People's perceptions of places

The excerpts below provide ideas and information for you to reflect on. They aim to support you to undertake meaningful inquiries where you can devise your own questions for local fieldwork or for investigations about how people perceive places in other parts of the world.

Children and planning

In the City of the Blue Mountains, primary school children were encouraged to participate in urban planning. They were asked to imagine that they were adults in 2025 and write a story about their home and their place. The most important issues that the children wrote about were traffic, the spread of urban development, places to play, protection of the natural environment and the ability to keep pets. The latter was particularly important because the City of the Blue Mountains abuts a national park (Cunningham, Jones & Dillon 2003).

Living in flats

In Sydney, some 88 500 children lived in flats across the city in 2006, or 11 per cent of all children in Sydney at this time (Woolcock, Gleeson & Randolph 2010, p.184). How would these young people have different perceptions of their urban environment compared to those young people living in the City of the Blue Mountains?

Far from nature

Young people growing up in cities are often deprived of contact with the biophysical environment. A Singapore-based study contrasted the experience of an older inhabitant (who grew up in a village where she swam in the river and caught spiders) to the life of young people in contemporary Singapore. A geographer explained that the only way that these young people were likely to have close contact with nature would be if they had spent some years overseas (Kong 2000, pp. 266–267).

Reading the graffiti

UK teacher educator, Clare Brooks, recalls taking a group of Year 10 students to examine a local place. She took the students to a run-down part of town that had high crime rates and was, in her opinion, in need of redevelopment. Much to the teacher's surprise, the students read the graffiti and revealed that the area was comparatively safe and that there was a strong sense of community. The dialogue between the students and teacher unearthed new understandings about this place.

Gendered places

Some studies from the 1980s revealed that girls' leisure activities were much more restricted than boys. These young women were not permitted to take up motorbike riding nor hang out in the streets. They were much more likely to be supervised by their parents. (Valentine, Skelton & Chambers 1998). How might gender affect perceptions of place?

Different mental maps

The historic city of Mechelen in Belgium contains ten high schools that attract students from a large hinterland. The teenagers that visited the city centre had different perceptions of this place. The mental maps and spatial cognition of teenagers who went to school in outlying areas were largely confined to the city park near the main shopping area. Those students who commuted to school had mental maps that centred on the railway and bus stations – favourite teenage 'hangouts'. The teenagers that lived close to school were very familiar with the places that the other two groups frequented but they also frequented public places near school – the city park, several town squares, the waterfront and bridges, supermarkets, food shops, and secret or hidden places (Vanderstede 2011).

Spatial exclusion

Another study from the 1980s, from South Australia, described the ways in which young people were discouraged and even evicted from shopping malls. The perception of the shoppers, shopkeepers and security guards was that young people were not welcome in these places (Valentine, Skelton & Chambers 1998).

The role of the media

A study of young people's perceptions of urban places taken from England, Finland, the Netherlands and the USA revealed that the media culture had a strong influence on people's representations of place. These mediated images of the city tended to emphasise urban problems reflecting the negative undertone of the news media and the tendency for TV series and films to portray more dystopian aspects of city life. The young people's perceptions were also greatly influenced by places of consumption and leisure (Beneker, Sanders, Tani & Taylor 2010). Both ideas offer opportunities for inquiry and fieldwork.

Contested places

A group of Australian geographers described Newcastle, NSW, as: 'a contested place where "male, blue-collar and Anglo-centric narratives" are the hegemonic discourses of this place; and where Aboriginal, non-Anglo-Celtic, indigenous and women's voices are silenced' (Hutchinson 2012, p. 40).

Another geographer explored the perceptions of residents from seven suburbs in the inner area of Newcastle concerning what makes a good neighbourhood for children. Public-housing tenants lived among some of the most expensive housing in the city in one suburb but the neighbourhood was regarded as a 'bad' place to raise children due to perceptions of the inappropriate behaviour of both adults and children (Mee 2010, p. 198).

Indigenous eyes

Primary students from Brisbane's inner city suburb of Fortitude Valley were encouraged to explore their place using ICT resources. They walked through the suburb gathering material using digital and disposable cameras, sketchbooks and notepads. They constructed annotated e-collages as webpages reflecting their particular representation of the Valley seen through the eyes of these predominantly Murri children (Hutchinson 2012, p. 41).

Residents and visitors

Another study from Knoxville, Tennessee showed that the perception of the built environment of a place varied considerably, depending on whether the people interviewed were permanent residents or visitors to the city. The respondents were asked to assess what they liked and disliked visually. The residents thought the industrial areas needed improvement but the visitors most disliked the billboards and signs (Golledge & Stimson 1997).

Home on the street

The word 'casa' in Portuguese signifies both 'a house' and 'to feel at home'. Street kids, particularly males, from Salvador, Bahia (Brazil's third-most-populous city) treat the streets of the city centre as their workplace, their place of economic survival and their home. They prefer to live on the streets of the wealthy suburbs where the tourists come. By way of contrast, 'The Brazilian middle-class children grow up "behind bars" in their closed condominiums and spend most of their time inside of private homes, private schools, and semi-public commercial playgrounds and shopping centres, always under adult supervision' (Ursin 2011, p. 225).

Street literacy

A survey of British children aged from 10 to 12 years revealed that a third of the respondents described the city centre as 'dangerous' and 20 per cent of them described the place as 'violent'. The children that showed the most unease lived out of town. This suggests that city children had developed a kind of 'street literacy'. They had learned to relate better to the inner city (Freeman & Tranter 2011, p. 101).

Real fear of crime

A study from Gateshead, in north-east England, suggested that teenage children's fear of places were grounded in reality. Young people reported instances of victimisation, including violent crime and harassment that reflected their fear of crime. Girls in particular had the highest levels of fear despite the fact that they were less likely to be victimised (Freeman & Tranter 2011, p. 25).

Safe suburbs to hang out in

In Belgrade, Serbia, where many people are materially poor, the housing estates were deemed to be comparatively safe for young people. This was attributed to the lack of mobility among the Serbian people that had contributed to a supportive sense of community. Young people were given a great deal of autonomy, free to roam from place-to-place, to select friends and acquaintances, develop social networks that act as 'safety nets' against perceived risks in the community (Tomanovic & Petrovic 2010).

Focusing on the journey

In Vancouver, British Colombia, a Filipino maid tried to establish a sense of home, a sense of place in her tiny live-in room, but her view of the city was a truncated one. She travelled across the city to fetch the family's shopping but had a kind of 'tunnel vision' of the places around her. She focused on the journey rather than the complexities of the surrounding city.

Learning from others

In Beijing, a geography teacher is engrossed, absorbing the sights and sounds of the journey across the city, while his companions, a group of art teachers, are preoccupied with thoughts about the destination – a street famous for its shops displaying Chinese artworks. Later, the geography teacher's perception of the city is enhanced as he learns much about Chinese art.

A safe spot

A study of a medium-sized town in south-east England revealed that one in three 16–24-year-old Asian and Afro-Caribbean males and Asian females were unemployed. Many of the Asian young people (Muslims of Pakistani background) lived in old terraced housing near the centre of town. The young people felt safe there, protected by their community, but other young people explained that they would not feel safe there at night (Watt & Stensen 1998).

Magical memories

Tourists are intrigued by their encounters with cities that are full of pedestrians and vibrant city life. They are overwhelmed by memories of place. They bring back perceptions of Venice, Copenhagen or Prague as places 'where the diffused rays of many separate beams of life fall into focus' (Mumford 2004, p. 16).

Places for special people

In Copenhagen, vision impaired people are encouraged to engage with places throughout the city. The entrance hall of the main railway station is made accessible to vision impaired people by laying new flagstones and there are different surface marks along the railway platform edges. Inside the new Centre of the Danish Association of the Blind, the vibrations of the beechwood parquet floors can be felt by deaf people. Outside, scented plants make it easier for vision impaired people to find their way (Golledge & Stimson 1997, p. 50).

Resources

Beneker, T., Sanders, R., Tani, S. & Taylor, L. (2010). Picturing the city: Young people's representations of urban environments. *Children's Geographies 8(2),* pp.123–140.

Brooks, C. & Morgan, A. (2006). *Theory into practice: Cases and places.* Sheffield: Geographical Association.

Cunningham. C., Jones, M. & Dillon, R. (2003). Children and urban regional planning: Participation in the public consultation process through story writing. *Children's Geographies 1*(2), pp. 201–221.

Freeman, C. and Tranter, P. (2011). Children's *urban environments: Changing worlds.* London: Earthscan.

Golledge, R. & Stimson, R. (1997). *Spatial behaviour: A geographic perspective.* London: The Guildford Press.

Hutchinson, N. (2012). Place Writing: narratives, experience and identities. *Geography Bulletin 44*(1), pp. 32–47.

Kong, L. (2000). Nature's dangers, nature's pleasures. In S. Holloway & G. Valentine (Eds.) *Children's Geographies: Playing, living, learning.* London: Routledge.

Mee, K. (2010). 'Any place to raise children is a good place': Children, housing and neighbourhoods in inner Newcastle, Australia. *Children's Geographies 8*(2), pp.193–211.

Mumford, L. (2004). Cities and the crisis of civilization. In S. Wheeler and T. Beatley (Eds.). *The sustainable development reader.* London: Routledge, pp. 15–19.

Tomanovic, S. & Petrovic, M. (2010). Children's and parents' perspectives on risks and safety in three Belgrade neighbourhoods. *Children's Geographies 8*(2), pp. 141–156.

Ursin, M. (2011). 'Wherever I lay my head is home' – young people's experience of home in the Brazilian street environment. *Children's Geographies 9*(2), pp. 221–234.

Valentine, G., Skelton, T. & Chambers, D. (1998). Cool places: An introduction to youth and youth cultures. In T. Skelton & G. Valentine. *Cool places: Geographies of youth culture.* London: Routledge.

Vanderstede, W. (2011). 'Chilling' and 'hopping' in the 'teenage space network': Explorations in teenagers' geographies in the city of Mechelen. *Children's Geographies 9*(2), pp.167–184.

Watt, P. & Stenson, K. (1998). The street: It's a bit dodgy around there. Danger, ethnicity and young people's use of public space. In T. Skelton & G. Valentine. *Cool places: Geographies of youth culture.* London: Routledge.

Woolcock, G., Gleeson, B. & Randolph, B. (2010). Urban research and child-friendly cities: A new Australian outline. *Children's Geographies 8*(2), pp. 177–192.