (typical of protectionist ideology), they failed to address the root causes that led young people to employ such renegade tactics. The hyphy movement proves that if adults ignore young peoples presence and importance in city spaces, young people will find a way to retake what is rightfully theirs.

### *Case Study: Homezoner “shared street” concept:*

The concept of a Woonerf (Home Zone in English) originated in the Netherlands after a car ran over and killed a journalist’s child while she was playing. This tragic event in 1975 sparked an anti-car, anti-traffic campaign called Stop de Kindermoord (stop the child murders) – a campaign that actively involved children. The campaign forced city planners to recognize the need to make streets safer for children’s play and use and called for more innovative transit planning. Official home zones now exist over of much of Europe as more and more countries recognize that neighborhoods designed for people, not cars, can increase residents quality of life and strengthen community identity.

While each Home Zone employs different strategies to meet its particular spatial demands and constraints, they typically have many features in common. Most Home-zones eliminate raised sidewalks, which traditionally separate zones for vehicles and pedestrians and employ a combination of paving, street furniture, and

planting to slow-moving traffic and reduce car speeds to a walking pace of 8 to 12 miles per hour.

In implementing these tactics, home zones hope to reduce or remove dominance of the car, foster a sense of community, encourage diversity of use, and increase activity and play.

# Moving Forward: Advancing children's rights through participatory urban planning

Because many urban spaces only cater to adults' perceived need for control and order and do not consider children's needs for community, play, and autonomy, children often feel marginalized and excluded in their surrounding environments. The only way to counter this spatial exclusion is through greater political inclusion that allows children to have a more active and participatory role in shaping their built environments. By recognizing children's importance in the urban planning process, incorporating children in research and consultation, and entrusting children with greater participatory decision-making, adults can take the necessary steps to build not only more inclusive and just spaces, but a more inclusive and just political system.

Most progressive adults and non-profit leaders claim that youth participation is vital to a healthy, vibrant community, yet little is done to reform the systems that exclude younger people from playing an active role in their communities. Occasionally youth or children may be invited to an organization or foundation meeting, however, one child in a room full of adults does not signify meaningful participation, nor does one research project involving teenagers facilitate any kind of lasting change in youth empowerment. Meaningful participation is the institutionalization of a more just and inclusive decision-making process – it is not a collection of isolated and tokenistic opportunities or events (Kirby, et al. 2003). In order to truly engage children and youth in city planning, government decision-making and community organizing, adults must assist in creating institutionalized, sustainable, and meaningful opportunities for children to speak and act on behalf of themselves. They must take a "proactive" approach to children's participation, whereby urban policy becomes the product of negotiations and cooperation amongst all citizens, regardless of age.

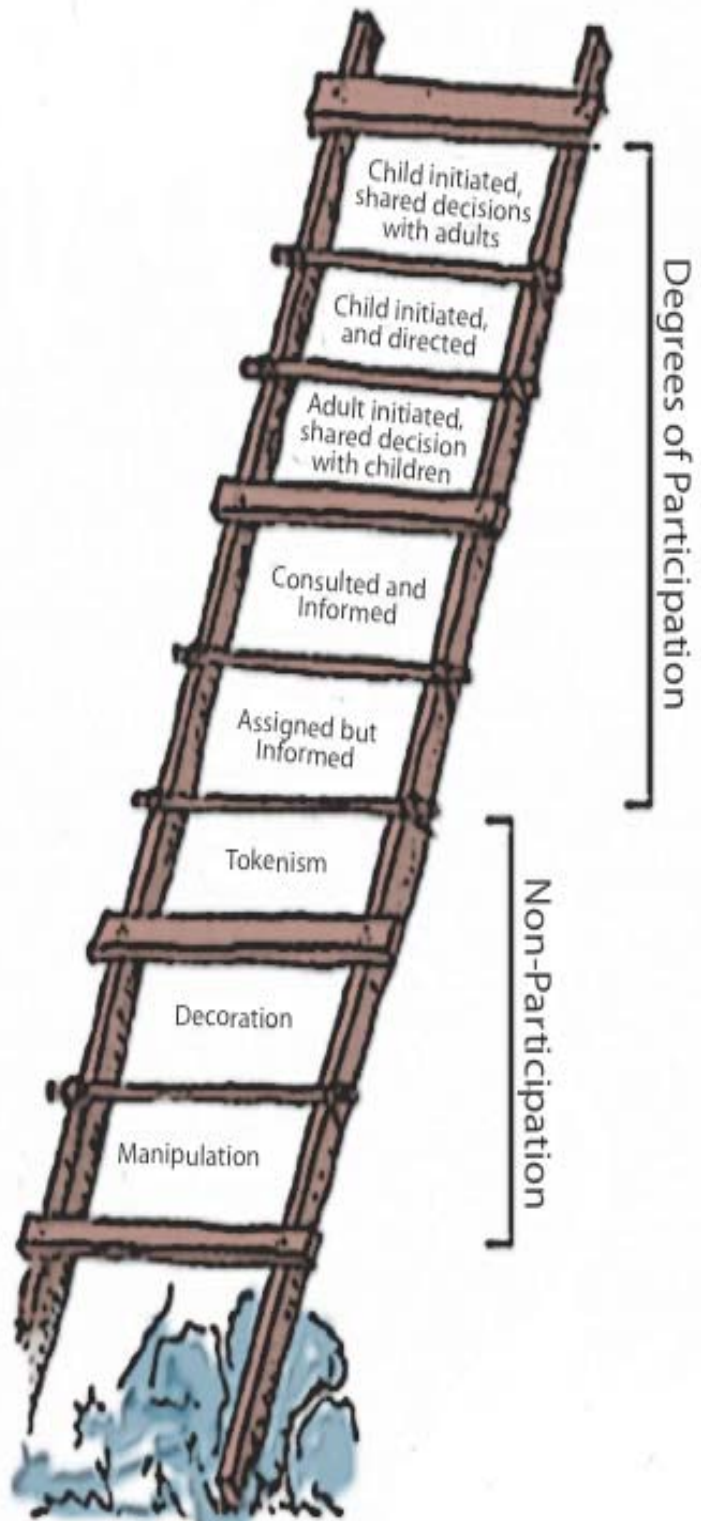
There is no one size fits all model of children's participation, instead participation must be fostered across both formal and informal settings" relevant to the community, social group, and cultural context. Robert Hart, a foremost scholar and advocate in the Child Friendly City Movement developed a typology that characterizes children's different levels of participation. While all projects should not necessarily aim for the highest rungs of the ladder, none should fall in the first three categories. The goal of the typology was not to create a prescriptive formula for children's participation, but rather to raise awareness about the possibility for children's empowerment. Participation: "It is not necessary that the children always operate on the highest possible rungs of the ladder. Different children at different



times might prefer to perform with varying degrees of involvement or responsibility. The important principle is one of choice: programs should be designed which maximize the opportunity for any child to choose to participate at the highest level of his ability" (Hart, Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship 1992).

Non-participation:

- **Manipulation:** children and youth don't understand the project or its aims. For instance, pre-school children carrying political placards for a march that they do not understand.
- **Decoration:** adults ask children to perform at an event (sing, drama, recite poetry) but do not explain the reason for the event, involve them in its organization, or give the children the opportunity to excuse themselves from the performance. "Children are there because of the refreshments, or some interesting performance, rather than the cause" (Hart 11).
- **Tokenism** children and youth are seemingly given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about the subject and little or no opportunity to formulate their own opinions. Typically there is no discussion of how these children were chosen or what particular perspectives they represent.



Preventing Non-Participation:

The bottom three rungs of the ladder reflect a process of adults trying to fit children in to the project without disrupting any current adult power structures in place –

these projects only serve to advance the status quo and further marginalize children. According to Mathews, for children to become more active participant, they must understand the intentions of the project, know who made the decisions concerning their involvement and why, have a meaningful role in the project, and volunteer to participate after the project was made clear to them. Here a project can mean anything from a one-time event to a formal, ongoing, and institutionalized council for children and youth.

#### Degrees of Participation:

- **Assigned but informed:** adults decide on the project and children volunteer to become involved. The children understand the project - that is, they know why they are involved and who decided to involve them.
- **Consulted and informed:** the project is still designed and run by adults, but with the full understanding and consent of the children and their input and opinions are taken seriously.
- **Adult-initiated, shared decision with children:** adults own the initial idea of the project, but young people are involved in the planning and implementation. Children's views are considered and children are involved in making the decisions.
- **Child initiated and directed:** the children or youth think of the initial idea for the project, without adult interference, and decide how it is supposed to be implemented. Adults are available for support, but do not take over.
- **Child initiated, shared decisions with adults:** children or youth have ideas for the project and also initiate it themselves. They may seek advice, discussion, and support from adults and at their own discretion. Similarly, the adults provide their expertise for the children or youth to consider, but do not impose their will.

As evident from the ladder, active participation reflects a spectrum of engagement and includes everything from children's one time involvement in a park clean up, to their inclusion in a consultative research project, to their presence on formal councils on government bodies.

From a planning perspective, actively involving children requires engaging children in multiple levels and various times. It requires first acknowledging young people's stake in the built environment and their capacity to make change. This active acknowledgement ensures that children's participation will remain on the upper portion of Hart's ladder and will prevent the manipulation and tokenism of young people. After acknowledging children's importance and abilities, planners and policy makers should engage children in more participatory research and consultation in order to further advance children level of participation. Finally, planners should strive for the final rung of the ladder and engage in more shared decision-making with children through active and participatory planning.

## Acknowledging children as capable agents for change

Children throughout the world have demonstrated that they are capable agents for social and environmental change and that they deserved to be valued and respected in the decision-making process. In Australia, children's input is considered an integral part of the Community's Safety Plan. In France, there are over 200 city councils of children that have an active say in policy and planning (Alparone, etc 2001). In Harare, Zimbabwe (Mclvor 2005) and Johannesburg, South Africa (Swart-Kruger, Jill), children document their environmental conditions and plan the effective use of scarce resources. And in the New Schools of Colombia, children participate and manage their schools' environment and community including raising gardens, developing fish farming programs and raising tree seedlings.

In fact, there is no psychological evidence to indicate that children are unable to actively participate in planning discussions. Children as young as age six have the capacity, ingenuity, and motivation to become keenly involved in determining the development and management of local places (Mathews 2001). Based on an analysis of children's competencies, ability to understand others' perspectives, and logical development, Bartlett et al recommended that middle childhood (ages 6-12 years old) offers the ideal time to begin offering opportunities for youth participation. According to Bartlett, children at this age no longer want to imitate adult activity as younger children do, but seek to master the skills valued within a culture. They have a desire and ability to make friendship and understand others' points of view, but are not yet involved in the same level of identity searching and self-awareness as adolescents.

Other projects such as the Coriandoline Housing for Boys and Girls, which used the recommendations of pre-schoolers to guide the development process, have shown that children even younger than six can analyze and express their needs as well. While children may not engage in the same way as adults and may be in need of more creative tools and techniques, their contributions are typically realistic, effective, and innovative (Hart 1992).

Children are not only as capable as adults, they are more capable at understanding how the built environment can better serve children, because they are most aware of their own specific needs. Constante Parrin, author of *Belonging in America*, said, "On just about every issue affecting children's well-being-...the decisions adults make in the public domain turn out to be as likely to work against children's interests as for them" (160). Not involving children in decisions related to their wellbeing, works counter to the aims they strive to achieve, after all an eight-year old is the best expert in what it means to be a eight-year-old.

Children also have greater sensitivity to global social issues like environmentalism and pacifism, and often have a kind of social sensibility that adults lack. For instance, Tori Osborn, one of the most influential progressive leaders in Los Angeles credits her involvement in the Progressive movement with her early childhood experiences growing up in Denmark, a country that embraces children's freedom and autonomy. Osborn later moved to fascist Spain and witnessed violence and oppression first hand. Because of this dramatic feeling of

freedom and paradise lost, Osborn said she first became active in the peace movement at age six and has not stopped since. Colombia's Children's Movement for Peace provides another striking example of children's ability to enact change. During this movement, 2.7 million children aged 7-18 participated and voted in a special election to demand peace and an end to violence that forced guerrillas to come to a cease-fire. One year later, 10 million adults followed the young people's example, and voted "Yes" for a Citizen's Mandate for Peace, Life, and Freedom. For cities concerned with sustainability, environmental protection, and more peaceful relationships among people, children's input and suggestions can help advance those goals.

Perhaps most importantly children want to participate in influencing their built environments. In a case study analysis of children's participatory planning projects, Frank found that children were enthusiastic and that planning initiatives were able to attract children across the board, "regardless of their age, location (suburbs or inner-city neighborhoods), ethnicity, or socioeconomic status." Furthermore the opportunity to engage in real world, participatory initiatives had even more appeal for children who did not traditionally do well in school or in other adult institutions (Frank 2006).

## **Including children in research and consultation:**

Once planners and decision-makers recognize children's importance and capacity in the planning process, they must then engage with young people to understand how children currently use and relate to the built environment. This understanding will help guide policies and decisions so that spaces better reflect the needs of children as well as adults. Children are the most knowledgeable about their lives and their environments and researchers should honor and respect that by including children as equal participants in the research process. Too often researchers address children's role and status in society through quantitative indicators that fail to address children's qualitative state of being or relationship with their environment, an approach exemplified by the traditional "ScoreCards" of young people's well-being.

In order to engage in more collaborative and qualitative work with children, researchers must explicitly recognize the power imbalances in working with children, respectfully adapt research processes to children's communication styles, be mindful of existing preconceptions and involve children in the research process. This will once again ensure that children's involvement does not fall into decoration, marginalization, or tokenization. After outlining these preliminary conditions and guidelines, I will then present a toolkit for planners and decision-makers to more effectively engage with children in the research process and provide an example of the tools' success.

## Guidelines for participatory research and consultation with children and youth

### *Researchers must recognize and overcome the power imbalance*

Because children tend to accept adult authority and seek adult affirmation they may respond to what they think researchers want to hear which would severely limit the research findings (Mahon et al, 1996; Harden et al 2000). If adults open acknowledge and address issues of power, control, and authority they can better foster relationships between researchers and participants (O’Kane 2000).

However, addressing power imbalances does not necessarily mean equalizing power in all situations. Rather, it reflects a desire on the part of the adult to engage with young people in nurturing flexible environments instead of replicating structures of authority, exclusion, and control. Basic everyday behaviors can significantly assist in bridging the power differential and children will feel more comfortable and equal if a researcher maintains eye contact, participates in games and activities instead of watching as a passive observer, eats with the young people, and sits or crouches down to the child’s level (NSW Commission for Children and Youth, 2008).

### *The researcher must assume competence and adapt to children’s communication styles:*

For every age level, rather than asking whether or not younger children are able to participate, researchers should instead question, “What support can be provided to enable children to participate to the best of their ability.”

For example, children who hesitate to express themselves in words may prefer expressive drawing techniques or photography. Younger children who have trouble reading two-dimensional maps or plans for the redesign of their school may be better able to manipulate the three-dimensional mode. Also, abstract ideas and concepts are difficult for children to understand and using more practical examples can help bridge that conceptual gap.

### *Children should be involved in the research process:*

Children can be involved in all stages of the research process from defining the research question, to developing the methodology, to collecting the data, to disseminating the results. By involving children in all stages, children can ensure that adult’s studies are sensitive and relative to children and feel more of a sense of ownership and empowerment in the process.

## A tool kit of child-friendly approaches and techniques:

### *Traditional Methods:*

- **Open interviews:** Less structured interviews can provide more opportunities to collaborate in an interview and make participants feel freer

in expressing their thoughts and opinions (Driskell 2002, 208-113). Interviews should be in a setting where children feel comfortable, physically and emotionally, in their home, local playground, or recreation center. Meeting children on their turf is important because it helps counter the power differential.

- **Focus groups:** Focus groups can make children feel more comfortable and help them better express themselves. It can also help alleviate the power differential between an adult researcher and child participants. However focus groups can often be confrontational or stifling settings for individuals, and certain participants may dominate the conversation leading to a false consensus. When working with children, the focus group should not take place in an institutional setting because it could convey a hierarchical power relationship and prevent children from expressing their true opinions
- **Questioners and surveys:** can be helpful in reaching a large number of people and getting a more complete list of concerns and visions. However surveys typically do not facilitate a participatory process and are not very interactive or provocative. If used, surveys and questionnaires should be suitable for young people, use appropriate language, be interesting in content and design (include pictures), and provide for a combination of close and open-ended questions so that children can express themselves in their words (Driskell 2002, pp 139-146).
- **Daily activity schedules/dairies:** This is an incredibly valuable technique for researchers to better understand how children use their time. For example, what children do, where they go, who they are with, etc. (Driskell 2002 pp 188-120)

### *Expressive methods:*

- **Free Write:** A free write response to an open question can give participants the opportunity to move outside the researcher's understanding of the topic (NSW Commission for Children and Young People 2009, 72). When using this technique let the children and youth know that they are not being judged on their writing skills or techniques, but that the research is focused on their ideas and opinions. In one impressive example of a free write, Hill, Laybourn, Borland (1996) interviewed 28 children about emotions and well-being. They gave the children an "About Myself" sheet where children could write basic details about themselves and their likes and dislikes. This effective method of engaging conversation dissolved the "right" "wrong" perception to answering questions (NSW Commission for Children and Young People 2009, 56)
- **Drawings/Collages:** (Horelli 1998 pp 230-232), Driskell 2002 115-117: Drawing and collages can provide one of the best tools for understanding children's perceptions and views. For example, Swart 1988 asked street children to draw a line down the middle of a piece of paper and on one side draw people doing "good things" and on the other side draw people doing

“bad things” she then drew out a greater conversation about moral values (NSW Commission for Children and Young People 2009). They can also act as an icebreaker to begin an individual interview or focus group. When using drawing techniques, give clear instructions, do not comment or interrupt, and do not praise good drawings and criticize bad ones and do not only use “good” drawings in the analysis.

- **3D models built in community workshops:** Utilizing 3D models creates a more interactive process that can engage children to consider design alternatives and adapt current design to better meet their needs. The 3D model is easier for children to envision and can act as a valuable tool for a structural analysis of neighborhood. Modeling also clarifies urban planning and the built environment for those unfamiliar with design. (Horelli 1998, 230) (Hart 1997 169-170) (Driskell 2002 159-160).
- Role Play, drama, and puppetry (Driskell 2002, 124-146) (Hart 1997 p 170): Children can also communicate their ideas through role play, drama, and puppets. This tool can be used as an icebreaker and to build trust in a group interview or focus group. While this is a useful option for discussing more sensitive issues, older children are less receptive and less likely to respond.

### *Actions in the field*

- Photo reports: Researchers often give children cameras and ask them to take pictures of either a certain aspect of their community –such as spaces that they like or spaces that they dislike. These photos are valuable on their own, but can ideally provide a valuable tool in engaging children in a greater discussion as well. (Horelli 1998, 230, Driskell 2002, 130-133)
- Walk around the Neighborhood: In this activity, small groups of children walk and explore their neighborhood and record the positive and negatives of certain areas. Afterwards they come together in a larger group and make a more complete list. (Horelli 1998, 231)
- Guided tours: In a guided tour, the young guide provides information about the built environment and often recounts oral histories of experiences. It is typically done by foot or by bicycle. (Driskell 2002, 127-129, Malone 2002)
- Gulliver’s Mapping: In this activity, the researcher puts up a large map of the area for about a week and members and residents are invited to make any comments. The map is typically used to understand residents’ perspectives and connect with their experiences and memory of place. (Driskell 200, 158):

## Involving children in meaningful decision-making

*“If you had a problem in the black community; and you brought together a group of white people to discuss it, almost nobody would take that panel seriously. There’d probably be a public outcry. It would be the same thing for women’s issues or gay issues. Can you imagine a bunch of men sitting on the Mayor’s Advisory Committee on Women? But everyday, in local arenas all the way to the White House, adults sit around and decide what problems youth have and what youth need, without ever consulting with them” Jason Warwin, 17-years-old youth activist. (Funders Youth Organizing, 6)*

The previous section discussed the need to include children in consultation and research. While consultation is a vital step in the participatory process, consultation alone does not empower children to make meaningful decisions. Children can only engage as active members of society if they have the power and opportunity to make meaningful decisions over their community and their lives. Meaningful participation requires that organizations move beyond simply providing services to young people or treating children as clients, participatory decision-making instead necessitates a change in power relations. As Chawla argues, “participation is about real power sharing: between majority and minority groups; between the privileged and underprivileged; between politicians and their constituencies; and between central office staff and field workers. People who have power don’t want to share it” (Chawla 2002, 244). The same is true in the relationships between young people and adults.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child establishes that children have the right to express their opinions in matters that concern them, and that these opinions must be weighed during the decision-making process (Article 12). Since nearly every decision involves children either directly or indirectly, city officials and non-profit organizations must not confine consultation to only designing recreation centers or schools (although these could be good starts), but should also include young people in nearly all community policies, campaigns, and actions. While the potential for child and youth involvement could range from health care and prison reform to environmental sustainability to food justice and everywhere in between, this study limits itself to children’s participation in urban planning. I will begin this section by speaking about participation more broadly, before providing specific recommendations and case studies for involving children in participatory planning.

According to Torres, planning with children requires more than a restructuring of power from adults to children. Child participation instead requires a new way of thinking about planning based on an “interactive process in which planners and users work together to shape environments, and together learn to see things in new ways and act accordingly” (Torres 2009, 7). The subsequent three case studies examine participatory planning in three different countries and then analyze their successes and limitations. According to those working with children’s participation in Norway “best practices are not about models, structures and



methods, but about values, attitudes and professional approaches” (Lillestol 2006). Because of this, the discussion of these planning efforts will focus primarily on the projects values and outlook regarding young people.

### ***Porsgunn Model:***

From birth, children in Porsgunn, Norway receive a formal message from the mayor saying they are valued and respected in the town. In fact, all new born babies get a letter from the mayor with a book that says “welcome to the world – welcome to Porsgrunn. Now you express yourself mostly by laughing and crying. But I hope adults surrounding you listen to you and take you seriously.” But Mayor Elizabeth Nilson does more than hope; she ensures that there are well-supported institutional opportunities for children to participate as equal and valued citizens.

In 1992, Porsgrunn suffered from an extreme economic depression that led to a lack of pride in the Porsgunn civic identity and a massive exodus of young people from the community. The Mayor decided to take a proactive approach that aimed to “build a positive identity for the whole community, based on the idea and strategy of children as fellow citizens.” (Lillestol 2006) She then enacted a series of programs and policies to involve young people of all ages directly in the planning process. Youngest children begin their understanding of the built environment through education and a school curriculum that addresses topics such as playgrounds, traffic, and leisure times. Once children understand the role of the built environment in their lives, they are entrusted with the power to change that built environment. School-aged children have the opportunity to directly participate in budgeting and with the cooperation of the Mayor and community leaders, prioritize and allocate money to community projects that they deemed important. And older children aged 17-18 years old, have an opportunity to serve on a formal youth council and have equal power to the adult counselors in the town.

The holistic model views participatory planning as part of an ongoing long-term project with children of all ages and abilities. Overall, the project has been successful in both politicizing children and youth and making them feel a sense of belonging and acceptance in their community. Based on research conducted by the council, children in Porsgunn are more politically active in boycotts, alternative organizations, demonstrations and protests than other children in Norway. (Lillestol 2006). Over a 20 year period, Porsgunn showed an increase in the number of children who reported feeling satisfied by their local community (Lillestol 2006)

Part of the reason that the project has been successful is because it is well supported and affirmed by the national conscious. Norway as a nation has institutionalized children in the planning process and the National Building Act requires that all children’s interests must be consulted and evaluated before any planning decision occurs (Chawla 2002,163). Children are consulted through a “Children’s Tracts” project which asks children to create a map of where they live; areas/ places/ playgrounds they use during the summer, winter, and year round; the streets/ roads/ trails that they used, and any areas that they perceived as dangerous. This analysis provides policymakers with an important with analytical tools for municipal and regional land to use and integrates children in the planning process. Because of the project’s success, Sweden has adopted the technique as well

and now conducts the analysis using GIS technology (World Health Organization-Europe 2002). The planners worked with children to identify their needs with the ultimate aim to “work out a project that can benefit from the children's creativity but at the same time is made feasible by the contribution of the adult expert” (Tonucci and Risotto 2001: 414).

### *City of Children Initiative, Italy:*

Seven cities in Italy have created Children’s Councils and Participatory Project Workshops as part of the national City of Children initiative. These innovative programs have allowed children to dramatically change their environment based on their desires and needs.

#### The Children’s Council

In Italy, children’s councils develop proposals and requests on how to improve city spaces and then submit the proposals to a municipal government that is receptive and supportive of the suggestions. In Fano, these requests have directly lead to the closure of certain streets to traffic, increased play space in town squares and condominium areas, and increase access to sports equipment (Baraldi and Emilia 2005, 23). The model for the Council rejects the traditional concept of a youth council as a role-playing game in civic education and instead advocates for a group of children engaged in a process of making suggestions to adults. These adults work on the side of children and encourage their participation and defend their perspectives (National Council of Reserach: Institute of Cognitive Sciences and Technologies 2010).

The Council, comprised of approximately 20 fourth and fifth graders nominated within their schools, meets every 15 days to openly discuss how the city can better meet their needs. The structure of the meetings allows the children to choose the best way to proceed and deliberately rejects typical school practices such as the raising of hands or writing reports. The council likewise rejects mimicking adult rules of order and does not require any kind of formal voting or regulations for formal proceedings (National Council of Reserach: Institute of Cognitive Sciences and Technologies 2010).

#### The Participatory Project Workshop

The participatory planning workshop gives children the opportunity to consult with outside practitioners (planners and architects) in order to increase the awareness of children’s perspectives and allow children to become “authors” of their cities. Specific methodologies vary from city to city. In Fano, for instance, school classes or other groups of children visit the site and incorporate a specific project into their yearly curriculum. Each group of children chooses a particular element of the built environment they wish to change - for instance, the town square and monuments, green spaces, traffic planning, waste management, or play spaces (Baraldi and Emilia 2005). In Turin, on the other hand, the participants engage in a two year project to study and plan how to rehabilitate, beautify and revitalize the areas around schools. (Baraldi and Emilia 2005).

In all cities, however, the children's work begins with an assignment, an explicit request made by the administration that asks children to prepare a plan for a project. This project is guaranteed to happen and has all economic resources available, meaning the children's participation will not result in futile, unrealized suggestions. Children then develop a methodology for researching and creating the project. The children present their project to city decision makers and are recognized as authors of the initiative. The project is then approved and the necessary measures are taken to ensure that the children's plan is realized. After the project is completed, children attend an inauguration celebration and continue their involvement through maintenance of the area (National Council of Research: Institute of Cognitive Sciences and Technologies 2010).

The children's participation and projects have resulted in meaningful changes to the built environment. In Fano, children's actions have led to the restructuring of a housing development to be more conducive to play, the building of a cycle path, and the rehabilitation of abandoned green space. The workshop is now involving a group of former child counselors, coordinated with an architect, to develop and propose ideas to the new city master plan. (Baraldi and Emilia 2005). Similarly, in Turin the participatory planning workshop engaged in a two-year project to study and plan how to rehabilitate, beautify and revitalize the areas around schools. (Baraldi and Emilia 2005)

The reason these projects are so successful is because they are part of greater nation-wide effort to adopt a new culture of childhood- one that seeks to redefine children as social actors capable of actively contributing to social life and making decisions on their own ((Baraldi and Emilia 2005). The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) as well as the Child Friendly Cities (CFC) Initiative formed the ideological basis that revolutionized how Italy conceived of its children. In 1996, the Minister of the Environment created the Sustainable Cities for Boys and Girls project that was intended to not only encourage projects related to children's participation and the urban environment, but also sought to create a new culture of governance that recognized that a city fit for children is a city fit for all. Much from the environmental project money has gone to fund the various projects described above. Without the impetus provided by the CFC and the CRC, children would never have achieved the status and participation they now enjoy in their communities.

The reason these projects are so successful is because they are part of greater nation-wide effort to adopt a new culture of childhood- one that seeks to redefine children as social actors capable of actively contributing to social life and making decisions on their own ((Baraldi and Emilia 2005). The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) as well as the Child Friendly Cities (CFC) Initiative formed the ideological basis that revolutionized how Italy conceived of its children. In 1996, the Minister of the Environment created the Sustainable Cities for Boys and Girls project that was intended to not only encourage projects related to children's participation and the urban environment, but also sought to create a new culture of governance that recognized that a city fit for children is a city fit for all. Much from the environmental project money has gone to fund the various projects described above. Without the impetus provided by the CFC and the CRC, children would never have achieved the status and participation they now enjoy in their communities.

### ***Brazil's Children's Participatory Budget Council***

Barra Mansa, Brazil established a Children's Participatory Budget Council in 1998, with 36 elected children and youth from age 9 to 15. Brazil currently has the best and most comprehensive participatory budget council in the world, both for children and adults. Brazil defines participatory budgeting as "a process of direct democracy, universal and voluntary, through which the population has the opportunity to discuss and to decide the budget and public policies...It combines direct democracy and representative democracy" (Uribatam de Souza in Cabannes, 2003: 6). By controlling the budget, citizens have greater control and the government is forced to be transparent.

Because of youth involvement children have funded a new all weather sports surface at the municipal schools in order to support physical education in the school. They have also allocated money to light the a local tunnel where children played in the evening, and they renovated a health clinic to include resources for dental care. Despite the success, leaders in Brazil warn against using a cut- and past formula for a participatory budgeting council arguing that PB is part of "a culture of participation and relationships between local government and society. And requires a mobilized citizenry as a precondition for success." (Cabannes, 2004: 40)

These case studies reveal certain common values and preconditions that are necessary for the support of any project related to participatory planning including:

1. A belief that children and youth can make positive contributions to the collective community
2. Strong support for the CRC and subsequent CFC initiative
3. A commitment to include all children and youth, and not just favor the traditionally high achieving children.
4. Accommodation for all levels of children's capacities and meaningful opportunities for various age levels
5. The support of adults to assist in guiding and facilitating youth projects, as well as in guiding and encouraging opportunities for youth collaboration.
6. An understanding that institutionalized projects create more long-term results.

### **Conclusion:**

Children's engagement in the built environment develops their sense of citizenship and place, self, and community and can ultimately serve as a vital tool in youth empowerment. Here empowerment is defined as the process of placing "the social and political strength of the marginalized at the center" (Baker cited by Vainio-Matilla, 2000: 422). Empowerment means local people are not just mere recipients of development but actually "co-owners" of their projects and active agents in their lives. If children experience a life marked by protectionism and passivity they become disengaged and apathetic citizens. As Hart argues, "children must learn active and responsible citizenship through opportunities to practice" (Hart and de Winter in Chawala, 2002: 14). Likewise, if children live segregated lives with little community interaction, they become unconnected adults with little

investment in the public good. The public realms, both in formal decision-making and informal space use, give children the opportunity to learn about society, explore it, observe it, and gain a greater sense of belonging.

By incorporating children into the planning process and giving them a chance to have a say in their environment, children have a greater understanding of their role in democracy, a greater investment in the public good, and often become more confident and empowered citizens (Hodgkin and Newall 1996) (Frank 2006).

**I will now turn to a case study of Southeast Los Angeles in order to apply the framework for a child friendly city and guidelines for children's participatory planning at a place-based level.**

# CASE STUDY: SOUTH EAST LOS ANGELES

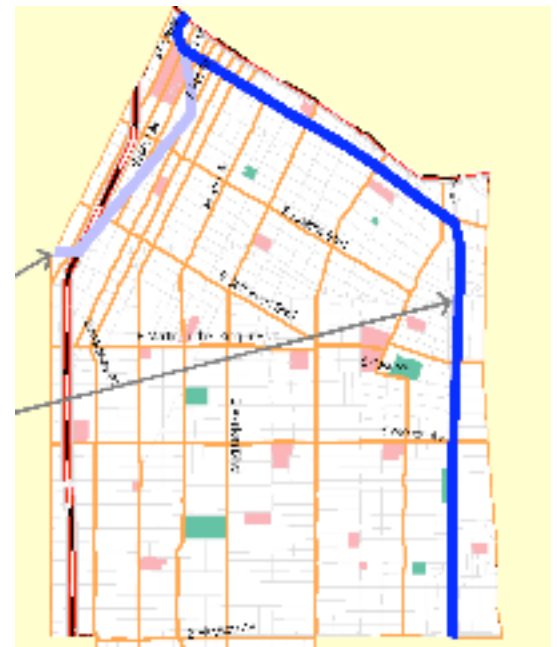
## Why focus on Southeast LA?

South Central Avenue used to be the place of “strolls in your Sunday bests” said current councilmember Jan Perry. This historic avenue was home to LA’s original streetcar line and became a center of the nation’s first set of middle-class African American families. With the population shift, South Central became the foreground of a new cultural movement and the various clubs and hotels lining the commercial thoroughfare became “the laboratories where West Coast jazz was born” ((Gold, Central Avenue is dreaming again 2009).

However, in the 1960s as manufacturing jobs relocated and unemployment soared, Central Avenue became a center for increased poverty and unemployment, gangs and the explosion of crack cocaine rather than music, culture, and community life. Yet, South Central Avenue today does not entirely resemble the urban wasteland described above. Although safety and crime remain imperative issues, this area is home to thousands of families, many with very young children. Everyday at 2:30 when school gets out the street’s cracked, narrow sidewalks fill with mothers pushing baby strollers, kids zooming about on skateboards or scooters, and swarms of teenagers talking on street corners.

Because Southeast Los Angeles has such a high density of young people, many of whom are overlooked by traditional adult institutions and prevented from using public spaces, there is an urgent need to reverse this marginalization and directly involve children and youth in community development and participatory planning.

While Southeast Los Angeles consists of the entire area between Santa Monica and 120<sup>th</sup> Street (North to South) and Figueroa to Alameda (East to West), this study primarily examines the commercial and residential area surrounding South Central Avenue (beginning at Santa Monica and ending at Slauson). I choose this area because within three block of either side of Central Avenue there are nine educational institutions, meaning that this small urban corridor area serves as a hub of activity and a center of community for hundreds of children and youth.



## *The density of children and youth*

In Southeast Los Angeles 48,759 of the total 59,975 households consist of families with children – that is over 81% of households. This makes Southeast Los Angeles home to one of the highest concentrations of children in all of Los Angeles, and the area closest to South Central Avenue (represented by zip code 90011) has an even higher percentage of very young children.

Age	Area near S. Central Avenue.	Southeast LA	Los Angeles
Age 0-4	11.10%	10.89%	7.05%
Age 5-9	9.44%	9.46%	6.65%
Age 10-14	8.89%	9.13%	6.87%
Age 15-17	5,682 5.23%	12,913 5.66%	153,050 4.07%

(City of Los Angeles 2009, data from 2000 US Census)

Furthermore, Southeast Los Angeles has an unusually high overall population density in comparison to the rest of Los Angeles (17,462 people per square mile) and the neighborhoods directly surrounding South Central Avenue have a higher density yet at over 20,000 people per square mile (a density more comparable to New York City than the rest of Los Angeles) (City of Los Angeles 2009).

There are also a greater percentage of people living in multifamily homes and non-single family units (67.05% combined) compared to those living only in single-family units (32.95%). For children, the implications of these data suggest that most young people are living in units with or near other children and families – a key characteristic in a child-friendly city (City of Los Angeles 2009).

Type of housing	Number of occupants	Percent of occupants
Single-family Unit Occupants	134,898	32.95%
Multiple-family Unit Occupants	136,754	33.40%
Nonsingle-family Unit Occupants	137,783	33.65%

(City of Los Angeles 2009, data from 2000 US Census)

## *However, the young residents face severe economic and social marginalization*

Southeast Los Angeles is primarily a low-income community of color. According to the 2000 census Latinos make up 72.6% of the population and African

Americans make up the remaining 25.2% (City of Los Angeles 2009). Over 41.1% of people live in poverty, but for children (12 and under) and youth (12 to 17) those numbers are even higher (52.0 and 45.9% respectively). Because of the concentration of poverty, children in this area face staggering odds and social workers say the children are forced to confront life with a strength and resilience well beyond their years (Matthews 2009).

A statement written collectively by students at Free L.A. High, a small Inglewood-based charter school for teenaged students impacted by the criminal justice system reflects some of the numerous challenges youth in this area face<sup>1</sup>.

“We’re from the city of L.A., where they answer to ‘Where you from?’ could get you killed ... We’re refugees from the war on drugs and the war on gangs ... We’re from guilty until proven innocent ... We’re from caging people for being colored and poor ... We’re from Rampart, poverty pimps and broken promises ... We’re the children that rose from the ashes of Watts in ’65 and South Central in ’92. The children that fled from American-made bullets and bombs in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala and Laos ... We’re from ‘been to more funerals than graduations.’ From ‘won’t bury another homey without fighting for justice.’ From ‘we’ve had enough’ to ‘take the system down and build something new” (Piasecki 2009)

For many of these children and youth, adult-run institutions including the government, the prisons, or the schools, have all failed them. “My school doesn’t really help”, Jess Jacquez, a resident of South LA and a youth organizer for the Community Coalition said, “They actually make the work harder to understand and when the students want the help, the teachers are too busy. Some teachers are willing to help but others are just there to get that check” (Jacquez 2009). If children and youth do not have a way to empower themselves and shape their communities, they will remain victims of an adult world that has continually demonstrated that it does not care.

### *Yet despite the challenges, there is now more hope, more development, and more money than ever before.*

In a series of articles for the LA Times, journalist Scott Gold described South Los Angeles as straddling a line between peril and promise – peril because of the continued poverty, gang violence, and failing schools, but promise because of a slough of new developments and funding that will hopefully bring a new energy and light to the area. In September of 2009, a new affordable housing development called Central Village open on Central and 20th Street as part of a new \$27.5-million mixed-use project. The opening was so momentous there was a marching band serenading the 800 people in line at the new Superior grocery store (Gold, Central Avenue is dreaming again 2009).

---

<sup>1</sup> While Inglewood is not part of Southeast Los Angeles many of the students who attend the charter school are residents of Southeast Los Angeles and their voices are representative of many young people’s experiences in the area



In January 2010, the \$14.7-million satellite City Hall on the corner of Central and East 42<sup>nd</sup> finally opened its gates after a seven year long battle. This architecturally innovative building features a 1,500-square-foot community center, a 7,500-square-foot city services center, and the first "green" roof on a municipal building in L.A. "This is an urban park that just happens to have a building on it," said City Engineer Gary Lee Moore. "You don't want it to be a fortress. All public buildings should be welcoming and inviting." "We're going to give people back their history," Councilmember Jan Perry said (Gold, Central Avenue is dreaming again 2009).

A month later in February 2010, a brand new, \$32-million mixed-use housing development opened at Central and East Adams. The project included a Fresh & Easy Neighborhood market and an additional 18, 500 square feet of retail space (Gold, Central Avenue is dreaming again 2009).

Sharon Ramos, the youth director at a nearby church and community center described the impact that these developments would have for children, "A lot of our kids see what's around them and think that nothing ever changes," said. "This is a start, a way for them to see that things do change. It's a big deal around here."

The upcoming year is scheduled to bring even more development and in 2010, an additional mixed-use project (the \$28-million Rittenhouse Square) will open on Central and East 33<sup>rd</sup> Street. This development will include 4,500 square feet of retail and 100 apartments for senior citizens.

Other projects are expected to follow, including a \$9.3-million early education center and health clinic on East Jefferson Boulevard, just west of Central, and in 2012 another \$15-million housing development and a \$23-million renovation of a YMCA.

The goal of all of the millions upon millions of development dollars is to "give the community a distinctive flair, retro next to modern, a village atmosphere where people live and work in the same place" (Gold, Central Avenue is dreaming again 2009). That goal is incomplete however, unless as this paper advocates, the planning process ensures that children have a central place and say in that new "village atmosphere".

### *Funding Sources:*

### *Funding Sources:*

In addition to the development, there are a variety of relevant bond measures that allocate funding for projects, especially parks in under-resourced areas such as South Los Angeles.

- **Proposition K:** is a park-bond measure passed in 1996 by LA voters to address the inadequacies and deterioration of the city's "Youth infrastructure", such as parks and recreation centers. The bond allocates \$300 million over 30 years for the acquisition, improvement, construction, and maintenance at 183 park sites. There is an additional \$142.7 million for competitive grant applicants to fund capital improvement, maintenance and land acquisition (Wolch, Wilson and Fehrenbach 2002).

- **Proposition A:** Also 1996, LA County voters renewed 1992's Proposition A to provide funds for more than 140 specific projects throughout the county focusing on parks, recreating, at-risk children and teens, community, and neutral land.
- **Proposition 40:** This is another park and environmental bond measure passed in 2002 that include \$832.5 million for the acquisition and development of state and local parks, including grants for local assistance programs to develop parks and recreation areas and facilities
- **The Quimby Act:** This State law is designated to generate funding for park development that requires developers to either pay in-lieu funds or set aside land for park and recreation uses within or in the immediate vicinity of new subdivisions
- **Proposition O:** In 2004, the voters overwhelmingly passed Proposition O, which authorized the City of Los Angeles to issue a series of general obligation bonds for up to \$500 million for projects to protect public health by cleaning up pollution in the City's watercourses, beaches and the ocean (LAPropO n.d.). This proposition will fund a \$26-million project in South Los Angeles to transform a historic rail yard into a nine-acre wetland park.
- **Safe Routes to Schools:** Communities across California now have access to millions of dollars to improve the safety and quality of their streets as part of the National Safe Routes to School Program. The program exists at a national and state level and funds infrastructure projects as well as educational projects that encourage children to walk to school. Historically, schools in wealthier areas have applied and received more grants, but the program is currently trying to ensure that the funds are more equitably distributed. South Los Angeles residents may have a major advantage in funding because Jessica Meaney, California Policy Manager for Safe Routes to Schools, currently lives in Echo Park and has expressed a deep commitment to the equitable allocation of funds. She also stated that she would be happy to assist communities and schools in completing the grant application process. For details on the application and funding process see appendix A.

## A child “unfriendly” city: socio-spatial marginalization in Southeast LA

The child-friendly movement has often centered on the problems of middle-class children living in the suburbs – children who, as mentioned earlier, are “strapped into the backseat of a family sedan chauffeured to and from school, soccer practice and piano lessons...like pampered prisoners – cosseted, constrained and constantly nagged” (Cadzow 2004: 18). Yet this is not the case for children in Southeast Los Angeles. In Southeast Los Angeles many families cannot afford cars and are dependent on walkable streets and public transportation. Likewise families often live in crowded conditions and do not have the luxury to move out to the isolated suburbs. In many ways, however, because of the high density of children and youth and the proximity of stores and resources, Southeast Los Angeles could potentially provide children with a much more nurturing and supportive environment that had greater social networks and more opportunities to exercise autonomy and freedom.

However, while children do at times benefit from their mixed-use, high density environment, they, like their suburban middle class peers are restricted from fully engaging in their community or actively making decisions over their lives. While the socio-spatial marginalization of children in Southeast Los Angeles is very different from that of the wealth “pampered prisoners”, the lack of respect and autonomy young people in this area receive from adults reflects the broader oppression of all children in the United States. By using Southeast Los Angeles as a case study we can have a more nuanced and complex understanding of the various ways adultism exercises itself on the built environment and over the lives of all children in this country.

Socio-spatial marginalization results from both human (socio) oppression and environmental (spatial) injustice. The first part of this section outlines how children are unable to actively participate in public spaces because of social conditions including institutionalization, safety concerns, and hyper criminalization. It then moves on to discuss how children’s built environments fail to meet their needs. This purpose of this section is to provide a background for understanding why children’s participation is so critical in this area of the city and why children must be entrusted with greater decision-making ability.

### **Social marginalization:**

Social marginalization reflects a social process that relegates individuals or communities to lower social standings and separates them from the rest of society. Children’s social marginalization in southeast Los Angeles is a result of institutionalization that keeps young people confined in adult-controlled space. It is the result of safety concerns that make children afraid to use public spaces, and it is the result of hyper criminalization, which forcefully prohibits adolescents from the participating in the public sphere.

### *Institutionalization:*

Currently the majority of elementary school children in South Los Angeles attend after-school programs, meaning they are kept on-campus inside an institution from 7:30 AM to 6:00 PM – eleven and a half hours. Adults claim that these programs “keep children off the streets” “give them a safe place to play and do homework” “and keep their minds occupied so they would stay away from gangs” (Human Impact Partners 2009). Yet, children do not typically enjoy their time in the programs. A survey of 5<sup>th</sup> graders in the Los Angeles Unified School District asked the children to mark all of the statements that were true about their after-school program, and while 11% responded that it was safe and 10% said that it helps with school work, only 9% said they like it and only 6% reported that they would like to go (California Healthy Kids Survey 2008).

Having spent the past four months volunteering six hours a week at a site for LA’s Best Afterschool Program in Southeast Los Angeles, I observed that children in the program do not have the opportunity to play freely or exercise any kind of autonomy over their decisions. While there are sporadic and fun opportunities including competitive basketball and a three-week long African dance class, the children in the program are, for the most part, institutionalized, disciplined and controlled. Students are commonly told to put their hands on their heads until the room is silent (often for upwards of twenty minutes), or told that they cannot go play until they learn to make a perfectly straight line (meaning they are often standing still in a line for 15 minutes until they are “released” and given permission to play). Students who misbehave (because they refuse to silently work on their homework or do not put their hands on their head for the entire five minutes) are “benched” and spend the majority of the three-hour block sitting alone with their heads down. If they are lucky, they just have to pick up 50 pieces of trash (as if they are convicted criminals serving probation).

This kind of criminalization of children from kindergarten on instills low self-esteem and devalues their creativity, contributions, and general existence. Remarkably, however, students rarely question this hyper-disciplined environment because they cannot conceive of anything else. In a built environment that constrains their play, autonomy, and freedom, where police can search children and youth without cause, and where more money is spent on prisons than schools, children often do not even realize they can ask for or expect anything more.

### *Safety concerns:*

In 1994, Shirley Bus conducted a research study of children in urban Los Angeles and used photo journals and open-ended interviews to understand how young people interacted with the built environment. She found that Los Angeles’ children do not feel safe in public places such as schools, parks, and neighborhoods and instead spend their time socializing in the mall or other private spaces like the home (Buss 1994). While this study was conducted just two years after the Los Angeles Riots, in a time where all residents felt shaken and fearful, the apprehension and distrust of public spaces expressed in the study continues today. In my conversations with child residents, I have heard similar stories of children’s early

exposure to violence and constant fear. A 10-year-old resident of Southeast Los Angeles who lives off Avalon Street told me that he is afraid to play outside, even though he wants to, because of a shooting that resulted in a dead body on the street outside his home. After recounting the violent incident he told me, "that's why I never play outside again."

According to a 2003 survey, many students could not get to and from school without witnessing a crime or being subjected to violence (Human Impact Partners 2009). Often youth (especially those affiliated with gangs or crews) who felt they could not get to school safely, would opt to stay home rather than risk their safety. Choosing between education and safety should never have to be a choice, but unless the city begins to engage with young people to make streets and schools safer, education and safety will continue to compete in young people's cost-benefit analysis.

### *Hyper criminalization*

While safety is unquestionably an important and vital concern, safety for some cannot justify the oppression of others. Los Angeles will never and can never be considered a child-friendly city if it continues to justify the massive incarceration and criminalization of children and youth under the guise of "community safety" and "protection." For too many young people, especially children and youth of color, Los Angeles has become an oppressive police state that regulates their movement, friendships, and presence without any justification or cause.

Gang injunctions, which make it a crime for gang members to be together in public, have become The Los Angeles Police Department's most powerful tool in the marginalizing of young people and restricting their access to public space. In May of 2009, LAPD issued the largest gang injunction in State history, which covers an entire 13.7-mile stretch of South Los Angeles. This injunction gives police a legal justification to arrest children and youth who are, for instance, leaning against a backstop, standing at a street corner, or sitting at a picnic table in the park. As Sgt. Alex Vargas, who leads a Newton Division gang unit states, "It makes it a crime -- an arrestable crime -- to hang out together" (Gold, Promise and Peril in South LA 2009). Shockingly, police can "serve" these injunctions to young people without providing any legal proof of gang affiliation, meaning that enforcement becomes entirely subjective and young people can be punished for a crime without ever committing one (Gold, Promise and Peril in South LA 2009).

The police use unfounded fear and an assumption that all youth are criminals to justify the injunctions and subsequent civil rights violations, but their generalizations of young people do not match the reality. Even in those areas with the highest rates of gang violence only 15% of men join gangs, and 10% of those 15% commit the vast majority of crimes, meaning the majority of gang violence is executed by a mere 1.5% of the male population. Despite the reality, the police now have the authority to arrest anyone and everyone they deem "criminal" which will only add to the already expanding prison population. Prior to the injunction, young people in South Los Angeles were already 1.6 times more likely than kids in other neighborhoods to face arrest and incarceration (Children's Planning Council 2006)

and in total over 20,000 LA youth spent time in the county's 19 probation camps or three juvenile halls ((Piasecki 2009). Now with the gang injunctions, authorities expect that the numbers of youth in the judicial system will only increase.

Because of the subjectivity of gang injunctions, LAPD have a legal justification to racially profile and can use surveillance, security, and punitive penal practices as a means of "preemptively" controlling black and Latino populations (Rios 2008). The Children's Planning Council reported that minority interaction with the juvenile justice system is in even greater disproportion: More than 90 percent of youth housed in juvenile halls and probation camps in 2003 were of Hispanic or African-American descent.

These children are more than numbers; they are human beings that our society allows to be treated as less than animals. Jasmine Hernandez, a South Los Angeles resident, described how her time in juvenile detention robbed her of her connection with humanity. "You feel like you're trapped in a hole and you're never going to get out. When you're locked up, your whole spirit dies," she recalls. "You're just a dead person walking. You feel like you don't want to live anymore," she said (Piasecki 2009).

For Los Angeles to become a more child-friendly city, children must be recognized and valued as participatory space users, and safety must become a more inclusive and community defined condition. The Mayor recently launched a Summer Night Lights program that kept parks in areas with high gang activity open until midnight and offered free programs in order to provide a safer alternative to criminal activity. By providing a space for teens and demonstrating that they are valued members of society, the City reduced gang related crimes by 17% and reduced gang related homicides by 86% (City of Los Angeles 2008). The project also provided \$250,000 in youth jobs. These kind of programs that recognize young people's need for public space and interaction can contribute to a much more sustainable vision of safety than increased police and massive incarceration.

For more information on inclusive safety and defensible space see page 17.

## **Spatial marginalization:**

In this study, spatial marginalization relates to how physical environments alienate and exclude young people from engaging as participatory space user. It moves beyond thinking about children as victims of unhealthy environments and instead questions what *affordances* the built environment offer that would enhance children's well-being and quality of life.

### ***Inadequate Living Spaces***

Approximately one-third of the living spaces in Southeast Los Angeles is single-family units, many of which are located near and around South Central Avenue. For the most part, these single-family homes have small front yards set back from the street and separated from the sidewalk by a gate or fence. While this kind of housing provides the necessary buffer for children to play close to home, it does not facilitate a sense of community and common public open space.

Furthermore, much of the housing has a kind of fortress feel with bars over the windows and extensive fencing.

The multiple density living spaces found in and around South Central Avenue, have very few affordances for children despite the fact that they house many younger residents (apparent from the multiple bikes and scooters outside). While there may be a courtyard or common open space, it is typically cemented, with sparse and dying greenery. Several of the apartment complexes I visited had dark hallways and entryways as a result of both the enclosed design and the lack of maintenance in replacing light bulbs. Furthermore, many of the housing units has stained stucco painted in bland colors that does little to stimulate the imagination of children or provide any kind of visual attractions. These housing conditions are a result of adult-oriented construction that fails to consider children and their unique needs, but are also a product of systematic disinvestment in low income areas that fails to meet or consider the needs of all low-income people, adults and children alike.

As mentioned previously, there are a variety of new housing projects currently under construction, which promise to offer more child-friendly environments (although none of the developments use that exact wording). The new housing development on Adams and Central was made specifically with families in mind with 30 of the 80 affordable units offering three bedrooms for families with more than one child. It is a mixed-use housing development meaning the bottom layer is all commercial (including a grocery store) so children could easily walk downstairs and buy a Popsicle or piece of fruit.

Furthermore, the development centers children's play space in the middle of the housing units, creating both community surveillance and an adjoining conference room with a kitchen and an outdoor grilling/patio area for the adults to play. The play area located on the second floor looks out into the cityscape and blue skies, making children feel as though they are playing in the clouds. On the other end of the apartment complex, a circular meeting area bordered with trees and plants provides a perfect space for older children to meet, talk, and hang out. The winding and open cement pathways also provide easy tracks for running and scootering.

The complex features extensive planting of native varieties that often attract butterflies and hummingbirds. And unexpected architectural details such as circular cut outs in the stairways and large windows near the elevators create an open and airy feel.

### *Inaccessible and restrictive playing spaces:*

Children in South and Southeast Los Angeles have some of the worst access to parks and open space in all of the United States. Out of 13 square miles of South Los Angeles only 4.72 miles fall within walking distance of a park space (Human Impact Partners 2009, 78) and in 2005, 25% of parents in South Los Angeles said a playground is not accessible to them (compared with 16.9% in LA County) (Los Angeles County Department of Public Health 2005). Furthermore, in a recent study, the Trust for Public Land found that only 34% of children in Los Angeles were within one-quarter of a mile of a park. This compares with Boston where 78% of

children are within one-quarter mile of a park; New York with 59% and Atlanta with 43%. Los Angeles ranked last for park accessibility of all seven major metropolitan areas with a total of 650,000 children out of walking distance to parks or green space (The Trust for Public Land 2004). Los Angeles is the worst for park access, and South Los Angeles is the worst of Los Angeles, making this area the worst of the worst.

Yet, a major concern for many young people is not only the quantity of parks, but also the quality. "We have parks around here but...you go up there and they have trash everywhere, and hoboes living under trees and stuff," said a Belmont High School student participating in a focus group related to teenager's perceptions of park space. "And it would be nice to have somewhere to go where the cement isn't all cracked and the clay isn't all rubbery due to the usage. I mean, just a nice park" (Gearin and Kahle 2006, 37). Providing more parks matters very little if those parks are not well maintained, safe, and welcoming to young people.

Estrella Park in South Los Angeles provides an excellent example of the importance of park maintenance and care. Estrella Park began in 1982 when a class at Norwood Street Elementary School decided to turn a vacant lot into a neighborhood park. These children designed, planned, and built the parks, and invested their time and energy to improving their common spaces. However, 20 years later the park fell in disrepair and residents abandoned the community space, meaning the efforts of the children were in vain. This example illustrates that no matter how innovative the design and participation of a project may be, if it is not maintained it will not last. Furthermore, it shows the need for institutionalizing children's participation because if Norwood Street Elementary continued to involve children in the ownership and stewardship of the park it would serve more than just the class of 1982.

Traditional parks are by far the most frequent play spaces in Southeast LA, most of which cater only to high motor activity and nothing else. These parks typically provide traditional play equipment and opportunities for organized sports games, but have no movable parts and do not facilitate more creative, open-ended play (with the exception of a large, badly maintained sandpit at Gilbert Lindsay). There are also very few opportunities for children to socialize in public open spaces since there are currently no central plazas or town squares. As a result, teenagers desiring a public area to hang out often congregate in the only open space they can find – the MacDonald's outdoor eating area on the corner of Slauson and Central. While physical play is vital and important to children's emotional and biological health, as mentioned earlier in this study, physical play alone cannot meet all of children's diverse play needs.

With its roof-top, innovative architecture, and open community space, the new City Hall on Central Avenue, could have been an ideal opportunity to create a new space for play. However, when I visited the building they refused to let the public onto the roof saying that they were worried children would fall, which means the development it is not as welcoming to all residents as the politicians claim.

The Augustus Hawkins Natural Park, the newest park to South LA, similarly restricts children's full movement and engagement, despite being an innovative and beautiful community space. Augustus Hawkins Natural Park provides a relaxing



setting for residents to walk and bike through native plant communities, riparian areas, and rolling hills and during the weekend the park swarms with children on scooters zipping past wildflowers and sycamore trees. Although the park is a model for what urban sustainable natural areas could look like and who they could serve, children are not as encouraged to interact with the environment as they could be. The lake is fenced off meaning that children cannot touch the water or directly interact with the wildlife; much to the disappointment of various young children begging their parents to let them hop the wooden fence and put their feet in the water.

While recent projects have not fully honored or respected children's presence and use, there may still be hope in the future. Planners recently broke ground on a new South Los Angeles Wetland Park, a 9-acre park that is expected to provide residents with a "green haven" of native trees, shrubs, plants, and a small lake and scheduled to be completed by early 2012. Because of its location near Dorothy Johnson High School and Los Angeles Academy Middle School Park designers are hoping that through signage describing various plants and wildlife, the park can serve as an outdoor classroom as well. "(It's) ... a great place to walk around and see nature up close," said Council woman Perry, adding that she has seen geese, herons, egrets, parrots, butterflies and dragonflies during her visits to the park (Norwood 2009). This park could have the potential to provide an ideal play space for children. However, planners must design the space as more than a natural museum to passively see or learn about nature, and must instead create opportunities for children to actively manipulate and participate in their environment.

### *Car-oriented transit systems:*

The current streets and transit system further inhibit children from participating in their public spaces, and because of safety concerns, poorly designed streets, and expensive and inefficient public transportation, children in Southeast Los Angeles have little opportunity to exercise autonomy and or move freely.

### *Lack of Walkability*

The Los Angeles-Riverside-Orange County Metropolitan Area is one of the least safe places for pedestrians in all of California (Ernst 2004). Pedestrian and bicycle safety is even more of a concern in places with higher population densities and greater proportions of people of color (like Southeast LA) (Loukaitous-Sideris, Liggett and Sung 2007). The main reasons why pedestrian safety remains such a tragic issue in Southeast LA is because the City vastly underfunds pedestrian and bicycle friendly projects, especially in low-income communities of color. Of the \$12 billion of Federal Transportation funds in California between 1998 and 2003 only 0.9% went towards pedestrian or bicycle friendly projects, a mere \$0.51 per person (Ernst 2004). As a result, a community survey in South and Southeast Los Angeles revealed that there is a lack of controlled intersections, few crosswalks, and too few pedestrian signal heads at traffic lights (Human Impact Partners 2009).

The lack of public infrastructure creates an environment that is hostile to pedestrians and cyclists. In a neighborhood survey in South LA, only 27% of survey

respondents said that their neighborhood was walkable or bikeable and most reported that streets had excessive traffic, narrow and broken sidewalks, and a lack of adequate street lighting. Residents also pointed to the lack of traffic calming measures and the high incidence of pedestrian injuries as further reasons they did not feel comfortable walking (Human Impact Partners 2009, 2-17).

A recent national and California state effort called Safe Routes to Schools has aimed to increase the number of students walking to school by increasing money for infrastructure improvements and programs promoting walking and bicycling. The effort recognizes that walking to school is a vital part of children and young people's lives and can increase children's sense of independence and opportunity for social interaction. But the project found that despite the benefits, fewer and fewer students in the United States are walking to school. Thirty years ago, 60% of children living within a 2-mile radius of a school walked or bicycled to school but today that number has dropped to less than 15% (Cal Trans 2010). Because of these alarming statistics, Cal Trans and the federal government have invested \$48.5 million and \$46 million into the new program.

### Lack of Bikeability

Bicycling has become a way of life for young people, particularly teens in South Los Angeles. They ride alone or in groups of three or four on their modified fixed-speed bikes ("fixies") that they have painted, modified, or changed to express their individuality and style. These bicycles, painted in a rainbow of colors, with accessories such as cards or ribbons woven into the spokes, become mobile pieces of art. For this new generation, bicycling is no longer a stigmatized activity for those without cars, but an act of creative expression and an integral part of the techno-colored youth culture.

Yet despite the demand, the City and planning department has yet to provide safety provisions or sheltered bicycle lanes. In a comparison of miles of county bicycle lanes per 100,000 populations, South Los Angeles had a mere .42 miles whereas West LA had over five times that at 1.92 miles. Furthermore, an analysis of Southeast Los Angeles' bicycle plan reveals that South Central Avenue is primarily served by just one commuter lane and has no protected lanes.

### Little access to public transportation

For children and youth public transportation is both inefficient and expensive. Students (K-8) and (9-12) have to pay \$24 per month for a public transportation card (\$288 per year). For a family with three children the total cost of public transportation would be \$72 per month and a staggering \$864 per year. Without affordable access to public transportation children and young people are often late to school or choose not to go at all. As Juana Gonzales, youth organizer for Community Coalition said, "I'm a junior [in high school] and there are difficulties that come up like not having \$24 a month for my bus pass to get to and from school and if I do public transportation, it is very difficult because I have to take two buses to get to school. Most of the time I go late to school and it results in me not passing or being absent from first period" (Gonzales 2009).

Although Southeast Los Angeles has fairly easy access to public transportation, the price and inconvenience makes the bus and metro a difficult option for children and youth. Los Angeles has two main organizations in charge of transportation: The Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transit Authority (LAMTA), which operates the Metro bus and rail lines, and the City of Los Angeles Department of Transportation (LADOT) that operates the DASH bus lines. In South Los Angeles, the Metro Blue Line is the most accessible and runs reasonably frequently (five to 15 minute intervals on weekdays to 12 to 20 minute intervals on weekends). But the closest station with bike racks is either Grant or Slauson, which makes it difficult for people living closer to the Vernon or Washington stations to access the station on bike (Human Impact Partners 2009).

Buses are the most common form of transportation and lines 53 and Metro Rapid 753 run along South Central Avenue. Line 53 (a 24-hour bus line) runs 6-10 minutes on weekdays but only once an hour on evenings and weekends, while the Metro Rapid runs every weekday in 10 to 20 minute intervals. A community survey conducted for the Crossing Housing Development, reported that of the South LA residents in their sample, 39% relied on the bus as a primary mode of transportation and 73% said that public transportation is easily accessible. However, many residents also reported that the transit system was inconvenient and did not come frequently enough (Human Impact Partners 2009, 2-20).

## The absence of children's participation

The previous section discussed how children's socio-spatial marginalization limited their ability to engage in their environment and community. The only way for these conditions to change is through greater child and youth involvement in decision consultation and decision-making. However, based on my research I found that children in Southeast LA and the City more broadly do not have meaningful opportunities to participate in their environment. This lack of participation only perpetuates and reinforces their existing socio-spatial marginalization.

In order to analyze children's current ability to influence local decision-making in Southeast Los Angeles, I identified organizations that have the ability to influence planning in the built environment or organizations that directly promote children and youth empowerment. Understanding that a variety of public and private actors can shape the planning process, I focused on government bodies, funders, community development corporations, and grassroots organizations. I observed the way in which each organization involves children and youth through informal observation, formal interviews, and analysis of the groups' mission statements. For the subsequent analysis, I then characterized the type of organization and the level of children's participation in order to conclude on the organization's achievement in youth participation.

*Type of organization:* Here, my analysis draws upon Kiby et al. (2003)'s typology of participatory cultures within organizations. In their conceptual framework, consultation-focused organizations are those that use children's participation to inform service and policy development. While children are consulted and their

opinions are considered, they have no influence in the actual shaping or implementation of project development. Participation focused organizations allow children and young people to have input into organization decisions. Typically these activities are limited to certain areas of work and are often time bound (e.g. advisory group or recruitment panel) or context specific (e.g. youth forum, school council). Finally child/youth focused organizations: place children and young people's participation as central to the principles and structures of the organization. *Level of Participation:* I then continued my analysis by critically evaluating each organization based on Hart's ladder of children's participation (page 25). As mentioned earlier, Hart's ladder provides a useful framework for understanding participation and makes a distinction between non-participation, which consists of the manipulation, decoration, and tokenism of children, and active participation, which includes projects where children are assigned but informed and consulted and informed. Active participation also includes projects that are adult initiated but have shared decision-making with children, child initiated and directed, and child-initiated with shared decision-making with adults. In this schematic, ideal children's participation results in a level of power sharing whereby children are equal participants with adults.

## **Government Commissions and Councils:**

The Planning Department, Community Redevelopment Agency, Commission for Children, Youth and Families (CCYF), and the LA Youth Council all fall under the category of governmental commissions or councils. Within the organizations in this category there is considerable difference in their ability to influence the built environment and make changes. While the Planning Department and CRA have a great deal of power, CCYF has substantial less influence, and LA youth Council has almost none.

### ***The Planning Department:***

Type of organization: Non-Participation/Consultation-focused

Level of child/youth Participation: None

Achievements: non-participation, at times increased education

During the 1960's planning, design, and city management became more of a socio-cultural process, rather than a series of technical decisions and involved more of a conversation among groups, individuals, and community members. Because of this new orientation every planning region of Los Angeles must complete a Community plan developed with the collaboration and support of local residents. However, the planning department does very little to involve children in their community meetings and group discussions, meaning that in areas like Southeast LA, one-third of the population is unrepresented.

Recently however, some innovative individual planners have begun educating children on the built environment and how it impacts them. While education alone does not constitute action, it can help empower youth through information and capacity building. For instance, James Rojas, a transit planner for

MTA, partnered with The Heart Project, an educational arts program, to teach a 10-week art course about the built environment to a class from Mujeres y Hombres Nobles Continuation High School in East Los Angeles.

Rojas asked his 24 students, most of who came from low-income families dependent on public transit, to recreate a model of the Metro Gold Line taking into consideration land use and accessibility in their community. The students used recycled materials including construction paper, colored blocks, and bottle tops to design 3-D models of their ideal transit-oriented community. In the process, students identified their typical destinations and community issues such as gang territory, busy streets, and lack of parks.

Rojas explained the importance of the process to himself and the students stating, “As a planner, I learned a great deal from the students about their individual and community perceptions, and mobility patterns. [And the students] in the process... seized the meanings of urban planning, architecture, and transportation and commanded a greater understanding of how they participate in it” (Rojas 2009).

While Rojas employed innovative teaching tools to relate urban planning to young people’s lived experiences, the information and perspectives that the students provided concerned a project that had already been constructed, so the activity was essentially futile. In the future, children and youth should be involved as active participants during the process, not afterwards when their perspective can no longer be implemented.

### ***Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA):***

Type of organization: Non-Participation/Consultation-focused

Level of child/youth Participation: None

Achievements: Non-Participation

The Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles (CRA/LA) is a public agency that invests in neighborhoods to spur economic growth and improve resident’s quality of life. They play an instrumental role in creating affordable housing and recreation space by “laying the groundwork and providing the preconditions that enable private investors to revitalize neglected communities” (CRA/LA n.d.). The agency conducts community meetings to ensure that their projects reflect the needs of local residents. However, like the planning department, children are rarely or never included and there are no institutionalized opportunities for their participation.

### ***Commission for children, youth, and their families (CCYF):***

Type of organization: Consultation-focused

Level of Participation: Tokenistic

Achievements: Advocacy on behalf, but not with children and youth

Established in 1995, the CCYF has aimed to improve the local government’s ability to enhance the quality of life for young people in the City. The organization’s vision statement reads, “Every Los Angeles child should reach adulthood having experienced a safe healthy and nurturing childhood which prepares him or her to become a responsible and contributing member of the community.” This reflects a

shift from creating programs that treat problems to empowering communities to support families. According to the Commission, “the City will address the underlying systematic causes of family and community problems such as poverty... Building healthy, safe, and physical infrastructure is the City’s best approach to supporting families and their children”(CCYF 2002) . The Commission also plays a vital role in policy advocacy and data collection, analysis, and disseminating data related to children and families in the City. However, children are not directly included or represented in the Commission, so their needs are all adult defined rather than self reported. There is an entire section in the current Strategic Plan entitled “what we want for our children”, a section which could instead read “what our children want”.

Currently the CCYF is in flux. In March 2010, the Mayor threatened to cut the CCYF and the entire Human Service Department that housed it citing the need for budget cuts. However, HSD (which consists of CCYF, Los Angeles Youth Council, the Commission on the Status of Women, and Human Relations) represents a mere 0.1% of the city’s budget with a yearly cost of only \$2.1 million. This fact that lead one staff member of HSD to half jokingly say “that the yearly operating budget for the HSD is equal to LAPD’s yearly budget in post-it notes.” As of March 2010, the Mayor agreed to move and consolidate the department into the Community Development Department, but several staff members will be laid off and it is unclear if the commission will be able to operate as it has before.

### ***LA Youth Council (LAYC):***

Type of organization: child/youth focused

Level of Participation: Tokenistic

Achievements: low level of actual influence, elite controlled. Proposed neighborhood chapters and increased budgeting would substantially strengthen and empower the council and its young people.

The LAYC is a group of voluntary members aged 13 to 19-years-old who serve as advocates for children and youth by promoting city sponsored programs, developing projects to serve the community, and trying to involve youth in the City's governmental processes. The Youth Councils started under Mayor Tom Bradley who believed youth representation was vital in instilling a sense of civic responsibility and community activism within its members. This approach to youth participation as "promotional" for city programs or as a method of "instilling responsibility" does not reflect meaningful participation because it uses youth as means of furthering the governmental agenda, rather than providing a space for young people to question and frame such an agenda. Such an apolitical approach to participation often fails to appeal to students who historically have been marginalized and oppressed by adult power structures. Rather than the council providing a means through which youth can acknowledge and confront adultism, it has become a tokenized instrument of adult control.

The Youth Council also fails to represent the majority of youth living in the City and tends to be a venue for academically high-achieving students who are empowered or connected enough to seek out the opportunity to participate. After Mayor Tom Bradley, Mayor Richard J Riordan allowed only youth members officially

appointed by the City Council to participate in the Council, making the participation process elitist and reserved for those already high achieving students. Alumni of this elite board include Los Angeles City Councilmembers Tom LaBonge (CD 4) and Paul Koretz (CD 5), City Controller Wendy Greuel and L.A. County Supervisor Mark Ridly Thomas.

Elitism continues to dominate the youth council, and while wealthy districts such as West LA are overrepresented in meetings, South Los Angeles and the Valley (home to the greatest number of children and youth) have no representation. On the 2008-2009 board, of the six members of the executive board, three members attended private schools (2 of which are located in Pasadena, the other in Bell Aire), one attended an elite magnet high school for students desiring to study medicine, and the remaining two are high achieving, advanced placement students at Venice High School. For these students college admission is a primary concern, and many are participating in the council, at least in part, to boost their resume and get into elite colleges and universities.

The formal structure of the meetings only furthers the elite image. At the meetings the Mayor's office requires that the youth use Robert's Rules of Order and take formal meeting notes. In employing this level of adult structure and order, the council is making kids "fit into" the formal process instead of encouraging the process to adapt to the needs and desires of youth. The formalized rules could potentially discourage youth who do not feel as comfortable in institutional settings.

Although the council has traditionally furthered elitism and under representation, in September 2007 Elisa Lam took the position as Youth Council Coordinator and City of Los Angeles Human Service Department staff member, hoping to reform the council to be more inclusive and politically powerful. She dramatically restructured the Council by creating organized local chapters to conduct community projects, engage other participants, and recruit more members. Each local chapter then votes on one member to be appointed as the Mayor's Youth Commissioner and these elected officials form an executive board composed of a President, Vice President, Director of Chapter Affairs, Secretary, Communications Officer, and Historian. In creating a hierarchical structure for participation, Lam hoped to involve more young people, particularly those who do not have the privilege and access to find the Council on their own.

Lam speaks openly and honestly about the Council's lack of representation and power and said that kids do not currently have the opportunity to push back. She stated "To City officials, [the members] are just kids and they won't let them make any real change...I don't know how Youth Councils work in other cities, but I hope it's not like this." Lam hoped to increase the Council's power by giving member's input to the City budget and arranged for two members to meet with the Mayor to discuss how the budget impacts youth and what budget cuts could mean for them. Understanding the age hierarchies involved in such a meeting, Lam ensured that the members were prepared and briefed by her before entering the meeting so that the young people could feel competent and empowered to express their opinions.

Over the course of her time as Coordinator, Lam built lasting and trusting relationships with the young participations, yet her ability and understanding of

young people went overlooked in the Mayor's office and in March of 2010 the City laid her off and dissolved the entire Human Service Department. Without Lam the future and potential of the Youth Council to become a more representative and empowered body could be severely hindered. The LAYC will now move to the Mayor's Office under the guidance of Juliet Flores. Flores originally grew up in South Los Angeles and now works in the Mayor's Neighborhood and Community Services Department as a South LA Area Field Representative. While Flores has a deep commitment to children, youth, and the Council, the Council is yet one more responsibility in addition to her already pressing full time job. Without adult support, LAYC cannot possibly move towards a more representative and inclusive forum for youth empowerment and engagement.

## **Foundations/Funding sources**

The California Endowment and First Five are currently two major funding sources operating in South Los Angeles. These two organization represent billions of dollars of possible investment but neither have actively incorporated children's participation in their structure or mission. If these organizations made more of an effort to fund only organizations that promote children's participation, there would be a dramatic increase in the level and range of children's engagement.

### ***California Endowment:***

Type of organization: Consultation-focused

Level of youth involvement: Tokenistic.

Achievements: little to no participation of children, adult focused

The California Endowment recently identified a portion of South Los Angeles as one of fifteen communities to receive over three billion dollars in the upcoming ten years. As part of the Building Healthy Cities Program, The Endowment has conducted a series of community workshops and information sessions to help residents and non-profits working in the area identify a list of four focus areas to build upon in the upcoming weeks. Starting in 2010 this ten year program hopes to improve the physical, social, and economic systems that support healthy living in California.

Currently, the Endowment is engaged in a participatory community process designed to assist the community in defining what a healthy community means to them, what specific outcomes and campaigns are necessary to meet their goals, and how they can work collaboratively to achieve those goals. During this initial brainstorming process the foundation has sponsored various innovative and creative programming for the community and activists working within it. For instance, in the "Day in the life" activists and community leaders were asked to create a narrative based on their first-hand experience of accessing educational, housing, recreation, food, public transportation, and public social service resources within the area by walking and traveling on public transit in the area. Participants spent one hour on school campuses and in the classroom, four hours walking and accessing park and recreation centers, nutritional resources, commercial zones, and



public transportation stops and then ended their trip at the County System/Institutions (DPSS/County Health Center/Probation).

While The Endowment has effectively utilized creative participatory methods of problem identification and resources, they have not done an adequate job of engaging youth in their discussions. At one General Planning Meeting, the adults stressed the importance of including young people and young voices, but in a room of 50-60 adults, there were only seven young people all of whom came because of their involvement with the Community Coalition (see page 61). These empowered young people contributed their insight on community development and racial relations in their community, but often had to stop the adults in their conversation to ask for clarification on the meaning of words or specific terms. The fact that the young people had the courage to ask for clarification in a room full of powerful adults indicates their level of confidence and empowerment, but reflects very negatively on the inclusiveness of the meeting for youth.

At one point in the break session, when participants were asked to define "safe spaces" and reflect on racial relations in the future, the two young people in a group of seven adults remained silent, not because of their lack of ability to contribute but because the space had failed to compensate for the inherent difference in power relations. At one point, one adult member of the group directed her comment to one of the teenagers and said, "Speak! We want to hear from the youth." To which the young person, feeling tokenized and put on the spot, looked down at his paper and blushed. Later in conversation, I asked the two young members of the group if they would be more comfortable brainstorming first in a group of their peers, to which they responded that they definitely would, and one young member named Jessie expressed the difficulty of communicating with adults, particularly those educated and powerful, saying "I can't speak in my language."

### ***First 5 LA:***

Type of organization: Non-participation /Consultation-focused

Level of Participation: Non-participation

Achievements: Little to no participation of children, adult focused

First Five LA is a major funding organization for projects related to children and families. In their 2009 strategic plan, First 5 LA outline four goals: for babies to be born healthy, for children to maintain a healthy weight, for children to be safe from abuse and neglect, and for children to be ready for kindergarten. But, like the California Endowment, First 5 has adopted a "place based" approach for allocating resources instead of funding initiative-based funding. They have recently allocated \$100 million to their new Community Developed Initiatives under the belief that members of individual communities are best suited to meet the needs of their neighborhoods. Community Developed Initiatives target a wide range of outcomes through interventions in health, early learning, and family safety/support and provide financial resources to groups working with children.

## **Community Development Corporations:**

Community development corporation (CDC) is a general term used to describe non-profit organizations that serve to promote the interest of the community. They often engage in affordable housing, economic development, education, community organizing, and real estate development. Because they often have the ability to build houses, establish parks, or incentivize business, CDC's have a powerful role in changing the built environment. Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust, Coalition for Responsible Community Development, and Esperanza Housing Corporation all fall under the umbrella of CDC's.

### ***Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust (LANLT)***

Type of organization: currently consultation-focused, will become more participation-focused

Level of youth involvement: For programming, adult-initiated, shared decision with children. For meetings, tokenization or non-participation

Achievements: Children are active participants in the use of space and activities, but not in the planning and design. A proposed youth organizer could dramatically increase youth engagement.

Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust is a non-profit organization that assists in the acquisition and maintenance of parks and gardens in underserved areas. In South Los Angeles, LANLT played a key role in reforming Estrella Park from an unsafe and rundown space to a center for community activity with programs such as yoga, kickboxing, aerobics, mural design, photography, creative writing classes, and a series of movie nights attended by hundreds of people.

LANLT involves meaningful community participation in all stages of design and development, restoration, and maintenance. Through extensive community organizing, LANLT engages residents in community meetings to discuss what residents want and need from their open spaces. However, according to executive director, Alina Bokde, these meetings tend to be more adult-centric, and while adults participate young people and children “hang out and play.” Young people do have a participatory role in planning the programming and events at the parks and gardens, for instance, young people decided to have both a hip-hop and martial arts class and the adult planners ensured that the youth had the resources to carry out their projects.

Bokde expressed concern about the lack of direct decision-making of young people and the current marginalization of their voices in formal planning and design processes. She hopes that by the end of the year, the organization will hire a youth organizer to increase outreach and involvement.

### ***Coalition for Responsible Community Development***

Type of organization: Participation-Focused

Level of Participation: Adult-initiated shared decisions with children.

Achievements: increase youth's sense of belonging in community through employment in community projects, educated young people on becoming agents of change, and engaged youth in collaborative research projects.

Started in 2005, CRCD defines itself as a "youth-centered" development corporation and works with residents, businesses, community organizations, and civic leaders in South Los Angeles to create a more conducive environment for young people. The organization has focused on neighborhood and community beautification, workforce development for youth and young adults, as well as housing and economic redevelopment.

Children and youth are primarily involved in the organization's neighborhood and community beautification efforts and have been involved in removing 80,000 square feet of graffiti and disposing of five tons of trash and bulky items per week. According to staff, this has dramatically increased young people's sense of belonging. They also aim to increase youth empowerment through education, and CRCD created a curriculum for Jefferson High students that encouraged young people to become "community agents of change", teaching them how to access resources that improve neighborhoods and to work directly with local political and city representatives.

During another project, students at Manual Arts High School and Jefferson High School worked with staff on resident surveys of more than 165 households in South Los Angeles (Maple and Main Street). Youth unveiled the results of the survey at a community forum, where they assembled a panel of local leaders that could address the community's concerns and carve out methods to work collaboratively.

### ***Esperanza Housing Corporation:***

Type of organization: Non-participation/Consultation-focused

Level of Participation: non-participation, some participatory educational programs

Achievements: non-participation, some community programs

Esperanza Community Housing Corporation addresses the needs of our community comprehensively through five core program areas: housing, health, economic development, education, and arts & science.

Esperanza seeks to create opportunities for community residents' growth, security, participation, recognition, and ownership through developing and preserving affordable housing, creating opportunities for child care, ensuring quality education, promoting accessible health care, stimulating involvement in arts and culture, pursuing economic development, and advocating for progressive public policy. Through partnerships with churches, schools, block clubs and other community institutions, Esperanza helps to strengthen the social infrastructure of the neighborhood. In all of their actions, Esperanza strives to build hope with community. The organization works primarily with increasing affordable housing but also runs an arts and science program for children and youth including the HeArt program, that James Rojas participated in to increase children's awareness of the built environment (see planning department).

Although the board of directors has one community member, three are no children in any positions of authority, and according to staff members at the organization, there is no direct involvement of children in planning or executing projects.

### **Grassroots Organizations:**

Grassroots organizations are non-profit organizations that are run by regular citizens. They typically work at a local level and are often involved in community organizing efforts. In general, these organization have very little funding and little power to exercise control over the built environment. The Children's Planning Council, Community Coalitions" South Central Youth Empowered Through Action, Youth for Environmental Justice, and Youth Justice Coalition are all grassroots organizations currently operating in or around Southeast LA.

### ***Children's Planning Council - SPA 6:***

Type of organization: Participation-focused

Level of youth involvement: In formal meetings: Tokenism In community organizing: child-initiated, shared decisions with adults

Accomplishments: Grassroots empowerment (at a high school level), Community outreach to younger people, greater collaboration amongst departments.

The Children's Planning Council has taken significant and critical steps in the coordination and cooperation of research and service provisions for children and families. The Commission created eight geographically based Service Planning Areas (SPAs) in an effort to integrate planning, coordinate services and resources, and provide a framework for information and data gathering activities across county agencies, nonprofit organizations, and philanthropy. The commission has also played a vital role in children's research and advocacy by publishing the Children's Scorecard that provides holistic and cooperative data regarding children's well-being.

In 2009, the county revoked its partnership with the Planning Council in yet another example of how the public sector fails its children and those who work closest with them. As a result, the Planning Council is no longer considered a County Commission and does not receive funding from the County of Los Angeles, which amounted to more than 50% of their operating budget. Most of the operational budget for the Planning Council now comes from First Five LA, a private foundation.

The SPA 6 chapter of the Planning Council currently operates based on a community organizing model and focuses on relationship building and community empowerment. Two organizers meet daily with different groups of community members (including children and youth) to identify the group's goal and strategies. A couple of these organizing groups are based in the local middle and high schools with local teenagers and adolescents. The Council has not made an effort to outreach to young children and has limited their engagement primarily to teenagers, especially those at risk. Currently, the groups meet to define values and concerns – making the organization focused primarily on empowerment. If the Council can

move from identifying concerns to taking action, as they hope to do, the organization has the potential to move from empowerment to active citizenship.

The formal structure of the organization does not reflect the gains in youth empowerment made at the grass-roots level. The community planning meeting, like the California Endowment's meeting, consisted of a room full of powerful, educated adults, together with three teenagers representing El Nido Family Center, a non-profit service organization primarily for teen parents. There was also one thirteen-year old participant representing an organizing group at Gompers Middle School named Stephanie. At one point the committee of adults called on Stephanie to speak on behalf of her new group, their projects, and why she was involved. Like the participants in the California Endowment Planning session, Stephanie turned red and looked down at the table and remained silent, providing yet another example of tokenistic participation that does more to disempower youth than to productively engage them.

### ***Community Coalition: South Central Youth Empowered through action (SCYEA)***

Type of organization: child/youth focused and lead

Level of youth involvement: Child-initiated and directed

Accomplishments: Youth empowerment, increased sense of community, tangible changes

South Central Youth Empowered Through Action is a youth-led community organizing group made up of African-American and Latino high school students working together to improve the social and economic conditions of their school and community. Youth in this organization have given testimony at City Hall for educational equity (Coalition 2008), organized protests and conducted their own research. Crystina Spight, a 15 year old at Manual Arts High School described the organization as "youth taking control of what they feel should happen in the community and how they feel the community should be ran... not just [letting] the adults and politicians run us. "

The group organizes and outreaches fellow young people in the community through eight High School Organizing Committees (HSOC's) throughout South Los Angeles including: Washington Preparatory, Fremont, Dorsey, Jordan, Manual Arts, Crenshaw and Locke. All groups are led by a student organizer, and begin with an hour for academic assistance followed by a two hour meeting. But, as youth organizer Carmen explained, it is "not a boring meeting because there are more youth we have fun activities and entertainment" (Aguila 2009). Because all meetings are youth-run and organized and do not reflect adult power structures, the group is more inviting and conducive to young people, particularly those feeling most isolated and alienated by adult controlled institutions.

SCYEA's campaigns primarily focus on educational equity including equalizing access to college prep classes and increasing college-advising in high schools. Because SCYEA does not confine itself to merely education issues, it has also been able to have an impact on the built environment and greater community as a

whole. For instance, young people played an integral role in limiting the number of liquor stores in the neighborhood.

SCYEA successfully campaigned around the equitable distribution of Proposition Better Buildings funding and because of their youth-led research, organizing, and activism was able to garner 153 million dollars in repair for South Los Angeles Schools. Proposition Better Building's 2.4 billion dollar bond to improve the physical structure of high schools throughout California continuously overlooked and ignored inner-city schools in allocating funds. SCYEA exposed this injustice by using student surveys to document the need for infrastructure repairs in all South Los Angeles including plumbing, lighting, tiling, and roofing and photographed the unjust conditions. In the process, SCYEA actively informed students about Proposition Better Buildings and built coalitions with community members and decision makers to advance their cause.

One of SCYEA's strengths is that the youth-led organization, which has its own autonomy and decision-making power, is just one part of the Community Coalition, a powerful grass-roots organization founded in 1990 by community leaders including Assembly Speaker Karen Bass that aims to make South Los Angeles a healthier, safer community with positive economic development, decreased crime, poverty and substance abuse through grass roots organizing. Because SCYEA is connected with and supported by this organization, young people benefit from the guidance of seasoned adult organizers and have the ability to be involved in broader community change. The connection with adults also creates a vital support system, necessary in any youth organizing. Spight, said that the network of student and adult activists has served as a family and a second home. She went on to say that because she does not have a lot of support from family and teachers, Community Coalition staff are the only ones she can rely on for support (Spight 2009).

### ***Youth for Environmental Justice (Youth-EJ)***

Type of organization: child/youth focused and led

Level of youth involvement: Child-initiated and directed

Outcome: Youth empowerment, increased sense of community, tangible changes

Youth for Environmental Justice, like SEAYA consists of a youth-led, youth-organized group situated within a broader community organization. Youth for Environmental Justice (Youth EJ) works to empowers youth to take a stand for social and environmental justice in low income communities of color through organization, education, and leadership development and has become an integral part of Communities for a Better Environment, a state wide environmental justice organization.

Like Community Coalition, youth organizers meet and recruit in the local high schools. Currently, Youth Action Clubs exist in three high schools, Huntington Park, South Gate, and South East High School. Youth Action strives to educate, empower, and organize youth to create positive change in their community. Members of Youth-EJ have worked with organized parents and other community members to fight against a power plant and oppose freeway expansion.

## *Youth Justice Coalition*

Type of organization: child/youth focused and lead

Level of youth involvement: Child-initiated and directed

Outcome: Youth empowerment, increased sense of community, tangible changes

The Youth Justice Coalition (YJC) is one of the nation's few organizing projects led by young people (ages 8 to 24) who have been, or are currently under arrest, on probation, in detention, in prison, or on parole or whose parents/guardians, brothers, or sisters have been incarcerated for long periods of their lives (website). The goal of the organization is primarily focused on reforming the juvenile "injustice" system by challenging race, gender and class inequalities, and working to tear down a system that they believe represents a vast disregard for young people's constitutional and human rights. The organization uses direct action organizing, advocacy, political education, and activist arts to agitate, expose, and annoy the people in charge in order to upset power and bring about change. Although the organization may not explicitly deal with the construction of the built environment, it aims to secure the rights of young people to use and be present in the built environment without threat of police harassment and abuse. YJC is also the most committed community organization to youth empowerment through direct leadership and organizational decision-making.

The Organizational Board of Directors, which provides administrative oversight, must maintain a minimum of 58% youth membership. The institutionalization of youth leadership at the highest rung of organizational power reflects a genuine commitment to youth potential instead of the tokenistic role of young people in most organizations. According to the organization. "If the YJC doesn't maintain its commitment to being led primarily by youth in the system, then it should be disbanded. At best, it would be replicating existing advocacy work. At worst, it would become an apologist for a racist system."

## **Findings: Children's participation in Southeast LA**

Based upon my engagement with the above organizations and my subsequent analysis of their current level of children's participation, I discovered various issues that hinder children's full level of participation.

### ***Lack of institutionalization:***

While youth participation is well institutionalized in non-profit, community organizations especially the Community Coalition, Communities for a Better Environment, and Youth Justice Coalition, meaningful and sustainable children and youth participation is nearly entirely absent in formal government and official planning.

### ***Lack of government support:***

The current administration, both at a city and county level, has systematically underfunded nearly every governmental organization working with children. In 2009, the County revoked its partnership with the Children's Planning Council, thereby eliminating nearly the entire budget of this young-centered organization. A year later in 2010, the City dissolved the Human Service Department, leaving the Commission for Children, Youth, and their Families in scrambles and threatening the existence of the Youth Council. As part of this cut, Elisa Lam, former Youth Council Coordinator, lost her job despite spending the last two and a half years completely devoted to the Youth Council and its members. While authorities may cite the budget deficient as a justification for the cuts, the Los Angeles Police Department, infamous for criminalizing young people, has experienced no budget cuts in the past year. This fundamentally questions whether the City truly lacks the funds to commit to children or, as I believe, adult authorities just do not view young people as recipients worthy of the City's investment.

### ***Little Inclusivity:***

Most opportunities for involvement center on teenagers and adolescents and very few include anyone under the age of 13. Based on my interviews, adults in these organizations appear to believe that teenagers are more competent and relevant to community organizing and planning efforts. However, as this paper indicated earlier, this is not the case and younger children are equally relevant, competent, and important participatory community members.

### ***Limited Scope:***

Most organizations currently working with young people focus primarily on increased services and programs for young people or advocate for change in adult-run institutions such as schools or prisons. With the exception of LANLT and CRCDC very few organizations currently working with or around young people have chosen to target urban planning or the built environment.



## A power analysis

### Methodology:

Based upon the previous descriptions of the organizations, I created a power analysis to show organizations level of youth participation relative to their power to change the built environment. This analysis is important in order to understand how children's limited power impacts their socio-spatial marginalization.

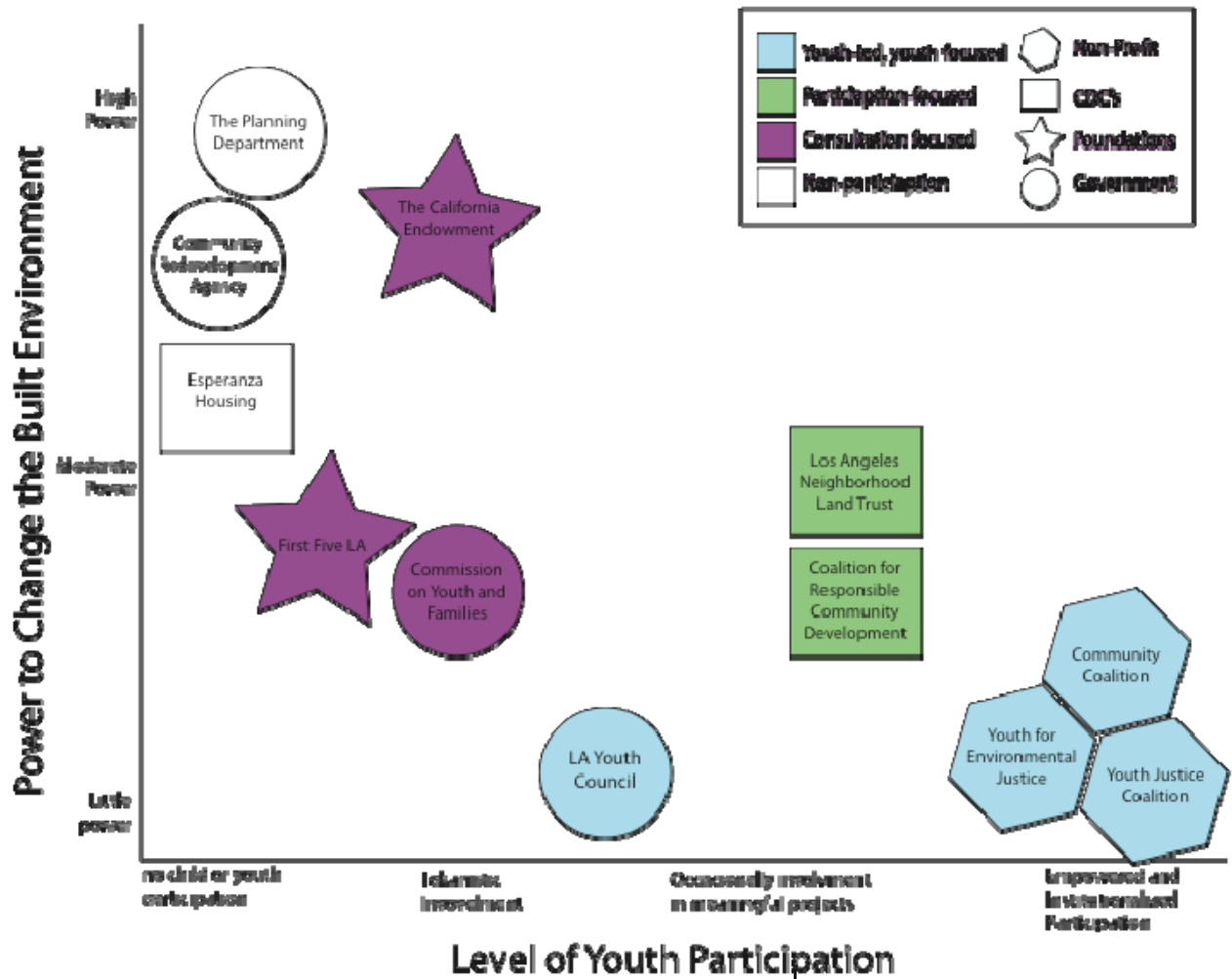
In the diagram, the x-axis indicates the level of child and youth participation in organization, with no child or youth participation on the left moving upwards to empowered, institutionalized participation on the right. I determined each organization's level of participation based on Hart's typology described in the previous section. The Y-axis reflects the power of organizations to influence or change the built environment, with little power on the left, moderate power in the middle, and high power on top. This was a rather subjective determination based upon the level of funding and decision-making authority for each organization. The varying colors represent the organization's culture of participation and include youth-led, youth-focused, participation focused, consultation focused. Organizations with no culture of participation were characterized as "non-participation" and have a hollow color. Again, I made this determination based on my analysis in the previous section. Finally the varying shapes indicate the type of each organization (non-profit, CDC, foundations, and government).

### Analysis and Discussion;

The power map indicates that organizations with the greatest power to influence decision-making in the built environment (such as government and foundations) have the least amount of youth participation, whereas organizations with the greatest amount of youth participation have little to no power to influence to change current conditions. The map also indicates that children are most empowered in non-profit organizations (hexagons) and participation-focused organizations

According to the map, there is a strong correlation between the culture of the organization and the level of youth participation. Organizations with a consultation-focus have little participation, organizations with a participation-focus have moderate participation, and youth-led, youth focused groups have the highest level of youth participation. This correlation does not necessarily have to exist. Consultation-focused organizations can develop institutionalized methods for involving children and engaging young people in every step of the research process. Similarly, participation-focused organizations can meaningfully engage children in developing and implementing programs though more systematic and on-going strategies. These strategies would then push these organization more to the right of the power map.

# Power Map Analysis of Children's Participation in Southeast Los Angeles



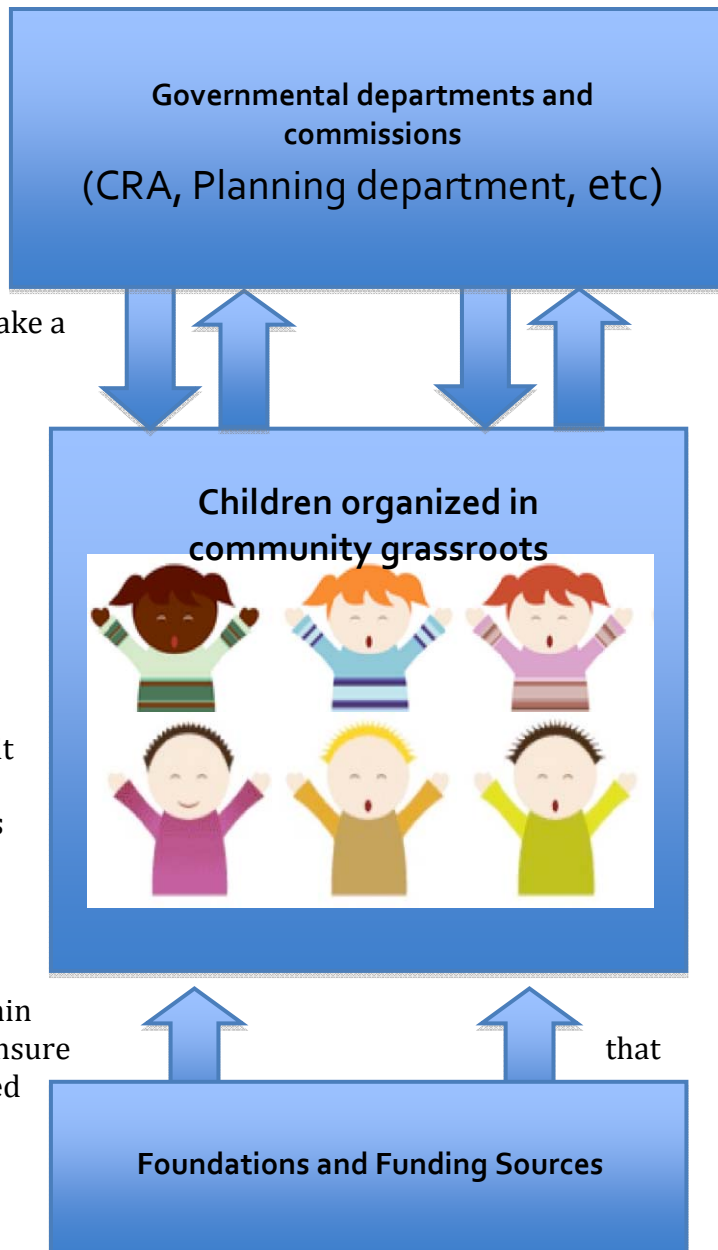
## Recommendations for greater children's participation in Los Angeles

### Adopting a more strategic approach to children's participation:

Because there are so many organizations working in Los Angeles to influence community planning, it is vital to take a strategic approach to children's participation that recognizes the importance of all political players, not just official government organizations

### *Grassroots efforts should lead the children's participatory movement.*

Due the sheer size of Los Angeles, it is unrealistic to think that bureaucratic organizations such as the planning department will be able to devote a great deal of time to organizing and consulting with youth. Instead, this organization should be done at a local level within non-profit community groups to ensure children and youth have a sustained and institutionalized form of participation. Once organized, children can then more effectively push back on governmental departments and commissions and advocate on their own behalf.



To do this, I suggest that every community-organizing group appoint at least one youth organizer and develop a chapter for children and youth. This chapter should be supported by the general organization, but like the case of Youth EJ and SCYEA, have the ability to make their own agenda and create their own campaigns. Unlike Youth EJ and SCYEA, however, children's involvement in their community should not only include teenagers. As discussed repeatedly in this paper, younger children are just as relevant and just as capable.

Although community organization may claim that they have no energy, time, or money to invest in youth outreach and empowerment, this is simply not a reasonable excuse. Young people represent upwards of a third of the population, and any non-profit, community-based organization that claims to "represent the underrepresented" simply has no valid justification for children and youth's exclusion. Organizations regularly accommodate adults with special needs such as non-English speakers, elderly, or the mentally and physically disabled. Children deserve the same kind of special consideration.

***Funding sources should support this movement by prioritizing resource allocation to projects and groups that directly involve children and young people.***

Grassroots organizations cannot and will not invest more time and energy working with young people unless they have more support in the form of greater funding and resources allocation. Foundations such as First Five and The California Endowment should encourage the spread of children and youth's meaningful participation by incentivizing organizations that involve younger people (in more than a merely manipulative, decorative, or tokenistic way). These foundations control billions of dollars and if they make a statement to prioritize funding for organizations that involve and empower young people, organizations will respond.

Furthermore if children and youth have access to funding sources and can allocate resources as they please they will have a greater sense of power, and easier time recruiting other young people, and thus a greater ability to make change.

***Government should consult with children and appoint young people as board members***

Because government officials ultimately make many of the final decisions regarding planning, there must also be formal participation of young people in traditional government. Government bodies that regularly consult with the community such as the CRA and the Planning Department should organize separate events to engage younger residents. These events should employ creative techniques such as James Rojas' interactive model or other techniques listed in the toolkit on page 29.

In order to ensure that these recommendations are acted upon, each government body should consider appointing a young person to the formal board of directors. This young person can act as an in-between to facilitate greater

coordination and contact between young people and make ensure that youth voices are heard in the formal structure and planning process.

The Government should also drastically strengthen the power and influence of the Youth Council. The Youth Council should become more representative using Lam's model for chapter organizations (see page 55-56) and should have the opportunity to set an agenda and pressure elected adults. One way to increase the power of the council is to provide the youth members will a budget that they can allocate as they wish.

## **Recommendations for organizations to institutionalize children's participation:**

While the strategic plan detailed above outlines how the City can best integrate children's participation, the following step by step recommendations provide guidance for how individual organizations can better involve children and young people.

### **Begin a conversation within the organization:**

Each organization working in Neighborhood development or urban planning should engage in a dialogue about children's role in the community. The CRC and Child Friendly City Framework can provide a meaningful and important tool in framing the discussion. Do not assume that because your organization involves families, it necessarily involves children. Often involving "families" means involving adult parents who have children. Involving children would take a different orientation and involve children who have adult parents.

Based on this conversation, consider what changes should be made to your mission statement, organizational structure, current projects, and research and community outreach efforts to be more inclusive of children and youth.

### **Begin a conversation with children and youth:**

In order to plan for children and young people, adults have to better understand how and where children spend their time, what they think about their community spaces, and how they think these spaces should change to better meet their needs. To accomplish this organizations have to take a more holistic view of children and their well-being and rely on qualitative information acquired through creative and innovative research techniques.

### **Draw upon children and young people's current passion and energy.**

Children and young are already engaged in social movements to reclaim public space – whether this be through decorating their "fixie" and riding it from the beach to downtown with a group of friends or taking over a street and turning it into a dance floor. Recognize those efforts as valuable and important and harness that energy to make substantive changes to infrastructure and policy.

**Encourage greater collaboration and convergence among various organizations:**

Several organizations already have high levels of youth empowerment and involvement and can provide a valuable asset for adult organizations working to do more consultation or participatory planning with children and youth.

**Work with children to develop a list of demands or concerns and the necessary changes needed to meet these demands:**

From the initial conversations with children, facilitate a more formalized process of problem and solution identifications. Ideally this stage would lead to a written document that could guide future efforts and projects.

**Link children and youth participation with funding:**

Ensure that children have access to funding sources both so that they can feel more empowered in the resource allocation process and so that their projects make a greater impact. For non-profit organizations this should mean identifying what funding sources are available including Proposition K, Proposition 40, The Quimby Act and Safe Routes to Schools.

**Institutionalize children’s involvement through formal structural changes:**

Ensure that children have a formal say in the organization through board membership or youth councils. Youth councils should not be tokenistic and should instead involve real power sharing and decision-making power. These organizations should also proactively work to include all children, not just “high achievers” looking to pad their college resume.

**Focus on children and youth empowerment, not on programming:**

Too often government, non-profits, and foundations focus on short-term programming for young people created to accomplish a certain goal or outcome. After the goal is “achieved” or is no longer a priority for funders, the program ends and children and young people never hear about it again. This kind of funding creates sporadic investment that treats young people as clients instead of participants. More resources, time, and energy should be allocated to the creation of more long-term opportunities for empowerment that allow children to set their own goals and work proactively to meet them.

## Conclusion:

In recent years, Los Angeles community advocates have finally started to address the marginalization of youth through increased leadership opportunities and community organizing efforts. These organizing efforts primarily target “at risk” teenagers and adolescents and attempt to change their behavior through community engagement. The efforts to empower high-school youth to change their educational system or to advocate for judicial reform are a vital part of a movement towards multigenerational equity. However, the mistreatment, disrespect, and marginalization of children and youth does not begin when the police search and harass a fifteen-year-old on his way to buy milk for his family or when authorities target and arrest a twelve-year-old at a park in an area with a gang injunction. Youth marginalization begins when infants and toddlers learn to walk in toxic homes that do not reflect any of their specific needs. It begins when school children don’t have the space to play and the space they do have resembles a prison yard more than a nurturing environment for physical, mental, and social development. It begins when older children cannot afford or are too afraid to take public transportation and cannot achieve any sense of autonomy or control over their movement, their lives, or their everyday decisions.

This systematic neglect is a product of an ageist society that fails to recognize children as real people or empower them with any say or influence over their lives and it affects all children regardless of race, class, ability, or gender. Yet, this “adultism” proves particularly salient for children and youth victimized by other “-isms” - for the young people who find themselves not only at the bottom of an age hierarchy, but the bottom of various income, race, and/or gender hierarchies as well. This collective intersection of interdependent systems of oppression manifests itself in the built environment and shapes children’s lived experiences before their first day of kindergarten, before their elementary school commencement, and long before their high school graduation.

In order to move forward and empower all members of our society, adults who have the ability and power to change the built environment must incorporate and support children and youth in formal consultation and decision-making. Young people have the right to participate and express their opinions and it is the obligation of adults to ensure that they have the opportunities necessary to exercise that right.

# Bibliography

- Aguila, Carmen, interview by Community Coalition. *Chase Community Giving Challenge* <http://cocosouthla.org/youth/scyeamission>. 2009 йил December.
- Baraldi, Claudio, and Reggio Emilia. *Cities with Children: Child Friendly Cities in Italy*. organization, UNICEF, Florence: Innocenti Reserach Centre, 2005.
- Bartlett, Sheridan, Roger Hart, David Satterthwaite, Ximena de la Barra, and Alfredo Missair. *Cities fo Children: Children's Rights, Poverty, and Urban Management*. London: Earthscan, 1999.
- Buss, Shirley. *Children and the urban spatial environment: Meaning and action from young people's angle of vision*. PhD dissertation, Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles, 1994.
- Cal Trans . *Safe Routes to School*. 2010.  
<http://www.dot.ca.gov/hq/LocalPrograms/saferoutes/saferoutes.htm> (accessed 2010 йил 11-April).
- California Healthy Kids Survey. "Technical Report: 5th Grade 2006-2008." Los Angeles County, 2008.
- CCYF. "A Vision for the Future of Los Angeles: Action Plan for the City's Children, Youth and Their Families." City of Los Angeles Commission for Children Youth and Their Families, Los Angeles, 2002.
- Chawla, Louise. "Evaluating Children's Participation: Seeking Areas of Consensus." *SPA Notes* (IIED), 2001.
- . *Growing Up in an Urbanizing World*. London: Earthscan Publications, 2002.
- Children's Planning Council. "Children's ScoreCard." Los Angeles County, 2006.
- City of Los Angeles. "Southeast LA (Community Planning Area)." Government, Department of City Planning- Demographics Research Unit, 2009.
- . "Summer Night Lights." 2008.  
<http://mayor.lacity.org/Issues/GangReduction/SummerNightLights/Index.htm>.
- Coalition, Community. *A-G Accountability Session*. 2008 йил 10-June.  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TszQkM\\_FyMU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TszQkM_FyMU) (accessed 2010 йил 11-April).
- Cooper, Claire Marcus, and Wendy Sarkissian. *Housing as if People Mattered: Site Design Guidelines for Medium-Density family Housing*. Berkeley , CA: University of California Press, 1986.
- Coriandoline. *Coriandoline: Le case amiche dei bambini e delle dambine*. ANDRIA Cooperativa de Abitanti, 2008.
- CRA/LA. "What We Do." *CRA/LA Building Communities*.  
[http://www.crala.net/internet-site/About/what\\_we\\_do.cfm](http://www.crala.net/internet-site/About/what_we_do.cfm) (accessed 2009 йил 11-April).
- Ernst, Michele. "Mean Streets 2004: How far have we come." Surface Transportation Policy Project, 2004.



Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics. *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2009*. Washington, D.C. U.S. Government Printing Office.

Frank, Kathryn. "The Potential of Youth Participation in Planning." *Journal of Planning Literature* 20 (2006): 351-371.

Gibbs, N. 2009. "The Case Against Over Parenting". *Time Magazine*. Nov. 30, 2009

Gearin, Elizabeth, and Chris Kahle. "Teen and Adult perceptions of Urban Green Space in Los Angeles." *Children, Youth and Environments* 16, no. 1 (2006): 25-48.

Gleeson, B, and N Sipe. *Creating Child Friendly Cities: Reinstating Kids in the City*. London: Routledge, 2006.

Gold, Scott. "Central Avenue is dreaming again." *Los Angeles Times*, 2009 йил 25-September.

—. "Promise and Peril in South LA." *Los Angeles Times*, 2009 йил 7-June .

Gonzales, Juana. *South LA Road to College*. 2009. <http://blog.cocosouthla.org/meet-our-bloggers/>.

Hart, Roger. "Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship." International Child Development Centre, UNICEF, Florence, 1992.

Hart, Roger. "Wildlands for Children: Consideration of the Value of Natural Environments in Landscape Planning." *Landshaft+Stadt* (Eugen Ulmer GmbH & Co., Stuttgart) 14, no. 1 (1982): 34-39.

Human Impact Partners . "29th St. / San Pedro St. Area Health Impact Assessment." Health Impact Assessment, Los Angeles, 2009.

Jacquez, Jesse. *South L.A. Road to College*. Los Angeles, 2009 йил Spetember.

Kirby, Perpetua, Claire Lanyon, Kathleen Cronin, and Ruth Sinclair. *Building a Culture of Participation*. Non-profit, National Children's Bureau, London: PK Reserach Consultancy Ltd, 2003.

Klicka, Christopher, and William Estrada. "The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: The Most Dangerous Attack on Parents' Rights in the History of the United States." *Home School Legal Defense Association*. 2007 йил March.

<http://web.archive.org/web/20080326173650/http://hslda.org/docs/nche/000000/000000020.asp>.

Knowles-Yanez, Kimberley. "Concerns of children in land use planning processes." *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning*, 2002.

LAPropO. *Background to Proposition O*. <http://www.lapropo.org/> (accessed 2009 йил 11-April).

Lennard, Henry, and Suzanne Crowhurst Lennard. *The Forgotten Child: Cities for the well-being of children*. Carmel, CA: International Making Cities Livable Council, 2000.

Lillestol, Kjell. "The Porsgrunn Model." *Ilmajoki*. 2006 йил 25-10.

Los Angeles County Department of Public Health. "Los Angeles Health Survey." Office of Health Assessment and Epidemiology, Los Angeles, 2005.

Loukaitous-Sideris, Anastasia, Robin Ligget, and Hyun-Gun Sung. "Death on the Crosswalk: A study of pedestrian-automobile collisions in Los Angeles." *Journal of Planning Education and Reserach* 26, no. 3 (2007): 338-351.

Luken, Eleanor. "Children's power over play; Cultural geography of playspaces in America." Masters of Science, Architecture, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, 2009.

Matthews, Beverly, interview by Meredith Abood. *Children in South Los Angeles* (2009 йил 28-January).

Medrich, Elliott. *The Serious Business of Growing Up*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982.

Moore, Robin. *Childhood's Domain: Play and Space in Child Development*. London: Croom Helm, 1985.

National Council of Research: Institute of Cognitive Sciences and Technologies. *The City of Children*. 2010 йил 5-April. <http://www.lacittadeibambini.org/> (accessed 2010 йил 5-April).

Newman, O. *Defensible Space*. New York: Macmillan and Co, 1972.

Norwood, Chico. "Wetland Park Brings Nature Back to South Los Angeles." *LA Watts Times*, 2009 йил 16-April.

Piasecki, Joe. "Redefining education for students who need more than academics." *The South Los Angeles Report*, 2009 йил 9-November.

Rojas, James. "The Eastside Gold Line Rail as a Learning Tool for at-Risk Youth." *LA Streets Blog*. 2009 йил 15-December. <http://la.streetsblog.org/2009/12/15/the-eastside-gold-line-rail-as-a-learning-tool-for-at-risk-youth/> (accessed 2010 йил 11-April).

Spight, Christina, interview by Community Coalition. *What Student Activism Means* (2009 йил 6-September).

Sutton, Lisa. "Adventure playgrounds: a children's world in the city." <http://adventureplaygrounds.hampshire.edu/adventureplay.pdf> (accessed April йил 2009-11).

Szapocznik, Jose, Joanna Lombard, Frank Martinez, Craig Mason, and Deborah Gorman-Smith. "The Impact of the Built Environment on Children's School Conduct Grades." *American Journal of Community Psychology* (Springer Netherlands) 38, no. 3 (2006): 299-310.

The Trust for Public Land. "No Place to Play: A Comparative Analysis of Park Access in Seven Major Cities." 2004.

Tonucci, Francesco, and Antonella Rissotto. "Why do we need children's participation? The importance of children's participation in changing the city." *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 11 (2001): 407-19.

Torres, Juan. "Children and Cities: Planning to Grow Together." *Contemporary Family Trends* (Vanier Institute of the Family), 2009.

Ward, Collin. *The Child in the City*. London: Bedford Square Press, 1978.

Wheward, R, and A Millward. *Child's Play: Facilitating Play on Housing Estates*. Chartered: The Chartered Institute of Housing, 1997.

Wolch, Jennifer, John Wilson, and Jed Fehrenbach. "Parks and Park Funding In Los Angeles: An Equity Mapping Analysis." Sustainable Cities Program: GIS Research Laboratory, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, 2002.

World Health Organization- Europe. "'Children's Tracks' Norway." *Children's Health and Environment Case Summary Book*, 2002.

Zeisel, John, and Poly Welch. "Housing Designed for Families." US Department of Commerce, 1981.