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Participatory photography: children's voices in municipal planning

by FAHRIYE SANCAR

Children's participation in place making

With a few exceptions, children are routinely excluded from municipal planning. In fact, they are not seen as real citizens with the right or voice to participate in shaping policies. Representing the interests and fulfilling the needs of various users is one reason for enabling their participation. However, children are often overlooked in this regard even though adults cannot adequately represent their needs. Moreover, an important outcome of participatory planning is the process of collective learning that takes place through the dialogue. People learn about each other, their environment, and self-governance. The earlier they are engaged in this process, the better citizens they become. Planners, even those who are committed to meaningful participation of the public, often ignore the fact that children are part of the public and need to be reminded of the compelling reasons for involving children in municipal decision-making.

Involving children in the place making function of the municipal government is especially important because places (and active engagement with places) perform an important role in the healthy development of children into well-adjusted adults and responsible citizens. Being rooted in a place, calling a place 'home', translates into caring for that place, not only for oneself but for generations to come.



Figure 1.
Children
of Yali

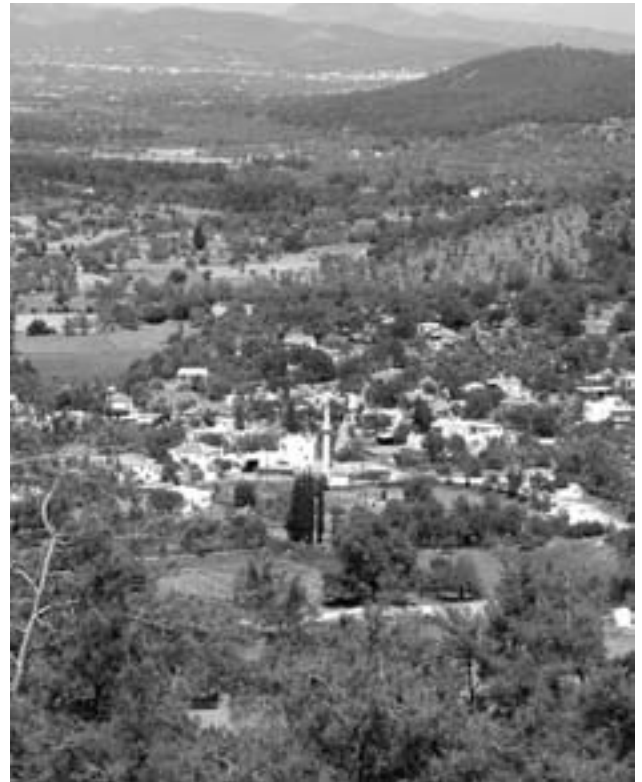
Planning is an effort to shape the future. Children, who clearly have the largest stake in the future, should therefore have the right to participate in planning it. Adult attitudes towards place reflect immediate (largely short term) concerns and motivations. Children's perceptions are free of adult concerns. In this regard, children are much more objective in their assessment of what matters. Furthermore, adults' perceptions and evaluations of place depend on the instrumental value of place; place is often a commodity, a resource to be exploited. For children, place is valuable in itself. This is why favourite places are often those that are remembered from childhood. And also why children ought to have a voice in municipal planning.

Planning context: Yali Municipality, Bodrum, Turkey

This paper reports a participatory planning case involving the children in municipal master planning in a fast-growing tourism region of South-Western Turkey, the Bodrum Peninsula (Figure 1). For the past seven years we have been working with various municipalities on projects of their choosing in the context of an urban planning course. The course is taught as part of a summer study abroad programme organised by the University of Colorado, College of Architecture and Planning. In 2004, we worked in Yali Municipality. Our study group included 13 undergraduate and graduate students from the University of Colorado whose interests range from architecture and landscape architecture to urban and regional planning. Yali Municipality encompasses a large and as yet undeveloped area of the Bodrum Peninsula (Figure 2). The newly formed municipality was poised to draft a master plan and the Mayor asked us to develop proposals to incorporate in the upcoming planning process.

As always, we began our study in collaboration with local officials and experts, including the Mayor, the Director of Planning and Development, and the city council. It soon became clear that when a place is experiencing a high rate of growth due to its attractiveness, the planning public often puts a higher value on the benefits of development compared to the costs of losing the sense of place that attracts development in the first place. Once all is said and done, the place in question does not resemble what it had been for its original inhabitants, especially the children who have little if any role in making these choices themselves. While these decisions are made in the name of job creation and betterment of standard of living for the younger generation, the cost of losing those values that make a place special are rarely considered. We decided to involve the chil-

Figure 2.
Typical
Landscape
of Yali



children in identifying those attributes that make a place special, and therefore loved and cared for, in order to build a basis for making plans. Also by involving them in the initial phase of planning, we initiated a conversation whereby sharing their perceptions, knowledge, and values, the children reminded all of us what matters, while they themselves became conscious of the uniqueness of their environment. At the end of our study we presented our proposals in a public forum held in the centre of Yali at the municipal cafe. Here I will describe 'participatory photography' which is the technique we used to involve children, the results we obtained, and then conclude with a critical discussion of the process.

Participatory photography

When discussing place-related issues, visual media offers obvious advantages compared to using verbal descriptions. There is a long tradition in environmental psychology of using photographs to study people's preferences for places and discover what makes certain places more desirable than others. Likewise, designers and planners often show photographs of good and bad examples of development to engage the participants in the planning process. However, in both

Figure 3. Middle school students writing about favorite places
Figure 4. Elementary school students writing about favorite places (bottom)



cases, 'experts' (i.e., researchers or planners) choose the photographs and 'participants' react to them. Also, the images represent generic examples rather than photographs of places that the participants are intimately familiar with. 'Participatory photography' refers to a technique for participatory/collaborative research and planning in which participants are actively engaged by taking the photographs themselves. These images then provide locally relevant, concrete, and vivid information for discussing and making places.

Generally, the technique involves three stages.

- First, the participants are given disposable cameras and simple instructions to take pictures of places they like (and dislike).
- Once the pictures are developed and displayed on boards, participants write a short explanation of why they took each picture.
- The third stage involves discovering as a group significant places and themes by putting similar pictures/comments into categories. Each theme is then described by the most representative image(s) together with comments.

The outcome is a public display of the themes, which the participants can interpret and use to develop arguments for plans, policies, and actions.

Participatory photography has the additional advantage of facilitating children's participation by helping them articulate their points of view without having to rely on verbal and/or graphic skills exclusively. But, most importantly, taking pictures is an empowering act. Children begin to see their environments in more detail and different ways, are more willing and able to talk about them, and are proud of what they are able to produce.

Discovering children's places and values

When I approached the Municipality with my desire to involve children in our study, they were enthusiastic and supportive. The planner contacted the headmasters of the two schools and arranged a time for us to meet with the students. The headmasters of the schools selected 12 elementary students from Kizilagac and 12 middle-school students from Ciftlik, the two main settlements in Yali (Figures 3, 4). In the first meeting, we distributed disposable cameras and asked them to take pictures of their favourite places. They went on their photographic expeditions in groups of three. Working in groups makes the experience more fun and children benefit from each other's experiences. After a day of taking pictures, the photos were developed, pasted on boards and brought back to the students. In our

Figures 5 and 6.
Natural Landscapes



second meeting, we asked them to write down why they decided to take the pictures that they took. Again they worked in groups and discussed each picture and what to write about it as a group. One difference between the two groups was a larger diversity of photographs taken by middle-school students. This can be accounted for by the fact that they were older and were able to cover more terrain.

Ideally, place categories and themes should have been identified in a third meeting with the children. However we were able to schedule only two meetings during the last week of the school year. Therefore, we put the pictures into place categories ourselves. We displayed the following categories along with representative pictures and children's comments, organised by the number of pictures in them (most to the least):

- **Places of natural aesthetic value:** in both villages, most of the pictures were of natural aesthetic features such as mountains, shorelines, gardens, valleys, and orchards (Figures 5, 6).

Figures 7 and 8.
Houses; new and old



Figure 9. A
cistern

Figure 10.
A pond



Figure 11. Public area outside
of the health centre



Figure 12.

- **Villages and homes:** children were proud of their villages and their homes, and took panoramic photos of the villages, stone architecture, and pictures that showed the combination of the old and the new (Figures 7, 8).
- **Water features:** similar to children everywhere, places with access to water, such as cisterns, ponds, fountains, and creeks, were included in the photographs (Figures 9, 10). Children also expressed concern about losing some of the

ponds (and the ducks that go with them), because they felt they were drying up (possibly due to all the efforts to 'improve' drainage ditches).

- **Public realm:** a significant number of pictures showed children's presence in and appreciation of the public realm, such as public gathering places and public buildings. This was especially true for the Ciftlik children who were able to go to the public beach on the Yali coastline (Figures 11, 12).

Figure 13. A favourite play space



Figure 14. Impromptu soccer field



Figure 15. Carpet making



Figure 16. Saddle making

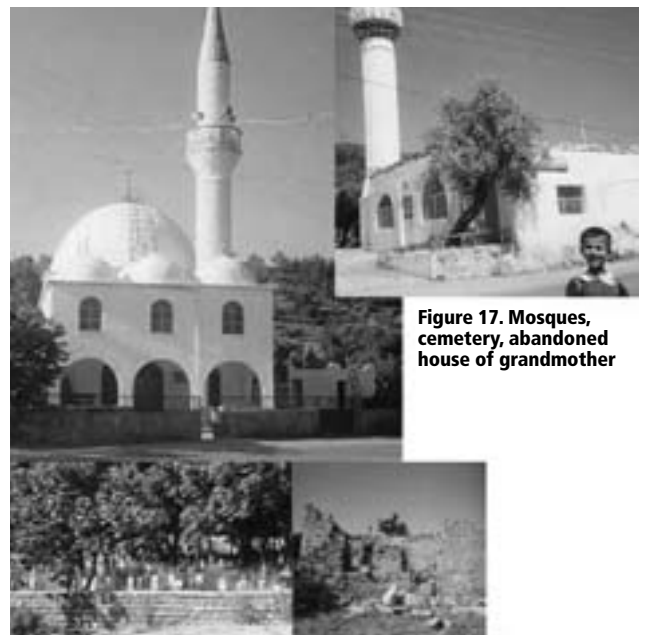


Figure 17. Mosques, cemetery, abandoned house of grandmother

- **Play places:** children had a high regard for the places where they played. Play places included formalised playgrounds, streets where they would ride their bikes, and mountains and woods (Figures 13, 14).

- **Workplaces:** children were able to make the connection regarding the significance of the working environments contained within their respective villages. Many photos were taken of working environments such as olive groves, agricultural fields, places where local crafts are made, and other workplaces (Figures 15, 16).

Other places of significance included areas that contained old abandoned structures, historic sites and mosques (Figure 17).

Figure 18.
Undeveloped shore



Figure 19.
Cave on the hill



Endangered places: the children's list

During our presentation to the public and in our final report to the Municipality, we made the point that the adverse impacts of economic growth on children are significant, yet receive little attention by planners and policy makers. Pictures that children took reveal that Yali is close to an ideal environment where children enjoy freedom of movement and can take part in many of the everyday activities of their villages. Below are the places that children photographed which are most likely to disappear as Yali grows and develops as a tourist destination, together with a discussion of the consequences for Yali's future.

- **Wild places:** access to nature is perhaps the most valued aspect of child-friendly environments. Children in Yali have access to a rich and diverse natural environment that they value. The natural encounters that children enjoy today that are most endangered include: enjoying nature on the undeveloped shoreline; having unrestricted access to the shore; and an easy walk into the forest in search of adventure (Figures 18, 19).
- **Cultivating the earth:** raising one's own food forges a connection to earth that children in urbanised and developed areas do not have. As agriculture becomes more mechanised, large-scale, and intensive, the quality of agricultural products declines. What is perhaps more important is the loss of know-how as more families give up farming in favour of service jobs that require much less skill. Among the pictures that children took were gardens, fields and orchards that can provide basic subsistence, and raising animals such as a cow and chickens for household consumption (Figures 20, 21, 22).
- **Sharing the public realm for play:** development often means that roads are for automobiles not for children's play. Eventually, children are segregated from daily life in the name of safety. Now, children in Yali can play soccer on the

Figure 20.
Orchards



Figure 21.
Gardens



Figure 22.
Raising animals



Figure 23. Biking on the street



Figure 24. Ruins



Figure 25. Old car



Figure 26. Heap of junk



Figure 27. Pomegranate tree

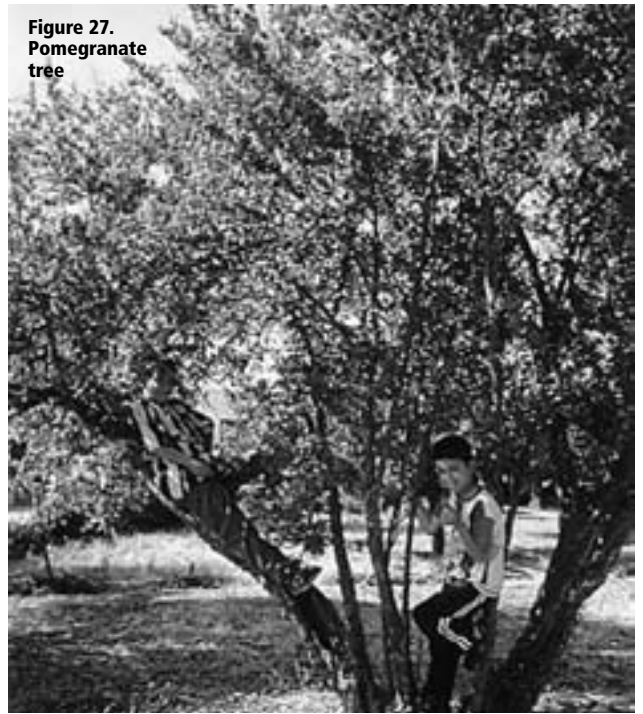


Figure 28. Grand old tree



Figure 29. Old mulberry tree with lots of fruit



square adjacent to the playground, and they can ride their bikes on streets. Examples of places that may be lost to children are streets and other public right of ways where children are riding their bikes and squares off main roads where ball games are played (Figure 23).

- **Adventure in junk:** heaps of junk in obscure places has enormous appeal to children. These places provide opportunity for creative expression as well as socialisation. If the place also has running water, all the better. As we expected, children of Yali were quick to show us some examples that will disappear as the area is sanitised for mass tourism: examples include old cars, discarded furniture and metal items, and abandoned old stone houses. (Figures 24, 25, 26).
- **Grand trees:** people never forget a special tree from childhood. Will the children of Yali be able to offer the joy of befriending a grand old tree to their own children? Mature trees that otherwise don't have a historical or ecological

value are often very significant for children. Here are some examples: a pomegranate tree, a mulberry tree 'with lots of fruit all the time', and what they named the 'grand tree' (Figures 27, 28, 29).

Guiding principles and acceptance by the community

We displayed children's photographs and stories as well as our own analyses, regional and local land use recommendations, and economic development policies at a gathering of residents, local professionals, the mayor, and city council members.

It was clear that no amount of new parks, playing fields, and Internet cafes can provide the same joy and satisfaction that wild places, cultivating the earth, having a piece of the public realm, great trees, and messing with junk can, when one is a child. We emphasised that the same principles that guide sustainable development also ensure that the future generations will enjoy what Yali offers to its children today. We were able to give concrete meaning to three basic principles:

- growth management;
- economic diversification; and
- protecting the overall landscape character of Yali.

We linked our policy, planning, and regulatory proposals to these principles and to the places and characteristics children showed in their pictures.

Public discussion that followed our presentation focused a great deal on the children's values (Figure 30). Children's portrayal of Yali through the lenses of disposable cameras



Figure 30. Presentation at the Cafe

showed great sensitivity and artistic appreciation, and this did not escape the audience. People did not add or subtract from the range of places and values children chose to show, which leads me to believe that the children we worked with were quite representative of their peers. Because children worked in groups when taking the pictures and writing about them, they were able to include themselves, which enhanced the emotional quality of the pictures. In many instances, they also took the pictures while performing within the places to illustrate their use value (Figure 31). The photographs had explicit and concrete reference to specific places, structures, and landscapes that helped the audience to make connections and understand our proposals. And, most importantly, children's photographs became the greatest and most effective advocates for our proposals.

Epilogue

In this instance we used participatory photography as a technique to include children's voices as part of our analysis that informed planning and policy proposals. The short (three-week) period in Yali, coupled with the language barrier between the students and the children, did not allow us to explore the potential of the technique as a catalyst for more active participation of the children in the development and implementation of proposals. On the other hand, the straightforward simplicity and briefness of the technique were perhaps the primary reasons for the Municipality's support and the willingness of the school administrations to provide us with access to the children.

Figure 31.
Children of Yali.



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to the two headmasters of the Elementary School of Kizilagac and the Middle School of Ciftlik for making it possible for us to get together with the children, and to Ryan Stubbs who accompanied me on the workshops to represent the rest of the study group. My greatest appreciation goes to the children of Kizilagac and Ciftlik, who shared with us their unbiased perceptions and feelings. They include Bilge, Arzu, Emrah, Yigit, Bahadir, Fatmagul, Bediha, Aydan, Vedat, Savas, Arif, Nihat, Mert, Ozge, Dilan, Pelin, Sedat, Aysegul, Nese, Dilek, Bahtinur, Bilge and Ismail, whose names I was able to record during our intensive workshop. I apologise if I have missed naming any other participants.

NOTES

1. All the photographs in this article, except Figures 2, 3, 4, and 30, were taken by 12 elementary students from Kizilagac and 12 middle-school students from Ciftlik, the two main settlements in Yali.
2. A version of this paper is also a chapter in the report that includes our analyses and proposals. We sent a Turkish translation of the report to the Mayor and the City Planning Department for their use during the master planning process.