

City of Children

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Bridging Languages and Scholarship

Series in Urban Studies



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To Federico and Nina, my grandchildren,
and to all grandchildren,
because they are our future.

To all of us, grandparents,
because we dedicate the most selfless
and free part of our lives
to build our grandchildren's future.



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Preface

An Issue with Languages and a Gift

This English version is a gift, a very important gift for which I thank Vernon Press. When I was studying, the foreign language taught at school was French. Back then, in Italy, French was the international language, for example, in diplomacy. It was only decades later, during my son's generation when the world realised that this was no longer true, and that English had taken its place as the new international language. But it was already too late for me. However, being a researcher myself, it seemed that I had no choice but to learn that language, and that is when my long, tiring, and frustrating battle with English started. Sadly, a losing battle. I tried everything: classes, books, tapes, even a month-long stay in Guilford, near London, but it all came to nothing. At some point, to preserve my mental health, I decided to give up, not without bitterness, though. At that point, I was sure that I just wasn't able to learn another language, and I resigned myself to that. After all, French didn't turn out to be particularly useful either. Then, two unpredictable things happened.

In Italy we have many dialects, every city has a different one, which usually varies from area to area. I obviously knew the dialect of my own city and, over time, I started learning the dialect of my wife's city, which at first seemed incomprehensible. For the local people, it was something unique, something that had never happened before. In the same period, my Spanish experience began. I started going to Spain every year for a few days; I used to communicate with people in Italian, and they understood me easily. Then the Spanish language started developing in my mind, without having to force myself to learn it, just as my wife's dialect had. Just as it happens when a child of a few months' old first learns to talk, it comes naturally, as he is surrounded by people who love him and who talk to him in that same way. So, I learned Spanish, which I now use with ease to communicate, give conferences, and do interviews. My defeat suffered at the hands of English, and my victory over Spanish, subsequently guided and influenced my career. After Spain came Latin America, and so my books also came to be published and well-known in these countries. The Anglo-Saxon world was left aside, far away. This is the reason why this edition really is an unexpected gift for me and, due to that, doubly appreciated.

Elizabeth Rahman deserves a mention and a kind thanks as well. This is also a strange story where luckily Spain and England collide. Elizabeth teaches at Oxford University, but we met on the Spanish island of Fuerteventura, where she lives and where I was due to speak at several conferences to present the

project “The City of Girls and Boys”. We talked about many things, including my difficulty making contact with the Anglo-Saxon world. She set things in motion very efficiently, and a few months later, thanks to her, the meeting with Vernon Press took place. Therefore, if I am the father of this book, Elizabeth is the godmother.

I hope that this edition, besides the personal attachment, will carry the ideas and the philosophy that are behind this project over to the Anglo-Saxon world which, during such a complex and problematic time that our planet finds itself in, proposes a simple but revolutionary solution: make our world, our cities, and our schools suitable for the needs and rights of children. This would solve many problems for us all.

Finally, it seems auspicious that this book will be published in the same year as the 30th anniversary of the approval of the International Convention of Childhood Rights by the United Nations.

Francesco Tonucci
Rome, 20 November 2019

Prologue

First assessment after more than twenty years

Francesco Tonucci

20 November 2014

(25th anniversary of the International Convention of Childhood Rights)

A short story

In May 1991, the City Council of Fano, the city where I was born, organized a week dedicated to children with the name "The city of children", and asked me to act as a consultant in this demonstration. During the week, activities, conferences and exhibitions were planned for, and with, the children, which concluded with the big "The city to play" party on Sunday; for which the main streets were closed to traffic so that the children could play. During that week, an extraordinary municipal plenary session was held in the largest theater in the city with the presence of hundreds of children and some guests; among which was Mario Lodi. The children presented their ideas and proposals and, as a grand finale, the plenary approved an agreement committing to repeat this initiative every year; and to which I was assigned as their scientific manager.

A few days later, I wrote a letter to the city mayor accepting the position, in which I also suggested that instead of considering "The city of children" an annual event, it would become a permanent project of transformation for the city with the boys and girls as its parameter of change. I proposed to the Administration that, for the realization of this project, a laboratory be created, a specific project team to be employed, and that a relevant headquarters be assigned where the team could work and meet other operators also dedicated to childhood and the children directly involved in the various activities. Thus, the project was born which at that time was called "The city of children" and is now, more adequately called "The city of girls and boys." It originated in my city, but since its first years, it has attracted the attention of the public and several Italian cities.

I remember that in the first documents I sent to the mayor I made it clear that the main objective of this project should be to give children the possibility of leaving home unaccompanied, allowing them to have the fundamental experiences of exploration, adventure and play with their friends.

Why in 1991: from being protected to being citizens

In 1991, Italy recognized the Convention on the Rights of the Child, approved by the United Nations in New York on November 20, 1989; Spain had already recognized and assumed it in 1990. The convention put an end to a long journey of our democracies regarding children's rights. The world that emerged from the two world wars was materially and morally destroyed. In the name of absurd ideologies, entire villages were exterminated, cities were destroyed without repairing their architectural and artistic treasures, and a large part of the population was sentenced to starve. World politics observed this long experience of horror and bloodshed in disbelief and humiliation. Cities were full of orphaned children, abandoned, without protection or hope.

On November 20, 1959, the United Nations approved the Declaration of the Rights of the Child: ten principles proclaim children's rights to be defended, protected and cared for against diseases, illiteracy, labor and sexual exploitation, military exploitation in tribal wars and crime. The introduction of a tutelary intervention was necessary and urgent. However, in those years, science was studying child development thoroughly and, first by Freud, then Piaget, Vigotsky and Bruner, childhood was recognized as the most fundamental period of human development. In the nineteen-thirties, Janusz Korczak, the great Polish educator, wrote his Declaration of the Rights of the Child with phrases such as: "The child has the right to live in the present" and "The child has the right to protest an injustice".¹

On November 20, 1989, the United Nations approved the Convention on the Rights of the Child that confirms the rights to guardianship, defense and protection, which for the first time, formally declares the full citizenship of children from birth. From that moment on, girls and boys are no longer future citizens, adults in training, but citizens and, therefore, holders of rights.

Our project was born and developed with the aim of reminding cities of the duty to put this solemn effort, assumed by all of the countries of the world, into practice and, especially, to recognize the citizenship of children.

Unfortunately, 25 years after its approval, this fundamental law is not yet in the public domain and, perhaps for that reason, it is not applied at large. Moreover, while something is being done to reduce the deficiencies linked to

¹ Janusz Korczak (1878–1942) was a doctor, pedagogue and writer. He dedicated his life to orphaned Jewish children in Warsaw organizing the orphanage as a fascinating children's republic. When the Nazis deported the little orphans to the Treblinka extermination camp, Korczak, who could have been saved, wanted to accompany them and on August 6, 1942, he entered the gas chamber with them.

the fundamental rights of children such as life, health, dignity and education, nothing is done to recognize the child as the protagonist of his and our story.

Articles 12, 13 and those following, which recognize the right to freedom of opinion, expression and association, are practically unknown; the right to rest and leisure and to engage in play, stated in article 31, is completely underestimated. And all this because it is preferred that we overlook the fact that article 3 of this convention declares that the interests of the child should always be considered above all else and, therefore, be a priority over those of any other person.

Federico, a ten-year-old member of the City Council of the Boys and Girls of Rome, after his first year of work, told his mayor: " We ask this city for permission to leave home unaccompanied." A strange proposal, as parents are the only ones who can either grant or deny that permission. But Federico knew that, if he asked his parents, they would say that he could not because the city does not allow it, so he approached the mayor and said: "Give me permission."

Federico and his parents surely have a similar opinion about the city, but draw completely different conclusions. The parents say: "The city is dangerous, so you can't leave. If you have to leave, we will accompany you, probably by car". Federico thinks: "The city is dangerous, so you have to change it." His parents have resigned themselves; they consider the state of affairs as something objective, unaffiliated with their will and their power. Federico has not resigned, he needs his autonomy, so he strongly asks for change. It reminds us of St. Augustine's phrase: "Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage; Anger at the way things are and Courage to see that they do not remain the way they are".

The project was born with, and has developed according to, this goal – to take advantage of the anger and courage of children to change cities.

The international network

As mentioned earlier, the project has been of interest to the public, the media and cities since its inception and a small network of cities was quickly formed; one which recognizes the annual celebration of Fano as its meeting and exchange point. In 1996, the National Research Council, my workplace, took on the project and assigned the management and coordination to me; which

was consequently moved from Fano to Rome.² From that moment on, the network expanded and, over time, more cities and countries were added. The current network is made up of about two hundred cities in Italy, Spain, Argentina, Uruguay, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Chile and Lebanon. In the case of Italy and Spain, the project has generally embraced small-medium sized cities, while in Latin America large cities such as Buenos Aires, Rosario, Córdoba and Mar del Plata in Argentina, Bogotá and Medellín in Colombia, Lima in Peru, Montevideo in Uruguay, and Santiago in Chile have done so.

In recent years, national or regional networks have been created to promote the coordination and exchange of experiences between cities. In particular, since 2000, the Educational Action Association of Madrid³ organizes a national congress every two years with includes all of the Spanish cities that either already form part of the project “The city of children”, or that are interested in it. In 2014, the eighth meeting was held. In 2012, the association won the Habitat Award of the United Nations thanks to this experience with the project “The city of children”.

Since 2007, at the request of Governor Hermes Binner, the province of Santa Fe has had a Latin American Laboratory, in order to extend the project to the cities of the province of Santa Fe and offer support and coordination to the Argentine and Latin-American cities who have joined this experience.

In 2014, with the support of the University of Deusto and the autonomous administration of the Basque Country, a network was formed in this community.

A book as a toolbox

The project awakens a lot of interest and an increasing number of cities are requesting meetings, conferences, and counsel. I am required to attend hundreds of meetings, which drove me to publish this book in 1996. A book whose purpose is to help cities interested in joining the project, a kind of ‘toolbox’ that explains the meaning of the offer, its philosophy, and illustrates its operational proposals, with the experience of Fano as a substantial reference, which until then was the first and the most organized. Of course, the effect of the book was just the opposite of that expected by the author and,

² Currently, the International Laboratory of the project “The city of girls and boys” has been integrated into the Institute of Cognitive Sciences and Technologies of the CNR (www.lacittadei-bambini.org) and is managed by a working group, led by the author, and of which Antonella Prisco and Daniela Renzi are part.

³ For more information see: *Acción Educativa MRP* – www.accioneducativa-mrp.org

instead of reducing the requests for meetings, trips, and training courses, they increased exponentially and worryingly so to this very day.

Among all my books, this is the only one that has been fortunate to be translated into the four languages of the Spanish Nation with the titles *La ciudad de los niños*, *La ciutat dels infants*, *Haurren Hiria*, and *A cidade dos nenos*. There is also an Argentine edition with several reprints and many editions in Italy.

In 2002, it was considered necessary to reflect new ideas, new experiences, and it was believed that an expanded reissue of the first book would not be sufficient. Then, *Se i bambini dicono: Adesso basta!* (When children say: Enough!) was published. This second book was intended to be the continuation and update of “The city of children”, but instead of narrating the experiences of different cities, the floor was given to the children. Twenty-six sentences with children’s proposals or complaints became the twenty-six chapters of the book. In each of them, the author answers two questions: Why does a child say that? What could be done if children were heard? Thus, a broad analysis of the current child condition and a vast repertoire of the initiatives, activities and experiences carried out in the cities in these years, and other possible ones, emerged to provide concrete answers to the children’s expectations.

First assessment after more than twenty years

During the presentations of this project, we are often asked whether we can make an assessment of these over twenty years, and if we can affirm that in the cities that adhered to the project, real changes have been made and verify the nature of them. It is not easy to give an answer. Many projects similar to ours require the increase and improvement of activities and services for children. In these cases, the assessment is simpler if the changes from one initial state to another are considered by measuring the opening hours of the services, the square meters of the green areas, and the spaces available for children. However, in our case, we ask cities for a radical change, almost a complete transformation. That’s why we talk about a “New philosophy of city governing”. In general, children are not heard, and their ideas are not taken into account as real components of the city’s administrative policy. Typically, children are not allowed to go out alone to see their friends, to get to know their environment or experience playing freely.

Offering children these spaces, these opportunities, raises strong conflicts with the interests of adults, politicians, teachers and their parents. The most frequent and significant disputes are against the unlimited power of automobiles, against the disappearance of public spaces, against the

occupation of free time with homework and extracurricular activities, against the disinterest shown by adults for children's opinions and needs.

With this premise as a starting point, it seems to us that these are the significant changes observed in the adults' behavior of the cities participating in the project.

More time dedicated to children

In all participating cities, politicians have spent significantly more time on childhood policies; discussing interventions in their favor and talking directly with children. Experiences that have already been practiced, such as visits to schools, have been reinforced and other more authentic experiences, filled with possibilities have been implemented.

Listen to the children

The best channel for the relationship between city politics and children has been the Girls and Boys Council. Young children, chosen by a raffle, periodically meet with an adult to offer the mayor the child's point of view, as stated in article 12 of the convention. City authorities listen to the children and try to address their proposals.

Change of priorities

In the most responsive cities, interventions are often observed in favor of pedestrians and bicycles or of public spaces. However, these points are often overshadowed by those considered urgent and imperative, such as traffic, parking, and roundabouts. In our cities, changing the order of priorities has been accepted on many occasions; favoring pedestrians over cars, neighborhoods over cities, children over adults, and play over work.

The case of Pontevedra

Two years ago, when I returned to Pontevedra and presented myself to the mayor, he said: "Francesco, this is your city." He explained that ten years ago he had attended my presentation on the project "The city of children" and it had convinced him. At that time, he was already the mayor and has since tried to modify the city to correspond with these premises. He cited the exact problem regarding priorities. I had criticized the way in which the issue of urban mobility is addressed by considering the problem of private traffic as a priority and trying to facilitate it. To facilitate urban mobility, the traffic lanes are widened, roundabouts are created, parking lots are increased. The result is that the sidewalks are narrowed, making it more complicated and dangerous to travel on foot.

He proposed to reverse the priorities: starting with the problems of pedestrians, then cyclists, public means of transport and, finally, private means. In Pontevedra, a nine-meter street dedicated six meters to cars, while for pedestrians and street furniture (street lamps, bins, benches) there were two sidewalks of a meter and a half. Pedestrians had to go in a single file and, if they carried a stroller or a wheelchair, it was impossible. They have reversed the priorities, first examining the needs of pedestrians, and have decided that two people with an open umbrella should be able to pass each other on a sidewalk (it rains a lot in Pontevedra). As a result, each sidewalk is two and a half meters wide and, with the furniture, three meters. There are three meters left for cars – the streets are one way and there are no parking spaces. The other problem I had raised was the right of pedestrians to have a continuous march, without interruptions or level changes (think of the people in a wheelchair). Today, in Pontevedra, all pedestrian crossings are at the height of the sidewalks and it is the cars that must go up and down. In Pontevedra, the maximum speed in the entire city is 30 km/h and in the historic center 20 km/h. Two years ago, the City Council invited all children over the age of six to go to school on foot and without adults to accompany them.

A democratic election

Choosing pedestrians over cars means siding with everyone instead of some, because we are all pedestrians, and being pedestrians is the only thing we have in common. Some use private means, others public, others cycle, but all, at some point are pedestrians. Choosing the small city instead of the big one is also a democratic choice – we all live in a neighborhood and many of its inhabitants do not leave. Therefore, it is fair to invest, as a priority, in projects and resources in the small city of the neighborhoods that guarantee the highest possible quality of life for all citizens; from the smallest and most vulnerable.

Increased autonomy of movement

Many of our cities have embarked on a complicated but honest process to reverse the seemingly unstoppable tendency to limit the autonomy of movement of girls and boys in their own city. In some cities, thousands of children, aged six and above, take the route between their home and school every day without adults. They go with their friends instead, who they then meet up with in the afternoon to play. In all these years, children from various countries and cities of different dimensions and social characteristics have shown that they know how to move with responsibility and caution.

A new security policy

The Girls and Boys Council of Rosario, a large Argentine city where children are in real danger of aggression and kidnapping, has claimed, however, their right to autonomy. The question of how this objective could be achieved, elicited several conventional proposals such as: "more police", "more control from the adults", "surveillance cameras in the streets"; all of which repeated what they had heard from parents, from teachers and on TV. One of the smallest children even suggested: "Adults should help us, but from a distance". An original, unpredictable proposal that demands a change: adults should not behave as parents only to their own children, but as citizens; creating security, concern, solidarity. Faced with the traditional political proposals of reaching higher levels of security by increasing defensive instruments, which are very expensive and ineffective, children instead propose the policy of the presence, of the occupation of public space, of people's interest in the public space and safety, starting with that of the children. I remember, with excitement, in Mexico City, perhaps one of the most complex cities in this regard, when the mayor, after hearing my proposal, affirmed before the children, politicians and the media that, in his opinion, this was the authentic revolution –restoring the children's autonomy, allowing them to be safe again in their neighborhoods.

A diverse way of doing politics

Hermes Binner, who was the first mayor of Rosario and later governor of the province of Santa Fe, often repeats that he has learned to do politics through "The city of girls and boys" project. What it has taught him is that political decisions, if intended to be correct and effective, must always be transversal and include all the competencies of the Administration. Therefore, we maintain that this is a project of the mayor, of the city, and not one of its sectors or competencies.

Interest in scientific research

The International Laboratory, in line with the objectives of our public research body, has developed study programs in recent years to analyze the effects of the activities proposed by the project; as much as on children who have participated in it, as on adults and the social environment. Other research organizations and several universities in the cities of the network have participated in this activity.

The need for a new edition

Books have a life, they are written, published, they are often well received and successful, then they lose their strength and presence. It is difficult to find them in bookstores and, finally, they are sold out and disappear. This book has had a long and fruitful life, many translations and editions. But, apparently, the project it proposes has a longer life. This is the reason why, once the first edition was sold out and faced with the requests of interested people and new cities joining the project, I thought to give it a new lease of life. I hope that the book continues to accompany the administrators, teachers, and parents interested in this new philosophy of city governing.

Foreword

Dear Frato,

I was very pleased to receive the drafts of your book. I read them right away because you write with simplicity: clear, accessible, like a polite and kind person who loves his readers and helps them understand the text effortlessly, with correct arguments, with unpretentious, every-day language, with examples that everyone can understand and that, like the ones you offer, are part of the experiences of each and every one of us. I was immediately attracted to the beautiful image, which is shown at the beginning, according to which the city today becomes the forest from the tales for children. Not too long ago, the children were afraid of the forest, where wolves and evil witches lived, while they felt safe in the city. Now things have been reversed, the city has become hostile: "gray, aggressive, dangerous, monstrous." The book is permanent praise to the fantasy, creativity, freedom, intelligence, spontaneity, extraordinary wealth of ideas and feelings, typical of the world of children.

For me too, not only for the children, the city is hell. But I protect by leaving home less and less. My life can pass in the four walls of my study without too many inconveniences. But I have not forgotten my life as a child. On the contrary, it reappears with increasing clarity in my memory. The most beautiful memories of my childhood are those of holidays in the country, when we played in the open air without any danger and wandered along the paths, where occasionally an ox-drawn carriage passed by.

But also, my city was totally different. We lived in Turin in a neighborhood of recent construction, in a "stately" home, as they said then, on the corner of a cut street, which ended shortly after our gate. It was called Gasómetro Street (today it has changed its name), because the neighborhood had been built where the old building, already non-existent at that time, that supplied heat and light to the city (the streetlights of my childhood streets were still gas-powered) was.

It was enough to go down the stairs to reach our "game room." There was no danger. We were going down alone. We didn't play on the road, because it was paved. We played on the sidewalk. Our games were "sidewalk" games. And now, in the city, those games have disappeared.

Among them the spinning top, which the most courageous took in their hands while still turning and threw it against the top of its adversary to knock it down; the marbles made to slide with a blow of the index finger and the thumb. The "week" (similar to Hopscotch), a more feminine game, to tell the truth, that consisted of jumping on one foot on a rectangular outline drawn

with chalk, where each box represented a day and the first to arrive on Sunday without falling won. The "stamps", as the stickers torn from the matchboxes were called and which, once placed one on top of another forming a small tower, were struck from a distance with a flat stone making it slide down the sidewalk and the winner was the one who made the most stickers fall.

A few years later, when we were in high school, a group of five or six of us who lived in the same area returned from school. We walked along a long, straight, deserted street (today it has become almost impassable because of so many cars parked on either side, some even in double-parked), so deserted that we were advancing kicking a ball, as if we were the strikers of a soccer team, until the moment in which we separated and each one took the path to his house. At that point, there was a church which was always closed, whose doorway served as a goal for our last strikes.

We also played in the yards. I spent hours on the kitchen balcony watching the children in the adjoining houses, who played hide and seek, chase, four corners, cops and robbers. It was almost as if I was playing with them – I learned new games, which I practiced with my friends in the small courtyard of our house, in which the doorwoman's son was the king; he was much more skilled than I was in all games.

Nowadays the space in the yards has been reduced more and more. Why reduced? Once again, due to the cars, which have pushed the inhabitants of the houses to each build their own garage. My children have never played in the yard. And the worst part is that the "elders" have begun to complain about the fuss that children make with their screaming and have forbidden them to play in the afternoon when they return from school. They do not complain, however, about the noise that cars make when leaving the garage in the morning and when they return in the afternoon.

It's true, the children have disappeared from the city. They are found only in the parks where their games are the usual: the slide and the ring. I live on a long street with courtyards where children could play without any danger. But it is clear that this practice has been lost. The courtyards have been built not for children to play, but instead in favor of vendors. The porches are, like pedestrian areas, a space for shops and, if any, for the elderly, who can walk more freely, when window shopping. Children are only interested in toyshops and the odd pet store, such as the one below my house, which is an obligatory stop for my grandchildren when they come to visit their grandfather.

I don't know why I have told you these things. It has been a way of expressing my sympathy for your ideal city.

PAGES MISSING
FROM THIS FREE SAMPLE

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