

### *Summary of Engagement with Children by Diana Studer.*

My Architectural thesis project, through the Royal Architecture Institute of Canada's Syllabus Program, focused on researching the impact the built environment has on children's mental and psychological development. The outcome of this research was to provide a way to support the creation of healthy environments for children living in urban settings. Research clearly showed that children are directly impacted by the environments they are provided and need access to nature, affordable housing, opportunities for play, and multigenerational and informal connections. Most importantly, children need an environment that fosters their right to independent movement and autonomy.

Through the research, an emphasis was placed on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This document points to the need to listen and respect the rights of children. This seemed to be the greatest thing lacking for children living in urban areas since few spaces are provided for them to manipulate and design. Taking cues from current pedagogy models and countries which invest a significant education component in teaching architecture, I created a one day design charrette prototype. In April of 2017, I ran the charrette prototype with a group of 21 children on a prominent public space in Victoria, BC. The aim of the charrette was to gather information on Centennial Square which was then presented to the City of Victoria Planning Department.

### *Design Charrettes and Key Differences in Types*

Towards the end of the last century, design charrettes and public consultations have gained popularity in helping planners and designers collect feedback on current projects and master plans. While these processes have helped create better relationships between project teams and the community, their format and delivery preclude the participation of children. However, children represent an untapped resource of information to help their communities evolve, especially considering they will one day inherit these places.

The key differences in the traditional approach to charrettes and the one developed for children are as follow:

**More Hands-on:** The children created all final presentation material for the town hall meeting.

**Art based:** Descriptions and written formats were used as little as possible. This was replaced with an abundance of art supplies and art-based activities.

**Experience Based:** The children depended on their experiences and interactions with the site.

**Open Ended:** Charrette was an idea generating exercise rather than designing a single solution.

**No Right or Wrong Answers:** Criticism and judgmental language was discouraged.

**Child-Led:** Facilitators and Designers were tools for the children to use.

**Fun:** Ensure everyone was having fun and enjoying the exercises.

## ***Information Collection***

Providing different ways for the children to express their thoughts and collect information from them meant creating several different activities involving different levels of involvement from the group. It was important to ensure each child felt they had the opportunity to participate and someone listened to their ideas. It was also important to ensure each individual's ideas were collected before putting them into groups where some children may become quiet or participate less. A way of collecting this individual information was also important to ensure it wasn't overlooked later.

## ***The Prototype***

To test the ideas and assumptions made about creating a children's design charrette, a full day charrette was planned for Centennial Square adjacent to City Hall. The square and a room in City Hall were reserved to carry out the charrette. Twenty one students participated in the workshop ranging in grades 5 through 8. Based on the group size, five local architects volunteered as group facilitators, plus three advisor architects, a charrette facilitator, a videographer and a photographer to document the day, as well as several teachers and teaching aides from the school.

Four key elements were identified to make the workshop run smoothly, broken up into a morning and an afternoon session. First, the children needed an opportunity to experience the site and then be inspired on the potential of public spaces. This was followed by an opportunity to process this information individually before a session to create solutions for the site collectively. The day would then conclude with a short town hall presentation to a councilor and city planning officials. The aim of the morning session of the charrette was focused on collecting information and processing individually through an onsite experiential scavenger hunt, a game showing public spaces around the world and a collage making exercise. The afternoon session focused on generating ideas and working together as in groups through a group design project and a final discussion on the overall site features and design.

## ***Final Outcomes from the Children***

Some general observations about public space can be made from the information gathered from the children during the one day charrette.

**Flexible:** The children repeatedly showed a variety of things to do and that flexibility in space was important to them. In their collages, none of the children focused on a single solution but showed multiple ideas for the overall site.

**Water Play:** Seeing water isn't enough for children; they wanted to touch and play with it. Much of the criticism on the current fountain was it didn't do anything. Many of the collages showed the fountain gone but water play in the square in some form.

**Maintenance:** The children were very critical of the Square because it looked run down and neglected. Although Centennial Square was a legacy project, the children could not understand the importance of the space and why it was allowed to become rundown.

**Art:** Art holds a significant place of importance for children and was repeatedly mentioned. A small disclaimer on the day is the children had a lesson on interactive art the week before this charrette. However, it could be interpreted that this lesson had a profound impact on the children. In fact, art was discussed during the day and was shown in the models and collages more than typical forms of play (ie play structures).

**Imprint of themselves:** The two most common forms of interactive art by the children were graffiti art and chalk stations. This could be interpreted that the children crave some way, even temporarily, to leave an imprint of themselves on the site.

Documentation of the process of creating the design charrette, including research on children's psychology, pedagogy, urban design and design charrette processes, as well as comprehensive documentation of the charrette and final outcomes, is compiled in the book *Put Play To Work*, by Diana Studer.