"Stop the Child Murder": How a grassroots movement for children's safety formed a new paradigm in urban design

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Abstract: Dutch cities are nowadays considered among the most pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly in the world. However, back in 1971, pedestrian deaths by motor vehicles had reached record levels, with 3,300 people dead, 500 of whom were children. Following the tragic death of his young daughter in such an accident, a journalist wrote a polemical article, entitled "Stop the Child Murder", which became a national sensation. With the same motto, in the densely populated district of De Pijp in Amsterdam, a group of children organized themselves to demand safer streets and to claim open space for play instead for car parking. In a documentary filmed locally, we watch children actively claiming their rights, putting up barricades to exclude motor traffic, standing up to adults expressing opposite opinions. Soon after, many local streets in De Pijp were transformed into "*woonerven*" (living streets), where children can move around safely and play in the proximity of their houses, thus setting the norm in the Netherlands. In the paper this historical case of a grassroots movement successfully instigating institutional change is critically presented in order to understand its local specificities and to extract useful lessons about the tools, agents and methodology of community-based urban transformation.

Keywords: children's right to the city; children's activism; *woonerf*; livable street paradigm

Introduction

Active participation of citizens in the shaping of urban space, in the sense of political grassroots movements (Castells, 1983), of collaborative planning (Healey, 1997) and in the various forms of more recent participatory approaches, such as place making (Palermo and Ponzini, 2014) or tactical urbanism or handmade urbanism (Rosa and Weiland, 2013), is at the core of human-centered urban design and planning. The history of people-centered urbanism is abundant in examples of bottom-up processes that have contributed to a paradigm shift in the physical design of cities. From the story of Aldo van Eyck's playgrounds in postwar Amsterdam which constitutes an extraordinary case of participatory democratic process (Lefaivre and de Roode, 2002) to the opposition movement against the dissolution of historic neighborhoods in downtown Manhattan led by Jane Jacobs, which she eloquently describes in her seminal work (Jacobs, 1960) to the preservation of the Highline in downtown Manhattan (Lopate, 2011) and its transformation into a vibrant public space, the catalyst of change has been the people: citizens, residents or users who organized themselves and succeeded in disrupting top-down practices, claiming their right to the city (Lefebvre, 1968) in the most concrete and physical sense. It is an important lesson to be learnt for urban planners and designers: against a deterministic urban model, often based on aged regulations and ways of thinking, citizens provide an innovative perspective, unveiling real, everyday needs and pointing to flaws in dominant models of production of urban space (Rosa and Weiland, 2013). This is

the framework for the discussion of the story of the mainstreaming of the *woonerf* concept in the Netherlands as it took place in the early 1970's, as a result of a nation-wide campaign for the safety of children from traffic and their right to use the streets as public space. The *woonerf* concept soon became a street model in urban design (Ben-Joseph, 1995) and was replicated in many other parts of the world; it is known in English-speaking countries as home zone (Biddulph, 2001). In the paper, the importance of the bottom-up movement that led to the widespread adopting of the *woonerf* in the Netherlands and to the subsequent state regulation, is presented both as a positive and optimistic case of a successful cooperation among the various stakeholders (residents, professional planners and designers, municipal and state authorities) when a direct and urgent demand was made by the users of urban space themselves, and as a specific instance that showcases the transformative power of a movement that "put children first" as well as the inherent dynamism of children-city relationship (Katsavounidou, 2012).

The story of the *woonerf*; daring to challenge the car

In most European countries, we nowadays live in a historical period in which, thankfully, policy makers and citizens alike have come to the realization that car traffic is not compatible with a vibrant city for people. But this has been a very slow and time-consuming change of mentality: in the 1960's the challengers of the widely-accepted domination of the car in urban space were few and marginalized. The French Situationists were among the pioneers; in the article entitled "Situationist theses on traffic", from 1959, Guy Debord prophetically points out:

> *It is not a matter of opposing the automobile as an evil in itself. It is its extreme concentration in the cities that has led to the negation of its function. Urbanism should certainly not ignore the automobile, but even less should it accept it as a central theme. It should reckon on gradually phasing it out. In any case, we can envision the banning of auto traffic from the central areas of certain new complexes, as well as from a few old cities.* (Debord, 1959)

A few other voices opposing the car-oriented urban development model that was prevalent at the time included Jane Jacobs (1958; 1960) and the great thinker Lewis Mumford, who, in his essay "The American way of dying", wrote about the car, the "sacred cow" of America as he called it:

> *Some of the critics have dared to say that the Sacred Cow of the American Way of Life is overfed and bloated; that the daily milk she supplies is poisonous; that the pasturage this species requires wastes acres of land that could be used for more significant human purposes; and that the vast herds of sacred cows, allowed to roam everywhere, like their Hindu counterparts, are trampling down the vegetation, depleting wild life, and turning both urban and rural areas into a single smudgy wasteland, whose fancy sociological name is Megalopolis.* (Mumford, 1966)

Despite, however, critiques such as Mumford's, the overarching climate of the era was that of an almost unanimous acceptance of the car as a permanent feature in city centers. Therefore, the case of Delft in late 1960's arose as a true beacon for change, challenging as it did the design of the typical street and subverting the overall-accepted premise that, since cars were introduced to cities, streets "belonged" to them. It is the first time indeed that what Donald Appleyard (1980) calls "street dwellers' rights" were put forth:

- The street as a sanctuary: streets should be safe for all pedestrians and bicyclists, especially children;
- The street as a livable, healthy environment, free of excess noise and polluted air caused by motor vehicles;

- The street as a community, serving as the common space where neighbors can engage in common actions;
- The street as a neighborly territory, enhancing the sense of belonging, pride and responsibility;
- The street as a place for play and learning: children should be able to use street space for spending time outdoors, and should have the freedom to roam safely in their neighborhood;
- The street as a green and pleasant land, where elements of nature can be incorporated in the physical design, providing relief from the grayness of the city; and finally
- The street as a unique historic place, with its own history and embedded with people's memories.

The Delft case is telling in the respect that these parameters where initially put forth in the form of demands made by residents to the city, but soon became an academic issue in the planning field. The local call for action was supported theoretically by Nick de Boer, Professor of Urban Planning at Delft University of Technology. De Boer especially emphasized the importance of street space for the well-being of children. Especially in lower-income neighborhoods, play areas were very scarce, and therefore the street space was extremely valuable in that respect. He presented solid arguments that streets should be redesigned in a way that would allow the co-existence of cars and people, thus allowing for people's activities to take place while the car could go through, nonetheless as a mere "guest" in the street (Ben-Joseph, 1995). Thus the idea of the *woonerf* ("residential yard") was formed, materialized in terms of physical design to give the impression of a "yard", thus psychologically influencing car drivers to slow down and be careful; the street became the in-between living space for the people (see Image 1). The three most important design features of the Delft *woonerf* were the following:

1. Sidewalks and roadways were integrated into a continuous, shared surface
2. The linearity of the street was replaced with a winding layout for the car path
3. With the active participation of the residents, front gardens, trees, planters and benches were introduced.

Image 1. A typical *woonerf* in Delft, as it is today. Source: https://www.humankind.city/2015/12/woonerf-inclusive-and-livable-dutch-street/

In retrospect, one can argue that the *woonerf* idea re-attributed to the street the attributes that characterized it for centuries of human habitation, before the advent of the car: the street had always been a communal space, a neighborly territory, a place for play (Gehl, 1987). Its historic function is still evident in many pre-modern examples, such as medieval Italian or Greek towns and villages, continuously inhabited to this day. While, however, in Italy and Greece in the 1960's and 1970's, historic urban centers were ruined and marred by congestion and pollution, the little town of Delft was showing that a return to the primordial function of the street as a livable environment was indeed possible.

***Stop de Kindermoord*"; a grassroots movement for children's safety from traffic**

By late 1960's the idea of the *woonerf* had already started to take shape, as described above, albeit in a small and scale – it was only implemented for the redesign of a few streets in residential districts of Delft. It was not tested in more dense and compact parts of cities or in streets with heavier traffic. In the Netherlands at that time, most cities were not at all pedestrian- or bicycle-friendly. In fact, in the year 1972 casualties by motor vehicles in Dutch cities had reached a tragic record: 3,264 deaths and about 70.000 injuries. Among the dead, 457 were children under the age of fifteen (Feddes and de Lange, 2019). A year before, the six-year-old daughter of Vic Langenhoff, a journalist, had died in such an accident. After this tragic death, Langenhoff ran a series of articles on national newspaper De Tijd, entitled "*Stop de Kindermoord*" – or "Stop the Child Murder". "One of the 3000 people who died in traffic accidents in 1971 was my youngest child, who was 6 years old. She was on her way to school when she was hit by a car coming around a blind bend at full speed", he wrote, and emphasized that "our society will never be just until a child can spontaneously run to meet his or her father without risking being run over by a car" (Feddes and de Lange, 2019).

Langenhoff's articles caused a sensation throughout the country and were the source for the "*Stop de Kindermoord*" initiative across the Netherlands, which resonated strongly in the capital, Amsterdam. The Dutch society more and more agreed that something had to be done to stop the main cause of needless deaths: the automobile. Maartjie van Putten, a then 23-year old mother, and one of the leaders of the movement, said in an interview about that era: "Automobile traffic in Amsterdam had increased dramatically. On our street there was a primary school and children were run over frequently. When I saw Langenhoff's article I thought: my God, what kind of society are we creating?" (London Cycling Campaign). People's reaction took the form of active protest, picket marches, and activist demonstrations (like the powerful message evoked through the site installation of 150 white crosses that symbolized the deaths by motor vehicles – see Image 2). Families took the streets to claim a safer and more children-friendly environment for the city dwellers (Image 3). One of the most remarkable protests took place outside Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum were the participants laid down with their bicycles pretending to be dead.

Image 2. “150 deaths per month” - Installation for raising awareness over the fatal role of cars in urban districts. Source: https://lcc.org.uk//pages/holland-in-the-1970s

Image 3. “Stop the Child Murder” protests in the Netherlands in 1972. Source: https://lcc.org.uk//pages/holland-in-the-1970s

These intense campaigns throughout the country, under the “Stop the Child Murder” motto, created an impetus for institutional change, as well. Quite soon, people’s demands were heard very seriously by government and municipal authorities. A national official committee was formed and state transport advisors in fact visited Delft to see how the *woonerf* principle worked in situ and how it could be implemented as a rule in street design. A few year\s later, in 1976, Dutch street design legislation integrated these principles and defined the specific design requirements of the *woonerf* (Ben-Joseph, 1995):

- Pedestrians may use the full width of the roads within a woonerf; playing is also permitted on the roadway
- The impression that the highway is divided into a separate roadway for motor vehicles and a footpath should be avoided
- Features should be introduced which will restrict the speed of all types of vehicles

- Drivers within a *woonerf* may not drive faster than at walking pace

Thus the idea of the "living street", the street as a space first and foremost for people and then for the movement of vehicles, became an institutional reality. The *woonerf* principles have since then been introduced, in variations, in the design codes of the UK, the US, Israel, and Japan (Ben-Joseph, 1995; Biddulph, 2001). "Putting people first" is the common denominator of the various forms of "calmed traffic" streets, as the sign of the woonerf explicitly shows – see Image 4.

Image 4. The *woonerf* sign. Source: https://www.humankind.city/2015/12/woonerf-inclusive-and-livable-dutch-street/

"Aren't we entitled to a play street?": what happens when children are really being heard

From the advent of the modern era, one could say that children in city centers are a paradox merely by being present. The child, as conceptualized in the modern society, is the epitome of the vulnerable, and the dense city center is the incarnation of all ills: the stressful rhythms, the anonymity of the crowd, the lack of community, the scarcity of nature and open spaces, the increased criminality – all attributes of the stereotypical image of the downtown seem to be on the antipode of the ideal conditions for a child to be raised. This stereotype is indeed the basis for the predominant choice of suburban living – and suburban expansion of cities – that has characterized western urban civilization for most of the second half of the twentieth century. There have been different voices, however, putting forth a different, much more inclusive conceptualization of childhood: children need the city psychologically and socially as much as the city needs them (Ward, 1978; Dolto 1990).

In the case of postwar Amsterdam, which is quite typical of western European cities, urban planning experts and administrators alike assumed that families wanted to escape the historic center – who would want to raise children in the mixed-use, densely built, bustling center, when spacious new housing estates were built in the suburbs? The reality is that many people preferred to stay in the city, and even new families settled there in the baby boom generation.

A penetrating film of the era is Roeland Kerbosch's *Namens de kinderen van de Pijp* ("On behalf of the children of the Pijp"), which aired on Dutch television on March 16, 1972 and created a strong wave towards a reassessment of how city space should be used and by whom. In the film we watch a group of children living in De Pijp, a district of 40,000 inhabitants at the time, in central Amsterdam. The everyday environment where the children live, as we see it in the background, is a dense, mixed-use typical 19th century urban fabric, with multi-storey apartment lining fairly narrow streets, with shops on the ground level. Streets are used for parking and vehicular circulation, while narrow sidewalks are where people are confined to.

Image 5. Scene from the film *Namens de kinderen van de Pijp* ("On behalf of the children of the Pijp") (1972). Source: https://bicycledutch.wordpress.com/2013/12/12/amsterdam-children-fighting-cars-in-1972/

The child protagonist, however, is seen walking in the middle of the street, claiming his right to use street space (see Image 5): he complains about the fact that his neighborhood has no open spaces, trees or greenery, like the suburbs, but it has "a great school" and he has many good friends. In an essay assignment for school, the children discuss the conditions of their neighborhood and put down the problem quite plainly: "All these cars are unbearable; there is no space left"; they emphasize that cars cause accidents and air pollution. So we watch the children forming an advocacy group, asking passersby to sign their petition to the city officials to close two streets from traffic and create "play streets" instead. The adults' reactions are telling of the conflict: while many people stand by the children, there are some who are resistant to change: "You cannot ever close a street; streets are for traffic", they proclaim. Others diminish the agency of minors: "Ten, twenty children can't do anything!". Indeed, when children meet with city officials (see Image 6), they get many promises but nothing happens: "You keep asking but if the city doesn't act, you have to do things yourself", the hero of the film says on camera. And this is what they do: they put up barricades to close the streets to traffic, they bring their toys and play in the middle of the road, they ride their bicycles and roller skates, they sing and chant "Get these cars out of the way, we want to play!"

Image 6. The children of the Pijp meet the Aldermen. Source: https://lcc.org.uk//pages/holland-in-the-1970s

We also watch a community meeting, during which adults stand by children's demands, stressing out that "this is much more important [than playgrounds], more important than political talk". The children and the parents are not curbed by violent reactions (one driver knocks down the barricade and they put it up again and again). "That's how you campaign! Show what's wrong and how it can be better. And then the city will follow", the child says.

The impact of the film on raising awareness of children's rights to safe and healthy streets cannot be overstated. In a newspaper comment the next day of its airing, a critic wrote: "This film moved me deeply. The situation for the children living in this slowly decaying neighbourhood was portrayed in a beautiful way through their own eyes. Amsterdam alderman Han Lammers had a tough time with them although they just want to play like their parents could. It won't be easy to close down streets to traffic as was revealed by the scene with the enraged driver who turned violent at the adults who helped the children with closing the street." (from the Leeuwarder Courant 17th March 1972 as quoted in Bicycle Dutch). As a matter of fact, however, many streets were actually turned into *woonerven* that same year (1972), including Hemonystraat, the very street where the children had protested in – and it still remains so today, as shown in Image 7.

Image 7. Hemonystraat, one of the streets that the children of the Pijp fought for, as it is today. Source: https://bicycledutch.wordpress.com/2013/12/12/amsterdam-children-fighting-cars-in-1972/

Conclusions

The story of the "Stop the child murder" movement in the 1970's Netherlands is at the same time paradigmatic and exceptional. The uniqueness of it lies in the cultural specificities of the Dutch society, its long tradition of civil society, and the high value it attributes to the concept of play. This is shown diachronically, from the famous painting "Children's Games" by Peter Bruegel the Elder (1560) – which shows a Dutch townscape where adults and children alike play all kinds of games – to the co-creation of the constellation of playgrounds (more than eight hundred) in Amsterdam after World War II, designed by Aldo Van Eyck, instigated by hundreds of letters of citizens to the municipality (Lefaivre and De Roode, 2002). In the Dutch mentality, play is considered the quintessential entitlement of children, while at the same time children are respected as citizens and their participation in decision making is considered a given. These fundamental cultural aspects undoubtedly played a major role in the success of this grassroots movement, but probably are not easily reproduced, given the fact that not many societies share them.

Apart from this exceptionality, however, the "Stop the child murder" movement is typical in the sense that is yet one more case of children's empowering role in urban transformation. Two other such cases of a dynamic involvement of children in city matters come from quite diverse cultures – Brasil and Albania. In the first case, the former mayor of Curitiba, Jaime Lerner, a pioneer in implementing people-friendly practices in his city, literally "used" children to make the case that streets do not belong to the cars: back in 1971, when Rua Quinze, a central street in Curitiba, was turned into a pedestrian mall, a group of motorists had organized a demonstration that was supposed to go through the street. Lerner enlisted hundreds of children who on the same morning of the scheduled demonstration swarmed the mall, armed with paper and crayons and "occupied" it, thus turning the motorists away: it was quite an "unbreachable defense" (Freeman and Tranter, 2011: 194). In the case of Tirana, Albania, the major Erion Veliaj, since he was elected in 2015, has been implementing many children-friendly measures, including creating a significant number of new playgrounds and parks, but has also been cooperating with children to show that the city has to change towards a more sustainable development: children's bicycle marches are organized to claim the need to restrict car traffic and children are trained in recycling practices at school, and subsequently train their parents at home (Veliaj, 2017).

One should point out, however, that these two instances of children's involvement are more top-down than bottom-up. In that respect, the Dutch case, especially the case of the children's advocacy group in De Pijp, is truly revolutionary: it showcases the power of children as active agents, their unique way of seeing urban issues in a pragmatic and practical way, their determination and inventiveness. For bottom-up process around the world, it is therefore important to take into serious consideration the innovative character that children's perspectives can dynamically bring about: children's ideas and energetic participation can be instrumental for change, both in the collective mentality and in institutions. Interestingly enough, when involved actively in such practices, children prove to us that the conceptualization of the child as a stereotypical symbol of vulnerability and innocence is in fact turned on its head. And finally, it shows how much the city has to gain if children are educated and treated as active citizens, as in the case of the Netherlands. These are valuable lessons for all communities worldwide.

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