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Eszter Jákli

*Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences, jakli.eszter@uni-mate.hu*

Anita Reith

*Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Reith.Anita@phd.uni-mate.hu*

Balázs Almási

*Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences, almasi.balazs@uni-mate.hu*

Miklós L. Pap

*Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences, papmikloslaszlo@gmail.com*

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# The role of participatory planning in designing school environments

Eszter, Jákli <sup>1</sup>, Anita, Reith <sup>1</sup>, Balázs, Almási <sup>1</sup>, Miklós L., Pap <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Institute of Landscape Architecture, Urban Planning and Garden Art*

## 1. Abstract

Child-friendly open space design and urban planning has an evolving role in the past years. Among others, this includes initiatives where participatory planning is used as a tool to understand the needs and desires of children in order to create child-friendly environments. One of the open spaces where this has a high importance, are the school environments – including public open spaces around schools as well as schoolyards. Schools and schoolyards can also be important for greenways as they can serve as important hubs in the city – gathering points for people and habitats for city flora and fauna. Connecting schools to greenways can be a child-friendly act, as it may allow students to reach the school in a safer environment.

The authors analyse several projects where participatory planning with children were used to improve the quality of open spaces in and around schools. Twelve existing projects from Hungary were studied. The paper provides an overview of the different objectives that each project set: realizing small interventions to make the environment more comfortable, designing the schoolyard together, or simply learning about the environment and strengthening identity. To reach these goals, different methods are used and thus the processes may have different results as well. The paper aims to collect, analyse and evaluate these methods in order to use them as a basis for future participatory design processes to create child-friendly public open spaces in and around schools.

## 2. Introduction

The idea of participatory planning appeared in the 1960s, when some urban planners and designers realized that instead of top-down decision-making, working with communities, understanding their perspectives and representing them in planning and design processes will help create liveable and inclusive cities (Davidoff 1965). Kevin Lynch was one of the pioneers who used participatory methods to understand people's experience in the cities (Lynch 1960), and later proposed a program called *Growing up in Cities* in which he applied similar methods with children (Lynch 1977). Unfortunately, in the 1970s there was little interest in children's perspectives, and city officials did not recognise what today is more widely accepted: "*A city good for children, is a city good for all*" (Danenberget al. 2018, 18). At the end of the next decade, in 1989, the Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted by the United Nations. Amongst others, it declares children's rights to participate in decisions that affect their lives (UNICEF, 1989). The Agenda 21 by the United Nations concludes that children need to be included in participatory processes in order to improve the environment (UN, 1992). The *Growing up in Cities* program was reinitiated by the UNESCO in 1995 (Chawla, 2001) and UNICEF (The United Nations Children's Fund) started the *Child Friendly Cities Initiative* in 1996 (Thivant, 2018), which aims to make governments support children's rights and to help them integrate children's rights into policies and programs.

Initiatives to involve children in urban planning and design are growing worldwide. These initiatives need to apply special methods and tools in order to reach the younger generations and to help them express their opinion and thus involve them in the design process. The *European Network of Child Friendly Cities* (Europe), and the *Children, Youth and Environment Network of the Environmental Design Research Association* (USA) provide platforms for professionals to share their experience and learn about child friendly practices in participation (Derr et al. 2018).

In Hungary, child-friendly initiatives and engagement of children is also evolving, however further improvement is needed. As part of the *Child Friendly City Initiative*, the *Gyermekbarát Település Program* also runs in Hungary, with so far 13 settlements that are claimed child-friendly and adapt child-friendly practices (UNICEF 2018 and 2021). KultúrAktív Association focuses on built environmental education and has been organizing several projects which aim at the education and participation of children. However, municipalities usually have fewer tools to use when designing with children (Balogh et al., 2020). In the further chapters, authors aim to analyse and present some examples from Hungary, where participatory processes have already happened in school environments, in these special locations inside the city, where child-friendliness is a must.

### 3. Background and Literature Review

Involving children in the design process and the child-friendly approach has become increasingly important in landscape and urban planning. Several projects have already happened worldwide, which can serve as a strong inspiration for Hungary and Hungarian initiatives as well. The book titled *“Placemaking with Children and Youth: Participatory Practices for Planning Sustainable Communities”* presents case studies from different countries, as well as methodological help for carrying out such projects (Derr et al. 2018). *“The City at Eye Level for Kids”* also aims to introduce initiatives that focus on child-friendly aspects and describes projects where different areas in cities were transformed into child-friendly places where kids can play and learn in safe environments, with a separate chapter revolving around participation and inclusion (Danenberget al. 2018).

In Hungary, few publications are available about the participation of children. The kultúrAktív Association run several child-friendly projects. Their projects engage children’s and youth’s involvement in different learning and design processes and are documented on their website/blog and in different project publications (kultúrAktív 2022). The book titled *“Gyerekszemmel. Építészet gyerekekkel és gyerekeknek”* (Through the eyes of children. Architecture with and for children) shares valuable knowledge, case studies and methods in this spirit (Reicher et al. 2006). The book titled *Minden térben gyerekekkel. Online és offline közösségi tervezés gyermekközösségekkel*<sup>1</sup> emphasises the importance of participatory planning with children and gives useful practical knowledge and methods to help carry out such projects (Szilágyi-Nagy and Mihály, 2021). In 2019, a collaboration between the Association and the Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Institute of Landscape Architecture, Urban Planning and Garden Art has initiated the LADDER project<sup>2</sup> which focuses on school environments and aims to create good practices in this topic, through collaboration with schools in Hungary.

Other publications with different focus also include some good practices of children’s participation.

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<sup>1</sup> With kids in all spaces.

<sup>2</sup> *Laboratórium Diákokkal a DEMokratikus környezetért*, aka Laboratory with Students for Democratic Environment

The book titled *Kívül-belül jó iskola*<sup>3</sup> deals with the shaping of indoor and outdoor spaces of schools, focusing on the aspects of pedagogy, environmental psychology, child-friendliness, participation and sustainability, in order to formulate practical guidelines in creating well-functioning, learning environments (Réti 2011). The book titled *Hogyan varázsoljunk újjá egy közteret? Kézikönyv jól működő közösségi terek létrehozásához*.<sup>4</sup> focuses on the community aspects of public open spaces, with an emphasis on participatory approach.

Dealing with the school environment, the Iskolakertekért Alapítvány<sup>5</sup> is also an important actor in the Hungarian context. Their mission is to help educational institutions run school gardening projects. As such, involving children in the design, building and maintenance of these gardens, also builds good practices in this field (Iskolakertekért Alapítvány 2022).

#### 4. Method and Data

The study presents and analyses Hungarian schoolyard renewal projects with the involvement of children. 12 projects from Hungary were analysed which were selected after several levels of research. As part of an event of the LADDER Living Lab (the kick-off meeting of the project in February 2020), authors used the “world café” method<sup>6</sup>, which itself is a participatory tool to gather existing projects from Hungary where children were involved in the shaping and design of their school environments. The results obtained from the world café were extended by a research on the internet and informal interviews with the responsables of the named projects in order to get acquainted with as many projects as possible. Based on these, the study hopes to collect the most relevant projects from Hungary in the topic of the research. Most of the studied projects were catalysed by “outsider” organizations, and did not originate from the schools themselves. However, this doesn’t mean that schools themselves do not operate such projects on their own: the book titled *“Kívül-belül jó iskola”* presents a few schools where smaller-scale participatory design or common building activities took place, but mostly these projects are not documented and shared, and as such, we have little chance to get to know them in details (Réti 2011).

The data used in the research was acquired from project documentations, books, articles and websites, as well as an online survey which was used to get to know the projects in details. The survey was used to collect information about the projects: quantitative information such as the duration of the project, number of students and teachers participated, budget, etc., and qualitative information such as goals, used methods, physical and non-physical results, biggest success and difficulties which occurred during the process. The survey operated with open-ended questions in order to get the most relevant information. Unfortunately, older projects were not reachable anymore via the survey, and authors could only rely on the information found in written documents, therefore the depth of the information vary in the studied projects.

To analyse the acquired data a qualitative comparison was carried out. The analysis focuses on the main aspects of the projects, such as their objectives, the used methods and the most important results. Different methods belong to each project which are defined by the objectives and are

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<sup>3</sup> Good school inside and out

<sup>4</sup> How to make a public space sparkle again? A handbook for creating community spaces that work well.

<sup>5</sup> Foundation for School Gardens

<sup>6</sup> a participatory tool that serves for collecting knowledge, information, ideas from the participants during a thematic discussion between the participants

partially defining the expected results as well.

## 5. Results

The authors collected 12 projects from Hungary that are pioneers in participatory design involving children (Table 1.). Although it is a relatively new approach, the first projects of collaborative schoolyard transformation already happened by the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the studied projects, foundations, NGOs, municipalities, universities and in one case an architect studio were the partners that helped carry out the projects. Funding was provided by NGOs or the operators of the school, the municipality or the church, and shows great variety which also determined the final objectives and results of each project.

The main objectives are the same in all the projects: to improve the schoolyard, however the range of transformation vary a lot. The most common goals are to make the schoolyard friendlier and more liveable for the kids, open it to the public, add new functions, or to redesign and renew it completely. Due to the different focus, the length of the projects is different as well. In many cases, it adjusts to the school year, in other cases, such as in Budaörs and Miskolc, the processes last longer than a school year, e.g. the project in Budaörs is already going on since 2 years. The projects carried out by the LADDER project in Budaörs and Miskolc are also special, because due to the pandemic, they were partly realized online (Reith et al. 2021).

All of the studied projects use a combination of methods which show great variation. The use of the methods depends on several factors: the objectives, the characteristics of the target group (age group of children, social background, etc.) of the project and the available resources (timeframe, budget and human resources – especially the knowledge of the partners). Most of the studied projects focus on the collective analysis of the site whereas others also involve children in further steps of the design process: in the design and the realization phases as well. Perhaps the most obvious method of analysis is to interview children and other stakeholders, which can be either quantitative (questionnaire) or qualitative (interview). These can be used to explore a range of issues and attitudes. In the studied projects, questionnaires were used to collect background or additional data as well as to get to know children's ideas of the place. Amongst the studied projects, those that were carried out by the school operator, so municipalities (Zalaegerszeg and Óbuda) and the church (Mosonmagyaróvár) used questionnaires (Zalamédia 2011, OBVF 2018, Építészfórum 2019) as an important analysing tool. In the case of the No.1. Primary School in Budaörs, questionnaires were used during different phases of the project: at the beginning to analyse the community and to gain some background information, and later to get to know the pupils' opinion about different design ideas. Interviews were held with the school community members of the Dr. Ámbédkar School in order to deeper understand the background of the school and the pupils, and to gain information about their expectations of the project (Reith et al. 2022). Another method of inquiry is focus group discussion, in these cases “brainstorming” activities which were used in several projects to collect and discuss ideas of different stakeholders, mainly students, but in some cases other school community members and even residents from the neighbourhood were asked as well. Brainstorming was used in different projects of the Zöldövezet Program in Inota, Miskolctapolca and Mezőnyárád (Foltányi 2008). An online roundtable discussion was held at the beginning of the process in the No. 1. Primary School in Budaörs, in order to involve as many stakeholders and local actors as possible.

Observation of users can be a way of analysing the site as well. This was an important issue in the case of the Boldog Sándor István Catholic Primary School in Mezőnyárad, where a park around the school is used not only as a schoolyard but also as a public park (Foltányi 2008).

Children's drawings are a useful tool for assessing kids' perceptions of the environment (Barraza 1999). Depending on the questions asked, different information can be obtained - more indirectly than through questionnaires - by analysing children's drawings, which can be particularly useful for younger age groups for whom it can result more difficult to express themselves in writing. Many projects used this method in order to get familiar with children's ideas and expectations of their surroundings, and later use the results to make the final designs of the site. It was used in the Ady Endre Primary School in Zalaegerszeg, in Lágymányosi Bárdos Lajos Primary School and in the No.1. Primary School in Budaörs, and was so successful that the schools organized exhibitions to display these drawings (Zalamédia 2011, Újbuda 2014). The Schoolyard Development Program in Óbuda also used this method: after filling a workbook related to the schoolyard, students were asked to create their ideal schoolyard designs (OBVF 2018). The participatory planning process of the Piarist Secondary High School in Mosonmagyaróvár also included students' drawings in the design process (Építészfórum 2019). Creating models and prototypes of the ideas of the children is strongly connected to drawings and all of the mentioned projects, apart from the schools in Óbuda, did use this method to further test and analyse ideas. In the case of the Dr. Ámbédkar School in Miskolc, prototypes were created as well, however drawings were not used here (Reith et al. 2022, Reith and Szilágyi-Nagy 2022) – the reason is probably because drawings work better with younger age groups, whereas high school children are not that open to express themselves this way.

Mental mapping also serves for understanding children's perceptions of the environment and therefore are useful tools in participatory design. Joy-sorrow maps are special kind of mental maps, where the aim is to document the values and problems, i.e. the 'joys and sorrows' of the chosen site (Vásárhelyi 1996). At the Lágymányosi Bárdos Lajos Primary School a joy-sorrow map was created about the playground near the school, by the first and fourth graders. Based on this map, children re-imagined the playground in drawings, and modelled the finished designs using various waste materials (Újbuda 2014). In the case of the Mórnicz Zsigmond High School in Szentendre, a class surveyed a part of the schoolyard through joy and sorrow mapping, which later served as a base for the collaborative design and transformation of the schoolyard (Kelemen 2019). One activity of the playful sessions organized in the No.1. Primary School in Budaörs was also similar to joy-sorrow mapping: kids had to map the schoolyard and identify the favourable and unfavourable places by taking photos of them.

Different informal educational workshops and experimental education methods were used in several projects. Normally these projects were longer processes, where a longer period of time was available to carry out the project. In many cases the objectives were also slightly different from other projects, and were not that “direct”: the aim was not “only” to renew the school environment but teaching kids about a certain topic and raising their awareness about their surroundings was equally important. In the Schoolyard Development Programme in Óbuda, workbooks were used as a tool. Besides assessing students' ideas, opinions and attitudes towards the schoolyard as a basis for community planning, the aim was also to teach students about landscape architecture (OBVF 2018). In the Safecity project which was carried out in the Vécsey János High School Dormitory in Budapest, a series of sessions were held on the topic of architectural crime prevention and many different methods were used such as drama pedagogy, scavenger hunt, creative competition, film

shooting, situational exercises, etc. which not only contributed to the participatory process, but also transmitted important knowledge to children about the topic (Reith et al. 2019). The process in the No. 1. Primary School in Budaörs is also a long process that is still ongoing. After the collective analysis of the community and different stakeholders, collecting the pupils' ideas in the form of drawings and models, the analysis of these accumulated materials also happened with the involvement of the children. Voting sessions and a board game called Urbanity was used to generate more discussion about the ideas between the children. The aim of the project here, besides creating more child-friendly open spaces in the school, is also to make the students more aware of their environments, help them express their ideas and practice democratic decision making in the school. At the Dr. Ámbédkar School in Miskolc similar goals were set, however, the context is different: this school aims to help disadvantaged youngsters graduating from high school. In line with this, it was essential to teach students how to take care of the school environment and to show them how to participate in democratic processes in their own environment. Common visioning and priority setting was made through a technique called “nominal group technique” and voting, which defined the main objective of the participatory process itself which later utilised several informal educational methods and community building actions to realize the set goals (Reith et al 2022, Reith and Szilágyi-Nagy 2022).

There is a difference of approach in the involvement of children in the studied projects. All of the projects involve children at the beginning of the design process: getting to know the community, the site, the subject of the design process, however designing the school environment itself is a different issue. Some of the studied projects do not involve children in the design phase, and adults – landscape architects, or in other cases teachers and parents decide and design based on the information they got from the children and other school community members. In the Safecity Project in Vécsey János High School Dormitory and in Móricz Zsigmond Secondary High School, students were involved in the design decisions and ideas were created together (Szilágyi-Nagy 2019, Kelemen 2019). In the No.1. Primary School in Budaörs and Dr. Ámbédkar School in Miskolc, students were also involved and could vote on their favourite interventions to be implemented (Reith et al 2022, Reith and Szilágyi-Nagy 2022). Despite the fact that the school environment was designed by professionals, in the Piarist High School in Mosonmagyaróvár and in the Aquincum Primary School, children could vote on their favourite design, which was further developed by the architects/landscape architects (Építészfórum 2019, OBVF 2018). Similarly, children are sometimes involved in the realization and sometimes not, although involving them in the building and maintenance has many benefits and serve as an educational tool as well, amongst others it helps raising children's sense of responsibility and identity. Those projects where professional designs were created at the end are typically the ones where the whole schoolground was renewed. Therefore, a higher budget was available and kids were not involved in the building process, as in the case of the schools in Zalaegerszeg, Óbuda, and Mosonmagyaróvár (Zalamédia 2019, OBVF 2018, Építészfórum 2019) and the playground around Lágymányosi Bárdos Lajos Primary School. However, in the rest of the studied projects, children were involved in the building process and many times they also play an important role in the maintenance.

**Table 1. Studied projects**

Project name	Year	School	Partner organization	Objectives	Main methods	Main results
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Zöldövezet program	2007	Inotai Általános Iskola, Várpalota	Inotai Iskolásokért Alapítvány	to improve the schoolyard with new functions, to open it to the public	brainstorming - collecting ideas in a "wish-box"	planting, cleaning up, building activities: green classroom, family corner, outdoor kitchen, with students and residents
Zöldövezet program	2007-08	Miskolc-tapolcai Általános Iskola	Miskolc-Tapolcai Iskoláért Alapítvány	to improve the schoolyard, create an open air classroom	brainstorming	planting and building with students, maintenance by students
	2011	Ady Endre Primary School, Zalaegerszeg	Város-gazdálkodási Ltd.	redesign the schoolyard with the involvement of students	questionnaire, children's drawings and models about dream schoolyard	exhibition of drawings, professional landscape design
Zöldövezet program	2011	Boldog Sándor István Catholic Primary School, Mezőnyárad	Mezőnyárádi Gyermekéért Közhasznú Alapítvány	to improve the schoolyard which is also a public park	observations with students, brainstorming (collecting and discussing ideas)	professional landscape design, community building, maintenance by students
	2014	Lágymányosi Bárdos Lajos Általános Iskola		to generate ideas about the playground near the school	joy-sorrow mapping, drawings, creating models	exhibition at the university (Faculty of Landscape Architecture), playground is built
Schoolyard Development Program	2017	Bárzsi Géza Primary School, Budapest	Óbuda-Békásmegyer Urban Development Nonprofit Ltd.	redesign the schoolyard with the involvement of the school community	questionnaire, voting, workbook for kids; children's drawings about "dream schoolyard"	raising awareness about landscape architecture, professional landscape design, physical renewal of schoolyard
Schoolyard Development Program	2018	Aquincum Primary School, Budapest	Óbuda-Békásmegyer Urban Development Nonprofit Ltd. and Szent István University, Faculty of Landscape Architecture	redesign the schoolyard with the involvement of the school community and university students	questionnaire, voting, workbook for kids; kids drawings about "dream schoolyard"	raising awareness about landscape architecture, university students experience a real participatory project, schoolyard designs made by university students and final design by a professional, physical renewal of schoolyard
Safety	2018-19	Vécsey János High School Dormitory, Budapest	kultúrAktív Association	to teach students about architectural crime prevention, to create safer school environment	sessions on the topic, experiential education methods e.g. dramapedagogy, situational exercises, etc.	renovation of interior and exterior spaces with students a publication about methods

Inspires	2018-19	Móricz Zsigmond Secondary High School, Szentendre	ESSRG Research Group	to create a vegetable garden and other recreational functions and to carry out a human-nature relationship	joy-sorrow mapping, collaborative school garden design and maintenance	community building and initiatives to develop other areas in the schoolyard integration to the curriculum improvement in teacher-student and student-student relations, and in students' attitudes towards the environment
	2019	Piarist Secondary High School, Mosonmagyaróvár	CAN Architects	design a new school complex with the involvement of students, teachers, families	essays, drawings, conversations, questionnaires, workshops where prototypes were built and analysed with future users, voting	4 different designs were made by the architects, the most suitable according to the needs of the stakeholders was selected
Ladder project	2020-	Budaörs, No.1. Primary School	Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences and kultúrAktív Association	making the schoolyard more liveable with the involvement of students	mapping the schoolyard, ideal schoolyard - drawings and models, voting	exhibition of drawings, selecting best ideas
Ladder project	2020-22	Dr. Ámbédkar School, Miskolc	Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences and kultúrAktív Association	making the schoolyard and dormitory garden more liveable involving students, awareness raising	collective analysis, interviews, common visioning and goal setting, creating prototype, voting, building together	cleaning up the schoolyard building activities (edible garden, sculpture, school building beautification), publication about cooperation and main methods

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

Applying participatory methods in transforming and renewing school environments is beneficial for many reasons. Besides helping in creating child-friendly designs, they also have the potential to strengthen the school community, increase the sense of responsibility and identity of children, improve democratic skills of students and tighten their connection to the environment and nature. It is obvious that the results are never only physical but non-physical as well which are equally important. New methodological tools, raising awareness on different issues and long term effects are significant in many of the studied projects. It is not unique that the project itself worked as a catalyst of future development and changes. The students in Móricz Zsigmond Secondary High School initiated new developments in the schoolyard, based on the success of the school garden project. The community of the Dr. Ámbédkar School felt empowered after the intensive program with landscape architect students, and with the help of other organizations continued the activities

in the spirit of the project: a sculpture made by the students was placed temporarily and the renovation of the roof has started as well (Reith and Szilágyi-Nagy 2022).

The studied projects prove that participation of children in designing their environment is an important and at the same time rewarding task for today's designers. Regardless of the abilities and possibilities, with willingness a lot can be achieved – both in the short and the long term. Based on these we can state with confidence that the participation of children is beneficial from both the children's and the investor's point of view. The studied methods of involving the children can be used widely in other projects in which this age group is targeted, regardless of the environment itself: school environment or the street where they live, Hungary or abroad. Methods and attitudes can always be improved and new solutions may evolve from the already known tools, however these can serve as a base toolkit to use in similar contexts.

Regarding participatory projects, the question of sustainability and continuity is an important issue. The participatory design process is never only about the design itself but also about transferring a new way of thinking about hearing the voice of the unheard, and keeping in mind the necessities of children. Thus it can only be the beginning and new attitudes and practices in daily life need to follow the process, in order to maintain the results and keep evolving. Future research should be concluded on how to ensure that the community continues the process and keeps the newly developed practices while also implementing new ones, after the design process is finished and they are back to “normal”.

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