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CHILDREN AND THE CITY: THE SPECIFICS OF THE
ENVIRONMENT DECONSTRUCTION

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Abstract

This paper analyses a childhood social space in a provincial Russian town. A city/town is an object for research by many scientific disciplines. It enables an individual to realize various aspects of sociality and to organize different communication forms according to temporal and territorial specifics of space. The paper conceptualizes the notions of private and public childhood space and “functional and conceptual space” of childhood. The research is intended to mark urban environment according to its safety, comfort and stimulation of children’s development. The methods of data collection are in-depth interviews (informants – parents, N=25), observation and data analysis carried out by axial coding. The research demonstrated that a territory safety is determined by the informants according to the presence of responsible and careful adults, closeness of the territory and limited entrance to it and safety of a child’s movements; comfort – according to the development of child industry, availability and quality of children goods, urban environment adapted for adults to move around with a child, a family’s housing and its size; opportunity for children’s development – according to institutions of supplementary education for children, children playing grounds and creation of relaxing zones for families with children. The highlighted markers of urban environment construct “good” and “bad” locales for children in a town.

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1. Introduction

A city/town is an object for research by many scientific disciplines because all aspects of human activities are concentrated in it. It is the city that enables an individual to realize various aspects of sociality and to organize different communication forms according to temporal and territorial specifics of a space.

R. Park refers to urban environment as a social laboratory and a focus of social problems and social changes, noting that in urban conditions institutions grow very fast and the majority of experiments in producing new forms of family life take place in a city (Park, Mckenzie, & Burgess, 1925). Following Park, E. Burgess considered a city to be “a laboratory” for studying various aspects of human behavior. However, in contrast to a chemical or physical laboratory, social objects cannot be withdrawn from urban environment for future research (Park, Mckenzie, & Burgess, 1925).

In the 1990s a “geographical” turn in the childhood social research stimulated the study “The children and the street”. An interest to this topic was stipulated, on one hand, by a negative street influence, a spread of deviations in the street environment and impeded operation of social control mechanisms, and on the other hand, by a need to use the streets for children to acquire necessary social skills (e.g., using public transport and obeying traffic rules) and interaction with other children and adults. It is not all by chance that there are two key sociological concepts of perception of a child in a street environment: “the child at the street” and “the child of the street”.

In his work “The child in the City” C. Ward tried to answer the questions: why are some children isolated from their home street and the city influence, whereas other children can use the street and the city space for their games and discoveries? The author defines various ways of children’s interaction with the city environment (Ward, 1978). M.V. Osorina’s paper “Children’s secret world in adults’ world” became a Russian variation of the children in the city environment topic. The author thoroughly collected the data connected with children’s practices of exploring the city space. In the book the experience of children’s interaction with the environment is represented by a variety of “places”: from accidental, “scary” and even dangerous (cemeteries, dumps, basements) to specially equipped territories for children’s leisure and games (Osorina, 2000). M. Yu. Sibireva, another Russian researcher, examines the influence of a big city on pre-school children’s socialization and draws a conclusion that “children not only “see” the city but try to organize their activity according to its socio-spatial specifics (Sibireva, 2011). “Soft” methods allow the researcher to discover children fears connected with the peculiarities of living in a megapolis (a fear to get lost, a fear of public transport and of the traffic). A lack of green zones and playing grounds results in children’s acquisition of the space by “adult” methods, more and more rarely applying to traditional children games (Sibireva, 2011).

A new focus in exploring childhood in the city environment is specified by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), an international organization which introduced in the public discourse a notion of “child friendly cities” as the locations which meet the needs and priorities of children. On a city level three integrated parameters to assess the “friendliness” of a city are suggested: “opportunities for individual development”, “health care” and “living environment”. “Opportunities for individual development” indicator includes the assessment of the quality and availability of the city educational infrastructure. “Health care” indicator records the state of children population’s health, various children diseases morbidity and the spread of social deceases. “Living environment” is divided into the “safety” (the number of crimes

against children, the number of children injured in transport accidents; street safety and safety for definite groups of children and teenagers) and the “leisure” (the number of children engaged in clubs and leagues, the development of culture and leisure sector, greenery spaces square, etc.).

Sociological research of the childhood city environment is connected with its segmentation, particularly, with the division into public and private zones. According to E. Goffman, if daily life is interpreted as a theatrical performance, the public is represented as the front part, while the private as a hidden or back part. An individual’s playing in the front region can be considered as an effort to make an impression that his/her activity embodies and supports definite social norms and standards (Goffman, 1978).

A public space is a space to reproduce childhood care discourse. Public and private spaces assign the status of the subjects, their orientation and distance. S. Lyman and M. Scott differentiate territories according to the following criteria: good organization - freedom, closeness-openness, controllability – uncontrollability, which, in fact, reflects the rules, rights and opportunities to access the territory. P. Bourdieu defines physical space as “a social structure” (Bourdieu, 2007). Physical space is inseparable from social one, as the former manifests itself as a product of social relations, interaction and social institutions. There is also a feedback – physical space structures social space.

According to A.F.Filippov, a Russian researcher, “an indivisible territorial unit” is a place which possesses all typical properties of the territory. The place is “a hub of social relations”, “it is the place what makes social relations visible, from the sociological point of view they alone are invisible” (Filippov, 2008). That is why we’ll consider the childhood space as a unity of territories divided into localities. The notions “functional and conceptual” units, introduced by A.Filippov, help deconstruct the connection between physical and above-physical parts of the territories. A physical part is the position of places and territories, their length and border limitations, whereas above-physical part is the perception of these places and territories – comfort, safety, “atmosphere” and appropriate social interactions. We connect satisfaction of childhood physiological needs with “functional places”, and social ones (needs of communication, recognition and development) with “conceptual places”. In the former case children often act as object of impact and demonstration of adults’ care. An opportunity to occupy active positions appears in conceptual places, which means that “functional places” are connected with childhood subsistence and “conceptual” with its development and socialization.

By the social interaction organization criterion the front region of the childhood social space is divided into institutional and non-institutional territories. Physical part of the former coincides with the position of childhood social infrastructure: kindergartens and schools, medical, culture and leisure and other institutions. Institutional territories are characterized by social relations regularity, adults’ control over children, closeness and routinization of interaction. Non-institutional territories correspondingly represent facilities beyond the institutions, like yards, sport grounds and playing grounds. They become zones of children’s activity and creativity due to their openness, freedom, lack of control and “a break in humdrum”. Home space is interpreted as side-scene because a rehearsal of social actions, a primary acquisition of roles and social norms take place there; it is a close territory with limited access.

2. Problem Statement

Urban social environment provides resources for development, it supports and protects childhood but it also creates risks for physical and mental health and for life of children.

3. Research Questions

- 3.1.** Is the urban environment comfortable and safe for children and families with children?
- 3.2.** Does the urban environment develop a child?
- 3.3.** What are "good" and "bad" places for a child in the urban environment?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to deconstruct childhood territory and its marking according to safety and comfort for families with children and commitment to children's development.

5. Research Methods

Methods of collecting empirical material are in-depth interviews and observations. As secondary data domestic and foreign research of children daily life and two town Internet forums (for mothers and for parents) were used.

5.1. Subjects (cases)

The study subjects are 25 parents, 22 female and 3 male. All informants are residents of a small industrial town in the Far East of the Russian Federation. This town demonstrates Russian typical demographic problems, like decline in birth rate, rising death rate and increase in the migration outflow.

6. Findings

6.1 Markers Of Space Comfort For Families With Children

While a territorial safety criterion has to do with the research how environment influences children world, a "comfort" criterion is assessed from the point how urban environment suits the adults with children. One of the informants calls this "an adult problem". The main criteria for comfort in institutional territories are accessibility of the environment, saturation with children social protection institutions and availability of social services and goods for children.

Judging by the respondents' replies, mobility is connected with carrying children in prams which can be difficult because there are no elevators or they are unsuitable for this purpose, there are no ramps at the entrance to the shops and clinics, and it's impossible to leave a pram at the entrance due to the absence of pram "parking" spots. Mothers' forum initiated a topic "Shops to come into with a pram and to purchase keeping it (a pram with the baby) in sight". Female residents of a city N list the shops not adapted for people with limited mobility but where it is possible to draw a pram inside and leave it with a security. It's interesting to note that there are no comfortable conditions for parents with young children even in shops selling goods for children. Here are some observations from mothers' forum: "Hopefully, the management

of children supermarket will see the point and make a porch for entering with prams... There is a notice on the pharmacy on A. street “No entrance with ice-cream, dogs and prams”.

In 2008 Russia joined the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and started to implement international standards on economic, social, legal and other rights of people with disabilities. The government Resolution № 175 (March, 17, 2011) approved an “Available Environment” federal program for 2011-2015, which stipulates creating available environment for persons with limited mobility: invalids, pregnant women, people with prams and pre-school children. However, in the researched region creating available environment is provided only at construction and launching new facilities as well as at reconstruction of the present ones. As the rate of construction in the region is very low, excluding the regional centre, the problem of barrier-free environment won't be solved at least in the nearest decade.

According to the informants, “functional spaces” are not just children shops scattered around the town; they are a concentration of goods for children in one “place”. The first children shopping mall, recently opened in the town, has become such a place. Respondents' sayings and our personal observation demonstrate its unsuitability for parents commuting both with and without children. The location of the shopping mall is noteworthy – in the suburbs, with minimum transport availability. It is situated in a two-storey building which lacks basic requirements, like sanitation, without air conditioning, in spite of summer hot and stuffy weather. The mall is decorated in minimalist style, like an adult space, and inner design resembles a wholesale warehouse, the shop assistants wear corporative T-shirts, like warehouse employees, there is no design corresponding the specifics of the mall: air balloons, illustrations, due décor, neither children relax zones nor children cafes. The choice of goods is dominated by Chinese goods, which amount to 90-95% of all the mall goods.

Home space stability provides a child with a sense of security and confidence, so the situation, when a family don't have an accommodation of their own, rent an apartment or live at their elderly parents, influences negatively on the creation of a sense of home: “Mom lives with her husband, she got married... so it happens, we don't have an accommodation of our own, we live at Mom's apartment. If anything happens to her husband, he'll leave his apartment to his children, and Mom will come to our place.” (Mariya, 27). Overcrowded accommodation can be a problem of home space. In another respondent's (Oksana) case two families share a two-room apartment, five people in all, or it can be a constant change of apartments if they rent it (Anastasiya's, one more informant, case).

Parents mostly assess institutional comfort by proximity either to home or a parent's working place, by availability of basic living amenities, inner comfort of the premises and their equipment and conditions for children development: (about kindergarten) “Well, principally it's OK, nothing pours from the ceiling, heated floors, not bad at all, rather cozy” (Anastasia, 29).

Comfort of a children space is defined by availability of “places for children”, “conceptual places” – equipped playing grounds in the courtyards, leisure parks, attractions and summer children camps: “Where else can we go?... Well, now in summer, there are inflated trampolines around the town... “L” (children entertainment center) – well, I haven't taken him there, because people say there's nothing good there” (Ulyana, 34).

However, on the entrance to children zones there are “limiters”, either a fee, or some requirements to an individual child's resources (intellect, special abilities), or family resources (belonging to “socially

thriving” families): ““Well, you enter a park, there’s a playing ground with attractions, 50 rubles for a child, you enter, ride there, do what you wish. Actually, it’s very primitive there, the things which are there are available in other cities in every courtyard” (Maria, 27).

Poor park zone and its unsuitability for children is connected with a short park season, and consequently, with unprofitable work of outlets, cafes and children attractions on the park area. Parents of school children are concerned about summer rest for their children. The town has three country children camps, two of them being municipal, which allows to provide 98 per cent of all schoolchildren with different forms of summer vacation. However, this form of organizing children during summer period is looked upon by parents as unsafe, connected with staying together with children from socially vulnerable families and children from orphanages.

There are almost no entertainment centers for children in the town, the informants mentioned only one, criticizing it: “They say, the premise is very crowded...one child on the top of another...that’s it” (Ulyana, 34), “But I don’t like it there, close room, very stuffy. Well, there slides and jumpers there. Well, I don’t like it because you cannot see your child there” (Natalia, 34). Mothers’ and parents’ forum in N. town contains information about three more children entertainment centers, however, they say about their focus on pre-school children.

From 2008 the town authorities started courtyards landscaping: they put children slides, seesaws, chinning bars, mazes and sand-pits. The informants pay attention to the changes in adjacent territories though their observations are full of distrust of the town authorities and disbelief of any changes for the better. In this situation a gradual transition of the authorities from improving municipal environment to the urban environment development policy is of great importance.

Expansion of children zones in the town is mainly due to private business sector, which opens entertainment centers, children cafes, etc.: “...the only café is the Simps café...sweet cuisine. There is no alcohol there. Formally it has no children café status, no cartoon design. In Singapore, on the first floor there is Baskin Robbins (family café)... But, well, this all is developing, they are not municipal enterprises” (Nastya, 30). This means that private business sector is more mobile in comparison with the public one, faster responding to competitive changes of the consumer market, for example, to an increase in pre-school children number. The activity of business in production and distribution of goods and services for families with children is supported with appropriate financial investments.

6.2. Markers Of Development Territory

Childhood space is to be assessed not only by safety and comfort criteria, which meet the basic children needs, but also by possibilities for its development. A poor, sterile environment is as harmful for a child as an insecure one. That is why, if not to take a family as the nearest child’s environment into consideration, the stimuli for his development are to come from the institutional environment (leisure centers, supplementary education centers) and non-institutional environment (general cultural level of a town, “atmosphere”).

A physical space structure (town architecture) constitutes a socio-cultural environment: “An architectural image of a city, house, inner design, school building – they are a socialized space, the structure

of which, actually, reflects the society with its hierarchic structure and management discipline” (Valitskaya & Sultanov, 2009)

The town cultural institutions potential, as the research finds, practically is not in demand. In the town there is a municipal library and its 16 branches (one of which closed recently), the children music and art schools, an art museum and a museum of local history, a culture center, a movie theater, a theater for young people, a youth theater and a zoo center. The informants say nothing about visiting libraries. Three children attend music school, but their parents see no future development in this because of the lack of specialized schools (colleges) in the Far East: “...well, there are much fewer some, eh..., serious centers of pre-school education and creativity, and, eh..., not high class people work there (the informant compares the situation with St. Petersburg), and that is why, I’m mainly afraid that he’ll grow up, eh..., not having realized his inner abilities, that’s what I scare, first of all” (Ilya, 39).

The Theater for Young People focuses on the youngest children and does not meet the cultural needs of school children. A movie theater becomes the only leisure activity, but the Russian film distribution lacks movies for youth and children, primarily they are foreign and domestic cartoons and foreign movies.

The parents find satisfactory sport facilities in the town, namely: tourist centers, stadiums and clubs. 384 sport facilities operate on the town territory: stadiums, sport grounds, football fields, hockey rinks and others; simultaneously they can house over 10 thousand people. However, they all function in an institutional environment, while in non-institutional one they are falling into decay –it is true for hockey rinks and sport grounds in the courtyards which are Soviet Russia legacy. An informant told that once a hockey rink in the next yard was flooded by a parent, a firefighter, who did it with his working fire vehicle.

Commercial sport and entertainment facilities are in demand with wealthy informants: “...well, one can mountain ski, go to a skating rink, to a roller rink. I like it. Well, they celebrate birthdays there. First, they spent some time in the bar, had tea and sweets and went riding, hm, and parents stay there...” (Asya, 33). Some informant’s child attends a swimming pool, but there is a long distance problem – one should take a tram to go to the swimming pool, and then cross four-line road.

An outside look of a person who experienced living in another city (in the European part of Russia) allows assessing the provinciality of a small town, as well as defining its perspectives of developing as the children territory: “...low quality service in this sphere, that’s it, in health care, in, well, education, and primarily in children art development. But it is also connected with the history of exploring this area, it’s very insignificant, and there are no, let’s say, very important, prominent cultural objects, which could be a basis for shaping a child’s taste and world outlook. In this situation everything could be compensated to some extent by nature-loving, which could be developed by various, well, tourist clubs” (Ilya, 39).

In fact, natural environment provides all opportunities for tourist activity, however, this branch, especially children and youth tourism, is not well-developed in the town. Tourism and regional studies are included in the list of the municipal supplementary education activities but well-trained practitioners are needed for its competent and safe implementation. The only agency functioning in this sphere – a tourist club “E” for children and youth, a municipal children supplementary education institution, was closed.

6.3. “Good” And “Bad” Localities

The urban environment safety and comfort criteria and the focus on children development finally bring us to semantic oppositions of *children – adult* worlds and of “*good*” – “*bad*” localities. These oppositions are the reflection of outer and inner inequality of childhood. In the Far Eastern town case we observe a clear predominance of adult zones over children ones. The list of places for adults with children to relax is short and limited. It includes municipal park zones, improved natural places (for example, Silinka river area, the Amur river promenade), children entertainment centers (“The Limpopo”, “The Robinson”), children cafes (“The Simpsons”, “Baskin Robbins”) and a standard number of cultural and leisure centers of a provincial town (movie theater, historical and art museum, library).

An advance of adult zones to children ones causes the displacement of children from open, free, not formalized children spaces into close and formalized institutions under institutional adults’ supervision. Primarily, it’s true for house adjacent areas. The courtyards are more and more occupied by adults for their own needs. In the informants replies the courtyards are represented as the conflict of interests territory, at least, for three groups – residents with children, dog owners and car owners.

Geographically the town demonstrates a map of social inequality, which is evident “in a certain irregularity of main social groups’ settlement in areas, which are different by the level of public utility service, by natural and industrial situation, by possibilities for subsidiary farming, etc.” (Faizullin,1997). Thus, availability of resources gives the citizens an access to prestigious spaces – environmentally friendly, with well-developed social infrastructure and transport, relatively safe and so on. The citizens lacking enough resources do not participate in reclaiming prestigious areas. Community segregation results in secondary inequality – different styles of life according to the habitat.

Basing on the interview texts we constructed two polar types of localities (places for living of adults with children): “good” and “bad”. The criteria for differentiating are presence/absence of “functional” children places; nearness/remoteness of children leisure centers; territorial reference to prestigious/unprestigious educational and medical institutions; relative safety/sources of danger, like problem families, criminals; stable/unstable transport net; convenient/ inconvenient house territory, etc.

“A good locality” is an area of central location, with place for walking with children (park zones, river embankment), children “functional” places (children shops, baby nutrition supply points, clinics), transport intercrossing lines (bus and tram routes), proximity of “conceptual” places (children clubs, creativity centers, sport facilities). Courtyards are comfortable, well-equipped with playing grounds, cordoned off with curbs, close for cars, with special places for walks with dogs. Ecology friendly area means that it lacks hazardous industries and has a lot of green spaces.

“A bad locality” includes the following: dormitories and hostel-like accommodation concentrated in one place, socially vulnerable families with children, criminal persons, places for dubious persons’ gatherings, bad transport net, nearness of boarding houses, remoteness from “functional and conceptual places”, bad condition of the houses: they are wooden, without sanitation and gas, house area is not landscaped. Poor ecological situation in such locality is connected with industries located nearby.

A competition for “good” localities causes territorial segregation; families in socially vulnerable situation are displaced into the suburbs, special institutions are provided for them. For example, orphanage children are fixed in definite schools and clinics, children from needy families have limited access to

prestigious educational institutions and to high-technology medical service. Two female informants name their family divorce a reason for losing social welfare. As a result, there appears institutional pressure on the children, who are forced to leave a prestigious educational institution.

On one hand, social segregation facilitates forming safe areas, but, on the other hand, it excludes a part of children from a comfortable institutional environment focused on development. Researching symbolic territorial values O.E.Truschenko by the example of Moscow demonstrated the importance of “a prestigious address” in creating “an impassable distance” between those, who possess it, and the rest, deprived of it: “Of the highest value are those urban areas which concentrate the owners of economic, cultural and social capitals, underlying a recognized superiority” (Truschenko, 1995).

Nevertheless, it should be noted that a small provincial town space does not have a strict hierarchy due to the lack of premium accommodation, insignificant number of new houses launched (mainly they have social function), concentration of social problems, like high rate of crime and alcohol intake of the population. It’s possible to say about the division of urban territories into central and peripheral ones according to the above mentioned criteria of safety, comfort and development focus. The urban outskirts are traditionally the areas of high concentration of hostel-like accommodation, wooden houses, as well as industrial areas.

7. Conclusion

Childhood space is segmented into the following zones: home (a conceptual center), “conceptual places” (mostly they are places for entertainment and peer communication – courtyard, playing ground and education centers) and “functional places” (community and social facilities – shops, baby nutrition supply points). An important criterion to choose a kindergarten or a school is its nearness to home, so provided schools and kindergartens are given the function of social and cultural life centers, it will help organize children leisure time and enhance their development (physical, moral and creative) – that’s what clubs, leagues and school-based children public centers are aimed at. Basing on the safety and comfort criteria and the focus on children development, with the help of interviews, two polar types of children spaces were constructed – “good” and “bad” localities.

The municipal authorities’ desire to improve the forefront of implementation gave a start to improving courtyards and constructing playing grounds. The parents are socially passive towards landscaping and developing urban territories considering it to be exceptionally municipal authorities’ concern. However, the urban environment cannot be defined as “children friendly” due to the fact that children from socially vulnerable (problem) families are excluded from it and zones of children social activity are developed insufficiently.

The specifics of the urban physical and social environment set a trajectory for institutional efforts. First of all, it is true for regional natural resources which can stimulate children and youth tourism and sports; for climatic features –developing winter sports (skiing, hockey, skating, snowboarding, etc.); and ecological problems set another direction for children initiatives, namely ecology tourism.

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