Growing Up in an Urbanising World

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CHAPTER TWO

Our Neighbourhood is Like That!

Cultural Richness and Childhood Identity in Boca-Baraccas, Buenos Aires

Nilda Cosco and Robin Moore

Young people in Boca-Barracas, the historic port district of Buenos Aires, described their lives and neighbourhoods through a variety of Growing Up in Cities methods. They revealed the 'paradoxical poverty' of an area of low material resources that is nevertheless rich in settings where its young people can play a vital role in the social and cultural life of their community. A community action programme was created based on the children's insights and priorities, which has inspired reflection on issues of governance related to the rights of children in the urban environment, as well as a discussion of the importance of a 'holding environment' where children have freedom to assimilate and transform their culture through play and exploration.

One day, best friends Cecilia and Fabiana invited us to see the monthly musical performance in *Pasaje Bardi* near their home. The *Pasaje* (Passage) was a small, elongated open space recently developed in the neighbourhood, adjacent to the railway station. Both girls had shown the space in their drawings during their interview and had included a visit there during the field trip. They told us how they liked it because of the paintings (a tango mural) and all the different community events that happened there. The *Pasaje* evidently held much meaning in their lives.

We went to pick the girls up on a Sunday afternoon. They were eagerly waiting for us, dressed in their best freshly laundered and pressed clothes, proud to be taking us on a trip to one of their special haunts in the neighbourhood. As we walked the several blocks to the *Pasaje* they were very sociable, telling us stories about different places in the area, where they could go on the train and the fact that they lived in houses built under the arches of the elevated tracks (see *Cooperativas*, Table 2.2).

While we were walking, we heard clinking sounds coming from the bag Fabiana was carrying. We arrived at the *Pasaje* to discover that the jazz programme had been cancelled. We decided to sit down anyway and spend some time together. Fabiana opened the bag and we found that the sounds we had heard came from chinaware for a picnic. The girls carefully laid out a tablecloth on the elevated grassy patch where we were sitting and arranged the cups and saucers, silverware, plates, napkins, a homemade cake and thermos of coffee.

The girls' enjoyment was obvious as they conducted the ritual of preparation and serving their guests. The 11 and 12 year olds had planned and executed the whole event with great care, with the assistance and support of

their mothers. Their sense of hospitality was remarkable. We had a very enjoyable party, sitting together on the retaining wall of the small terrace that served as a sitting area for performances. The whole experience impressed us as an example of high quality childhood, even though the material circumstances of the girls' families were extremely modest.

> *We began to see that at least for the group of Boca-Barracas children we were working with, low material resources had two very different faces — one the joyful, mature face of culture, the other the daily struggle of material survival.*

There was a quality of cultural richness here in this place and in the lives of these children that was striking. Similar experiences with other children and their families before and after our trip with Fabiana and Cecilia pushed us to overcome our initial commonplace assumptions about poverty (or as we prefer to say, 'low material resources'). We began to see that at least for the group of Boca-Barracas children we were working with, low material resources had two very different faces — one the joyful, mature face of culture, the other the daily struggle of material survival. For the parents, one made the other bearable. For the children the reward was fundamental. The richness of their cultural lives gave them a critical dimension of healthy development: a sustaining self-identity as individuals and as participants in community life.

This discovery caused us to dramatically shift our thinking by the time we completed our fieldwork. We had not been prepared to learn that many aspects of these children's lives were so positive in ways we had not considered prior to starting the Growing Up in Cities project in Buenos Aires. Even though these children lived in deprived environments, they gained a strong personal identity and sense of belonging from the cultural richness and social density of their daily lives. This shared identity with the neighbourhood and community helps explain the impressive ethical development of these children. Repeatedly during the interviews, field trips and photographic activities, we observed their feelings of solidarity, cooperation and care for each other.

For many years, conventional wisdom has perpetuated the idea that children living in low resource communities are poor in all aspects of their individual and social lives. One reason for this, as John McKendrick has discussed, is that we do not have a child-focused understanding of poverty.[1] For children, experiential richness in urban neighbourhoods is not readily correlated with income level.[2] The enormous range of contexts of family and community life conditioned by geography, climate, culture and political economy make us wary of generalisations. In the face of such complexity, how can one attempt to explain the dynamics of the quality of life of children as they age and develop? This is the question we found ourselves addressing as the project progressed, and the provocative results of our observations and field experiences with the GUIC children unfolded.

Our insights reflect our interdisciplinary backgrounds, as one of us is a design researcher of children's urban habitats (Moore) and the other an educational psychologist practised in working with children in low resource communities (Cosco). To do justice to our findings, we

TABLE 2.1

Boca-Barracas Community Profile

LAND AND POPULATION	
Land Area	967 hectares (2389.5 acres)
Population	126,000
Density	130 persons/hectare (53 persons/acre)
Number of blocks	576
Area of plazas and parks	26 hectares (0.2 ha/1000 population) (64.25 acres) (0.49 acres/1000 population)
Number of plazas and parks	26
Ratio of blocks to plazas and parks	22/1 approx.
RELIGION	Official national religion is Catholic. Minorities of other Christian and non-Christian religions exist, but they are extremely small.

will attempt four things in this chapter: first, to reflect on and interpret selected findings from the interviews of children and other standardised components of the GUIC project; second, to describe and comment on the results of the special Boca-Barracas community action components; third, to reflect on the issue of governance in relation to children's rights in urban planning policy and practice; and finally, to interpret the findings using the concept of the neighbourhood as a 'holding environment' according to the theories of Donald W. Winnicott.

BOCA-BARRACAS

Boca-Barracas, one of the oldest and lowest income sections of Buenos Aires, is located near the centre of one of the world's largest cities.

Shelter conditions in Boca-Barracas range from living in the street to residing in apartment buildings, and include many squatted houses and *conventillos* (see Table 2.2)

La Boca (the mouth) dates from the beginning of the 19th century. It was the original port area of the city and by mid-century was one of the most important immigrant settlements in Argentina. It was the birthplace of the tango and attracted many musicians, poets and painters to settle there. This has given a special identity to the area, both physically and politically. Here, the immigrant groups (especially Italians from Sicily) founded diverse social and political organisations which gave rise to a feeling of local solidarity unique in the city. As a consequence, La Boca has retained a strong sense of community identity and independent spirit, while at the same time influencing city power in its favour.

As Argentine trade grew, Barracas (which means warehouses) accommodated the increased port function up the Riachuelo River. Related industrial development expanded away from the river, stimulating a period of economic prosperity and an elevated quality of life. This era continued until the new *Puerto Madero* was built in the 1930s on the Plate River to accommodate larger cargo vessels. Then began the gradual decline of Boca-Barracas until implementation of the flood control public works

Figure 2.1 This aerial view of Boca-Barracas shows the characteristic grid street pattern of Buenos Aires and the fine grain texture of high density, low-rise residential buildings. 'La Boca' (the mouth) of the Riachuelo river can be seen far right. The 'Boca Juniors' soccer stadium is labelled 'CABJ'.

Figure 2.2 Outline map of Buenos Aires neighbourhoods showing low income areas in dark tone. La Boca and Barracas (bottom, right) are part of a band of the lowest income communities along the Riachuelo River.

and first trickle of reinvestment in the mid-1990s — coinciding with the GUIC project.

The tradition of solidarity and activism remained strong through the decades of military rule in the 1960s and 1970s. With the rebirth of democracy in Argentina in 1983, the area was able to rapidly rebuild its social infrastructure through community participation, reflected in

TABLE 2.2

Housing Types in Boca-Barracas

TYPE	CHARACTERISTICS	COMMENTS
1. ***Calles y plazas.*** Streets and plazas.	Streets and plazas where the homeless *(los sin techos)* live.	Local informants said some *sin techos* lived in Boca-Barracas. Informal observation suggested fewer people live this way in Buenos Aires than in cities in the USA.
2. ***Asentamientos.*** Settlements. Literally 'settling'.	Initial stage of a *villa* (cf. 3). Land is squatted and people construct 'emergency shelters.' Community feeling of solidarity is limited. People act as individuals to resist being pushed off the land.	To negotiate effectively with the owners, it is important to organise into a cohesive group, as for example the housing cooperative (cf. 9)
3. ***Villas.*** Villages.	*Villa* is the term used in Argentina for informal, self-built housing areas, along with *villa de emergencia* (emergency village) and the disrespectful *villa miseria* (misery village). Initially, structures are built from scrap and slowly improved with more substantial materials. The *villa* eventually becomes an organised community with political clout and street addresses. Outdoor space affords opportunities for social contact.	*Villas* date from the 1930s coincident with the greatest wave of European immigration. They provide basic shelter for very poor families but without security of tenure. Sites are often built on marginal, low-lying land and are liable to flooding. Some *villas* are over 30 years old. Boca-Barracas had two small *villas* where two GUIC children lived. The social and psychological impact of living in such a chaotic environment was apparent in their behaviour.
4. ***Casas tomadas.*** Squatter houses.	Literally 'taken houses'. Reliable information difficult to find.	As in other countries, squatter residents face problems of lack of basic utilities, insecurity, etc.
5. ***Hoteles.*** Hotels.	Former hotels that rent one room per family. High rents with several families sharing one bathroom.	No security of tenure.
6. ***Conventillos.*** Literally, 'little convents'.	Traditional La Boca housing. One family per room but with the advantage of a shared interior courtyard.	Tenure same as *inquilinatos* (cf. 7). Woodframe construction and oil stove heating cause high risk of fire.
7. ***Inquilinatos.*** Tenant houses.	Legal form of tenure introduced by Juan Peron to replace *conventillos (cf. 6),* makes tenants more secure. Rent of whole house sometimes shared by extended family or friends.	Currently, to evict a tenant, a landlord will refuse to take rent until the legal deadline is passed and through no fault of their own the tenants become 'illegal residents'.
8. ***Hogares.*** Homes.	Homes for children without families, such as orphans and former street children. Exist in many forms in Latin America, usually supported by the Church.	Two GUIC children lived in a Boca-Barracas *hogar* for school-aged boys. It was a typical two-story house, managed by an outspoken priest and wonderful, caring staff.

TABLE 2.2 (continued)

TYPE	CHARACTERISTICS	COMMENTS
9. ***Cooperativas.*** Housing cooperatives.	*Cooperativas* have the great advantage of being organised, legal entities and therefore support long term sweat equity investment.	A Boca-Barracas example was founded in 1994 by homeless people under railway arches. They invaded the area, resisted police eviction, eventually negotiated permanent lease with the railway company, and converted the arches into houses. Two GUIC children lived in the *cooperativa*.
10. ***Departamentos tipo casas.*** Apartments like houses.	Duplex/triplex/quad apartments built as row houses with street entrances to separate units.	Residents rent or own as part of a condominium.
11. ***Departamentos.*** Multi-story apartment buildings.	The bulk of Buenos Aires residents live in highrise apartments but few such buildings exist in Boca-Barracas.	Apartments can be rented or owned as a condominium.
12. ***Casas.*** Houses.	Typical houses are one or two stories high and are entered through a doorway directly from the sidewalk, Spanish style, often into a small private courtyard.	Few Boca-Barracas residents lived in either a rented or owned house.
13. ***Loft*** (anglicised). Lofts.	The newest housing form, similar to that found in older industrial cities in Europe and the USA where old, disused inner city warehouse buildings have been recycled and converted into living space.	Buenos Aires *lofts* are the domain of young, upper middle class professionals. Some are close to Boca-Barracas in the redeveloped *Puerto Madero* (former main port that replaced La Boca; the new port moved downstream to accommodate container vessels).

the Boca-Barracas Solidarity Network of more than forty local community organisations. This history provided a compelling reason for implementing Growing Up in Cities in Boca-Barracas, as the Network's objectives for children and families coincided with the project's philosophy, giving us a sense of assurance that the project would result in permanent changes beneficial to children. This turned out to be a somewhat naive assumption.

Although this chapter will focus on the cultural richness of the lives of the Boca-Barracas children, our intention is not to paint a simplistic, rosy picture that ignores the negative side of community life there. Children in Boca-Barracas, as in many other Buenos Aires neighbourhoods and in Argentina as a whole, face many problems. In 2001, four years after the completion of the field work, the socio-economic situation for working class families remains desperate. It is difficult to avoid slipping into a level of poverty from which there is no escape. Day-to-day survival is a major preoccupation.

OPEN SPACE AND QUALITY OF LIFE

Buenos Aires, like other large dense cities in South America, has a low level of open space provision: less than three square metres per capita, whereas the World

Health Organization recommends ten square metres per capita.[3] Furthermore, most of the city's open space is concentrated in two huge parks: the mature Palermo Woods (134 hectares) in the middle class residential centre of the city, designed by Argentina's first landscape architect, Carlos Thays; and a newly designated, but undeveloped, open space (130 hectares) in the working class southern part of the city. Boca-Barracas was better endowed with neighbourhood space than many other districts in the city because of the relatively large number of small plazas and parks for public use (see Table 2.1).

There is also the unique *Reserva Ecológica* (Ecological Reserve), a magnificent 350-hectare wetlands extending into the Plate River, used by thousands of people of all classes each weekend as an escape from the city. The Reserve is the most important environmental education resource in the city, serving about 30,000 school children each year. Located less than two kilometres from the centre of La Boca, the Reserve was a very special resource for older children and their families as it was easy to get to by *colectivo* (public bus) or even by foot, bicycle or moped. Several GUIC children mentioned this special resource during their interview or included it in their drawing. However, the Reserve and other major open spaces were mostly not accessible to children on their own.

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Figure 2.3 GUIC children interview an older resident of the neighbourhood to record his ideas for redeveloping the vacant lot behind the group as a park.

As the global economy advances, the material quality of life of many families in Argentina — as in a great number of other countries — is falling below minimum living standards. Environmental quality is becoming degraded and indigenous cultural richness is under siege.[4] The physical environment is becoming less and less friendly towards children. The stability of the Argentine economy, which in the 1980s and 1990s produced rising incomes in middle and upper middle class families, making loans and long-term credit possible, resulted in a dramatic rise in car ownership in a very few years. In Buenos Aires, almost overnight, city streets became clogged with traffic, heavily polluted (in 1997 leaded petrol was still in use) and physically very dangerous because of the undisciplined traffic. Argentina is reputed to have one of the highest traffic accident rates in the world. Already in 1988, in a study on *Children and Play in Large Cities*, sponsored by the newspaper Clarín, urban planner Ruben Gazoli warned that the streets of Buenos Aires had become mere traffic corridors. He was concerned that they were rapidly losing their social function especially for children, the primary users of streets in urban residential neighbourhoods.[5] As the global economy extends its reach, children living in the world's major cities, including Buenos Aires, are suffering an unfair share of negative impacts to their primary outdoor space, urban streets.

The plazas and public open spaces in Buenos Aires offer little respite from the conditions of the streets. The municipality has no money to take care of open spaces. They are dirty and polluted, and the needs of children tend to be ignored. Children are never involved in the redesign of a park or new management procedures sponsored by private enterprise. Nonetheless, as no other choices are available, children must play and so adapt their needs to these inadequate physical conditions. In Boca-Barracas, as in many Latin American city neighbourhoods, there were a few far apart but highly-prized small neighbourhood plazas that provided alternative spaces for play and hanging out.

Children in Boca-Barracas probably suffered less from the impact of traffic than in most other neighbour-

hoods in the city. Certainly the neighbourhood was traversed by several major arterial boulevards which were uncrossable 'rivers of metal' for younger children. The many factories in the area generated noisy truck traffic. However, the location of Boca-Barracas along the Riachuelo on the edge of Buenos Aires meant that there was not as much through traffic as in more central city neighbourhoods. The number of children observed outdoors, moving around the neighbourhood in non-school hours and on weekends, was impressive.

This observation contrasted with some middle class neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires where children live in restricted high-rise apartment buildings with little chance to get outside to play freely. These children's time is over-occupied, as they attend school from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm and then take classes in computer skills, martial arts, English and sports. On the weekends, they participate in programmes at private clubs. In contrast, children in Boca-Barracas led a rich daily life in a physically and socially diverse environment, over which parents asserted a relaxed territorial control. These children roamed farther from home than their North American and European counterparts (most walked to and from school, for example, and went on domestic errands and family visits many blocks away). As a result, they appropriated a wide range of local spaces.[6]

Although children in Boca-Barracas criticised the general level of litter, untidiness and lack of repair and maintenance of the plazas, streets and sidewalks in the area, they still used these spaces as there was nowhere else to go. Although these spaces might have seemed undesirable to an outsider, they harboured community life in the form of small neighbourhood industries, cafes, stores and the ubiquitous *kioscos* where a child might purchase something sweet for a few *centavos* (cents).

One of the most extreme examples of polluted open space in the whole city of Buenos Aires constituted one edge of the Boca-Barracas neighbourhood: the Riachuelo River corridor forming the *boca* of the old port of La Boca before flowing into the Plate River. The stinking Riachuelo, laden with industrial poisons from many unregulated plants upstream, had been an environmental *cause célèbre* for years, with successive governments promising to clean it up, but lacking the political will to do so. In 1998, the Buenos Aires government completed construction of a massive flood control system to keep the Riachuelo from flooding the neighbourhood. The objective is to protect the residents from the filthy waters entering their homes from time to time, but it will not change the pollution. As the flood problem appeared solved, the new threat of 'gentrification' became very real. Suddenly, La Boca has become a fashionable place to live because it is close to the centre of the city, has a strong local identity, a rich history and inexpensive housing — up to this point.

TABLE 2.3

Boca-Barracas Participants Profile (N=32)

Male, 14 Female, 18

AGE	# OF PARTICIPANTS	AGE	# OF PARTICIPANTS
10	8	13	8
11	8	14	8

THIRTY-TWO CONSULTANT CHILDREN

Fabiana and Cecilia were two of the group of 32 'consultant' children who were selected to work with us in the Boca-Barracas neighbourhood and brought together by Virginia and Maria, two social workers we had met at the local municipal offices. The selection criteria included half girls and half boys, spread from ages 10 through 14 (Table 2.3), evenly distributed across the residential zones of the neighbourhood, and representative of the forms of shelter listed in Table 2.2.

The children were knowledgeable about conditions in the neighbourhood and were willing to discuss them. The search for decent housing was a constant preoccupation, and the fear of losing their home was a constant cause of anxiety for many children. As one of the social workers commented, 'They don't live a deceived life... they know what is lacking or wrong.' When the GUIC children talked about dangers such as drugs, for example,

they did not label the situation simplistically as 'bad' but analysed it from a more mature point of view, explaining the 'war' between different drug dealing groups as a 'struggle to survive.'

'Don't worry', they told the Gringo researcher (Robin Moore) before setting out on a field trip through their territory, 'we'll take care of you'. This was their domain and they knew every square metre of it, who lived there, who their friends were, and areas to avoid because of drug dealing and violence.

Pedro and Claudio were two of these neighbourhood experts. They were best friends who lived in a group home run by the Catholic parish as part of the *Hogar Don Bosco* system.[7] The traditional masonry domestic building housed 13 boys ages 9 through 16.[8] Later in the project, the *Hogar* became a great place for subgroups to meet to work on projects in the common room in the front of the building, with shutters opening on to the street. It was the most neutral meeting place in the neighbourhood.

Pedro and Claudio were both 14 and therefore 'senior' members of the *Hogar* and as such accorded considerable freedom to come and go and to be responsible for their own lives. This was a deliberate policy on the part of the *Hogar* staff to prepare the members of the *Hogar* family to live independently in separate accommodations after the age of 17. Because of their knowledge of the neighbourhood and their interest in the project, Pedro and Claudio soon became key members of the GUIC group. Pedro's drawing was an accurate rendition of the street plan extending for many blocks around the *Hogar*.

'Don't worry,' they told the Gringo researcher (Robin Moore) before setting out on a field trip through their territory, 'we'll take care of you.' This was their domain and they knew every square metre of it, who lived there, who their friends were, and areas to avoid because of drug dealing and violence. During the trip we stopped outside the fire station. La Boca had had a volunteer fire department for many years, as the traditional portside houses in the neighbourhood were timber framed, sheathed in corrugated iron, and heated by a variety of open oil and gas heaters. Fires were common and firemen had high status in the community. As we viewed the fire station, Pedro explained that he wanted to join the force as he was a few months away from the minimum age of 15. There was only one problem: he wore an earring, which was strictly forbidden by the fire team. He was still considering this difficult teenage dilemma.

We looked upon each of these carefully selected children as a consulting 'expert', in the sense of someone who has acquired special skill or knowledge from experience: in this case, knowledge of the physical space of the neighbourhood and an understanding of the community dynamics. GUIC opened up a new dimension to their lives. Several of them commented about how good it felt to be asked for their opinions about their experiences in the neighbourhood and their ideas for improvement. Most of them had never been asked this type of question before — at least not in such a genuine way. After the interview with Pedro and Claudio, one of them thanked us for the exercise, saying how much he had learned from answering the questions. The two boys had an impressive capacity to explain themselves articulately. They were able to analyse aspects of their lives in the neighbourhood, answering questions that no one had asked them before. Most likely for this reason, like most of the GUIC children, they expressed a strong commitment to the project, gave carefully considered answers to the questions and participated creatively in the activities.

Pedro and Claudio were clearly aware of their knowledge of the neighbourhood. From them and most other members of the group of 32, we felt we got reliable information, often expressed with uncompromising clarity. Although these children felt immersed in a harsh reality, most of them were able to discriminate the reasons for their difficult lives and analyse the causes. They knew they lacked material resources and, at the same time, they were able to describe unforgettable, fulfilling events in their lives. We learned that behind the hard reality and struggle against adversity, there was plenty of logical

thinking and objective understanding of reality — the mark of an 'expert.' Another reason for their expertise is being *rooted* in a particular place, feeling part of that place, knowing that 'this is where I live so I know what I'm talking about.' To learn what children have to share simply requires letting them express themselves and listening respectfully.

FIELD TRIPS AND OTHER METHODS

Like the GUIC programmes in other countries, the Argentine programme had two main components. First, there was the standardised protocol with the selected group of children like Pedro and Claudio, Fabiana and Cecilia. In Argentina, it consisted of interviews with the children and some parents. During the interview, each child was asked to make a drawing of the part of the neighbourhood where she or he lived and to include the most important places in it. The methodology was similar to that employed by Moore in earlier research on the role of the physical environment in urban childhood.[9] Each child was also given a camera loaded with a 24-exposure roll of film and asked to photograph important places in the neighbourhood. As a final step, each child took one or two members of the research team on a walking tour around her or his neighbourhood 'domain' to share firsthand the places that had been described in the interview and photographed (Figure 2.6). This research was organised by the authors and conducted on the ground by them and three local social workers, and complemented by the authors' observations of public life.

The trips around the neighbourhood reinforced the value of favourite places such as the *Caminito*,[10] plazas, parks and schools, as well as landmarks such as the transporter bridge, churches and railways. Our additional independent observations of public life in the streets, plazas and parks made it possible for us to interpret the children's drawings more accurately. Many of the drawing elements were colourful renditions that, in the words the children used to describe them, expressed positive social values. By the same token, the drawings downplayed aspects that adults might have perceived as strongly negative, such as disrepair and litter.

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Figure 2.4 (ABOVE) The old transporter bridge across the Riachuelo — a highly visible, landmark and significant source of identity for the area.

Figure 2.5 (LEFT) Child drawing the transporter bridge.

Children mentioned the social dangers of some of these places after dark or when no one was around, but they emphasised the extent to which these places afforded freedom of action for their peer group. Although limited in size and widely scattered geo-graphically, the public spaces afforded children critical freedoms: to be together, to act. Without this, the quality of life would have been greatly diminished. Most children were part of an extended family peer group, usually with a few younger brothers, sisters and cousins in tow. From an early age, children walked every day around their *barrio*.

The way many children spoke with pride about the places that we visited during the field trips, and their bold confident body language as they moved around,

indicated their strong sense of ownership of their environment. This sense of the children's affiliation with their surroundings was supported by the interview results. All the children, except four, identified a 'favourite place' in the neighbourhood (14 different places in all, five of them parks or plazas) and all, except three, said they felt they 'owned' these places. The Boca-Barracas children lived a socially integrated life that was radically different from that of more affluent children in other parts of the city, whose time, space and social relations were restricted by

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Figure 2.6 Claudio and Pedro take the 'researcher' (Moore) on a tour of the neighbourhood.

the demands of after-school activities. Those children — and those in other cities around the world — are losing the depth of feeling expressed by Gabriel when talking about 'the good memories' of Plaza Colombia (occupying one city block), which, he said 'was my whole life.' Cecilia and Fabiana added cultural insight to Gabriel's sense of satisfaction. On our trip back home, we were reflecting on their life in the neighbourhood. 'I love the neighbourhood,' Cecilia commented. 'If someone took out La Boca from the city, it wouldn't be Buenos Aires anymore.' 'Here is where culture matters,' Fabiana added.

The field trips showed us that the children really knew their neighbourhood and genuinely appropriated the places they used. The girls especially were proud to show us how well they knew the neighbourhood and how competent they were to lead us through it. Most children did not take us into their houses as they were ashamed of the condition or size or both. Cecilia and Fabiana were exceptions. They lived in a housing cooperative which had gained legal rights to land that was originally squatted: a victory won through strong community solidarity. The owner-occupiers were justly proud of their accomplishments and this was reflected in the pride of the children. Most of the other children could not share this feeling. Possibly, this partly explains their strong feeling of identity with the neighbourhood which substituted for the home as a source of identity. As Nicolás bluntly put it, 'I don't like the house where I live but I like the neighbourhood'.

COMMUNITY ACTION

The second component of our work addressed the GUIC objective of involving the children in developing a participatory community action process, designed to take advantage of local opportunities for giving visibility to children's issues in urban planning. As much as possible, we tried to add to the children's cultural and ethical strength by developing an action programme that would provide an educational opportunity for the children and their families, to strengthen their capacity for understanding and to prepare them for community action in the future. It was a way of giving back something valuable to the children and their parents in return for their time, energy and ideas. These activities were designed to motivate the children to create solutions to their own problems in the context of a realistic awareness of both constraints and opportunities. At the same time, we also tried to create a partnership with community and governmental organisations to influence policy and create permanent change.

The community action process was further extended and used as a vehicle for exploring ways to build a governance process that would involve young citizens permanently in decision making about development of the urban environment. Our strategy in Boca-Barracas was to conceptually merge these components, hoping that syn-

Figure 2.7 Gulliver's Mapping (LEFT TO RIGHT): carrying the base map to the plaza; rolling it out; everyone joins in, sharing their memories and opinions.

ergistic links would grow between them and guide progress. This 'action component' of the project was organised by the authors and implemented by the *Móvil Verde* (the Mobile Green Unit, a non-formal education team affiliated with the urban environmental education programme of a labour union organisation).

Three community actions were included in the programme. First, a Gulliver's Mapping[11] (Figure 2.7) event was implemented as part of the Winter Vacation Festival in La Boca. Second, the children organised an exhibition of their photographs of Boca-Barracas which was also launched at the Winter Festival and presented at the Cultural Centre of Buenos Aires, *La Recoleta*. Third, a series of design education workshops involved children living in a sub-area of La Boca in implementing action projects in their neighbourhood.

Gulliver's Mapping

The 1997 Winter Festival in La Boca provided an ideal opportunity to involve people of all ages in a Gulliver's Mapping event. The map was constructed from the standard survey sheets prepared by the city (some of them unrevised for 40 years!), generously provided by the Urban Planning Department, taped together on sheets of cardboard backing. The day of the Festival, the map was assembled by our *Móvil Verde* colleagues at the *Teatro de la Ribera* as part of a public presentation of the whole GUIC project. After the presentation, a group of GUIC children helped roll up the four-metre-long map and carry it on their heads through the streets to *Plaza de los Bomberos*, where it was laid out on the sunny side of the space. The *Móvil Verde* was parked alongside to help facilitate interaction. It was not long before a couple of dozen participants of all ages had taken off their shoes and were sitting or kneeling on the map, coloured markers in hand, discussing their comments (neighbourhood memories, anecdotes and criticisms of present conditions) with each other and the *Móvil Verde* facilitators. A lady who appeared to be in her 50s was talking about a well known jazz trumpeter who had lived down the street. A lively discussion got underway between several neighbours and Móvil Verde staff about the polluted conditions of the Riachuelo — and what, if anything, the city was doing about it. Most people were sceptical if not apathetic, as there had been news stories, TV programmes and political debates for years without success in cleaning up the river. However, the city was installing a large scale ambitious flood control scheme that some participants valued and recorded.

After about three hours, the map was rolled up and stored overnight at the *Mutual Esperanza* neighbourhood club. The following day, Sunday, the map was unfurled at a different location, next to the *Biblioteca Popular de la Boca* where the children's photographic exhibition had been launched the previous day. Again, dozens of people of all ages expressed their observations, memories and opinions on the map. It was entertaining and informative for everyone. At mid-afternoon, the *Murga* festival[12] came

leaping by the Gulliver's site, which drew more participants into its spell: they just *had* to add their contributions. The completed map was later used in a public exhibition as an annotated reference map of the area, and in design workshops with the children.

Children's Photographic Exhibition

The photo exhibition was possibly the most successful activity we did with the children in terms of the public relations benefits and the modest cost of materials. In total, 13 children in nine teams participated in taking photographs of their environment. Some of these volunteered to help produce the catalogue and organise the exhibition. We acted as overall curators, while leaving the children as much creative freedom as possible.

Simple, inexpensive cameras were used to take the photographs. After a few minutes of instruction, most children had no problem using them. Each was loaded with a 24-exposure film. Most children worked in pairs, sharing the available shots. After a few days, each camera was returned, the film processed and the prints brought back to the child photographers for them to write captions. After analysing each picture the children made a final selection of the best shots. They were encouraged to explain why they took each picture, what it meant to them, and what they wanted to show to other people. They were asked to choose five or six of the most representative pictures and write captions for the general public.

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Figure 2.8 Preparing exhibit catalogue

This process obliged the children to analyse the life of the neighbourhood more deeply by highlighting aspects they found positive or negative. By taking photographs, they documented their social lives (friends, siblings), the polluted environment, their favourite places, their homes, and the landmarks of Boca-Barracas (Caminito, Parque Lezama, Riachuelo, and the old transporter bridge[13]). The girls especially photographed aesthetic objects such as paintings and statues. The captions helped reveal the meaning and intent of the photograph to both photographer and viewer.

An enjoyable part of the process were the three sessions organised with the children to design the exhibition catalogue. The workshop sessions were held at a local café and in the meeting room at the Hogar where Pedro and Claudio lived.

The children invented the title of the exhibition (from which the title of this chapter is taken), slogans to promote it, designed the layout of the catalogue and compiled the list of photograph titles. The exhibition opened in the *Biblioteca Popular de La Boca* on the first day of the Winter Festival, blessed by the priest from the *San Juan Evangelista* Church, and with refreshments provided in the form of bread freshly baked by Cecilia and her mother. It was interesting to observe the children from different parts of Boca-Barracas discussing their photographs with each other for the first time. The exhibition and the Gulliver's Mapping both encouraged a stronger feeling of solidarity among the group. This had been impossible to achieve during the interviews that were mostly one-on-one.

Creating Place From Space

La Boca contained many *baldíos* (vacant lots) and vacated buildings — the residue of bad economic times when many industries left the area and local businesses went under. From the community's perspective, the vacant land and buildings reinforced a negative image of economic neglect and abandonment. For children, however, they were places to explore, mess around in or play football. As in any city, the vacant lots offered space for a

limited range of activities; nevertheless, this space was more than mere square footage. As we discovered through the initial phase of standardised investigation, children attached identity and meaning to the vacant lots. They were spaces with a 'sense of place' as defined by Kevin Lynch in his book *The Image of the City.*[14]

We decided to continue working on the theme of creating place from space as part of the community action programme with the children. As a step towards exploring the development of a governance structure for children's participation, we organised a series of participatory design workshops with the children in a section of La Boca where the Solidarity Network was already working. Representatives of the Network said they were interested in the children's proposals, as they had identified the area as a priority for physical improvement.

Two fortunate coincidences enabled the design workshop initiative to be launched and rapidly move ahead. First, our search for space to work with the children in the immediate area (nearly always a problem in neighbourhood participatory work) led us to the grandfather of one of the children in the group. He was the president of *Mutual Esperanza,* a neighbourhood housing rehabilitation cooperative[15] that owned a large meeting room on the ground floor of one of their rehabilitated buildings. He was happy to let us use the space during the four-week programme. The second fortuitous circumstance was the availability of the *Móvil Verde* group to implement the programme.

Apart from our research interest in exploring processes of creating place, the purpose of the workshop series was to deepen the children's perceptions and understanding of the problems and opportunities in the neighbourhood through a hands-on approach to playful environmental exploration, learning, programming and design. Overarching themes included consideration of the neighbourhood as a child's habitat, children's rights and habitat (especially Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child), imagining a child-friendly neighbourhood and the extension of the participatory process into the realm of governance.

A critical artefact at the first session was the Gulliver's Map generated during the Winter Festival some weeks earlier. Many of the children were at the festival, which celebrated the winter vacation from school, and participated with their peers and family members in annotating the Gulliver's Map. The huge map was hung on one wall of the meeting room and immediately provided a means for the children to see that the much larger area of Boca-Barracas contained their immediate neighbourhoods and to explore their neighbourhood by identifying the locations of their homes.

> *It was interesting to observe the children from different parts of Boca-Barracas discussing their photographs with each other for the first time. The exhibition and the Gulliver's Mapping both encouraged a stronger feeling of solidarity among the group.*

At the first session, children engaged in an exercise called 'Place as a Person'[16] where they had to work in small groups and role-play different places in the neighbourhood as if these places had human history and personality. The rich, expressive drawings and dramatic presentations of the children created an upbeat spirit for the sessions to follow.

In the second session, with the *Móvil Verde* staff acting as facilitators, small groups went out into the neighbourhood (the child's habitat) to explore it as a multi-sensory environment. They recorded smells (noting their location on paper), sounds (with tape recorders), sights (with cameras), tactile characteristics (pretending to be blind) and taste (visiting a couple of *Kioscos* on the way!). This research information was brought back, shared and discussed. In this way, children were helped to more consciously understand the multi-sensory reality of their environment and to practice recording (objectifying) it. The session ended with a decision about specific design projects the group wanted to work on. Two vacant lots were chosen for renovation.

With the *Móvil Verde* staff continuing to facilitate the process, the third session started with groups visiting

each of the sites to record and evaluate the existing conditions. These included typical items any site designer would look at such as size and shape, solar orientation, wind exposure, microclimate, access, boundary conditions, natural features and cultural artefacts. The children also interviewed local residents about their ideas for the sites. They returned back to base and again shared the results of the field investigation, with the *Móvil Verde* staff prompting discussion by asking questions about the children's discoveries. This led each group into the challenging phase of deciding what they wanted to propose for their site and then developing the design programme to support the proposal, just as a professional designer would.

One group chose to design a neighbourhood chapel to replace one that had been destroyed by fire. The other group identified a large lot that they wanted to develop as a park. The third session ended after some initial discussions of the design programmes for each site.

The fourth session started with the completion of the programmes, which were then used as the basis of schematic designs on paper. Three-dimensional models were built from the designs, shared in the group of children, and presented to parents and some members of the Network during the final workshop session. Later, the models were displayed as part of the governance effort (discussed below) at the Buenos Aires Cultural Centre. *Móvil Verde* continued working on the Neighbourhood as a Child's Habitat programme for the rest of the year with some of the same GUIC children and others from the area as part of the Saturday programme sponsored by *San Juan Evangelista* Church. The Network also continued working in the area. Only time will tell if the children's designs for the new chapel and plaza will have an influence on renovations.

REFLECTIONS ON GOVERNANCE

In the GUIC project and in the field of policy development for children, recent attention has been focused on the issue of governance: the structure and process that are necessary for both developing and implementing policy.[17]

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Figure 2.9 *Móvil Verde* staff working with neighbourhood children.

This is the realm of social action. Certainly governance is a function of local government, but to be effective in implementing children's rights, the process must include collaborative relationships with many other organisations and institutions within civil society working with children at the local level where they live. Throughout the GUIC project we devoted almost obsessive attention to trying to establish these organisational connections and to make them work in favour of children. In reality, putting these principles of governance into practice was extremely difficult. It was relatively easy and very rewarding to work with the children and to engage them in actions to improve their environment. But finding ways to have their ideas taken seriously and to influence urban planning policy in favour of children's participation were enormous challenges. GUIC provided a vehicle for wrestling with these issues by testing different types of strategies and actions at local and city government levels. To try to understand the mystifying web of political nuances and personal allegiances and conflicts that dominated the domain of governance, we kept a running record of actions and our reflections on the (mostly frustrating) consequences.

The GUIC project was initiated at the beginning of a new democratic era of Buenos Aires city government and was officially adopted by the Secretary of Urban Planning and Environment, who expressed much interest in train-

ing and replication in other neighbourhoods in the city. His department organised a public exhibition of the children's photographs, models and the Gulliver's Mapping results in the *Recoleta* Cultural Centre of Buenos Aires — *the* place for local visibility and for best exposure in the national press.

At the local level, the GUIC project was recognised by the 'Boca-Barracas Solidarity Network.' *Móvil Verde* agreed to partner with GUIC to help implement the Gulliver's Mapping project and the Neighbourhood as a Child's Habitat programme.

At face value this record looks promising. In reality, at both city government and local levels there were major problems. Among the most severe were the attempts at both ends to coopt the GUIC project. After some excellent initial cooperation in the supply of base maps and aerial photography, cooption was deftly achieved at government level with promises of further cooperation and joint programme development. The Urban Planning Department took the GUIC project on board, then created an umbrella initiative called *Buenos Aires Ciudad Nueva — Construir la Ciudad con los Chicos y los Jóvenes* (Buenos Aires New City — Constructing the City with Children and Youth), and added their name beside the names of UNESCO and Childwatch International. The city had already conducted an environmental education project with young people and appeared to be committed to adding new participatory projects to their programme. Readers may understandably assume that it was good that the Department of Urban Planning promised to continue working in other parts of the city to add to the GUIC success. Whether that happened or not, we do not know as it was very difficult to track the actions of the city. The GUIC team, a small group of independent researchers, lacked leverage in a situation where all the power was on the other side.

In theory, children's rights should be non-partisan. In practice, political conflict was the dominant brake on progress. Every action was filtered by politics. At the local level, the mesh was very fine. The political stripe of newcomers was heavily scrutinised. However, as the objectives of the Boca-Barracas Solidarity Network and GUIC overlapped, we were initially welcomed to a meeting of the whole Network. As a group of independent organisations, the Network shared the common goal of working cooperatively for the community using member resources. Being diverse and decentralised was their strength but also a weakness. Problems of coordination of action and reconciling individual political interests were the most serious challenges they faced. We were thankful to those who cooperated for the children's sake, putting political ideologies to one side and accepting with humorous tolerance the English accent of one of us (the 'language of capitalism'). After contentious discussions driven by a suspicion of outsiders from an international project, several members of the Network supported GUIC, although still with reservations.

> *This led each group into the challenging phase of deciding what they wanted to propose for their site and then developing the design programme to support the proposal, just as a professional designer would.*

All the Network member institutions were desperately looking for funds to implement their own missions. At the same time, the Network itself was struggling to secure space in the community and to project itself as a worthwhile option to the people. In the background one could notice political aspirations expressed by some of the community leaders, although it was difficult to evaluate the real motivations behind their actions. Meanwhile, neighbourhood institutions, cooperative groups, day care centres, volunteer firemen and the Church, all participated in the Network's activities in an attempt to stay together and not lose opportunities — or perhaps to exercise a measure of control over each other's actions.

In 1998, when the Children's Hour Aid Fund of the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation offered GUIC a grant to set up a toy 'library' in La Boca, it was difficult for us to decide which institution was best qualified to implement this international project and administer the funds transparently. At that stage of the GUIC project we

had a pretty clear view of the neighbourhood groups, and we invited the YMCA to take charge of the project. Surprisingly, the Network leaders claimed their right to the grant, at the same time expressing their support of GUIC. It took several months of confusing discussions to resolve the situation so that the project could be successfully implemented. Through this experience, we discovered that without a lot of care, the local struggle for resources can spoil even very good programmes for families and child development.

In the descriptions of both the governmental and local situations, we have omitted much detail that added greatly to the level of frustration and a sense of wasting time to no ultimate advantage. One benefit that came out of facing so many difficulties was that we were forced to recognise the strength of political barriers to the process of governance at all levels. Even though the GUIC project achieved short term success, with good press and public visibility, in the longer term it could not succeed without committed political advocates at all levels; and even then, if their parties were voted out of power, the chain of governance would still be broken.

> *Finding ways to have their ideas taken seriously and to influence urban planning policy in favour of children's participation were enormous challenges. GUIC provided a vehicle for wrestling with these issues by testing different types of strategies and actions at local and city government levels.*

An important assumption in the practice of effective governance is that city government and community-based organisations are able to collaborate to achieve common objectives. During the period of the GUIC fieldwork, the Solidarity Network was a substantial innovation in governance. Potential for action at the local level was considerable. The Buenos Aires Department of Urban Planning was aggressively reinventing itself, embracing the new technology, tackling the capital city's long neglected major environmental planning issues, and launching an environmental education programme in the city's schools. The problem was that the city government staff and the Solidarity Network seemed to have little interest in working with each other. Mostly this was because the party in power at City Hall was different from most of the political ideologies represented in the Network. This ideological contrast was an insurmountable barrier to collaboration, even though both sides supported the GUIC mission and were openly committed to children. The situation most likely changed as a result of the political alliance that moderate and leftist parties formed in their successful bid to wrest power from the *Peronistas* in the 1999 presidential election.[18] With the nation and city controlled by the same alliance, one may hope for a more fruitful dialogue between City Hall and the local community — and more substantial interventions supporting children's rights.

Another — positive — reality is that leaders move on, taking experiences with them to new positions of potential influence. For example, the former director of urban planning is now dean of a university school of architecture. The GUIC ally in the labour movement was elected to the city government. Leaders of the Solidarity Network have surely risen up the political ranks. Each may have new opportunities for promoting GUIC-related issues.

GUIC worked directly with children to help them speak for themselves and propose changes to their environment. In reality, children cannot vote so they will always be dependent on wise adults to facilitate processes of democratic participation, to find resources, to open doors to influence. Even though the Convention on the Rights of the Child is embedded in the Argentine national constitution and the new constitution of the City of Buenos Aires contains strong paragraphs about the rights of children, an adult lobby and leadership will always be required to create action.

Where can such trustworthy individuals be found? In which type of stable, influential, non-political institution? We discovered that such individuals and institutions did exist in Boca-Barracas, for example in the Catholic Church and the Christian Association for Young People

BOX 2.1

Taking Action

- Participate in existing festivals and community celebrations.
- Create opportunities for children to present their points of view in creative ways (drawings, photographs, drama, role-play, street theatre).
- Network with pro-child organisations (churches, youth organisations, Girl and Boy Scout groups, YMCA/YWCA, neighbourhood associations, parent and teacher associations, women's organisations, worker's unions).
- Foster media attention by creating newsworthy events with and about children.
- Provide politicians with information about children and children's participation that can be used in their political campaigns.
- Encourage community groups to prepare a set of questions about children's needs for local politicians and gatherings of community leaders.
- Facilitate direct contact between children and local politicians and leaders.
- Create engaging, interactive public events that promote intergenerational interactions and communication (Gulliver's Map, *murgas*).
- Engage children in field-based design workshops, including presentations of proposals to municipal authorities.
- Collaborate with radio/TV children's stations and individual programme producers.
- Collaborate with university departments of journalism to facilitate children expressing themselves through newsletters and journals.

(the YMCA in the English-speaking world). Results of the GUIC experience in Buenos Aires point to the critical importance of local institutions (school, church, community centres) in helping children survive in an unfriendly environment of overcrowded housing, fast moving traffic, flooding from the heavily polluted Riachuelo River and scarce public open space.

These types of institutions are governed by strong long-term missions that are deeply embedded credos in organisational psyches. Constancy of mission and non-political, stable leadership make them trustworthy. They work to alleviate daily problems and to help people to organise themselves to change negative structural constraints on their lives. They are therefore much appreciated and respected by the community. (The main church in La Boca was involved in defending squatters' rights, for example.) Furthermore, they organise themselves so that residents see that every activity and event reflects the mission of the institution (not necessarily the case in overly politicised organisations which can lose sight of their main purpose). Yet, even in such organisations, it is always good to have young people remind us of primary goals. A YMCA leader told us about a boy's first visit to their recreation programme. 'Everything is very nice here,' he said, 'but when do we eat?'

Another valuable institutional resource we found was the social work team based at the municipal neighbourhood centre. This cadre of trained professionals committed their time to solving the innumerable problems families face. As impartial professionals who knew all the available community resources in the city, they were able to give critical support to families and children. For many women in the community, the social workers were their best ally. They helped women to get jobs, to solve problems with their alcoholic husbands, to take care of disabled children or to continue their education by attending evening courses. Social workers can be a remarkable community resource. The GUIC fieldwork would have been impossible without their help.

Clearly, local government has an important role. However, to be more effective, it needs to collaborate with recognised neighbourhood-based non-governmental

organisations and community-based organisations. Such an association could be the starting point for solving the most urgent family needs. Argentine labour leader and GUIC supporter, Victor Santa María, addressed the issue as follows:

'The high level of mistrust means that it is almost impossible for governments to intensify their communication with neighbours as they must do in order to take effective local action. To fill this void, many NGOs have developed missions that target specific issues and problems. These new, non-government social action entities have the capacity to communicate with neighbourhood associations and have the ability to unite people by implementing their objectives through actions. The government could become far more effective if they were willing to partner with NGOs to take care of the big priorities — employment and nutrition — as well as other important issues related to children, like spaces for play and recreation.'[19]

CHILDHOOD, CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT

Through the GUIC intervention in the lives of 32 carefully selected consultant children in a densely developed urban district in Buenos Aires, we discovered that despite the low material resources of their domestic environment, these children lived in a culturally rich environment which added much value to their lives and sense of identity. How did such an economically stressed area manage to provide such rich cultural resources?

As co-authors with a strong professional grounding in the field of children's urban play, in addressing this question we thought about the probable lives of these children in the neighbourhood in their earlier years. From observations of the GUIC children and children in general in Boca-Barracas, we discovered that by age 4 or 5 many children were out and about in the neighbourhood in the

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Figure 2.10 Group of children playing table soccer (for a small fee) on the pavement opposite the Boca Juniors stadium.

care of older siblings. From an early age they are exposed to the extended neighbourhood environment through play and through the interpretations of their older sisters, brothers and cousins.

Because the children live in such small cramped houses, neighbourhood social spaces (pavements, street corners, plazas, vacant lots, *kioscos*) become an extension of daily domestic life just beyond the range of parent intervention. These children grow up with a much higher degree of spatial freedom than more affluent children living in more spatious highrise apartment buildings. Boca-Barracas housing is dense but close to the ground. One can readily conclude, as research has shown in cities in the Northern Hemisphere, that this housing form (often with business on the ground floor and living accommodations above) results in more social contacts per block than other forms of urban neighbourhood.[20]

> *What are the qualities of the world of children that make it a potential space where they can play creatively and build culture?*

From an early age, children in Boca-Barracas spend much time outdoors interacting with their peers, neighbourhood adults and the physical surroundings that embody the history, culture and ethos of the place called Boca-Barracas. We saw the neighbourhood as a vessel that supported the subtle process of childhood culture, driven by children's intrinsic motivation to play. The theories developed by Donald W. Winnicott with respect to play in the lives of babies and young children help us understand the significance of this process of culture building. According to Winnicott, the true significance of play is that it is a *transitional phenomenon* linking the child's internal life to her or his physical surroundings and *culture*. He considered play as a transitional phenomenon because 'it is not inside; nor is it outside' of the individual. Winnicott postulated play as a 'potential space' between the baby and the mother.[21] He beautifully articulated this transitional world that exists as a kind of magic hologram embracing child, mother, others and the physical world. The latter is crucial in providing a grounding for the growth of an authentic culture. For Winnicott:

'The place where cultural experience is located is in the potential space between the individual and the environment ...The same can be said of playing. Cultural experience begins with creative living first manifested in play...For every individual the use of this space is determined by life experiences that take place at the early stages of the individual's existence.'[22]

The richer and more diverse the world is socially and physically, the richer this potential space will be, and the greater the possibilities for developing a rich culture rooted in place. Other writers, such as Edith Cobb and Joseph Chilton Pearce, drawing on other sources of information, have postulated similar processes of development.[23]

How does this process of developing identity through play move beyond infancy? In a socially rich environment, additional adults extend the parenting role beyond the mother. As children develop spatial competence, they move out into the world around them, exploring and discovering its treasures and building culture. Every place, every component of a place, has a history, a personality, a substance — in short, a meaning. GUIC children were very eloquent in this respect. Defining La Boca, Pedro said: 'It has two sides: one good, one bad. Poverty, sadness, but it is nice to visit Caminito, Costanera, Lezama Park, and the Don Bosco Home soccer field.' He pointed to the yin-yang medal hanging around his neck that seemed to epitomise his feelings and concluded: 'Everything is here; everything good, everything bad; the best and the worst.'

What are the qualities of the world of children that make it a potential space where they can play creatively and build culture? This has become a key question as we try to interpret the GUIC findings. Through play, children explore and discover places, transforming them as potential spaces to create culture. At the deepest personal and social levels, each place resonates with the local culture. For a place to be lived in as a potential space, various conditions that were present in Boca-Barracas seem paramount. Places should be stable and predictable, dis-

covered at an early age through play, and contain features that provide a strong identity that is the essence of the place. At the same time, places should be flexible enough to accommodate creative exploration. They should be highly differentiated into component parts that stimulate many different creative relationships for all types of children. They should support children's needs, especially in terms of scale and diversity. Places should be sufficiently safe physically, socially and psychologically. These conditions facilitate the emergence of popular culture and collective expression as a natural outcome of playful exploration that for Johan Huizinga is transformative: *'In the twin union of play and culture, play is primary. The relationship between play and culture is not static; time helps the elements [of play] to be absorbed in the 'sacred sphere,'* and the remaining elements are transformed into *'knowledge: folklore, poetry, philosophy, or in the various forms of judicial and social life.'*[24]

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Figure 2.11 Three boys enjoying being out and about in their 'holding environment'.

From the GUIC children we learned that a culturally rich neighbourhood supports healthy development and helps children gain positive identification and higher self-esteem. Conversely, creative play and free individual expression enriches the culture. This was easy to see in the many different artistic expressions in Boca-Barracas: street theatre, *murgas*, painting exhibitions and the traditional *picados*.[25] The challenge is to discover how community workers, child caretakers and other significant adults can become active agents to promote this kind of creative play, and therefore create the basis of culture.

Some insights about this issue were provided by the mothers of the girls and boys participating in the GUIC project. When asked how they would like their children to spend their time in the neighbourhood, most mothers responded in terms of their children's need for diverse opportunities for a creative life:

'Doing creative things'...'Playing, taking advantage of her childhood'...'More possibilities and spaces for leisure, like workshops, and courses. I am working in the neighbourhood to help develop these possibilities'...'I would like her to enjoy her age and not grow up too fast.'

These wise words from mothers expressed their intuitive understanding of child development. Notice too, the equal focus on play and enjoyment of life. Although living in very poor conditions, almost 30 percent of the GUIC children said they would like to live in the same place in ten years, and more that 50 percent said they felt that some places in the neighbourhood felt like they were their own. These expressions of GUIC children helped us to understand that children living in poor conditions can still have a sense of fulfilment if they live in a supportive environment where creativity is the precursor of culture.

Winnicott also questioned the conventional wisdom of putting a negative mark on 'poverty' and 'slums' — which so often stereotypes the residents negatively. He suggested that 'for a small...child a slum family may be more secure and 'good' as a *facilitating environment* than a family in a lovely house where there is an absence of the common persecutions' [by persecutions, Winnicott means 'pursuits,' or doing things together as a family].[26]

He defined a 'holding environment' as a necessary condition for healthy psychosocial development and offered what can be called an ecological conception extending from mother's arms to locality and beyond. In Winnicott's words, 'One can discern a series — the mother's body, the mother's arms, the parental relationship, the home, the family including cousins and near relations, the school, the locality with its police stations,

the county with its laws.'[27] Using the experience in Boca-Barracas, we have attempted to understand children's healthy development in relation to the facilitating or 'holding' environment of the family and community, and especially the influence of physical factors on its quality.

> *From the GUIC children we learned that a culturally rich neighbourhood supports healthy development and helps children gain positive identification and higher self-esteem. Conversely, creative play and free individual expression enrich the culture.*

Through creative relationships, children develop a sense of belonging and self-esteem. They acquire a resilient shield of survival which, on the one hand, comes from their environment and, on the other, is a protection against it. The Boca-Barracas environment provided rich experiential material for the children to work with, to elaborate, to differentiate themselves as individuals from both the good and the bad aspects of their surroundings ...and to understand and appreciate the difference.[28]

The 'holding environment' of the neighbourhood can be a nurturing space for expanding creativity and establishing a sense of belonging. It contains the products of collective imagination — in other words, culture. In the case of Boca-Barracas at its best, the 'holding environment' resembled the mothering role in offering a nurturing environment for child development. A GUIC mother, who had had a traumatic childhood with a violent father, expressed this combination of physical and social dimensions when comparing her childhood with her daughter's in Boca-Barracas. 'The physical environment is not better but the social and family environments are,' she said, thus acknowledging the many sides of the holding environment. Mothers intuitively understand this complexity. Answering a question about what her child would need to be successful as an adult, a mother said, 'Material and spiritual support.' She later explained that by 'spiritual' she meant emotional support, tolerant understanding and sense of companionship, rather than something provided by organised religion.

Our conclusions point to the critical importance of the holding environment of extended family and child friendly institutions (school, church, community centres) in helping children from low-income families to experience the transitional space of play and culture, and therefore to survive the lack of material resources in their lives.

Constant exposure to stable cultural expression gives children a sense of belonging and self-identity. Culture gives structure to children's identities that are constantly reflected in their relationship with their surroundings. As a child, you feel that you belong to that place and that place belongs to you. Familiar surroundings leave no doubt that you are in your place, the place that others share with you in a collective culture. In such a place, children become socially fluid and do not have to waste energy decoding strange territory. They simply enjoy living there with both its good and bad sides. In Winnicottian terms, we might consider Boca-Barracas a 'good enough' neighbourhood and a successful 'holding environment' for child development.

Our professional responsibility, then, is to find ways to conserve and create cultural richness by providing opportunities for a creative life through which families and their children can reach fulfilment as human beings. The results of the Growing Up in Cities project in Buenos Aires have taught us that the creation of revitalised 'holding environments,' where culture can develop through play, is a process that must come about through long-term systematic, participatory community development involving both children and adults. Local government members, community workers, caretakers, educators and artists will need to find ways of responding creatively to the social demands of the present day. This seems to be the path of wisdom towards a more equal, supportive and culturally rich society that supports personal growth.

ENDNOTES

1 McKendrick (1997).
2 Moore (1990).
3 Study conducted by the *Instituto Pro Buenos Aires*, coordinated by environmental expert, Daniel Luzzi. Results published in *Clarín*, 28 April 1997.
4 UNDP (1999); Korten (1995).
5 Gore and Cosco (1988, p. 27).
6 The chapters by Malone and Hasluck, Percy-Smith and Salvadori in this volume document the trend towards restriction of children's spatial freedom, as does Hillman and Adams (1992). See also Moore (1997) for a recent review of the issue.
7 Don Bosco was an Italian priest who came to Argentina in the 1940s to establish a network of social institutions, including homes *(hogares)* for homeless children.
8 The children had different backgrounds. Some had no family. Others could not live at home, as was the case with Pedro and Claudio.
9 See Moore (1990).
10 *Caminito* (little walk) was a well-known place in Buenos Aires. In the 1950s a group of artists and tango composers persuaded the city to remove a disused rail line and redevelop the space as a strolling street curving diagonally across a single block. Overlooked by brightly painted houses, Caminito is a place where artists exhibit their work and tango musicians entertain passers-by. It was a favourite place for local children to hang out and enjoy watching visitors from all over the world.
11 Gulliver's Mapping is a hands-on technique developed by Japanese architect Junzo Okada and colleagues to engage resident participation in community development. Okada first brought the technique to Buenos Aires in 1994, giving an opportunity to try it out. See Driskell (2001) for full details.
12 *Murga* is a rhythmic form of street dancing for all ages, accompanied by drumming and athletic kicking-style dancing. *Murga* groups perform around carnival time with 60 to 400 dancers from individual neighbourhoods. They each have their own costume designs and colour schemes, invent their own emblems, have funny names and write their own ironic protest songs. This vital form of popular culture is very much alive in Buenos Aires.
13 The tall, steel framework structure, now abandoned, had provided the means of transporting motor vehicles across the river before the high level road bridge was built.
14 Lynch (1960).
15 *Mutuals* are a specific type of legal entity common in Argentina. *Mutual Esperanza* was a cooperative organisation dedicated to raising funds for the rehabilitation of residential buildings in La Boca. Housed on the ground floor of such a building, it provided programme space for children, families and elders.
16 'Place as a Person' was an interactive workshop designed to help participants understand the characteristics of the place where they lived through creative personification.
17 For a recent discussion of governance in the context of children's rights and urban development, see Bartlett et al (1999).
18 The moderate *Radicales*, who were already in power in the Federal Capital of Buenos Aires, under Mayor Fernando de La Rua, created an alliance with the more left-leaning *Frepaso* party. The resulting *Frente Solidario* (Solidarity Front) was created to take on the *Peronistas*, solidly ensconced under the ten-year rein of Carlos Menem. In September 1999, de La Rua was elected president of the Republic.
19 Interview conducted 24 August 1999.
20 Excellent sources for research on housing form and social contact are Cooper Marcus and Sarkissian (1986) and Van Vliet (1983).
21 Winnicott (1971, p. 100).
22 Ibid. (p100).
23 See, for example, Cobb (1977, p. 100) and Pierce (1977).
24 Huizinga (1955, p. 46).
25 A *picado* is a soccer game played by whichever players show up, usually in a vacant lot.
26 Winnicott (1971, p. 142).
27 Winnicott (1975, p. 310).
28 Vickers (1972).

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