

ENHANCING CULTURAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS IN CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

Education of architecture mainly starts with establishing an understanding of one's relation with its environment and the built world. Sensing the place and learning to think spatially are the first and fundamental steps into the conceptual world of architecture (Varnelis, 1998: 212). In Turkey, common places are rich of cultural and historical assets, a context feeding architectural setting. Understanding of space is a culture specific construct, if stimulated at younger ages proves to be fruitful in many ways. It is the argument of this paper that if children are stimulated through culture and environment, their spatial perceptions grows, become culturally more aware, and builds a belonging towards the place they live in.

In Fall 2008, a collaboration started to foster between Kadir Has University, Graduate Program for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage (GPCH) and The Culture Awareness Foundation (CAF) to create awareness for cultural heritage in children through exploitation of cultural heritage.

CAF has been applying "Culture Ants" education program for the students in primary schools with narrow circumstances. This program is delivered by licensed volunteers in five modules expanding to an entire academic year. Volunteers from Kadir Has University, in a graduate seminar, with varied backgrounds, discussed the ways of creating consciousness in children towards the city surrounding us. In a way, it is the first step towards architecture education.

Keywords: *Culture awareness, children, space, environment, Culture Ants, spatial perception, Kadir Has University.*

THE CASE STUDY

Knowing the importance of providing a wider perspective to our children awareness for history, environment and culture as early as possible, the following program is envisaged. Having its roots from the experience of METU in 1976, a seminar program is organized at the Kadir Has University, Graduate Program in Cultural Preservation in Fall 2008. This program bears a great opportunity which is a unique structure in Turkey that calls students from all of the disciplines and not only limited to the architecture field. The strength of having this seminar in a multi-disciplinary format serves the complex needs of teaching cultural awareness to young children. It is planned that students from backgrounds such as architecture, civil engineering, psychology, proto-archeology, international relations will produce ideas having one of their foot on their past majors and the next on the preservation and therefore covers a wider range of aspects of the problem. The outcomes of the project will be presented to the Culture Awareness Foundation and it is hoped that they will be operative in the primary schools in the near future.

It is assumed that the primary school teachers, volunteers of the Culture Ants, and individual parents will appraise the outcomes of this seminar.

In this paper, the details of the structure of the seminar, the outcomes and its possible consequences upon our young generations will be discussed. It is hoped that this seminar will serve for better environments in the future, and in a way, it is the first step towards architecture

education. As we all know 'You cannot teach an old dog new tricks'.

WHAT IS CULTURALLY AWARE?

Environmental experience is related with cultural awareness. In his article Matthews questioned the relation of these issues in a non-western society (Kenya) and compared behaviors of subjects with their counterparts in Britain. Research proves to link cultural awareness with expressions of environmental perception (Matthews, 1995: 285-295). The children in Kenya who are more out-door displayed significant difference in expressing their environment, for example boys versus girls who were not allowed to play outside. Furthermore, when compared with their counterparts in Britain, it was observed that the mapping abilities of children in Britain were advanced in style, if not cognitively. How is it possible to interpret the results of this research?

In The Columbia Encyclopedia, *culture* is defined as "the integrated system of socially acquired values, beliefs, and rules of conduct which delimit the range of accepted behaviors in any given society. Cultural differences distinguish societies from one another". Another definition can be found at the Dictionary of the English Language

dictionary, The American Heritage, as "The totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought". From these explanations it is understood that out-door activities and culture are closely related. Many people from different disciplines such as psychology and urbanism looked deeply and scrutinized this link. For example K. Lynch (1979) looked at the children's environmental experience in different cultures, such as Cracow, Melbourne, Mexico City, Salta and Toluca. A. Rapoport (1978) pinpoints this issue in an article titled "On the environment as an enculturating systems". Spatial thinking develops, similar to the musical task at age related intervals (Nelson, and Barresi, 1989, 93-103). In the 19th century an education method developed by Froebel which focused on the motor-expression aimed the mental development through learning the world and the self. It is possible to say that the method has been quite successful in the early 20th century by looking at earlier education of famous architects like Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, Kandinsky. Froebel education system was common to all, which suggests that spatial thinking broadens the artistic sensitivity (Varnelis, 1998, 214).

In Turkey, especially in metropolitan cities like Istanbul, the urban experience of children is highly limited (Fig.1).



Fig-1: Children in the city and their playground (D.Karamýk)

The ability to establish a belonging towards the place they live in is narrow. A major reason is because they are not natives of the city. For the immigrating families, the rate of replacement is very high. The outcomes of this phenomenon cause environmental and cultural decay. People are indifferent to their surroundings. The local qualities are neglected, thus most of the Turkish cities are dehumanized. This is one way of looking at the problem from the social point of view. The transitory character of the dwellings, either built over night or in historically rich, yet abandoned areas, causes destruction of the physical environment. Therefore theoretically speaking if awareness for culture and environment could be stimulated or enhanced in children this would have positive impact on the city. Certainly the outcomes of this investment will not be visible in the city immediately.

However, the results of the Culture Ants, educational program carried out by the Culture Awareness Foundation (CAF) applied since 2002, are immediate. The program is designed around themes such as getting to know Istanbul, Istanbul and Water, Istanbul and Citizenship. Through this program, children are taken out of their usual environs to the historically rich areas of the city. This education is given by licensed volunteers, who are also trained at a different level. Therefore benefits of this program have a double effect. In Fall 2008, graduate students from Kadir Has University, Program for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage took part as volunteers. At the same time through a seminar, they searched ways in which issues of cultural heritage could be given to children in primary schools. As the most crucial aspect, the answer to what is valuable? came up. The importance of place emerged in their debates. In order to overcome this conceptual problem, graduate students designed a card game for children. In this way, their judgments could be refined (Fig. 2).

Another issue discussed was to convey the importance of historical past. Children until 10 or 11 years old are not able to perceive the historical process. In ancient surroundings like Istanbul, buildings from 5th century like Hagia

Sofia and modern structures can be seen next to each other. The age value of the structures can not be expressed easily. In order to overcome this phenomenon the historical evolution of objects that the children are familiar with are used (i.e. from ipod to gramophone). The same concerns were tackled by a similar graduate group in 1976 at METU, and they displayed a different set of ways of approach (Erder, 1976). After this early attempt, in 1990's children's involvement in architecture through education became an issue which developed until today. Turkish Chamber of Architects, which is in the process of preparing the National Children and Architecture Congress, initiated Children & Architecture Studies in 2002. The same year The International Union of Architects (UIA) gathered in Berlin acknowledged the role of children and UNESCO/UIA Charter for Architectural Education which comprises the basis of international studies on the education of children. Finland, Austria, France and Italy are some of the followers of this education charter. The main aim of these working groups is to enhance awareness in children for the cultural and environmental sensitivity.



Fig-2: Card Game (D.Karamýk)

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