The ideal child in the ideal city? The city as a co-educator

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Introduction

Space matters in education. Not only as the context of pedagogical provisions or activities, but also as an educator in itself with diverse pedagogical assumptions and agendas that shape societal relations (De Visscher, Bouverne-De Bie, & Verschelden, 2012; De Visscher & Bouverne - De Bie, 2008). The social and cultural position of children and young people in the city is largely influenced by particular urban planning and design logics. Spatial design entails different views on society, community development and education. As such, it is reasonable to state that urban planners have a pedagogical role, understanding pedagogy as a set of interventions in an already ongoing socialisation process into a more desirable direction (Giesecke, 1987). Spatial interventions have a pedagogical meaning, even when they are not based on any intentional pedagogical programs or theories.

In many cases however, particular views on childhood and education do underlie the spatial design of children's lifeworld. Regarding the position of children and young people in the city, several pedagogical planning frameworks have been developed, such as *educating cities* (Bernet, 1990), *pedagogy of the city* (Schugurensky & Myers, 2008), *community schooling* (Hiemstra, 1972) or *urban education (*Pink & Noblit, 2007*)*, which all share a view on urban spaces as a background against which formal, informal and nonformal learning processes, developmental processes and socialisation processes take place. This background then needs to be planned and designed through social and spatial interventions in such a way that it meets the developmental needs of children and young people in the best possible way. Throughout the twentieth century, the content of this prescriptive perspective evolved from the urban playground movement (already in the early nineteenth century) to the play-inclusive design of public spaces and – more recently –child friendly and child oriented planning and design guidelines (De Visscher, 2014; De Visscher & Bouverne - De Bie, 2008). They all share the assumption that the child as well as society can be engineered and controlled from outside. Each of these models departs from an implicit or explicit view on the ideal child in the ideal city.

But who is the child in all these design theories for places for children in the city or child friendly cities? Who is the child that we are planning the city for and to what kind of pedagogy does or should spatial planning contribute? It may sound like an odd question, but history shows that our current talking about 'the child' - and the most dominant planning ideas for places for children in the city that derive from that – entail different views on childhood and education. We will discuss three clusters of childhood images that affect our current talking about the child and ideas on the ideal child in the ideal city: the private child, the autonomous child and the public child. The aim is not to present a comprehensive overview of 20th century childhood images, which can be found in other publications (e.g. Cunningham, 2005; James & Prout, 1997), but to focus on the particular interrelations between constructions of childhood, pedagogical theories and perspectives on the

planning of places for children in cities. More specifically the need for a social pedagogical perspective as a framework for understanding the city as a co-educator will be explained.

The construction of childhood

Thinking about childhood as a separate stage of life and a specific group within society is a recent historical invention. The historian Philippe Ariès studied for example the portraits of families from the middle ages and concluded that children were often portrayed as miniature adults (Ariès, 1960). And further in history, the Spartans from Ancient Greece were known for their 'spartan education' which involved little sentimental value to the child as only the strongest and healthiest male babies were allowed to live (and to be military trained). Once the child stopped being an *infant* (which is derived from the Latin and means unable to speak) who is in need of care by its parents in order to survive, it was integrated in the adult world.

This attitude towards children changed in the context of the Enlightenment. Children started to embody the ideal of progress, they symbolized the future, literally and metaphorically. And in order to prepare them for their future role as rational and responsible citizens, they were separated from adult society and dismissed from economical activities for the benefit of preparing them as good as possible for their *future* role as responsible, competent and active citizens. In other words, children's socialization was organized as a process of social integration through social separation (Chisholm, 2001). Together with this, children's lifeworlds became increasingly institutionalized and pedagogically structured, for example by the introduction and gradual democratization of compulsory education and the organization of children's leisure time within pedagogically supervised forms of youth work.

The content of this separate childhood stage (and of the accompanying pedagogical agendas) differs according to the perspective from which childhood is constructed. In this paper, we will go into three possible perspectives that have clearly affected processes of child oriented urban design during the past centuries: the private child (or the child as part of the family), the autonomous child (or the emancipated child), and the public child (or the child as part of society).

The private child

A first cluster of childhood constructions with an impact on urban design refers to the child as an individual being that belongs to the private sphere of the family. The focus here is on the personal development of the child from a psychomedical point of view. Childhood is seen as a crucial stage of life during which children are supposed to develop their *head, heart and hands*, to discover and develop their talents, and to grow up into healthy, harmonious and skilled adults. This approach of childhood is rooted in developmental psychology, which has been the dominant approach to childhood studies during most of the twentieth century (and to a large extent still is today). The publication of Ellen Key's *The Century of the Child* at the beginning of that century reflects the romantic image of the child that was constructed in that time. The child appeared as a 'pure',

'divine' creature. Opposed to the adult world that was imbued with weighty, important matters, overwhelming professional and private expectations, competition, responsibilities, etc., children's lifeworld was idealised as a safe haven where one was still allowed to live happy and free, innocent and without any burden (Mortier, 1999). 'Original innocence' is the basic trait of the romantic view on childhood. This innocence should be safeguarded until adulthood and protected against bad societal influences (Hendrick, 1997).

The romantic view on childhood was also reflected in urban design, more specifically in the development of a playground approach. Both in the United States (Davis, 2005; Frost & Wortham, 1988) and Europe (Kassies, 1985), the first separate playgrounds for children were established around the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. These so-called 'play gardens' were created predominantly in the larger, West European cities (Kassies, 1985). These public gardens were secured, fenced places with adventure equipment for young children. They were constantly supervised by adults, mostly local residents and parents, but later also by professional supervisors. From time to time, these supervisors also organized activities in these play gardens. Even now, these fenced play gardens remain a common view in larger cities.

The construction of the first playgrounds in cities was closely linked to a public health policy on the one hand and an educational policy on the other. Internationally too, there are references to two major concerns in children's development and education (Hartle & Johnson, 1993). First, there is children's health and motor development. Playgrounds with adventure equipment are designed to make children exercise and to develop their motor skills while also providing open air within the city. Second, concerns regarding children's cognitive, social and emotional development underlie the development of play infrastructure in urban neighbourhoods. With regard to children's cognitive development, Froebel's theories concerning the Kindergarten (Davis, 2005; Frost and Wortham, 1988; Hartle and Johnson, 1993) were influential in the development of the first play gardens. In his theories on Kindergarten, Froebel attached great value to play as an educational activity and to the design of educational environments that promote children's creativity and activity. Froebel considered the outdoor environment primarily as a learning environment and (in line with a romantic view on childhood) valued play as being the highest expression of a pure life.

Later in the 20th century, the romantic view on childhood has been complemented by other approaches that fit in with the focus on the private child. Zelizer (1985) showed for example how in the past decades the affective-emotional value of children has increased enormously, whereas their utilitarian-economical value has decreased or even disappeared. Moreover as a result of increasing means of birth control and decreasing fertility rates in the western world, children have become a scarce and emotionally valuable resource within families. As a consequence she observed a strong sentimentalisation of the child and of childhood, resulting in a more protective attitude towards children.

Protection as pedagogical goal of urban planning

Positioning children within the private sphere of the home and family resulted in a private or individualized approach to education. It is no coincidence that in the same period of the publication of The Century of the Child, the systematic attention for the scientific study of the child grew. Stafseng even states that "instead of the century of the child, we got the century of the child professionals (Stafseng, 1993, p. 77). The scientific study of the child was dominated by developmental psychology and medical science, turning the century of the child predominantly into a century of the 'psychological' or private child (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Mayall, 2000; Woodhead, 1999). Jean Piaget (1973) was one of the most influential contributors to a psychological theory of child development. He described childhood as a sequence of four developmental stages (sensory motor, 0-2 years; preoperational, 2-7 years, concrete operational, 7-12 years; and formal operational, 12-15 years) with particular expectations of what the child should be able to do and what new skills it should acquire at each stage. His model has profoundly influenced many educational practices and school curricula.

The ideal child is represented in these development models as the child who has acquired all the necessary skills, dispositions, knowledge, values and competences that are prescribed in the child development theory in order to become a responsible, healthy and skilled adult. Urban planning can contribute to this ideal by creating spaces for children that contribute to their developmental tasks, and by creating safe environments outside of society where children can explore and discover the world. The Romantic ideal of childhood has dominated a view on the ideal pedagogical environment as being a rural, natural, 'anti-urban' environment (James & Prout, 1997). Jean-Jacques Rousseau had a great influence on current pedagogical thinking by making a distinction between nature and society within the child's education. According to Rousseau, nature is the regulating principle to which all education should be oriented. Nature is the best educator and the ideal environment for children to develop. The primary concern of the educator should be to keep the child far from the degeneration of culture that disturbs its natural development (Depaepe, 2000). The urban environment appears in this perspective as a major threat to the child's uncorrupted, good nature.

Also today the observation that the majority of Western children lives in an urban environment (and that his number is most likely going to keep increasing) (Chawla, 2002), contrasts with the moral concern about the city as an undesirable pedagogical environment. Urban public space has become a *big bad wolf* (as in the fairy tale of little red riding hood), representing a known but unpredictable threat in the outdoor world against which children should be warned and prepared (De Visscher, 2008). The streets have become a symbol of the potential threat posed to the safety and integrity of vulnerable children by so-called stranger-dangers (Blakely, 1994; Valentine & McKendrick, 1997), heavy traffic and number of accidents (Bjorklid, 1994; Raymund, 1995), and ecological risks (Woolley, Dunn, Spencer, Short, & Rowley, 1999). This big bad wolf syndrome resulted in the design of playgrounds: separate, safe places in the city, equipped with objects that stimulate children's development. The design evolved from fenced play garden to designer

playgrounds and – more recently – adventure playgrounds. The recent trend to more natural playgrounds in the city is rooted in a Romantic rural idyll that has become a powerful image and influence on the design of places for children in the city. "Perhaps the most powerful imagining is of the rural as a peaceful, tranquil, close knit community [...] based on a nostalgia for a past way of life which is 'remembered' as purer, simpler and closer to nature" (Valentine, 1997, p. 137).
The *insularization* of children's lifeworlds (Zeiher, 2003) is another result of the growing concern about children's safety and healthy development. Insularization refers to the increasing institutionalization of children's use of time and space which is more and more created around isolated islands in the city, such as the homes of peers, day care or youth centers, sport clubs, etc. "Children spend much of their time within the confines of islands such as houses, day-care and recreation centre buildings, sports fields, and playgrounds, and they have to go on their own or to be escorted and ferried by adults between these urban islands" (Zeiher, 2003, pp. 66-67). This results in a more fragmentized lifeworld of children.

The autonomous child

Individual pedagogy – based on protection and the design of separate spaces for children in society – resulted in a construction of childhood as an autonomous category, isolated from and even opposed to adults. The original goal behind the segregation of children's lifeworlds to temporarily dismiss them from public responsibilities and duties in order to safely prepare them for their future adulthood, gradually shifted into the institutionalization of childhood as a separate life stage. The original (protective) goal that children *shouldn't* participate in mainstream society turned into a situation where they *couldn't* or in some cases *didn't want* to participate in mainstream society anymore. The childhood period also became increasingly longer and the design of a separate *youth land* within society became increasingly comprehensive (Dasberg, 1981). This political exclusion was compensated by allowing children more and more independence and agency on the sociocultural level. Protection as a pedagogical goal was complemented with empowerment and emancipation, allowing and stimulating children and young people to create their own networks, cultures and activities. Different youth cultures represent this societal trend. The childhood period has become a time to build up different forms of social and cultural capital among peers. This resulted in the paradoxical situation where children were allowed more sociocultural freedom (also in terms of consumption) while at the same time staying increasingly longer economically dependent from their parents. Children have become a primary market for the consumer society in that they have money, needs and wants and the authority and inclination to use the former to address the latter two. As a result, they have also become an important influence market: as a direct influence market, children request that their parents purchase certain goods and services; and as an indirect influence market parents consider child preferences in making purchases (McKendrick, Bradford, & Fielder, 2000; McNeal, 1992).

These more emancipatory perspectives on the child also affected views on spatial planning and urban design. On the one hand, participatory approaches to urban design were introduced that gave children a voice for example in the choice of materials, attributes and functions of a particular place. Exploring what children want gradually became an extra stage in the planning process. The traditional play area approach was furthermore supplemented with a growing focus on children's perspectives on the play value of streets and various other elements found in public space. Imagination and creativity are presented as being characteristic of how children see and experience public spaces. Many studies within this approach (e.g. Burke, 2005; Rasmussen & Smidt, 2003) concluded that informal play spaces (generated by children themselves) are often more appealing to children than the designed and formal playgrounds. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, this attention was channelled into the application of models for a 'play-inclusive' design of children's neighbourhoods. These models aim not to isolate children's play in separate play islands, but to integrate it into the public realm in a more holistic way.
On the other hand, children are also addressed more directly by the market (influenced by neoliberal developments). The commodification of childhood resulted in the design of commercial spaces for children in the city (McKendrick, et al., 2000). The growth of commercial playgrounds is an example of this development, but also the growing disneyfication of the design of spaces for children (Mannion & I'Anson, 2004). The commercial image of the child (white, middle class, independent, smart and happy) is taken as a standard, marginalizing groups who don't meet this middle class ideal.

Many childhoods

The dominant psychological approach to education departs from an *average* or *normal* development, and therefore risks to ignore the diversity between children, as well as the diversity of broader contexts into which education and socialization take place. Especially those children whose situation deviates from the (middle class) norm or who participate in *alternative ways* in urban space, risk to become excluded or to be seen as a problem within urban policy and educational practice. Hogan (2005) points at three critiques that apply to the mainstream model of developmental psychology. The first critique is the decontextualized view on childhood from which it departs. Children are mainly approached based on their age or developmental stage, largely neglecting the diversity within these age groups. Most child development models aim to generate universal, timeless models of childhood that (over)generalize the diversity of social and cultural contexts in which children live. An example of this is the assumption that play is a universal and timeless characteristic of childhood (Hewes, 2007; Jans, 2004). The child as a playing being is a powerful image, based in the already discussed Romantic view on childhood, that had a strong influence on the design of urban public space. The critique on this image of the playing child doesn't depart from the correctness of the assumption that all children like to play, but on the fact that play can have different meanings for the child, and that children's play can't be isolated from broader

social, cultural and political context that circumscribes play. Play is a cultural element. The space in which play takes place, and where the rules of play are defined can't be isolated from society. Play *is* culture, and culture is originally played (Huizinga, 1971). As such, the play element of culture applies to children as well as adults (Mergen, 1975). This approach should be clearly distinguished from other approaches that define play as a culture of play, typical of children's lifeworld (James & Prout, 1997), or as a unique trait of a particular developmental stage (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998).
A second critique refers to the predictable child that underlies many child development models. Children's development is theorized as a linear, standardized and thus predictable sequence of stages. This predictability makes it possible to design spaces for children in the city in such a way that they contribute to social prevention and community development (National Playing Fields Association, 2000): harmoniously developed, happy, less frustrated kids make a positive contribution to community life and learn more easily to behave as responsible adults. Every deviation of these standards however is problematized as a pedagogical question or results in social exclusion. There is a powerful – often implicit – model of the ideal child which is translated in the design of spaces that fit the needs and desires of this ideal child, but in the same time excludes those groups of children that don't meet this ideal. This is translated in a very ambiguous attitude towards children's presence in public space, pushing some groups of children away from the indoors to the streets, and pulling other groups away from the streets into structured, pedagogical settings such as youth work. The irrelevant child, as a last critique, is based on the position that children take in childhood research and policy. The private child is often addressed as incompetent, methodologically unreliable, and therefore only gets a passive role as an object of research or policy (Hogan, 2005). Also in many urban design processes, children take a marginal position, *as we all know what children want*. Horelli (1998) describes this with the metaphor of environmental stepchildren who have little or no voice in planning processes.
In short, the universalistic approaches to childhood overgeneralize children as an age group and ignore other dividing lines like gender, educational level, social and cultural background, etc. As such, James and Prout (1997) talk about *many childhoods* instead of one universal standard course of childhood, showing the need of a more sociological approach to childhood theory and education.

The public child

The sociology of childhood aims to contribute to a set of approaches that don't depart from the child as part of the private sphere, but the child as a member of a broader society and his/her position as a (future) citizen. Children are theorised as social agents, and childhood as a social, cultural and historical construction. This focus on agency turns children into a direct and primary unit of study and policy, as opposed to the previously discussed *irrelevant* child within developmental psychology (Christensen & Prout, 2005). Furthermore, children's socialisation is seen as an interactive process instead of a one directional, individual process in which the child is introduced into the mainstream (adult) society (James, et al., 1998). Socialisation is not a matter of

teaching children how to act and behave in their future social life, but is a collective learning process of all members within society that children contribute to through their own everyday social actions. Biesta (2011) suggests to make a distinction between a socialisation conception of civic learning, which is about the learning necessary to become part of an existing socio-political order, and a subjectification conception of civic learning which focuses on the child 'coming into presence' as a unique person, and as a unique citizen within current society. Whereas a socialisation conception of civic learning is about learning *for future citizenship*, the subjectification conception of civic learning is about learning *from current citizenship* (Biesta, 2014).

As such, a sociology of childhood defines childhood as a *relational* construct (Honig, 1999) instead of seeing children and adults as opposite categories within society that need their own spaces. The definition of childhood can't be isolated from the definition of adulthood and vice versa because are derived from the same social, cultural, political and historical conditions. From a relational theory, childhood can't be defined as a particular entity, but basically as the result of social relations and power inequalities.

Positioning children in the public sphere, raises questions about their position as fellow citizens. Biesta (2011) emphasises the difference between social and political dimensions of citizenship. The social dimensions of citizenship focus on how children are able and allowed to participate in different social networks and social practices within the community. It is mainly about being part of society. The political dimensions of citizenship, on the other hand, pay attention to children's possibilities to have an influence on political decision making within society. So the social participation opportunities are complemented with political participation rights, including the right on having a voice and being heard within the socio-political debate. Applied to the city, Lefebvre (1968) states that the recognition and promotion of the urban citizenship of marginalised groups requires on the one hand equal opportunities of appropriation and use of urban public space, and on the other hand equal opportunities for the production of urban public space (Bezmez, 2013). Both strategies are summarized as promoting every citizen's right to the city. This means that all groups within the city (including different groups of children) should be able to find and appropriate physical and mental space within the city that they can identify with and that enables different social and cultural learning opportunities and modes of expression. Next to that, it also requires that different groups within the city (again including different groups of children) should be able to influence the further planning and production of urban space. The production of space relates to questions about which functions should get more or less attention and space in the city, and how contrasting spatial claims and needs of citizens can be reconciled within the city.

This political notion of children's citizenship doesn't imply that they should suddenly be addressed as being fully equal to adults or that every existing difference between children and adults (e.g. based on physical, psychosocial or cognitive abilities) should be completely ignored. It does imply subjecting the power imbalances between child and adult to a set of limitations and rules on how to deal with these inequalities. As a consequence, children are regarded in this approach as full

members (here and now) of the urban society whose aspirations, needs and opinions should have the same weight in the public debate and urban policy as the aspirations, needs and opinions of other citizens.

Towards a social pedagogy of the city

The notion of the public child opens up different perspectives on education than the private child did, by connecting educational interventions to a social political dimension. The Dutch pedagogue Perquin (1970) states that pedagogy is both individual *and* social, or it isn't pedagogy. This statement refers to the origins of social pedagogy, dating back to the late 19th century. Social pedagogy systematized the criticisms about the dominance of the so-called *Individualpädagogik*. These criticisms referred to the diverse goals of pedagogy: personal development and socialization or civic education. A pedagogical question dating back to the foundations of modern pedagogy. The broad and very diverse range of social pedagogical theories all share a focus on addressing the relation between individual and society from an educational point of view. Social pedagogy brings social considerations into education, and the educational perspective into social affairs (Hämäläinen, 2012). From a historical point of view, social pedagogy came into existence as a reaction to the new kinds of social problems and increasing social needs caused by industrialization and the breakdown of social order (Hämäläinen, 2012). Education was put forward as an instrument of social policy, not only for children but also for adults. As such the fundamental social pedagogical question is: how do we translate social problems in pedagogical questions and is this an accurate translation seen from the perspective of the most marginalized people (Coussée & Verschelden, 2014)?

As such, a social pedagogical perspective on urban planning includes a double shift in perspectives. First it moves away from an abstract image of the ideal child in the ideal city towards a pedagogy that builds on existing ways of living (together) in particular urban environments and the social problems that derive from them. From a social pedagogical perspective, urban planning processes should constantly move between the city as-it-is and as-it-could-be. Reading the city as it is, means to study the dialectic relation between the built environment and socio cultural practices that arise in it (Gehl, 2010). Against the obvious idea of urban planners reading the city from above, de Certeau (1984) promotes a bottom-up perspective focusing on the everyday practices of urban dwellers. In this respect the community is no longer object but more and more an undeniable subject of urban planning. Urban planning should build on the existing problem definitions that derive from the everyday practices of citizens (including children) and take these as the starting point of a collective learning process. Secondly a social pedagogical perspective on urban planning shifts from a categorical focus on children towards a spatial focus on shared urban spaces. Reading urban space in fact means to study the dialectic relation between the built environment and sociocultural practices that arise in it (Gehl, 2010). As a result of this spatial turn, the role of

children in processes of urban planning should be redefined into political agents and fellow citizens who co-construct the city.

The city as a collective learning process

To conclude, I go back to the initial hypothesis of this paper that the city matters in education. Defining and recognising the educating identity of the city raises questions about the underlying pedagogy of the city. Throughout this paper I have described different pedagogies – linked to different childhood constructions – that have been developed throughout the 20th century, with a rough distinction between psychological and sociological approaches. Each of these pedagogies resulted in a particular image of the ideal child in the ideal environment. And urban education is essentially a matter of learning in and from the city. Learning *in* the city refers to the city as a container of pedagogical facilities such as schools, day care centers, museums etc. The city – or more specifically the urban neighbourhood – is consequently seen as an external influence (positive and/or negative) on the educational processes that take place in the traditional pedagogical triangle of family, school and institutionalized leisure activities, and intends to contribute to the image of the ideal child in the ideal city. Learning *from* the city refers to the informal learning opportunities that derive from everyday encounters, places and situations within the city. In both cases, the underlying assumption is that children should be taught or socialized into predefined knowledge, attitudes, dispositions and behaviours, supporting the dominant image of the ideal child in the ideal city. In other words, children are mostly objects of change.

However, the city is not only a less or more ideal background for these institutionalized educational processes, but also a co-educator in its own right. I described a double shift in this framework: from the child as object of change (through education) to the urban environment as object of change (and approaching children as subjects of change); and from the ideal child in the ideal city as a basis for educational interventions to a focus on everyday "real" situations of living together in the city and the diversity of meanings that children provide to the city. This means that the pedagogy of the city can't be reduced to the focus on what and how children can learn in and from the city. As an alternative to this approach, the notion of the city as a co-educator requires attention for the city as a collective learning process in itself (not only for children). This collective learning process implies an open-ended discussion about the desirability of different ways of living together in the city and possible futures for the city. It is based on a collective and ongoing dialogue about the city as it is and the city as it could be. And in this approach, children are not the objects of education for future citizenship, but they need to be recognized as here-and-now citizens who actively give meaning to the city and who are capable of communicating these meanings within this open-ended, collective dialogue. As such, the city as a co-educator can contribute to a different and much stronger position of the child in the city, and to cities that children can identify themselves with.

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