Communicating Place

The places that children use for play and exploration in their neighbourhoods are important for their well-being. The development in modern society of increased social fears and the densification of the built environment means that children’s independent mobility decreases. In order to create cities that are good environments for children, it is necessary to understand how children experience and use their places. But how do children communicate their experiences?

In this book, Sofia Cele provides a vivid account of children’s realities by exploring how primary school children in Sweden and England communicate their experiences of place. By testing the qualitative methods of group interviews, walks, drawings and photographs, it is shown how children communicate different aspects of place through different methods. The different narratives the children communicate provide insight into children’s lives and thoughts, and reveal rich evidence of their experience of place. The need for the active involvement of adults is argued, in regard both to participating with children and to experiencing the children’s places, as this generates situated knowledge that grasps the complexity of place.

The results show new ways of consulting children that are based on children’s own means of communication. This is crucial knowledge for anyone interested in children and their environments and in how adults can understand this relationship.

Sofia Cele is a researcher at the Department of Human Geography, Stockholm University. After completing a Master’s degree in Urban and Regional Planning, she studied and worked in garden design and journalism before pursuing a PhD in human geography. This work is her doctoral dissertation.

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Communicating Place

Methods for Understanding Children’s Experience of Place

Sofia Cele
Communicating Place

Methods for Understanding Children's Experience of Place

Academic dissertation

for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Human Geography at Stockholm University

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Abstract

Sofia Cele: Communicating Place: Methods for Understanding Children's Experience of Place

This dissertation explores how children communicate their experiences of place. It focuses on the qualitative methods of group interviews, walks, drawings and photographs, and asks how children communicate different aspects of place. Drawing on feminist theory and qualitative methodology, the importance of situated knowledge for understanding children’s narratives is argued. Through studies in Sweden and England, it is shown how children’s place experiences are multi-dimensional, consisting of both concrete and abstract processes, places and objects.

The different methods reveal different aspects of these dimensions and the children provided rich evidence of their experience of place in regard to physical, social and cultural aspects. It is found that children’s individuality affects the success of the methods, rather than factors such as gender, age or nationality. The methods’ different characteristics, such as creative and interactive aspects, and how power relations are reflected through them are determining factors as to how and what children communicate.

Place-interactive methods allow children to communicate the direct experience of place and include subconscious actions as communication occurs through movement and play. The creative aspects of the methods allow children to focus more on their abstract experiences and to include experiences based on a wider time perspective than the present. Walking is discussed as a critical method for the researcher to include place as an active and multi-sensuous phenomenon. As it is shown that the methods reveal different aspects of the children’s place experiences, it is also discussed how this can be used from an adult perspective.

Keywords: children, place, interviews, photography, drawings, walks, communication, sensuous, qualitative methods, abstract, concrete, creative, interactive, Sweden, England.
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1. Introduction

When I was thirteen, I participated in a survey on children’s and young people’s attitudes, which was conducted in schools throughout Sweden. As the questionnaires were handed out in class and we engaged in answering the questions, an increasing giggle spread amongst us. The questions asked were so far from our everyday life that we could not resist the temptation to answer them all incorrectly. At that time, most of us were lucky to be allowed to smell the champagne on New Year’s Eve and when well-meaning adults asked us, ‘Do you inject amphetamine regularly?’ we had no alternative but to answer ‘yes’ just to pull a prank on the researchers. The alarming report regarding young people’s drug habits that followed the survey only made us giggle louder.

This memory came back to me when I was given the opportunity to engage in a research project regarding children’s physical environments. It became obvious to me that this would bring several challenges, such as understanding children’s perspectives, and gaining comprehension of how children can express their experiences in a way that not only suits them but that also is possible for adults to understand.

Research that involves people’s, and especially children’s, interaction with and perception of their physical environment always creates methodological challenges since the experiences are subjective and often difficult to communicate. One difficulty is that much of our interaction and communication with our surroundings is abstract, unknowable, untouchable and sometimes also unexplainable. It does not only take place at an intellectual level in our mind; it also takes place within our whole bodies.

Our everyday places, our childhood places and our most beloved places rest as embodied knowledge within us. Our bodies tells us what the ground feels like under our feet, where the snow melts first in the spring, where cars drive too fast, and which loose paving stones to avoid. Mostly, this is not knowledge that is possible to bring to an intellectual level when we wish to. This is tacit knowledge, which we are not even aware of, the kind of knowledge our bodies collect for us when we interact with a place frequently or intensely enough. It is preserved within us and only brought to light in the right context.

The aim of this book is to explore how children communicate their experience of place. The act of communication is multidimensional and includes much more than verbal speech. Communication is body language,
facial expression, interaction and movement; it involves memories and dreams as well as strategies for privacy and trust. Communication is place-bound and situational; what we communicate depends on who we are, where we are and what we are communicating; the way we feel will have an impact on what we communicate, and the people we are communicating to, or with, will also have an effect.

By focusing on four qualitative methods – interviews, walks, photographs and drawings – and allowing children of different ages and from different contexts to communicate experiences of place, I attempt to understand three main themes.

Firstly, how do the children communicate different aspects of their place experiences and what sort of places are communicated? Secondly, how do the different characteristics of the methods affect what children communicate? Thirdly, how and when is it possible and suitable to use these methods in order to understand children’s experience of place?

The intention is not to try to find which method is ‘better’ than the other, but rather to understand how children communicate through them and thus to see when they can be appropriate to use. The children’s expressions have been handled individually and the results have then been categorized in terms of gender, nationality and age, in order not to ascribe any predetermined views on the material. By working in two different contexts, Stockholm in Sweden and Bournemouth in England, and with two different age groups, eight and eleven, my hope has been to be able to see if there are any differences as to when the various methods are suitable to use.

Understanding how children experience their surroundings and how they communicate this is of importance for the development of suitable methods for creating successful research practises as well as the involvement of children in physical planning processes. There is a need to know not only which methods to use when consulting children, but also what children can contribute and how they can do this. To a large extent, this means understanding children’s experience of place, how they physically use places, the sensuous and cognitive experiences and the social interactions between people as well as between children and place.

Children’s Participation

This book was written at a time when there is an ongoing and rapidly increasing interest in children, both among different kinds of practitioners, such as planners and architects, and academic scholars. Within academia, and geography in particular, the development within qualitative methods, critical geographies, feminist geographies and participatory planning has led to a stronger position for children’s inclusion and participation in research and planning processes.
In 1989, the Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted by the United Nations and thereafter ratified by hundreds of countries. The convention states, amongst other things, that children’s best interest always should be taken into account and that children have a right to influence decisions that have an effect on them, such as the planning of their everyday environment.

It is not just the Convention on the Rights of the Child that emphasises children’s right to participate in and influence environmental, social and cultural issues. Agenda 21 focuses on sustainable development and people’s involvement in decision-making; it states that the creativity and ideals of young people should be mobilized in order to achieve sustainable development. Also, the Habitat II conference emphasised children’s participation (Adams and Ingham, 1998:9; Hart, 1997).

The international conventions and agreements mentioned above have led to a general consensus among the governments of many countries that children should be involved in processes that concern them and their interests. It has now also become a recognised focus within several academic disciplines to include the experiences of children.

A central question within this development is how children can participate and communicate their experiences. Which methods best provide a just understanding of children’s experiences?

Within the social sciences, an awareness of children’s needs has created new methodological approaches and it has become popular to combine different qualitative methods in order to understand children’s experiences as well as to bring together different perspectives on complex issues. Sometimes this is done without reflecting on and being sensitive about what these methods will provide, and the question is to what extent they are successful. Within the world of urban planning, the regular processes for consultations with and participation of the public that are used by city councils are often complicated and uninteresting even to adults and, therefore, completely unsuitable for children.

The uncertainty of how children can be involved in processes regarding their environment is extensive and, as Lindgren (2003) has written, it threatens to make the involvement of children and young people stagger to a halt. Poor methodological approaches will lead to poor results, thereby undermining the possibilities of including children’s perspectives in research as well as planning processes. There is, hence, a need to find means and methods for including children in the processes that they have a right to have influence.

This book should be seen as a critique and a development of the ongoing discourse regarding children’s involvement in research and planning processes that regard how they experience place. The starting point for the study is a query about what and how children can communicate through the qualitative methods that often are used.
Children, Places and Geography

This work relates to several different areas within urban studies, child studies and qualitative methods. The connection to place is one distinction that labels the study as geographical work. The relationship between man and place is studied within several disciplines; the strength of geographical research is the ability to include a wide spectrum of complexity in the relationship between man and place. Geographical theory has a broad foundation and draws on several disciplines in the construction of knowledge and theory. Here, I draw on experiences from psychology, environmental psychology, ethnology, sociology, architecture, child studies, art studies and anthropology, but am first and foremost inspired by geographical writers and theorists such as Tuan (1974, 1977, 1979, 2004), Matthews (1980, 1984, 1992), Massey (2001, 2005), Valentine (1996, 1998, 2000, 2001), Hart (1979, 1992, 1997) and Rodaway (1994), among others.

Geographical research has become more focused on sociological aspects of children and childhood, in contrast to psychologically-influenced research leaning on developmental psychology. There is now a sub-disciplinary field within geography called ‘children’s geographies,’ sometimes equated with the ‘geographies of childhood,’ although the former more often has an interest in the everyday lives of children and the latter has an interest in how society conceives the idea of childhood and how this affects children’s lives. This study can be labelled as being written within ‘children’s geographies.’ It does not strive to emphasise only sociological or psychological aspects, but rather the importance of place for children’s everyday lives, as Holloway and Valentine (2000:9-10) have suggested.

Since the 1970s, research on children has transformed and developed from seeing children as objects to study to viewing them as subjects who are more and more often actively included in the research process. Tuan (e.g. 1977) is a geographer who early on used children as an example of how connection to place is established and how the range and character of the child’s experiences widens and transforms as she grows older. Hart (1979) made an important discovery that has been central for this study; he found that by using walks as a method, the places children reveal are different than through other methods. His study presented an example of how children actively could be brought into the research process, as did the non-geographical studies of the Opies (1969), Ward (1978) and Moore (1986). These writers not only brought children’s best interests into research but also presented a perspective in which the main focus was on understanding children’s own views of play and urban places. They strived for a situated knowledge and examined children’s realities where they existed: on the streets, in rough grounds and in other play spaces. An open and continuously reflexive approach towards methodology and children’s experiences was central in these studies.
It is in the footsteps of these early writers I want to tread, bringing in the later findings and discussions of, for example, Matthews, (e.g. 1992), Holloway and Valentine (2000), Percy-Smith (e.g. 2002), Punch (e.g. 2000, 2002), Christensen (e.g. 2000a-c, 2003), O’Brien (e.g. 2000, 2003), Rasmussen and Smidt (e.g. 2003), but more clearly focusing on how children communicate their experience of place. Fine and Sandstrom’s (1988) sensitive ethnographic writings on children and methodology have had influence on this study with their approaches to the concept of childhood, ethics, as well as methodology, including child-adult relations. Also, Rasmussen (1998) comments on how she managed to reverse the power relations between child and adult by using methods that allowed children to be in charge of the processes of communication have been of importance.

I was following the experiences of the above-mentioned authors when I decided to critique some of the qualitative methods that are used in research and in different processes of consultation: interviews, walks, photography and drawings. The reasons for choosing these methods were straightforward. Interviewing and drawing are traditional methods for research on and with children and I wanted to know what kind of knowledge these methods would generate in comparison to the more exploratory methods of photography and walking. Others have found these methods successful, but I wanted to go one step further to see how children communicate through them. I also wanted to know if combining methods when working with children actually generates more and deeper knowledge. Another interesting question is what will happen with the children’s ability to express themselves if they are let out to interact with places whilst communicating? How does interaction with place affect children’s ability to communicate and how will the knowledge generated differ from that generated from methods that are creative in character?

Experience of Place

As mentioned in the beginning, the connection to place is central in many geographical studies (e.g. Tuan, 1977). Here, I have chosen to regard place not as a passive object to study, but as something that is active and transforming (e.g. Massey, 2005). It then follows that it is not only an understanding of the children that is important, but also an understanding of the places they refer to. To achieve this I have chosen to use myself as a tool, thereby including my experiences of places and the children’s interaction with these. This approach has its roots in the assumption that objectivity in qualitative studies on experiences demands that the researcher adopt a reflexive approach and for this it is necessary to get involved, to participate and enact the realities that are being researched (Law and Urry, 2004; Harding, 2004a+b).
Perception of place is a subjective process, and this process has different meaning and importance to different people. To some, there is almost no difference between their own identity and the place they live in. They seem to be so closely linked to place that it is not possible to imagine how such a person would ever survive someplace else. They breathe, grow, rest and evolve with their urban or rural environment. The streets, houses, trees or meadows that surround them are as important as their own bodies. To others, place is reduced to a location, a scene and an unimportant physical reality that holds no worth of its own but hosts a never-ending chain of characters and events, which mean everything, but could take place anywhere and still be as important.

The subjective experience of place is difficult for others to understand and even more difficult to capture and reflect in research. Our everyday interactions with our surroundings and the communication our bodies and minds have with place is both subjective and volatile and, hence, difficult to mediate and communicate.

When trying to define time geography, Hägerstrand (1991:133) wrote that the basic concepts it deals with are not verbal by nature. This is also the core difficulty in trying to define and express place experience. Verbal language is not sufficient in expressing all dimensions of humans’ experiences and impressions.

To facilitate writing about the children’s experiences of place, I distinguish between what I have chosen to call abstract and concrete aspects of place. Both of these are subjective experiences; abstract experiences refer to the inner processes place recalls within individuals whereas concrete refers to how individuals use places and objects, such as where they go and what they use.

Research on the experience of place may be seen as a contradiction since these experiences are processes based on individuals’ perceptions and inner lives. The research I present here is, of course, not on the experiences of place, even if this is the vocabulary I use: it is rather on the narratives of these experiences and perceptions. These narratives, though, are not necessarily verbal but may take different forms depending on the individuals involved and the contexts they derive from.

Rethinking Objectivity

The methodological approach I have chosen to adopt and investigate draws from many streams within contemporary geography. It relates to ethnographic influences within feminist geography in the self-consciously reflexive attitude that was adopted on the field as well as in the discussion regarding objectivity and methodology (e.g. Haraway, 1991; Gilbert, 1994; Rose, 1997; McDowell, 1992; Harding, 2004a+b), and to critical geography.
in the way it deals with children as a group that can be affected by unequal power relations (Painter, 2000; Valentine 2000).

In order to be able to include the diversity of the experiences I gained from researching both children and places, I have actively used myself and my experiences as a tool for understanding this knowledge and communicating it in a written form. This approach may raise questions on objectivity and the role of the researcher, and this is also a common point of critique regarding the use of qualitative methodologies.

Concepts of representation and reliability within this kind of study can be highly problematic but, without ignoring the question, perhaps they, in fact, need to be. Research with children is always problematic in regard to this issue. Since the perceptions of adults and children differ, the most suitable and appropriate method for an adult to try to understand and relate to the experiences of children must be to actively get involved with children, and learn how they use, relate to and reflect over phenomena.

Punch (2002) has pointed out that a ‘critically reflexive’ approach is important when studying children, with respect not only to the researcher’s role and assumptions, but also to the choice of methods and their application. Davies (1998) bring forward that reflexive techniques and approaches make it possible to hear a variety of children’s voices in the research, and that they help to ensure that interpretation is not influenced by personal prejudice or standard practice so that the children can be listened to as individuals and not as a group.

In line with this, I have chosen to remain reflexive and thus present in the text. This choice has also been argued by Baxter and Eyles (1997), who consider it important to document and display the ‘subjectivity’ that frames the study as clearly as possible, since this will make it possible to understand the results.

In this study, I have viewed ‘objectivity’ as something that is achieved by being continuously reflexive. Since this is a qualitative study on the narratives of experience, I have considered it important to get close to and to try to understand not only the children but also the places they refer to. Thus, I have chosen to use an approach to research and to writing in which closeness to the research subjects has been sought for a more reliable analysis and result.

This line of argument draws on the assumption that there is not one ‘reality’ out there that I as a social scientist can discover and describe. Rather, I see reality as multiple and transforming but not so ethereal that it is impossible to describe. The methods I choose as a researcher will have implications on the world I ‘discover’ and reproduce through my research. Along with Law and Urry (2004:393), I argue that research methods are performative, that they have effects and make differences. Instead of claiming that there is one real world that we can have different perspectives on, it can be considered that the world is multiply produced ‘in diverse and
contested social and material relations’ (ibid:397). This does not mean that these worlds are disconnected; instead, they interact and overlap. The result of this argument is that the methods and approaches I use as a researcher, in particular when studying an individual’s experiences of these worlds, need to be able to deal with ‘mess’ (Law, 2004), with the sensory, the emotional, the complex and the chaotic. I found that the best way of doing this was to actively use myself as tool. By including my experiences of places and the children, it became possible to reflect over these experiences, thereby displaying the context in which I constructed my conclusions. I argue that qualitative researchers need to find means of displaying the ‘subjectivity’ through which their material is analysed and that this is a successful approach in achieving ‘objectivity.’

The subjective and reflexive approach should not be seen as something awkward or self-centred; rather, it means de-constructing myself (see also Berglund, 1996) and remaining as open as possible. Reflexivity and a clearly present and experiencing researcher and writer, is a method that has been criticised for dealing with ‘poetics’ rather than ‘politics’ (e.g. Keith, 1992; Jenks, 2000). This is a standpoint I oppose, since if displaying the experiences the research is based on is considered dealing with mere poetics, then how can we construct reliable politics from these experiences? The experience of gathering research material should be seen as important a process for the results as the ‘physical’ material that I have in my hand when the ‘data collection’ is completed. Within numerical sciences, a solution to an advanced mathematical problem is not worth much without a display of the calculation; it is just as inappropriate for qualitative research to be presented without a clear display of approaches and experiences.

By reasoning this way, I approach a feminist standpoint where ‘objectivity’ is seen as situated knowledge that involves ‘standpoint theory’ and ‘strong objectivity’ (e.g. Haraway, 1991; Harding, 2004b). Briefly, standpoint theory involves recognising that all knowledge claims are socially situated and it argues that all research is normative (Harding, 2004a:11), although this sometimes ‘features behind a veil of claimed neutrality’ (ibid:2). It involves theory, methodology and political claims because it often deals with oppressed groups in order to create ‘oppositional knowledge’ (ibid:2). As a methodology, it often seeks to explain accounts that are not otherwise accessible and also often seeks to empower the groups that are involved in the research (ibid:3). Strong objectivity means that socially situated knowledge and accounts require and generate stronger standards for objectivity than conventional approaches. It requires a large amount of reflexivity and emphasises that all studies on the nature of experience and social relations that are results of qualitative studies involving observation and reflection also must focus on the ‘observers and reflectors’ in order to achieve objectivity (Harding, 2004b:136).
Outline of the Book

This book is divided into eleven main chapters and a final chapter with references. This first chapter lays out the foundation of the study; it presents the study’s roots, the context in which it is conducted and what its aim is.

In Chapter 2, the focus is on how research with children can be approached and how I have positioned myself in the particular issues. The differences between conducting research with children and with adults are discussed, as well as various aspects that need to be considered in the meeting between child and adult. The concept of ‘child’ is negotiated and after describing how certain researchers rely on development psychology and others on the social construct of childhood, I position this study as resting in between these fields. The final section of the chapter looks into the inclusion of children in different processes such as physical planning, as this is important background to how the methodological results from this study may be implemented outside the world of research.

Chapter 3 starts by looking into how studies on children have developed within geography since this provides a discipline-focused context to the study. Thereafter, we continue by looking at the concept of place and how children attach to, and use, places because this is vital for a methodological exploration. Research from the 1970s up through today is highlighted; this is crucial knowledge from which the methodological critique of this study develops. The final section emphasises the importance of sensuous experiences, in particular to children, and how the body is central for the experience of place.

Chapter 4 focuses on the interaction between body and place. Here, I discuss different discourses on walking as a theoretical and methodological means for researchers to understand cities and I reveal how I used walking as a way of actively bringing place into the research.

Chapter 5 focuses on the methodological approach applied in this study as well as the methods used. I give an account of the approaches used in the different countries as well as with the four respective methods. This is a central chapter in a study on methods and methodologies and it should be seen as a part of the study rather than a preparation for it.

Chapter 6 presents the two different study areas.

Chapters 7 to 10 concern the four individual methods (interviews, walks, photography and drawings) with one method per chapter. The chapters look into how the children communicated their experiences, what type of knowledge regarding place experience they generated and how the different narratives of place were constructed. The first of these chapters (i.e. Chapter 7) regards interviews. Since conversation has been an important part of all the methods and some of the aspects brought up here are general enough to be valid also for the discussions of the other methods, I have considered it
meaningful to allow this chapter to be longer than the three chapters that follow immediately thereafter.

Chapter 11 returns to the questions asked in the introductory chapter and brings together the results of the study. It looks into how the children communicated their experiences, what sort of knowledge they generated and how the different characteristics of the methods had an impact on which aspects of place the children communicated and how this knowledge may be implemented.

Remarks
Before the reader engages with the rest of the book there are a few remarks I wish to make. The children who participated in this study are English and Swedish and this forms the context in which this book has been written. There are of course outlooks into other contexts and literature from various countries, but it should be viewed in a Swedish-British context, although this does not exclude the results from being suitable to apply in a more general context.

All research that focuses on a group of individuals, in this case children, by definition involves generalisations, and this is true for this study as well. It has been necessary to refer to the group of ‘children,’ but it is always important to remember that groups are heterogeneous and that the importance of the individual’s experiences and preferences should always remain in focus.

Photography has been used as a method in this study and images are a substantial part of the research material. It is important for the reader to keep in mind that images as research material are not the same as images suitable to use as illustrations in a book. The images that bring most to the research are not necessarily suitable to use as illustrations, and the photographs in this book are hence not entirely representative for the research material, although a part of it.

All translations of Swedish quotations regarding the children’s expressions as well as quotes from literature have been made by me. This has been done with great sensitivity to the original meaning but all responsibility for any misunderstandings rests on me.

For simplicity, I refer throughout the text to ‘the child,’ ‘individual,’ ‘researcher,’ ‘person,’ etc. as ‘she’ rather than ‘he,’ ‘he/she’ or any other solution. This can be seen as a statement.
2. Researching Children

Methodologies

The fact that children’s perspectives are different from adults’, is something most people can probably agree on. How many times have we returned to our special childhood places only to find that they are very different from how we remember them; they are not only smaller but may also seem less remarkable and special. The world of a child is complicated for adults to understand; it is there and we know vaguely what is in it, but we cannot grasp it, nor can we easily get children to explain their realities to us, since they often assume that adults perceive the world in the same way they themselves do. The fact that adulthood evolves from childhood and that we never can return to what we were, or fully understand who we were as children, makes it complicated to recall what childhood is like. It is important to remember that the fact that all adults were once children does not make us experts on their realities, experiences or perceptions (Harden et al., 2000). All our childhood memories come from another time, place and context and even if we need to relate to our experiences in research it gets complex, since it is so easy to believe that we understand much more than we do. At the same time, most children are competent and able to communicate their experiences, even if they do this differently than adults.

Communication is central in research that involves people and individuals’ experiences. It means the act of giving, sharing or conveying the knowledge or experience of something to someone else. Communication is dependent on individuals, media and on what is to be communicated. It is not just the knowledge being communicated that is of interest, but also the process of communication with individual impressions, interpretations and expressions that are of importance for understanding what is being communicated. Communication not only consists of verbal speech, but may also include other forms of expressions such as artistic expressions, body language and play.

Children’s realities exist physically close to the adult world and are simultaneously socially distant, and from this fact evolves much of the complexity in doing research with children (Fine and Sandstrom, 1988:10). The methods that we choose to work with when we approach children must
aim to bridge the social distance so that the children can communicate their experiences. The challenge does not lie in understanding that children to a certain degree are and perceive differently than adults; the main problem lies in understanding what these differences are and how it is possible to bridge them to create mutual understandings. Rasmussen (1998:216) reflects on her experiences of doing research with children:

It was particularly difficult to see the strange in the familiar, and not to trivialize what is important to children. It took a long time to understand the meaning of tiny objects and the great importance that single events may hold from children’s perspectives.

So, how can we as adults approach children when doing research? In an influential reader edited by Christensen and James (2000c), the focus is on the cultures of communication that develop between the adult researcher and the participating children. The authors suggest that it is not necessary per se to use different methods with children than with adults but rather that the importance lies in adopting practices that resonate with children’s concerns and routines. By focusing on how children use language and also on their conceptual meanings and actions, the possibility of capturing children’s views increases (Christensen and James, 2000a:7).

In the literature, it is possible to see that participatory work with children often is approached from one of three categories. There are those who perceive children as similar to adults and hence use the same methods. One of the main problems with using this approach is that the power relations between children and adults can not be adequately addressed (Punch, 2002:322; James et al., 1998:31) and neither can the questions regarding children’s development. Approaching children from the other extreme means perceiving children as very different from adults (Punch, 2002:322; Fine and Sandstrom, 1988; Hill, 1997). James et al. (1998:189) present a third perspective, in which children are considered to be similar to adults but in possession of different competencies. Researchers with this perspective tend to use methods that are based on children’s skills (James et al., 1998:189; Punch, 2002:322) and this is the idea that is closest to the approach adopted in this study. Children are not a collective group who feel, experience and act similarly; they are individuals with different personalities and skills, and this needs to be taken into account.

When engaging in research that involves children, one of the main questions that needs to be asked is how it differs from working with adults. Is there a need for special methods and approaches? Punch (2002:337) is one of those who criticise the use of special concepts, such as ‘child-friendly methods’ when working with children. She argues that the innovative methods that often fall under this term rather should be called ‘research-friendly’ or ‘person-friendly’ since the ‘child-friendly’ term can seem
patronizing toward children. These arguments emphasize something important that also has been discussed in regard to the design of physical environments (Tibbalds, 2000). That which is good and friendly towards children is also beneficial to adults, so is it therefore right to distinguish ‘child-friendly’ environments or methodologies? Hill (2006:83) comments that children bring forward their views both as children and as people, so there is ‘no inherent gulf’ between the views of children and adults.

The methods that fall under the ‘child-friendly’ heading are also considered positive by adults and are often also developed from Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) methods originally used with adults. Punch (2002:338) emphasises the difficulty in lumping together children as a group since children, just as adults, are individuals and hence different. Therefore, it is not possible to argue that certain methods always are preferable with children since individual preferences and the research context influences which methods are most suitable. Punch advocates a human-centred approach that respects individuality and group differences such as class, age, gender, disability, ethnicity or culture. Her arguments build on the belief that it is too simplistic to view children as something similar to, or completely different from, adults. Instead, it is a combination of factors, such as the individuality of children, the research context and the researcher’s own behaviour that decides the success of the methodology.

Punch’s arguments are logical and genuine and draw on extensive experience with child research. However, bringing the societal context that surrounds children and research on children into consideration, it can still be argued that it can be necessary to use terms such as ‘children’s methodologies’ or ‘child-friendly environments’ since they emphasise the interest of children and mark out their position within the discussion.

Hartman (1986:16-17), though, sees two clear risks with distinguishing children as a group with special needs. The first risk is that their abilities and competencies are compared to those of adults. Focus turns to the abilities children have rather than their extraordinary abilities to achieve new skills. The second risk is the idealisation of childhood as something romantic, pure and sweetly innocent. The greatest danger with this ‘childhood myth’ is that it makes childhood into a kind of un-social reserve that prevents children from participating in society. By fully focusing on the childish, the playing, the helplessness, the growing and the spontaneity, adults risk being blind to the real situation of children. Hartman argues, in line with Punch, that the view of children also should include a human perspective, since every type of human character exists within the world of children as well as in the world of adults, since we all are human.

Christensen (2004:165) also advocates the importance of researchers seeing children as fellow human beings rather than as something ‘different’ that needs to be treated with a special set of methodological and ethical tools. Rather, she argues, it is important to understand children’s own
‘culture of communication’ by adopting reflexivity and dialogue as important strategies during the research processes. Christensen further criticises how researchers often put great effort into problematising and understanding ‘children’ at the same time as the role of the adult remains unexplored and unproblematised. Further, she argues that the importance of power relations and the need to see power is something that is embedded in the practice of everyday life. Viewing power like this means recognising that power relations exist everywhere all the time and are not easily separated from people, places or events. Nor are they easily placed into categories such as ‘children’ and ‘adults,’ and this is not even considered of great importance. Rather, the interesting phenomenon to study is how these categories are met through cultural interpretations of social life. Power relations are defined by how social life is negotiated, interpreted and understood. The unproblematised and often ‘hidden’ adult researcher that Christensen refers to is one of the reasons that I have chosen to be present in the text, in order to display who I am and what I experience (for further discussion, see Chapters 4 and 5).

**Child-Adult Relationships**

When conducting research with children, it is often difficult to find a balance between holding on to the role of being a responsible adult and not intervening with the children’s activities and hence hurting the relationship, so the children feel free to act naturally even when the researcher is present (Christensen, 2004). This is something that everyone conducting research with children will experience to varying degrees and thus also need to adopt a strategy for handling.

Fine and Sandstrom (1988:14-16) have distinguished two main dimensions that should be seen as central issues for a researcher doing research with children to handle. These dimensions regard the extent of authority and that of positive contact between the researcher and child. Fine and Sandstrom argue that it particularly is the issue of authority that separates research with children from research with adults. If the researcher has a high degree of authority and a limited amount of positive expressions, the children will behave as they do when they know that they are being supervised. There are, hence, very limited possibilities to understand children’s realities. If the adult expresses an increased degree of positive contact, but still remains relatively authoritative, the children have greater possibilities for action. The adult will always be expected to stay in the centre and remain a leader and will have difficulties remaining in the background to observe the children.

An adult who stays in the background and therefore has neither authority nor any affectionate relationships with the children will have great opportunities to observe children, but difficulties learning about how they
interact socially and what their views and thoughts are. The observing adult can see and map children’s behaviour but will lack children’s explanations of their behaviour. A role that builds on confidence and holds no formal authority, but that instead is the role of a friend is the one that is most likely to result in the most knowledge regarding children’s behaviour. However, the ‘friend role’ will always be an idealised role, since the researcher always will be different from the children because of his or her adultness and will hence never fully understand children’s realities nor fully participate in their physical activities. The adult will always be ‘different’ and not a part of the children’s realities or their imaginary world (Punch, 2001). But a remotely equal relationship can evolve and the differences between the adult and the children can also be positive in the way it allows the adult to ask ignorant questions regarding children’s behaviour (Fine and Sandstrom, 1988:14-16).

In research on the generational order between children and adults, Mayall (2000:121) describes two different roles that the adult researcher normally adopts, and this resembles the findings of Fine and Sandstrom (1988). Mayall’s first role is that of the detached observer, where the adult is considered to be superior and children are considered incompetent and unreliable, and in the process of becoming an adult. The other view includes the researcher conducting participant observation in order to understand children’s lives, actively seeking to suspend the differences in power between the generations. The first approach accepts the generational order. Adults are superior to children and the documentation of childhood is conducted with that in mind. The second approach questions the generational order and recognises that knowledge of children must start from children’s own experiences. Mayall positions herself as being somewhere in between these two, aiming to work with generational issues without assuming adult superiority or getting down to play-level:

I present myself as a person who, since she is adult, does not have this knowledge, for though I can remember some things about being a child, I may have forgotten much (...) (Mayall, 2000:122).

In line with Mayall, I have found when working with children that this approach is the less confusing strategy to use with them. The reason for this is that the first approach, which acknowledges adult superiority, misses out on children’s own knowledge and experiences. The second fails to rightly position the adult role and does not properly handle the grey zones of the researcher as someone in possessions of adult powers and the researcher as a friend among other (child) friends in school or at home.
The Child as Concept

The terms ‘children’ and ‘childhood’ will have to be defined and positioned since these concepts vary widely not only between different cultures but also between researchers and their perceptions of childhood. It is most common today to use the definition made by the United Nations in ‘The Convention on the Rights of the Child,’ which defines everyone under the age of 18 as a child. This is a definition that is appropriate when it comes to legal issues and human rights, but it is also a definition that needs to be used with great care when doing research. A 17-year-old, or even a twelve-year-old, is not always keen on being called a child and using that word without contemplation might cause problems for co-operation. There are also some other difficulties connected to the word ‘child.’ If everyone under the age of 18 is included in the definition, it gets very hard to know what we are referring to. There are obvious and enormous differences in the physical, social and psychological development of children in these ages. Therefore, it becomes necessary to further define what is meant by ‘child’.

Most commonly, children under the age of eight are called ‘young children’; children between nine and twelve are often considered to be in ‘middle childhood’ and children from thirteen and upwards are called ‘teenagers’ or ‘adolescents’ (Hart, 1997). The research in this book is with children aged eight and eleven, who according to this definition, would be young children and children in middle childhood.

Ögren (2003: 61) writes that children’s ability to have influence on the adult community is dependent not only on adults’ willingness to listen but also on how adults interpret what the children express and that this interpretation is dependent on adult’s values and approaches towards childhood. The social sciences previously handled childhood either through theories of socialization or through developmental psychology, both of which have led to children being considered a natural rather than a social phenomenon. During recent years, the attention has swung towards the social construction of childhood and the social factors that make up our knowledge of children and childhood. The basic assumption that childhood is a social construct reveals that our understandings of childhood and the meanings that we place upon children vary considerably not only from culture to culture, but also quite radically within history and culture, as proposed by Jenks (1996). There is still a gap between researchers who view children on the basis of developmental psychology and those who consider childhood something that mainly has been constructed socially.

The increasing focus on children as social participants in society is a global phenomenon, reflecting the blurring boundaries between children and adults and the ambiguities of what it means to be a child (Kjørholt, 2004:225). In many aspects, children are put into social and symbolic spaces of participation, making it possible for them to participate in certain areas
while excluding them from others (Kjørholt, 2004:227). The Convention on the Rights of the Child presents two contradictory images of children, and these two images are the main ones it is possible to identify within discussions and research on children and childhood. On the one hand, children are seen as objects in need of protection and shelter, and on the other hand they are brought forward as active and communicating subjects with rights and with the ability to express themselves (Lindgren, 2003:82; Buckingham, 2000).

How children handle the identities that adults thrust upon them has been examined by Jones (2000:43), who notes that children do not readily adopt these identities but that they can operate under the cover they may provide. Children live their lives within the structures of adult space. These material, symbolic and disciplinary structures are sometimes intentional, and sometimes un-intentional, but the children have to operate within them. Children’s abilities to create their own geographies are hence dependent on the structures of adult geographies.

Development Theory and the Social Construction of Childhood

Children’s age is often used when defining their competences and ways of being. That children’s physical and psychological development is of importance for their perception of, and interplay with, their surrounding environment is clear. The degree to which this development affects children’s being and experiences is, however, being debated. On the one side are developmental psychologists who emphasise development theory and on the other side are those, mainly sociologists, who emphasise the social and cultural dimensions of childhood as being of greater importance.

There is geographical research drawing on both of these arguments, but it has lately come to be more and more focused on the social aspects of children and childhood, drawing on sociological rather than psychological theories (e.g. Holloway and Valentine, 2000).

Piaget

The psychologist Jean Piaget set out the first major theory of cognitive development and his work has had great importance to research practice and the forming of schools’ curricula throughout the western world. It has had considerable influence on the way that children and childhood are viewed, but has met with serious critique, and it is this critique that has been the basis for the development within cognitive psychological theory. Piaget was interested in the nature of knowledge, its function and development. He saw consistencies in the way children behaved and this led him to formulate stages of development through which a child passes (Flavell et al., 2002). Piaget’s (Piaget and Inhelder, 1956) theory of children’s development is
based on the belief that the child’s concept of space is the result of interaction between the child and the environment.

Piaget argued that children’s evolving understanding of space is the result of adaptive mechanisms, and although not entirely age-specific, this evolvement still follows certain patterns based on the development of the brain. He recognised four stages of cognitive development that this interaction is based upon. From birth until the age of 15, the child develops from responding mainly to egocentric thinking, reflexes and generalised behavioural patterns to developing logical, symbolic and abstract thinking (Matthews, 1992; Flavell et al., 2002). Piaget considered human cognition a form of biological adaptation. The mind reconstructs and reinterprets places to make them fit with the person’s own existing mental framework.

A main criticism of Piaget’s work on research on and with children has been that it diminishes the child, making a child someone who is not up to adult standards (Donaldsson, 1978; Matthews, 1992; Kagitcibasi, 1996; Flavell et al., 2002; Morrow, 2006). However, this was not Piaget’s aim; instead, he wanted to get insight into children’s way of thinking (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2000). Morrow (2006) notes the irony in Piaget being accusing of leaving out exactly what he wanted to include.

Piaget challenged his own theories in his later years and gave less emphasis to the stages and logical model and focused his attention on developmental change and meaning rather than on logical structures. The psychological critique on Piaget’s work refers to the fact that a child’s cognitive performance is less consistent a stage than in Piaget’s theories. The reasons for Piaget underestimating young children’s abilities are considered methodological: a child might perform or answer incorrectly in a cognitive test but still have an understanding of the concept being assessed (Hartman, 1986, Matthews, 1992; Woodhead and Faulkner, 2000). When later researchers used more sensitive methods than Piaget had done, children also revealed more competences (Flavell et al., 2002:7-8).

Donaldson (1978) was one of those who criticised Piaget, claiming that the experiments he conducted were too restricted and too different from children’s everyday life. By slightly adapting his experiments, Donaldson claimed that the children’s reasoning was much more complex and sophisticated than Piaget had argued (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2000:24).

Today, it is argued that young children are more competent and older children less competent than Piaget assumed (Hoff, 2003). It is generally considered not suitable to think in stages regarding children’s development, but rather to view developmental patterns as rough ‘trends’ instead of stages (Flavell et al., 2002). Most of the psychological critiques do not dismiss Piaget, but rather add important aspects of development to his original thinking.

Flavell et al. (2002) notes how the complexity of Piaget’s theories makes them prone to over-simplification, thereby causing critique. Grahn (2003)
also refers to Piaget’s aim to emphasise that children’s development are affected by social patterns, relations and context as well as an inherited biological development pattern, but notes that sensuous perceptions, places and objects are prescribed with marginal interest.

A Swedish professor of education, Sandels, initiated a child psychological laboratory in the 1950s, implementing Piaget’s thoughts and ideas. She focused on young children’s abilities to handle traffic situations and argued that children’s development made it impossible for them to handle traffic situations under the age of ten, meaning that children cannot be taught to behave safely in traffic (Sandels, 1972; Vägverket, 2004:1-2). Children were considered to have difficulties controlling their attention and spontaneity, and were though unable to understand all aspects of a traffic situation (KFB, 2000:11). Sandels argued that children could not adapt to modern traffic so that it was necessary for traffic to adapt to children (Sandels, 1972).

The Social Construction of Childhood

A growing discourse within social science research on children focuses on how children and childhood are constructed socially. Holloway and Valentine (2000:2) write that childhood, in common with many social identities, at first seems to be a biologically-defined category, in this case marked by age. Children are commonly seen as subjects who have not yet reached biological and social maturity, and do not possess the competencies of adults. Childhood is understood as a time of socialisation in which children learn what it is to be a fully human adult being.

Kjørholt (2004:4) suggests that children are attached to childhood as a particular social and symbolic space that is socially constructed. The children are not only subjects but also objects encountering the concepts of being a child at a particular place and in a particular time. These concepts not only refer to ‘children’ and ‘childhood’ but also to other arenas that will have an effect on the children’s lives.

The social construction of childhood becomes particularly obvious when seen from a historical perspective (Ariès, 1962; Waksler, 1991; Holloway and Valentine, 2000; Cunningham, 2005). Ariès notes how children in the Middle Ages were regarded as miniature adults rather than as different from adults, and Jenks (1996) continues that it was during the Enlightenment that children were starting to be viewed as inherently different from adults (see also Cunningham, 2005).

Holloway and Valentine (2000:5) argue that this is why children have been seen as ‘less’ than adults and also why research on children has been less valued than other topics. Brannen and O’Brien (1995:70) write that children have been viewed as ‘adults in the making,’ rather than as children.

James and Prout (1997) explore the relations between the study of childhood and social theory by drawing on sociological and anthropological research. They focus on the constructed character of childhood both as a
structural feature and as a context in children’s everyday lives and they argue that since childhood is constructed socially it is not constant but instead changes with time as the cultural, political and social contexts evolve. Childhood, they argue, is not just constructed but is also continuously reconstructed.

The social approaches to childhood have been called ‘the sociology of childhood,’ ‘the sociological study of childhood’ and lately ‘the new social studies of childhood’ (James and Prout, 1997: James et al., 1998: Holloway and Valentine, 2000). This approach has appealed to a variety of researchers from different fields within the social sciences and has also, as mentioned, influenced geographers. The claim that childhood is a socially constructed phenomenon has challenged the ‘traditional’ developmental approaches within child research. Within this ‘new social study of childhood,’ childhood is recognised as being a social construction that varies with time and place. It is argued that if childhood can be seen not only as a biological phenomenon, but also as a social one that varies between social groups, societies and historical periods, its character, construction and consequences become more challenging and interesting for academics (Holloway and Valentine, 2000:5).

**Taking Age and Development into Account?**

The polarisation between researchers who see children and childhood through the lens of developmental psychology and those who see childhood as mainly being a social construct can be limiting to the study of children’s realities and it can cause methodological difficulties that researchers must overcome (Christensen and James, 2000b). Research based on developmental psychology rather often assumes that certain ages are suitable to certain methods and theories on cognitive development are used as a platform from which these methods are justified. This has been questioned by James et al., (1998: 174) (see also Christensen and James, 2000b:160-161), who asks how these researchers can be convinced that the suitability of their methods is dependent on the child’s biological development rather than being suitable to children at a particular age and in a particular society sharing social and not developmental experiences. Christensen and James (2000b) suggest that even if children broadly follow the same developmental path, their experiences need to be seen through a social and cultural perspective.

(…) their [children’s] social experiences and their relative competences as social actors must always be seen as contextualized, rather than determined, by the process of physiological and psychological change (Christensen and James, 2000b:176).
This discussion returns to the classic question of how much of a person is biological and genetic and how much is the result of social, cultural and physical environments.

It is clear that both the developmental and sociological approaches towards childhood will focus on and bring out certain aspects of the empirical material that are relevant to the particular perspective. Where the developmental perspective may have tendencies to overlook the social aspects that shape children’s realities, the sociological may tend to overlook developmental facts regarding children. Mayall (1994) reflects that what characterises children as a group simply is their lack of adulthood. Solberg (1996:63-65) has argued that age not should be seen as a major issue in child research since the researcher’s concepts of what the child is then will influence how children are approached in research. This affects the researcher’s openness towards the empirical material.

My exhortation not to take into account of age is meant as a recommendation to researchers to make an effort to set aside what we already ‘know’ about how children and adults differ when they embark on fieldwork (Solberg, 1996:64).

Moore (2004:1) has argued that a key understanding when engaging in projects with children is that children need to be seen both as an objective biological reality and as a social and cultural construct.

Here, my intention has been to position myself somewhere in between the developmental and sociological perspectives, just as Moore suggests above, focusing on children’s relations to place and their ability to communicate place experiences. I recognize that the experiences and competencies of a child not only are dependent on and vary with age, but also with culture and even within cultures as well as within social structures. I lean on sociological experiences as well as developmental psychology where the respective perspectives are relevant but keep the geographical focus steady on the individual child’s interaction with place.

**Children’s Participation and Consultation**

The focus on and interest in the involvement of children in processes is not something that is new and unique for our time, even if interest has increased during the last years. In the beginning of the 20th century, the Swedish writer Ellen Key released her book ‘Barnets århundrade’ translated as ‘The Century of the Child.’ Key discussed ideas on the nature of children and how their interest best could be brought forward and nurtured, dismissing most of the school system and the methods for raising children that were popular at the time. Key was an important person in Sweden, and though not always
popular, her ideas spread widely. She was influenced by the Arts and Crafts movement and she herself came to inspire many others. The Polish educationist Janusz Korczak was one of those inspired by Key and he emphasised the child’s right to respect in the 1924 version of the Geneva Convention, attempting to state guidelines for children’s right to a decent upbringing, including food, shelter and care as well as being protected from exploitation (Bartley, 1998; Lindgren, 2003:83-84; Hartman, 2001). This was the predecessor to the Convention of the Rights of the Child, which took shape under great pressure from Poland. Korczak’s influence has been mentioned as being the main reason for this (Hartman, 2001; Lindgren, 2003).

The term ‘children’s participation’ is often used frequently in connection with the different projects that take place. This term is, as suggested by Hill (2006), misleading since the majority of the ‘participation projects’ taking place actually are consultation projects. Within consultations projects, children are asked to present their views and experiences on issues that involve them, but this information is then later dealt with by adults and the children are not involved more after being consulted. A participation project should also involve children actively in making change, through democratic processes or active involvement in changing the physical environment.

Research with children and consultation projects that regard children’s places have much in common, mainly because they both often have distinct purposes and the aim is to ask children about specific issues. The resemblances regard issues of what children can express about place, how they can express themselves and how adults can understand this, as well as the handling of child-adult relationships. The methodological issues are thus very similar, even if there obviously are differences, such as researchers often being more interested in children’s conditions as a whole while consultation projects are more interested in specific places or practical issues. It is popular both among academics and practitioners to adopt similar qualitative approaches, and there are increasing overlaps between the two spheres (Hill, 2006:72).

The inclusion of children’s experiences in physical planning creates methodological difficulties. In 1977, Lynch raised the question regarding the discrepancy between children’s actual use and images of outdoor space and the planner’s or architect’s perception of the same space, which Wilhjelm (2002) responds to. She is concerned with how children’s perceptions of space and the fittings and misfittings of their perceptions and experiences compare to the perceptions of professionals such as architects, landscape architects and planners. The focus is on how architects as professionals can confront their own beliefs regarding different groups’ perception of reality. Wilhjelm seeks to illuminate parts of the architect’s practice that could be revised if narratives from children are to be accommodated. Through empirical studies in Norway and by using a series of qualitative methods
with groups of children aged nine to thirteen and groups of professionals, she
is able to compare how these different groups refer to outdoor space. She
found that the professional’s interpretation of space did not coincide with the
children’s stories of how they use space. The professionals were guided by
their ‘normative practice’ (Wilhjelm 2002:xii) and wanted to see space as
function-based or they tried to label places into fixed categories. This way of
thinking did, to a certain extent, directly contradict the narratives of
everyday lives that were provided by the children, which leads Wilhjelm to
question how professionals can reconsider their knowledge base.

Kylin (2004) is also concerned with how children’s perspectives can be
understood and brought into physical planning processes. She argues that at
present, planning processes fail to include children’s own places, the places
that are not labelled as play areas but still hold great importance for
children’s play. Since planning to a large degree builds on the visual, the
issues that traditionally get included in planning processes are the issues that
can easily be visualised. This, Kylin argues, means that issues that do not
have a clear physical orientation, such as children’s sensuous and bodily
perceptions, will be difficult to include in planning based primarily on maps
and plans. Children and their perspectives need to be brought in early into
the planning process, and this needs to be done in a way that allows children
to express themselves and their needs on their own terms.

What Kylin, and also Wilhjelm (2002), underlines are the problems that
arise because of the objectification of the environment that most of the
present planning systems demand, which fails to create places that can be
used multi-dimensionality. This means that it gets difficult to handle lived
reality and people’s everyday lives, and how sensuous perceptions and
unplanned activities shape individuals’ use of place. As discussed earlier,
children’s ability to influence and participate in processes is not only
dependent on adults’ willingness to listen but also on how adults interpret
what the children communicate. This interpretation is dependent on adult
values and on their approach to children (Ögren, 2003:61). Neither well-
written international documents nor enthusiastic officials are a guarantee that
children will be able to participate and have influence.

Kjørholt (2002:63) notes that children who participate in projects witness
that their presence often is wanted but that their opinions are not listened to
or taken into consideration. Children’s participation, therefore, not only
involves ascribing children with rights and including them in processes but
also actually understanding children’s participation and being willing to
seriously take children’s views into account. Some of the major difficulties
with children’s participation and consultation in planning processes come
from the experimental nature of the work, the small number of children who
participate and the lack of continuity (Haikkola and Rissotto, 2004).

Hart (1992, 1997) has engaged in children’s participation and notices that
there are different steps, or levels, of participation. From this, he constructed
a ‘ladder of children’s participation,’ which illustrates different steps of participation. The three lowest steps, in fact, do not represent participation at all; there, the children are used as a means by adults who want to deliver a message. The following five steps represent increasing degrees of participation. Hart argues that it is not always necessary that children operate at the highest rungs of the ladder of participation. Rather, the important thing is that children are not used as ‘decorations’ in participatory projects and that they are always provided with a choice about how much they want to participate. Projects that are initiated and led by adults can be participatory if the children who are consulted have understood the process and have their opinions treated seriously (Hart, 1997:42-44).

Hill (2006) has focused on an issue that is rarely discussed. This concerns children’s views on the methods that adults use to consult them with. Hill finds that the children’s views are sharply marked by notions of inclusiveness and fairness. The children who do not take part in the research or consultation can experience it as unfair that they have not been included while other children have, since the participating children have not been elected to bring forward the views of children.

They identified both as a matter of principal and feeling that it was not right that adults were taking account of the views of only a small minority of people by top-down selection or self-nomination (Hill, 2006:76).

This implies that children will find it unfair if only some children from, for instance, a school class are included in research or consultations. Several of the Scottish children in Hill’s study made it clear that expressing their views through consultation or research projects is not an opportunity but rather a right and it was because of this that the concept of ‘fairness’ became central. The children clearly disliked situations where some had, or appeared to have, more opportunities than others (Hill, 2006:77). An important aspect for disliking or preferring certain methods was also how ‘embarrassing’ the methods were. Embarrassment was connected to the children’s notions of privacy and sociability (ibid:84), but probably is also connected to the researchers’ approach and behaviour.

Berglund and Nordin (2005:180) have defined three different criteria that a suitable method for including children in the planning process needs to fulfil. It needs to be child-friendly, i.e. feel meaningful to use, not offend the child’s integrity and self-esteem and be fast (15-20 minutes) to use. It also needs to be school-friendly, i.e. possible to integrate with teaching, require minimal input from the teacher in terms of supervision and special skills and be cost-free. Finally, the methods need to be planner-friendly, i.e. relevant for spatial planning, trustworthy, saved electronically and easy to use with other basic planning material. These criteria aim at developing a
method that will be easy and practical to use in the daily work of an urban planner but also able to grasp and include children’s communication.

There are interesting examples of research and planning projects aiming at including children’s experiences into planning processes (e.g. Winter, 1997; Hart, 1997; Horelli, 1998, 2001, 2004; Spencer, 1998; Chawla, 2002; Driskell, 2002; Wilhjem, 2002; Willow, 2002; Kylin, 2004; Berglund and Nordin, 2005). The most prominent attempt within some of these projects focuses on how it is possible to combine the scale and perspectives of planners and children; the more structural and grand thinking of planners combined with children’s detailed and close-up experiences (Kylin and Lieberg, 2001). Several of these projects focused on finding methods for including children’s experiences and use of place into documents and Geographical Information Systems (GIS) that are possible to use directly in the planning process without extra arrangements. These projects include, among others, children mapping and writing directly into a GIS (Berglund and Nordin, 2005), officials collecting material through different methods and producing a GIS-based map indicating children’s use of and experience of places, such as the projects of ‘Children’s Tracks’ in Vestfold, Norway, (Almhjell, 1998, 2002, 2003) and the ‘Map of Sociotopes’ in Stockholm, Sweden (Ståhle, 2005), which, based on extensive consultations, marks out places that hold different values, such as ‘play,’ ‘picnic area,’ and ‘nice view,’ etc.
3. Children’s Geographies

The study of children within geography is not a traditional focus within the discipline, yet there is literature dating back to the 1970s (Holloway and Valentine, 2000:7). The subject has evolved as a sub-disciplinary area that focuses on how children’s perceptions, experiences and opportunities are socially and spatially structured. A study by Bunge (1973) that showed that children could be oppressed by the built environment was central to the development of the research field. The character of the geographical studies on children has varied and continues to vary in many different ways. The early studies, such as Bunge’s, were often radical, or were what can be labelled as positivistic or behavioural, such as Blaut and Stea’s (1971) collection of studies on cognitive mapping. Many geographers, however, take a humanistic approach, sometimes with close connections to environmental psychology (e.g. Hart, 1979). During recent years, much research has been influenced by feminist and post-modern thoughts, particularly studies that focus on children as an ‘othered’ group. Lately, the interest has been more focused on the methodological and ethical challenges that arise when working with children (Valentine, 2000:78-79). Most of the recognised research is of British or American origin, even if there is a growing mass of research stemming from continental Europe and Scandinavia. However, this research is, generally speaking, not widely acknowledged by British or North American writers, and this may partly be because of language barriers, as suggested by Holloway and Valentine (2000:8).

Among Scandinavian researchers, Björklid (e.g. 1982, 1996, 2002, 2005) and Rasmusson (e.g. 1998) in education, Nordström (e.g. 1990, 2002a-c, 2003) in environmental psychology, Willhjelm (2002) in architecture, Berglund (e.g. 1989, 1996, 2005), Grahn (e.g. 1991, 2003), Mårtensson (e.g. 2004), Lieberg (e.g. 1992, 1995, 1997) in landscape architecture as well as Halldén (2003a-b), Lindgren (2003), and Rasmussen (2004), to name only a few, have conducted insightful and valuable research on children’s places, social conditions and methodology. Relatively few Scandinavian geographers have conducted research and published internationally on children until recently, when interest and activity have increased. A special issue of Geografiska annaler (Gough and Lund, forthcoming) presents some of the contemporary Scandinavian geographical child research.
As has been discussed, it is possible to see a divide within the literature regarding children’s geographies. Some researchers put more emphasis on the psychological aspects of children whereas others draw more on the sociological perspective that sees children as social actors and that focuses on giving children a voice in the adult world (Holloway and Valentine, 2000:8).

During the 1980s and 1990s, the major interest in children’s use of public space within geography was divided into two different and contradicting paths. One studied children’s exposure to strangers and criminals, the so-called ‘stranger danger’ debate, and the other focused on children’s ‘antisocial behaviour,’ i.e. children’s ability to be violent, messy and noisy in public spaces (Valentine, 1996). Paradoxically, as Prezza (2004b:49) notes, this ‘youth problem’ within society is often solved by creating separate areas for children and thereby separating them from the rest of society, something that will increase the problem, since the sense of community and the construction of identity is obstructed. Holloway and Valentine (2000:9-10) argue that one of the most important contributions that researchers within geography can make to childhood studies is to illustrate the importance of place. They mean that by doing do so, geographers can add texture and detail to the analysis made of childhood as a sociological construct. Geographical studies, they suggest, highlight that conceptions of childhoods are temporally as well as spatially specific. An emphasis on children and place can also help focus on children’s need of places for outdoor activity for their well-being.

Place and Space

The discussion on space and place is central within geography and it has even been said that it is what constitutes geography (e.g. Tuan, 1979). The definitions of place and space vary and intertwine. Whereas some consider space to be more abstract or alien, and place to be more familiar and concrete (e.g. Tuan, 1977), others argue that both space and place are grounded and concrete (e.g. Massey, 2005), and still others see space as being practiced place (e.g. de Certeau, 1984) and, finally, still other people view place as grounded and practiced space (e.g. Merrifield, 1993).

I have chosen to mainly refer to place, and consider place to be a location of space. This definition of place is based on a hybrid of Massey (2005) and Merrifield (1993), and I consider place to be localised space, without considering space to be more abstract than place. Place, as well as space, includes abstract, concrete and social aspects, even if space is predominantly defined as a social dimension (e.g. Massey, 2005). Place and space should not be seen as contradictory but, rather, as mutually dependent. It is possible to act with, as well as within, place.
Asplund (1983) writes that place is created when a group of people connect it with meaning. Place is something that has meaning and is therefore important, but place is also characterised as shared and a sense of place is closely connected to intense participation and interaction with other people. With this perspective, place has deep social meaning and can provide a strong sense of belonging between people when they visit a place. Place is created by the people who ascribe it with meaning.

To understand people’s bonds and affections to place, Tuan (1974:59) notes that all aspects of a person must be considered: biological heritage, upbringing, education, job and the character of her physical environment as well as the cultural history and experience of her social group in the physical setting in which she is active. The concepts of ‘culture’ and ‘environment’ seem to overlap, he writes, as do ‘man’ and ‘nature.’ A person’s perception, attitude, value and world view intertwine and produce meaning (ibid:4).

Olsson (1978) notes that when he longs to return to the landscape of his childhood it is not the complicated relations and blurry memories of people, but rather the physical objects that constitute his attachment to the place. It is the feel of pebbles in one’s hand and the sharpness of blades of grass that are remembered so clearly that it is still possible to feel them. Olsson reflects that it might be the solitude and stability of physical objects that make it more likely that they are recalled from the past than continuously evolving mental perceptions of social relations between people.

I refer to abstract and concrete aspects of the experience of place and consider both to be subjective experiences. The concrete experience refers to which places the children visit and what they do there, which objects they use and which people they meet. This is mainly an experience and use of place that is visible for others as well, the kind of experience that can be observed and also shared with others. The abstract experience, on the other hand, refers to the processes a place triggers within a person; this can refer to place as a symbol but also mental processes like feelings, memories, thoughts and dreams. These are not always conscious processes, nor do they always take place on a logical level; rather, they are processes that occur in the interaction between individual and place. Some of these abstract processes are present only during interaction with place and others can be experienced elsewhere, too, as they are possible to recall as mental processes.

The abstract and the concrete are present simultaneously when a person experiences place. The concrete can not exist without the abstract, but the abstract processes can be used to recall a place when elsewhere, as long as it has first been experienced. The social aspects of place can be considered to be both abstract and concrete.
Children’s Attachment to Place

In order to be able to develop effective methods for understanding children’s experience of place it is necessary to explore their relationship with place. As previously mentioned, the human relationship with place is deeply subjective and volatile. It can often be difficult to put into words why we like or dislike places or phenomena within an environment. The main reason for this is that these experiences are reactions to sensuous experiences and memories triggered by place itself (Nordström, 2002a:25). When we interact with place, our feelings, memories and thoughts are continuous reactions to objects, people and place itself. This multi-dimensional experience is something that characterizes all human experiences and perceptions. We combine our sensuous impressions, personal preferences, social life and cultural identity with the memories and wishes that different places or objects bring out from within us.

We cannot logically explain why our bodies react to, or remember, certain objects or places the way they do. As adults, we often try to use logic and analysis to understand our surroundings. Children, on the other hand, continuously explore their surroundings and their interaction with it is bodily. They smell, touch, taste, climb, swing, bend and stroke objects. They balance on things, they use smell for direction, they take their shoes off in the grass and they stamp in puddles. They let their bodies explore place in order to understand it, to gain knowledge. They do this because it is fun, exciting and just because it is possible.

Place interaction and perception is a continuously developing action and the relationships we create with places as children remain within us, in many cases for the rest of our lives. That the human self is created in meeting and interacting with place has been explored by several writers (e.g. Tuan, 1977; Matthews, 1992; Hay, 1998; Christensen, 2003; Grahn, 2003; Kyttä, 2004; Ross, 2004; Manzo, 2005; Derr, 2006). Place consists of physical structures as well as social and cultural structures, and, particularly for children, place is often loaded with meaning and feelings (Hartman, 1986; Matthews, 1992; Halldén, 2003a). Understanding how children create bonds to places is as central as understanding how they relate to its physical, social and cultural structures.

Tuan (1974) refers to the affective bond between people and place as ‘Topophilia.’ It is a concept, he writes, that might seem diffuse, but as personal experience, it is both vivid and concrete (ibid:4). Topophilia can be broadly defined to include all the affective ties a person has with the material environment. These ties can vary in intensity and meaning: for some they may be of limited importance, while for others they may be enormously important. Very strong emotional ties to a place are often signs that the place
has become the carrier of emotionally charged events or is perceived as a symbol (ibid:93).

Children’s ability to ascribe certain places with meaning has also been explored (e.g. Ward, 1990; Grahn 2003; Mårtensson, 2004). It has been shown that the manipulation of places, such as ripping off some grass or moving a stick, can transform a place from being neutral to becoming a ‘special’ or ‘secret’ place. This manipulation might be so tiny that it is impossible for someone other than the child to see it, but the manipulation still strongly affects the child’s place experience and attachment. This has been revealed by Mårtensson (2004), who also has seen how the landscape that surrounds place affects children’s place behaviour and play. Landscape, she argues, is a participating actor in children’s play. Grahn (2003:102-103) refers to Proust’s abilities to describe children’s emotional attachment to place and how the ability to find a special space of one’s own that invites comfort, joy or amazement is an important part of constructing the self.

(…) After looking for me everywhere, my mother found me in tears on the steep little path beside Tansonville, saying good-bye to the hawthorns, putting my arms around the prickly branches, (…) ‘Oh my poor little hawthorns, I said, weeping, you’re not the ones trying to make me unhappy, you aren’t forcing me to leave. You’ve never hurt me! So I will always love you.’ And drying my tears, I promised them that when I was grown up I would not let my life be like the senseless lives of other men and that even in Paris, on spring days, instead of paying calls and listening to silly talk, I would go out into the countryside to see the first hawthorns. (Proust, 1913/2003:146)

Proust strongly exemplifies how place itself can provide comfort in an unstable world, particularly when the social and cultural setting surrounding the child changes and is experienced as unreliable. Place and the hawthorn bushes are considered stable and will not let the child down, and are therefore safe, reliable and worthy of the child’s love, even after he becomes an adult.

Tuan (1974:56) notes how difficult it is for adults to recapture the vividness of the sensory impressions that a child experiences. Children live in a world that is much more vivid than that of adults. From the age of seven or eight, he writes, the child is able to conceptualise space in its different dimensions, to appreciate subtleties in colour and harmonies in volume and line. She can see landscape as a segment ‘out there’ but also recognize it as an enveloping, penetrating force. Since children, in general, are more unburdened by worldly cares than adults, and are mainly unfettered by learning, they are open to the world. Christensen et al. (2000a) also note how important material space is for children’s sense of belonging and sense of ‘home.’ It is through dynamic and fluid movements that children constitute a sense of belonging to the places in and around their homes.
Children’s use of place is, obviously, also strongly characterised by playing (e.g. Björklid, 1982; Bishop and Curtis, 2001; Moyles, 2005), even if it is restricted by adult structures and rules. Punch (2000) has investigated how children deal with these structures and has found that they continuously develop strategies to prolong play and combine it with the structures that surround them in order to play when and where adults are not paying attention. Aitken (2000) continues the thought by saying that children construct their identities through play and interaction with place and people. But the social framework in which children act affects the children’s identities since they are met with the smiles, reassurances, tensions and aggressions of the adults surrounding them. The extent to which children have the chance to play is of vital importance for their development and well-being (e.g. Opie, 1969, 1993; Ward, 1978; Woolley, 2003). How children play depends on the place they are playing in (e.g. Opie, 1969; Mårtensson, 2004), who they are and how old they are (e.g. Opie, 1993; Bishop and Curtis, 2001; Woolley, 2003).

Children’s independent access to their nearby environment is crucial for their psychological and physiological well-being and development (e.g. Björklid, 1982; O’Brien et al., 2000). To be able to move about freely to play and explore is a vital part of childhood and often what springs to mind when adults remember their own childhood years. For many children growing up today, the luxury of moving about freely in their neighbourhood is no longer theirs to enjoy. This depends on several factors, but is mainly a combination of cities’ physical and social conditions.

Children and Cities

For many years, there has been a notion within the western world that cities are bad places for children to grow up in and this has marked parent’s behaviour patterns. This behaviour is slowly changing in that many young families remain in cities instead of moving to the suburbs or the countryside. Many children grow up in cities and, having noted that it is crucial for children’s well-being and construction of identity to have access to outdoor environments, it becomes important that cities function for children, too. But cities are no easy equations to solve. The rapid pace, the intensity and density, the crowds of people and the traffic – these are at once both the heartbeats and the veins of the city that many people love, breathe and live with, as well as the main issues that cause restricted mobility for children, or disabled, elderly or apprehensive people.

The question is how the essence of cities, with their bolting pulses and creativity, can be brought together with the need for safe and stimulating places for groups such as children. Traditionally, this has been solved by enclosing certain areas, such as playgrounds and schoolyards, and children
are kept within fences. But as noted by Spencer and Blades (2006:1), the environments of children are not necessarily the environments for children. Children’s use of places is so much more complex since their playful exploration of place is a continuous action that cannot be restricted by fences.

Some of the first people to write about children in urban environments in a modern way were the Opies (1969). Their interest was in documenting children’s play and games. The rich world of children’s play that was revealed to them during their study led them to question the well-meant efforts of adults to provide for children’s play, which they saw as wasted efforts. The work conducted by the Opies has been of great importance because of their professionalism; they took the world of children seriously and studied it without romanticizing or looking down on it.

The work conducted by the Opies came to inspire many. In 1978 came Ward’s book ‘The Child in the City.’ This book has been, and still is, considered to have set out a whole new intellectual tone in the field of child-studies (Moore, 1986:xiii). Ward writes from an anarchist’s perspective and explores the ways in which children in middle childhood use their environments, particularly urban streets.

By observing and talking to children, he studied how children used and enjoyed urban environments in imaginative ways that many adults consider to be inappropriate behaviour for children. This could be things such as using rough ground, abandoned places and demolished houses, building places, old fences, car wrecks, garbage and different kinds of found objects, hanging and climbing in pipes or just occupying streets and sidewalks for play (Ward, 1978:vi).

Ward wrote his book at a time when cities and urban areas were in decline, the urban population was continually decreasing and inner-city areas (especially) in Britain almost always equaled slums and deprived neighbourhoods. Cities were, in the general debate, not considered healthy dwelling places and particularly not for children. Ward’s intention in describing the many and imaginative ways that children can amuse themselves with simple everyday things and how they can create imaginary worlds to play in even in the most slummy parts of urban neighbourhoods was supposed to be seen as a celebration of the urban child and the richness of the city’s diversity. Instead, many readers came to look upon it as a ‘catalogue of deprivation’ (Ward, 2000:vii). People were not ready to redefine their ideas of what kinds of places children appreciated.

In 1979 came Hart’s ‘Children’s Experience of Place.’ As a geographer, Hart wanted to explore the development of children’s place experiences and consider both the physical and experimental experience of their homes and nearby environments. His aim was to ‘discover the landscape as it exists for children’ (Hart, 1979:4), with the subsidiary aim of developing methods for investigating children’s environmental behaviour. Drawing on a two-year
study in New England, Hart investigated children’s mapping abilities, spatial competencies and their accounts of different places that they liked or disliked. Hart was one of the first to pull together geography and environmental psychology and has been said to provide the roots of the ‘new geography of children’ (Matthews, 2004:11). Hart noted in his study that many of children’s places and networks (i.e. paths) are independent from the ones used by adults. The children created their own spaces, and had remarkable and detailed knowledge regarding their local places. He did, however, find that there was a gap between what the children could express to him through the methods he had chosen and the actual knowledge that the children possessed and revealed to him when he was out walking with them. The places that the children chose to reproduce in drawings and models were different from the ones they revealed to him during walks. The amount of smaller and more private places that were revealed increased during the walks or ‘place expeditions.’ The younger children pointed out more places with social meaning, such as homes, whereas the older children showed places with specific uses or places with aesthetic qualities.

At the same time, i.e. the 1960s and 1970s, in Sweden, the interest in children’s welfare and outdoor environments was large. Research as well as political organisations and documents focused on children’s independent mobility and right to play. Special norms and guidelines were developed and practiced within urban planning, strictly claiming allowed distances between, for example, a child’s home and the playground. A rapid pace in the building of new residential areas led to critiques regarding the negative effect that very high rise buildings have on children’s play. Of particular interest was the impact that motor traffic had on children’s independent mobility. Staffed playgrounds, ‘parklekars,’ were initiated and considered important for children’s well-being and development (Björklid, 2005:3; see also Nilsson, 2003). Norén-Björn (1977) conducted a study on play by observing playgrounds in Stockholm. By looking into physical and social aspects, she formed a sharp critique of how children’s play was handled within urban planning. The playgrounds, she argued, were poorly designed and not integrated into the places where they were located.

Björklid (1982) also studied children’s outdoor environments in Stockholm and found that even if children primarily play close to home, they want to be able to enjoy their diverse urban environments without restrictions, and not just enclosed playgrounds. Children, she found, would play everywhere independently of whether the environment had been designed for play or not. Furthermore, she found that the more natural and diverse a place is, the more activities children perform there. High-rise buildings, traffic and long distances to play spaces as well as bad weather were factors that were limiting for children’s play, in particular for girls.

Moore (1986) wanted his book ‘Childhood’s Domain Play and Place in Child Development’ to be seen as a close relative of Ward’s work. Moore
describes himself as being influenced by the Opies, Hart, Ward and Björklid. What he found interesting with these writers was that they realized and appreciated that there is a ‘hidden life of children’ which he himself, as a professional planner, had found difficult to cope with in his everyday work. He had noticed how wasteland and abandoned buildings where the main play areas in his neighbourhoods and how these areas were torn down or exploited by developers.

In a study of 9-12 year-old children from three different urban areas in Britain, Moore asked the children to make a map or a drawing of all their favourite places. He also held follow-up interviews and asked the children to show him around their neighbourhoods and to show him their ‘secret places.’ When summarizing the results, a diverse and continuous relationship between children and their environments was exposed. Moore found that much of the knowledge he drew from the walks he made with children was the most important since the contexts of those trips were too subtle and rich to have been clearly expressed in drawings and interviews alone. He also found that when asking for ‘favourite places,’ he had missed out on the important pathways and streets leading to the children’s favourite places. Moore realized that children do not only use pathways or streets for transporting themselves. Instead, they explore and play continuously and the more walkable an environment is the more time the children spend outdoors without actually doing anything particular. The more diverse the environment is, the richer it is to the child. The areas that seemed to possess greatest value for the majority of the children in Moore’s study were abandoned places and rough ground. These areas offered a great sense of possession and were often completely shielded from adult interference, and they seemed to be extremely important for socializing as well as for finding solitude and exploring the environment on one’s own. Rough ground was also the place for huts and dens, hiding spots and secret meeting places.

Although Moore found an enormous diversity in the way in which children used their places, he was also struck by the differences that could be observed between children living very close to each other. Children living in the same environments showed such widely differing patterns of use of their surroundings that he concluded that there must be more than parental restriction, physical access and urban design that decide how children use their places. He realized that each pattern of use was influenced by a complex set of interlocking factors – what he calls ‘hidden dimensions.’ These hidden dimensions can be relationships with parents, family and friends, cultural attitudes in the community, perceptions of social and physical hazards in the environment, the influence of school, youth organisations and other institutions, aptitudes and the genetic inheritance of each individual and the time spent watching television.

At this point, I have laid out some of the most influential research on children and places, in particular in regard to seeing children as active
subjects and using methods that aim to capture the children’s realities ‘on the streets,’ thereby producing situated knowledge. The rest of this chapter attempts to look into how the conditions for children have changed and to bring in later findings regarding children’s uses, perceptions and experiences of mostly urban places, as this is crucial for how we choose to approach children’s place experiences methodologically.

Accessing the City

The years after the 1970s and early 1980s have meant dramatic changes in the lives of many children. Increased social fears, traffic and car dependency together with the institutionalisation of children’s everyday lives, and the commercialisation of children’s play (McKendrick et al., 2000), have severely decreased children’s possibilities to be outdoors and explore their surroundings, to engage in free play and also to socialise without adult supervision. In commenting on his famous book, Ward notes (2000:viii) that the children of today have become an indoor generation because of the lack of access to outdoor environments and outdoor play. Moore (2004:1) points to the accelerating health problems, such as obesity, diabetes and heart issues, that spread throughout the western world as direct consequences of children’s limited access to the outdoor environment and the limited possibilities for free play that result. The increased possibilities to remain indoors and play and the internet and computers probably also have an effect on this.

At present, there is a growing trend within urban planning towards densification of the built environment. In Stockholm, the need for new dwellings is a political hot spot. The aim is to build on already exploited land and to spare natural environments. The eagerness to exploit has caused environments with value to the city dwellers to become exploited or threatened with exploitation, such as school yards, rough ground and certain park areas. In Britain, the Urban Task Force report has had much influence on making inner city areas more attractive as well as denser. The denser a built environment grows, the more people will live, work and travel there, and this is something that in itself seems to restrict children’s mobility. When children are not allowed out to play, socialize or just exist, they have to be indoors. For many children, this means that the natural exercise that outdoor activity brings is not compensated for. Instead, they remain still in front of the computer or television. When children are subject to increasing boundaries, they create their own space through everyday leisure activities, such as video and computer games, rather than by using outdoor environments (McNamee, 2000).

The lack of movement has led to a rapidly increasing problem with obesity among children and teenagers. Hillman et al. (1990) write that the number of children who walk to school alone in England has decreased from
80% to 10% between the years of 1970 and 1990. In Sweden, the majority of children still walk, but there has been a decrease from 94% in 1983 to 77% in 2000 (Björklid, 2003:24).

The fact that a denser environment is negative for children is questioned by some. Nyström (2003) writes that the determining question is how an area is made denser and which places become exploited. It is possible, she argues, that a denser environment means that children will be able to enjoy the urban culture more easily and that the city becomes more accessible to them.

Social fears regarding children’s welfare are increasing dramatically all over Europe. Percy-Smith (2002:58) reflects that there is a growing ‘moral panic’ concerning children and young people in public places.

Parents fear that their children will be the victims of motor traffic, murderers and paedophiles, or be orally abused. To protect children, parents keep them at home and drive them in their car when they need to get somewhere. In many places, schools are becoming more and more fortified with high gates, fences and guards, and with restricted time spent outdoors for the children. Any outdoor play is often strictly watched by parents or other adults and the children rarely freely explore the outdoor environment.

These tendencies are strong within the United Kingdom, but in Sweden fears regarding traffic and road safety are still more common than social fears (Björklid, 1996, 2005). There are studies (see Terrell et al., 2000; Prezza, 2004a) that suggest that children, who from early years were taught by their parents not to trust strangers, feel more alone and have a greater fear of intimacy during adolescence than other children. Social fears in public places are serious and provide new challenges to urban planning, since, as Worpole (2002:3) has noted, it is difficult to design public places that are based on the view that all users need protection from each other: ‘children from adults, and adults from children.’

As pointed out by Rasmussen (2000, 2004), much of modern children’s everyday lives comes down to commuting between home, school and free time facilities, such as sport arenas and after school clubs of different kinds. There is a need to not only bring the design of children’s home environments into the agenda, but also to focus on making school and after-school places for children better designed and more suitable for children’s need for play and outdoor activity.

There are, hence, many reasons for arguing for children’s right to the outdoor environment. It is possible to claim that children miss out on many important factors during their childhood years if they are not allowed to play freely and explore their environment; their physiological and psychological well-being are very dependent on their ability to move freely and explore and socialize in the outdoor environment without constant adult supervision. But children and young people are also important if the city environment that we strive for is one that is inclusive of all and allows a vivid city life on the streets.
The limitation of children’s use of public space is focused on by several researchers. Valentine (1996) argues that to a large extent, it returns to how adults define public space. Children are either regarded as being in need of protection from criminals or they are considered ‘anti-social’ and too uncontrolled and noisy for public space. She finds that in order to maintain the adult definition of public space, children and young people often need to be excluded since their ‘otherness’ collides with what is considered normal. Valentine finds deeper reasons for the exclusion of certain groups from public space; when normality is defined from a white middle-class male perspective, all other groups become ‘different.’

The increasing fear regarding children’s safety in public space, the so-called ‘stranger danger’ fear (Cahill, 1990; Valentine, 1996), has severely decreased children’s independent mobility. The fear is that children will become abducted, murdered or molested by strangers in public spaces. As is often the case, the fear of these crimes is much larger than the probability of becoming the victim of any of them. These fears may still outweigh the positive benefits of enjoying public space (Prezza et al., 2005). Several criminal cases involving children have had high media profiles and this has helped develop the socially acceptable idea that being a good parent is to keep children out of public space. Children are often considered incompetent, helpless and in need of protection. Valentine (1996:211) presents results that point to the fact that the fear of strangers not only has consequences for children’s independent mobility but also the extent to which adult males dare to interact with children in public space. The fear of being accused of molesting a child has caused many men to hesitate before intervening when, for instance, children get lost or fall off their bikes in public places.

Karsten (2002, 2005) explores the changed geographies of children to find out if it really ‘used to be better.’ By looking into how children used the outdoor environment of three different streets in Amsterdam, she compared children’s realities in 1950s and 1960s with that of today. Her findings reveal that there has been a change in the use of space over time. The amount of time urban children play outdoors has declined considerably and their ability to move and socialize freely has decreased. It is not primarily the structural changes in the environment but rather the social conditions in society that have led to the changes. At the same time, Karsten finds that there has been a change in the use of domestic indoor space. When the outdoor space was transformed from being a child’s space to an adult space, private homes transformed from being adult space to children’s space.

Karsten distinguishes three different geographies of children. She labels the first one ‘outdoor children’ and this refers to the children of the 1950s and 1960s who spent much of their time outdoors. The other two geographies she labels as ‘indoor children’ and ‘backseat generation’ and these refer to modern childhoods. These two share the parental generation’s
fear of children’s safety and the need to intervene in children’s free time, both of which severely restrict children’s mobility. The ‘backseat generation’ gets their decreased outdoor time compensated for by their parents, who drive them to different activities, whereas the ‘indoor generation’ does not get compensated at all. Besides health effects, the children get deprived of ‘real-life experiences’ and are not given the opportunity to meet children from other social groups. A consequence that follows is that the way children socialise has become much more segregated, something that may result in deep consequences in society.

Kyttä (2003, 2004) has also looked into independent mobility and focuses on what different places can provide for children. She draws on Gibson’s (1979:127) concept of affordance, which includes what an environment offers a person, ‘what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill.’ An affordance has features of both the environment and the individual and is located between the setting and the person (Gibson, 1979; Åberg-Bengtsson, 1996; Kyttä, 2004). Kyttä uses the affordance concept when conducting research with children in Finland and Belarus. She looks into the connection between actualized affordances and independent mobility. She argues that some places offer a high number of positive affordances and the children are allowed to explore and move freely in the environment. Other environments offer low degrees of independent mobility, with a low number of affordances due to the restricted mobility, meaning that the children’s will to explore decreases, or that the children get compensated through secondary experiences, such as looking at the environment from a car window.

Comparing Kyttä’s result with Karsten’s (2002, 2005), it is possible to see that children who have restricted mobility still can be compensated with both movement and, to a certain extent, experiences, if they have parents who are able and willing to compensate the children by driving them to activities and who make sure in other ways that the children are compensated for their lack of mobility. This phenomenon is also noted by Prezza (2004a:169) in the Italian context:

For Italian children, the city is mostly a scene that they observe from the car window, from the windows of their home or from clinging to the hand of an adult who forces them to walk at his/her pace.

The children cannot be said to be deprived of general experiences of the city but they are deprived of their own explorations and private experiences. This is serious since it has been proven (e.g. Matthews, 1992:235; Prezza, 2004a:169-170) that children’s independent mobility develops environmental knowledge as well as spatial and analytical abilities.
Children’s Places

In 2002, Unesco published a study, *Growing Up in an Urbanising World*, on children’s living conditions and the urban environment (Chawla, 2002). It included research from countries around the world and marked the revival of the *Growing Up in Cities Project* that was pioneered by Kevin Lynch in the 1970s (Lynch, 1977). Focusing on low-income areas, children’s living conditions are analysed both in the studies edited by Lynch and those edited by Chawla. In Lynch’s volume, the researchers described and mapped the spaces and territories where children lived, worked, played and studied. The *Growing Up in an Urbanising World* volume has a focus that is more on participant planning and how children and young people can be brought into local governance and community planning following in the footsteps of Agenda 21 and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The results from the research in both volumes clearly indicate that children’s welfare draws on social stability in the child’s context as well as the child’s ability to enjoy independent mobility and have an accessible neighbourhood. Nordström (2003) writes that the results from these Unesco projects indicate that this is what can be said to characterise good and safe environments for children.

Christensen (2003) notes how children are emplaced and how they build up knowledge through concrete engagement with place. But individual children are also more or less sensitive to place (Derr, 2006). The impact place has will, therefore, vary. Within the same setting, the children’s experiences will vary considerably. Fog-Olwig (2003) emphasises the importance of studying children in relation to the ways in which the city is constructed as a place as well as a social and cultural setting.

A clear focus within contemporary research on how children use place is the need to expand the common notion in urban planning that taking children’s views into account means making sure there are playgrounds. Playgrounds are important but, as Nilsson (2001) notes, children spend only 10-20% of their total time outdoors in a playground. Considering this, there is an obvious need to consider, include and consult children in the planning and design of all places.

In a study in Northampton, England, Percy-Smith (2002:57) reveals how children create places that are rich in meaning on the margins of the adult world, but also notes how adults try to prohibit children from creating these places. He argues that children’s right to ‘hang out’ needs to be protected and seen as a meaningful form of socialisation. It is through this activity that children and young people create their identities and construct their own places. Derr (2006) writes that places that allow children to explore provide them with a sense of freedom, control and self-esteem.

The fact that children often develop strong and affectionate relationships to places and often have emotions regarding different places from a very young age is noted by Matthews (1992), who writes that this knowledge is
not only important for understanding how children learn about place but also because it provides an understanding of what places children find most satisfying, as these often are different from what adults may believe. The places children seem to enjoy are parks, commercial facilities and places rich in activity, places that allow the children to act according to their own needs, values and potentials (Percy-Smith, 2002; see also Lawson, 2001). This was also found in a Danish study on children’s everyday lives in the city, where children consider diverse environments and green elements to be positive (Agervig Carstensen, 2005). The children also connect clear aesthetic values to natural elements. The negative aspects expressed by the children in both these studies have to do with traffic, boredom, pollution and environmental hazards, as well as the lack of facilities and new experiences. Heurlin-Norinder (2005) identifies certain environmental qualities that are important to children: places need to be safe, there needs to be landmarks and clear means for orientation, and a sense of locality is important, as is a varied and challenging environment (see also Nilheim, 1999; O’Brien, 2003).

The importance of natural environments for children’s well-being has been emphasised by many (e.g. Grahn, 1991, 2003; Nabhan and Trimble, 1994; Kong, 2000; Kahn and Kellert, 2002; Sorte, 2005; Faber Taylor and Kuo, 2006; Ross, 2006). Sebba (1991) writes that the characteristics of natural environments seem to be congruent with children’s needs in terms of the developing perceptual system. Natural environments provide a great variety of stimulation in regard to time and space. Nabhan and Trimble (1994) points to nature’s ability to allow urban children to ‘roam beyond the pavement, to gain access to vegetation and earth that allows them to tunnel, climb or even fall.’ There is evidence that children who have the opportunity to play outdoors or in nature-like environments are in better physical condition in terms of strength, co-ordination, balance, flexibility and the ability to focus and concentrate (Grahn 2003). The challenging aspects of nature are considered extra important when playgrounds become safer and hence also less challenging and developing for children. Kong (2000) finds that children engage socially, intellectually and emotionally with nature when they play in, learn from and care for it.
Spatial Abilities

Children’s experiences of place, as well as their ability to communicate these experiences, are often connected to the spatial abilities that the child is supposed to have. Development psychology and early laboratory experiments have influenced how children’s spatial abilities have been considered in the literature. It is now argued that there is evidence that young children’s spatial abilities have been underestimated. There is evidence (Matthews, 1992; Sobel, 1998; Plester, Blades and Spencer, 2006) that even young children possess spatial abilities and can use symbolic representations of places.

Geographical work (e.g. Blaut, 1987) claims that young children’s mapping abilities emerge naturally, independent of training, and that children seem to have awareness of the macro-environment in a global and unspecified sense and also to distinguish between the self and the macro-environment. Matthews (1992:235) notes that there is evidence that children who are just a few years old show spatial awareness, even if they lack the ability to solve different forms of spatial problems (see also Tuan, 1977).

The macro-environmental repertoire of many 3-4-year-olds includes route-learning and navigational competence, and an ability to use maps, aerial photographs and models of the environment to engage in interpretation and locating tasks, as well as a capability to employ spatial reference systems and orienting schema (Matthews, 1992:236).

A cross-cultural study (Blades et al., 1998) involving six countries with different cultural backgrounds showed that spatial competence appears naturally and without help from adults or formal training and that it does this in all cultures. Ottosson (1987) suggests that children should be encouraged to think of maps not in symbolic terms, but rather as miniature worlds that takes their starting point in the topographic knowledge the children already possess, since this better meets how they think spatially.

However, environmental competence also varies due to individual differences in the experiences that the child has had. Generally, the more independent mobility the child enjoys, the greater her spatial competence will be. Tuan (1977) reflects on children’s scale and on how the fact that they are small in size affects their sense of place and the places they visit. Children continually create and seek out places that correspond to their size, they hide under the table or build dens and huts that respond better to their own size than that of adults. He suggest that this, and the fact that children play with small toys and create miniature worlds, helps them think spatially and understand what the world looks like from above.
**Gendered Place Behavior**

Several writers have noted a difference between the genders in spatial competence and experience of place. This is particularly evident in studies dating back a few years (e.g. Ward, 1978; Webley and Whalley, 1986/2001; Moore, 1986; Matthews, 1992). Matthews notes that boys’ spatial competence is far better than that of girls and that boys perform better than girls on tests of spatial reasoning. He says (ibid:173) that the underlying reasons for this are unclear and disputed. It is of course relevant to properly define spatial ability and also how to measure it in order to understand why these differences occur.

The gendered aspect of the playground is comparable to that of public space. However, as has also been noted by Karsten (2003), it has not yet been the focus of feminist critiques. There are still assumptions among practitioners and some researchers that boys have ‘better’ spatial abilities than girls and that boys also need more space than girls.

Karsten (2003) notes how participation and activities in play spaces are structured by gender, and that the physical and symbolic aspects of place reinforce this divide. Girls are marginalized in public playgrounds, and playgrounds need to be big enough and designed to include both the interests of boys and girls. To prevent this marginalisation of girls, Morrow (2006) suggests a re-evaluation of the theories of gender identities that practitioners are approached with in order to create more finely tuned notions of gender identities based on children’s own experiences.

Gagen (2000:213-214) focuses on children’s gendered behaviour in the playground, based on Butler’s theories (1988, 1990, 1993). She focuses on gender identity and performativity: how gender identities are created through ideals presented to the children by adults in learning situations and everyday practice, and how these are elicited through spatial regimes. According to Gagen and Butler’s accounts, gender exists through particular bodily acts that are reproduced as normal through repetition and socially endorsed acts; hence, the body becomes gendered. The performative and flexible nature of gender is concealed, Gagen argues (2000:227) that an adult and institutional commitment to ‘expressive notions of identity’ is based on a socially accepted heterosexual norm. The way children can enact gender is restricted since its performative nature is not recognised and since the learning strategies adults adopt builds on normative practices that reproduce gendered behaviour. This affects children’s behaviour in and conception of place.

Mathews et al. (2000:64) have focused on young people in England and found that streets and public places provide an important social venue for many young girls. Rather than finding that girls have fewer spatial needs than boys, they found that girls’ use of public outdoor space is more frequent than the boys’. This, they say, is not recognised in debates about gendered space. For the girls in their study, public places were the main meeting
places where they hung around, met their friends and ‘waited for something to happen.’

A Geography of the Senses

Earlier in this chapter I noted how experiences of place are highly connected to the senses and how the sensory experiences a person receives of a place are what, to a large extent, creates the subjective experience of place. Place and perceptions of place can bring out memories and aspects of ourselves that we cannot consciously reach. Unexpected perception, such as a sudden scent or a sound, can trigger reactions and memories that we have no control over. Many of the perceptions, objects and places that bring out these memories do so because of experiences we have had as children, when certain aspects of place or place perceptions got loaded with meaning. Proust writes:

(…) the greater part of our memory exists outside us, in a dampish breeze, in the musty air of a bedroom or the smell of autumn’s first fires, things through which we can retrieve any part of us that the reasoning mind, having no use for it, disdained, the last vestige of the past, the best of it, the part which after all our tears seem to have dried, can make us weep again. Outside us? Inside us, more like, but stored away from our mind’s eye, in that abeyance of memory which may last for ever (Proust, 1919/2003:222).

The importance of the senses for the perception and experience of place is something that is commonly ignored in the literature. One of the first to write about the landscapes of the senses was the Finnish geographer Granö, who during the 1920s fought for this line of research (Hägerstrand, 1978:110). Recently, there seems to be a renewed interest, with Rodaway (1994) being influential within geography.

Rodaway (1994) refers to what he calls ‘sensuous geography’ in an effort to connect the analysis of body, space and sense, as well as to include the social character of the senses. By doing this, he aims to show that the senses are spatial, and that each sense contributes to people’s orientation in the city, to the understanding of spatial relationships and to the experience of places and objects both on a micro and a macro level.

The sensuous – the experience of the senses – is the base from which a wider geographical understanding can be constructed (ibid:3). Rodaway suggests that geographers perhaps need to return to a more sensual kind of study and not focus so strongly on the visual experience. He argues that a multi-sensual geographical study could claim to contain the fullness of the living world and everyday life as it manages to include the multidimensional and multi-sensual experience of place. He (ibid:4) distinguishes several different approaches to a sensuous geography but is himself mostly
interested in creating a geographical understanding of the senses both as a relationship to the world and the senses themselves as a structuring of space and defining of place.

The body is central to sensuous geographies for several reasons. The body provides orientation within the physical environment as well as a measure of the world, since it is through the body we appreciate space, distance and scale. The locomotion of the body provides the ability to explore and evaluate places and to move ourselves to satisfy our needs. The body also co-ordinates and helps to integrate the experiences we have and it provides us with temporal and spatial perception, giving us access to experiences outside itself (Rodaway, 1994:31).

The varying range of the senses has been discussed by many (e.g. Tuan, 1979; Matthews, 1992; Rodaway, 1994). In contemporary society, vision is generally considered superior to the other senses. This also characterises the research methods commonly used, as well as how we relate to places through different narratives. Most of our understanding of the world is based on our visual impressions (Matthews, 1992:66). Vision is the sense that enables possession and property, since it is possible to look at people and objects repeatedly, whereas a sound or a scent immediately disappears (Frisby and Featherstone, 1997; Urry, 2000:389). Vision is also the only sense that a human can give and receive simultaneously. The domination of the visual sense within modern western culture has been criticised. The critique refers to the fact that vision is reduced to a limited amount of features that then dominate other senses. Visual domination is considered to lead to oppression, such as the objectification of the female body (Urry, 2000:388-391; Mulvey, 1989; Taylor, 1994:268). Feminists seek ways of integrating all the senses in a way that does not exercise power over the ‘other’ (Rodaway, 1994).

Touch has the closest range, as it is connected to the range of the body itself. Sight, smell and sound can provide information from a distance. The senses of sight, hearing and smell are enhanced by movement through space and contribute to the conception of space.

Though sight is dominant, it is also relatively easy to regulate. We can choose to look away or close our eyes if we do not want to see. Smell, on the other hand, is a sense that is difficult to regulate and control. As expressed by Tuan (1993:57), the directness of smell provides a sharp contrast to the more abstract characteristics of sight. Smell has great importance for the experience of place. Particular smells can also help bring out the memories of places lost to us (e.g. Proust, 1913/2003). It seems, however, that different people can sense different smells in the same place, depending on our perception and which associations the smells bring to us and how we combine the different smells we perceive (Urry, 2000:393).

That sound sometimes is on the hierarchal top of all senses has been noted by Hägerstrand (pup/1991:106), who reflects on sounds such as the
telephone and other signals to which humans react to with impulse. The unexpectedness and sharpness of certain sounds makes them cut across all other sensuous impressions. Sharp and loud sounds therefore also have an effect on the experience of place.

Touch is both an active sense, when we actively touch something, and a passive one, when we accidentally touch something. Children actively feel more objects when interacting with place than adults do and hence put more emphasis on the tactile experience of place (Rodaway, 1994:48-50).

For children and people with handicaps, the full co-operation of all senses is central to their experience of place. Urry (2000:395) suggests that invoking all the senses challenges much of our understanding of urban life and refers to Massey’s (2001) writing on the micro-spatiality of people confined to a wheelchair and the diversity of the different senses that create their own local landscapes.

For children, the full co-operation of their senses is natural and forms their impressions and memories of place. It is socially acceptable for children to use all their senses when interacting with place, in comparison to adults. Children are allowed to touch and physically interact with place: to lie down on the ground to feel the grass towards the cheek, to strike a statue to feel its material, to taste a flower, to follow a scent or even to walk barefoot on the pavement. Urry (2000) notes how adults walking next to children do not understand children’s sensuous experiences. The only way adults can nearly understand is when they experience their childhood landscapes in their memories, but not even that is a correct image since it has been filtered by the many years that have passed.

Even if, as suggested by Urry above, it is difficult for adults to grasp children’s experiences, an understanding of the fact that children’s experience of place is connected to the impressions of all senses is an important step when investigating children’s realities.
4. A Researcher on Foot

If you listen, you can hear it. The city, it sings. If you stand quietly, at the foot of a garden, in the middle of a street, on the roof of a house. (…) It’s a wordless song, for the most, but it’s a song all the same and nobody hearing it can doubt what it sings. (McGregor 2002:1)

On Foot

The complexity in writing about experience of place has been widely acknowledged and it is through this difficulty that the ‘performative’ turn of the social sciences and humanities has developed. Through theatre, opera, performance art, dance and multimedia, new ways of expressing the city have been developed, though still not without managing without the written word (Thrift, 2000:406).

The reflection of place and place experiences in art, closely related to performative methodologies, has been explored by Tuan (2004), who has sought to study the difference between place as experienced through art and as a physical place. While place reconstructed in art is a product of a certain time made by a certain person, the ‘real’ place is continually evolving and will be perceived differently by the same person from one time to the next.

There is an increasing interest in using walks in research, both as a theoretical means of understanding the city and as a methodology where participants are asked to take a walk in their surroundings. The reason for this is that it is assumed that walking facilitates understanding of place experiences and makes it possible to include detailed knowledge of the place as well as of the abstract processes the place initiates within the participants.

Bateson (1972/2000) discusses how it is not possible to distinguish a strict division between mind and the ‘outer world.’ Hägerstrand (pup/1991:142; see also Gibson, 1968, 1979) continues the discussion by writing that the basis of our way of thinking and understanding may be our actions rather than our perceptions. Consequently, walks can be seen a means of allowing motion to facilitate the understanding of our relationship with place and how we perceive it.

However, there is no need to see motion and perception as contradicting each other. It is much more fruitful to regard perception as being present all
the time – if I do not act, I will still perceive, but my perceptions will mainly be constituted of what I already know: I will see, touch, smell and hear familiar things. If I act, my perception of unfamiliar things will increase.

Still, bringing in Hägerstrand’s (pup/1991) line of thinking, during a walk we encounter and perceive a flow of different kinds of impressions, some of which we are already familiar with and others that we have not come across previously. These will awaken our interest by stimulating, comforting, scaring or irritating us. Movement can therefore increase our perceptions; we get stimulated by moving and the different places we walk between, the perceptions and impressions we receive enclose us in a place where the boundaries of the past, present and future are blurred. The physical structures of houses, pavements, streets and trees affect us; the social and cultural dimensions we feel and relate to, such as the way we feel welcomed or alienated; the memories, narratives, thoughts and dreams that flow through our minds are awakened by our movements and perceptions and are part of the subjective experience of place.

It is by moving and stopping, experiencing and perceiving, acting and remaining passive, dreaming, thinking, loving and loathing a place that we create our own subjective versions of it. This subjective place can not fully exist within our minds, but is reconstructed every time we encounter places, new or familiar, and when all dimensions of a place are brought together as one.

Walking, as a field of methodology and research, refers back to academic work as well as to social and political movements in the middle of the 20th century. Walks are used not only as a method to work with empirically, but also as way of exploring the concept and experience of the city.

Radical geographer Bunge (1977) conducted studies in the late 1960s and 1970s in which he used the colonial and capitalistic term of ‘exploration’ to turn concepts around and show how explorations could be used to provide insight into problem areas in Toronto and Detroit. Through walking, he managed to provide different perspectives on the areas and also to include residents in the research, in order to gain knowledge on their everyday lives and urban structures.

The term ‘urban exploration’ also relates back to the founding of the ‘psychogeography’ and the European avant-garde. In the 1950s, the ‘Letterist International’ movement, based in Paris, founded the term as they explored cities on foot and thought up revolutionary ideas for overturning the city and its dominant social and spatial structures. In the late 1950s, the ‘Situationist International’ provided a central role in the creation of ‘psychogeography,’ in which activists, artists and writers started exploring the possibilities of urban space. Their aim was highly political, not seeking only to gain knowledge about urban space but rather to change the society they explored. The urban explorations of this time were documented through artistic expressions, including writing but also different kinds of mappings of
human activities, such as movements, desires and other kinds of experience of place (Pinder, 2005:388-389).

‘Psychogeography’ has an underground air and is marginal in its character; it engages with the street and its practices, fragments and materials. Nonetheless, it has had importance for the development of a critical understanding of the city, including practitioners from academia as well as art. Within ‘psychogeography,’ pedestrianism is seen as the prime approach of investigating, experiencing and understanding the city (Pinder, 2005:390).

The majority of the texts on walking and experiences of the city refers to the nature of the everyday experience and how, and if, this can be represented. Those considered most famous and influential are perhaps Breton (Cohen, 1993), Benjamin (Caygill, 1998; Pile, 2000) Debord (Sadler, 1994), de Certau (1984) and Lefebvre (1996), and their work has formed the basis for much other research. These writers consider the city to be something more, a place of dreams where the boundaries of experience can be pressed and where the many levels of the city always keep something hidden and barely touchable (Thrift, 2000:399). If the aim is to read these texts in order to use them methodologically, it is easy to find them over-theorized. Interesting and challenging, yes, but hardly in line with the characteristics of most people’s experiences of everyday life even from a representational perspective. Everyday life is considered something exhilarating and difficult to understand and is therefore viewed from a distance. De Certeau’s writings have been influential but have also been criticised in the way that they have led to a romanticized approach to everyday life and the resistance of ordinary people.

Thrift (2000) offers both a critique and a defence of the above-mentioned authors, asking how, from a less theoretical perspective, they facilitate the understanding of connections between experience of place and everyday life in the many empirical studies they are used in. Starting with the critique, he mentions that they all write about the central cores of important urban centres and do not include suburbs.

It is difficult to think of the situationists in Stevenage, de Certau in Catford, or Lefebvre in Lewisham – though it is a beguiling prospect (Thrift, 2000:399).

A second point of critique refers to the way they use cities, or parts of cities, as prime examples of the commodification of everyday life, which, Thrift argues, does not leave room for anything except a homogenized conformity. The third reason refers to what he calls the ‘snobbish romanticism’ about the city and its inhabitants. The city becomes an ‘all-consuming capitalist machine’ where the only visible perspectives are those that suit the authors, and the city becomes a landscape of power, marginalisation and resistance.
The city and its inhabitants get caught in ‘modernity,’ which results in the focus turning to larger, complex systems rather than to the authentic everyday life (Thrift, 2000:399-400).

Thrift’s defence of the same writers refers to the notion of experience and the way in which the city is understood as holding extensive possibilities. These possibilities continuously change and become redefined through movement and time. The attempt these writers make is to bring forward the full potential of the city. Another aspect is the importance of embodiment and the use of all senses in the experience of the city. The final defence refers to writing and the connections between writing and the city (Thrift, 2000:401-403). Writing is not just about capturing the city in print, but is also a way of experimenting with style in order to free the city to perform across the spectrum of possibilities (Thrift, 2000:403).

Thrift’s critique is worth keeping in mind, emphasising the strengths as well as the weaknesses of some of the discourses on walking. The central point he makes, I argue, is the risk that walks make the researcher more alienated from place and everyday life when the aim of using this approach often is the opposite. Another central aspect is how walks provide the potential to include more multi-sensory experiences of place in research.

Walking into Everyday Life

Researching and observing city life could be considered both very simple and extremely difficult (e.g. Morris, 2002). Simple because it is, in one way or another, a part of most people’s everyday lives, for me as a researcher as well as for anyone else. I am therefore acting in the city on the same premises as anyone else. There is no need for any exceptional understanding of what makes the city dwellers act the way they do. Getting to work, socialising, walking, shopping, travelling and all other such activities are more or less a part of all people’s everyday lives. There is no reason to assume that I am more, or less, experienced in city life than any of the people I interact with or observe. The abstract and transforming characteristics of city life probably make it just as easy to claim to know everything as it would be to feel that after years of study all that is still possible to see is a complicated, ever-changing web of social actors, economic and political factors struggling side by side in an urban setting. It would not be possible, for sure, to challenge either claim since it is just as likely that both are true as it is that neither of them are.

When I engaged in this study and before all the final decisions had been made, I started to feel a need to explore the areas I had chosen. I wanted to come closer to the places where the children are active, and observe and participate in the city-life.
I started to spend time in the areas. My first intentions were straightforward: I wanted to learn how to find my way and get to know streets, parks and buildings. I soon realized that by walking through the areas at different times of the week, of the day and in different weather that, even in the reasonably big cities of Stockholm and Bournemouth, I began to recognize the people who lived and worked in the areas. I started to ‘feel’ the areas and collect local and informal knowledge, which added to my experience of the places.

In Stockholm, this meant changing some of my normal habits. For example, instead of shopping in my own local store, I would take the bus to my study area and shop there.

When I visited Bournemouth, I actively tried not to live as a visitor. Instead, I attempted to follow the daily schedule of the city-dwellers as much as I could. This meant ‘going to work’ in the morning, queuing for food in a stressed way at lunch time, shopping at the local supermarket in the evening or on Saturday morning and buying the evening paper at the same local newsagent at night. It meant not only picking up things that I found ‘British’ but also adapting my own behaviour in order to fit into the new context. I changed both my Swedish accent as much as possible and my body language, and tried to respond to situations not in a typical ‘Swedish way’ but in what I observed would be a more natural ‘English response.’

All of this is obviously very difficult to judge the outcome of and is difficult to analyse. However, it was, from my point of view, an approach that was very successful. It not only meant that I got genuine local knowledge of the areas but also that I could make very good observational studies. In the beginning of my work, it was obvious to all that I was a visitor. I not only felt like a foreigner who sometimes got lost and needed a map but was also quite obviously picked out as one by the English. They sometimes asked if I needed help with directions or their body language revealed that I was a tourist standing in their way when they wanted to get on with their everyday lives. As my studies progressed, however, I noticed that people’s responses toward me changed. I made casual acquaintances who assumed I was a native British person, and I did not tell them otherwise; tourists started to ask me for directions; and the local people no longer sighed over me but instead gave me knowing looks when groups of tourists were standing in my way. The fact that I, perhaps not always but on some occasions, managed to pass as a local in regard to behaviour, body language and accent gave me many advantages in my observation studies. People started to talk to me, making casual comments regarding everyday things, such as the weather or local news, but also in some cases things that regarded my work, such as young people’s behaviour in the city. The fact that people stopped treating me like a foreigner or a tourist and more as a local inhabitant made it possible for me to create a foundation from which I
could understand my research material in a different way than otherwise would have been possible.

The observations I made in Bournemouth while walking and acting everyday life felt valuable at the time since I became more familiar with the areas and I felt safer when conducting the rest of the research. The full extent of the benefits, though, did not become evident until during my conversations with the children and when I analysed the material. In particular, this regarded the fact that I had noticed that there was a conflict at one of the local supermarkets. Boys and young teenagers gathered in the garage of the supermarket to skateboard in a corner where there rarely were any cars parked. Since I walked past this corner every time I went to shop for food, I was familiar with how and when they normally skated and also the strategies they had developed to handle the security guards who sometimes came to tell them that they were not allowed to be there. During my conversations with the children in school, I noticed on some occasions that they referred to these boys and the garage skating, but did not want to reveal it to me since they probably thought they could get into trouble. When I started talking about the skaters in the supermarket and indicated that I did not pass any judgement on them, the children immediately loosened up and provided me with more information on several issues. Common everyday observations like this, some of which seemed unimportant at the time, also became very important during the analysis of the drawings and photographs since I could recognise events, people and places that I myself had experienced when walking in the city.

Working this way meant that I came to change much of my own personal behaviour and it raised questions of identity and belonging. In the beginning, when I spent time in England, much of what I did was acting. I studied behaviour or listened to an accent and then I copied it until I could tell from my surroundings that it worked. Soon, however, I did not have to act and my behaviour changed automatically. This regarded the way I interacted with strangers, the way I responded to everyday events and the way I handled the sociocultural context in which I was active. My everyday behaviour within the English context started to become more and more different from my Swedish behaviour. This does not, of course, regard dramatic changes, but in many small everyday situations I could distinguish between my Swedish response and my English one. This does not only have to do with my behaviour and body language but also depends to a large degree on the use of the two different languages. As the English language involves more politeness and casual social phrases than Swedish, the amount of brief and casual conversation with strangers in England tended to be more common than in Sweden, where this is not as accepted. This started to lead to a problem since I could not act similarly in the two areas, and I soon felt that my local knowledge in Bournemouth was better than it was in Norrmalm in Stockholm.
The problem of speaking casually to strangers in Sweden was overcome by accident. For my own convenience, I sometimes started to bring my dogs with me during my walks in Stockholm. Often, people spontaneously started to talk with me when I had the dogs with me. This was particularly the case with children of almost all ages, who seemed to be drawn towards the dogs by some natural curiousness.

The walks I conducted were hence of different characters and these characters came to influence the results. Amato (2004:2) has looked into the meaning of different types of walks and what they mean for urban life. What do promenading and strolling, romantic walking and country hiking, window shopping and urban pedestrianism mean? To me, it became apparent that different types of walking meant that I became classified differently by the people surrounding me, something that I started to use methodologically.

I made it a practice to conduct my walks in two different ways. When I wanted to get in touch and talk to people, I dressed in a casual way, brought my dogs and walked through parks and along streets at a slow pace, actively searching for eye contact. Other times, when I wanted to be an anonymous observer, I dressed up smartly, tried to look stressed and avoided eye contact, even though I observed as much as possible. These different types of walks meant that I became classified as belonging or not belonging to the places I walked. It was obvious that the slower pace, the casual clothes and the dogs made me belong to a place. People talked to me and asked for directions and I could be more active in the city life. The smarter clothes and faster pace disconnected me from the place and its people, even when I tried to establish contact. I clearly experienced how certain characteristics of myself, such as clothes, and the pace and character of my walking, affected the relationships I could establish with people as well as with place.

This approach might seem unconventional but I found that it not only worked, but actually was the only way that I could get a deeper understanding of these places.

Walking in the areas was important for my ability to interact with local people and places and to create an understanding of how everyday practices were carried out. It soon became obvious that the walks had other benefits as well. While walking, thoughts, ideas and questions regarding the work took shape or became clearer and walking nearly always seemed to ease the writing process. Oates (2003) has written about motion and writing and argues that a writer preferably should move through the landscape she writes about since it makes communication between a place and the inner self clearer. Movement and writing are irreversibly connected since they both are closely attached to the self and the conscious. Thus, movements facilitate the understanding of different places, but that does not necessarily makes it easier to write down and communicate this knowledge. The reason for this is that it brings a need to not only find the right words but also, in my case, to be able to separate the deeply personal experience of place with the
knowledge gained regarding the children’s experience of the same place. Pred (2005:331) refers to how Hägerstrand expresses the difficulty of verbalising and defining thoughts and experiences.

Place a row of door handles before me! I can’t describe in words which of them is the door to my childhood home. But I would be able to feel it by hand. Verbalization is a threat to sensory impression.

The act of verbalisation is demanding and forces the writer to sort and define experiences, although it may be almost impossible to do so because of their ethereal character.

By using walks as an important research approach, it became possible for me to use my own experiences and perceptions as tools for creating an understanding of the areas. The walks offered me the ability to understand the characters of the chosen areas and it also became possible for me to master the physical structures of the neighbourhoods. The repetitive approach to walking that I adopted meant that my understanding of and experiences with the places I visited were created over a period of time. In this particular case, the period was four years, which meant that the character of places and the people visiting them were revealed as containing more diversity than probably would have been the case if only a few walks had been conducted. Such a long period of time is not necessary in order to benefit from walking, even though a repetitive approach is a reliable means for gaining an understanding of place.

Walking, as compared to observing, means that I not only see, hear and smell people and place, but I also act with and within them. This provided me with a deeper understanding of the places, because I could observe other people’s experiences, while I also had active experiences of my own. The walks and the understanding they gave me constructed a solid platform of knowledge, ‘feel’ and understanding of the areas that proved utterly important during analysis, when I needed to independently think about and relate to these places. I could then return to the places, which were not merely photographs, maps or blurry memories, but something I had experienced strongly over a period of time. The walks proved to be means for including place in the research not as a passive location or concept, but as the vivid and multi-dimensional phenomena it is.
5. Methodology

Description of the Fieldwork

The fieldwork was, as has been mentioned, carried out in Bournemouth in southern England and Stockholm, the capital of Sweden. These places were chosen for several reasons. My connections in the cities aroused the initial interest to investigate what two different urban contexts mean for children’s use of place. The physical and social contexts in the two cities vary, as do, to some extent, the cultural. I therefore found it interesting to see how children in these cities use their outdoor environment as well as how the different contexts are reflected in the way that children communicate their experiences of place.

A total of 83 children took part in the research, 44 of them Swedish and 39 English. There was an almost equal amount of boys and girls, as well as an equal distribution of children in the different age groups. The four methods of interviews, walks, photography and drawings, were not used in the exact same way in the two different contexts and not all the children participated in every method. See Table 1.

The methods were chosen for several reasons. Since methods that allow children to document their everyday life are considered a suitable approach for gaining knowledge on a whole range of child-related issues, as proposed by Hart (1997), I leaned on using this approach. Interviews and drawings are traditional methods in research that involves children. I was interested in understanding how successful these methods truly are at capturing children’s experience of place. I have been in contact with participatory processes where these methods provide results that make adults conclude that children are unfit to be consulted. What is it that children communicate about place through these methods and how and when should they be used? Hence, this is a critique as well as a query regarding what the children communicate through these methods. The choice to include walks and photography relates to my interest in understanding how interaction with place affects our ability to think, relate and communicate place.

The work with the children was carried out in May 2003 in Stockholm and late June 2004 in Bournemouth. In both countries, there were two age groups of children, one group of eight-year-olds and the other eleven years
old. In Sweden, all children in both age-groups participated in interviews, drawings and walks. In England the eight-year-olds participated in drawings and interviews and the eleven-year-olds in photography and interviews.

Table 1. Children’s participation in the different methods.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Drawings</th>
<th>Photography</th>
<th>Walks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>English eight-year-olds</strong> (18)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>English eleven-year-olds</strong> (21)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Swedish eight-year-olds</strong> (21)</td>
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<td>•</td>
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<td>•</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Swedish eleven-year-olds</strong> (23)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The fieldwork should be viewed as a means for understanding how children communicate their place experience through the methods. The aim of this empirical work is not to present a comparative study of children in two different countries, but rather to use them as ways of mirroring how different phenomena relating to the physical, social and cultural structures of place will occur and influence methodology and children’s everyday life in different contexts. The two different contexts, therefore, highlight and reflect one other, providing a more diverse image of children’s means of communicating place. Comparisons between the contexts are made when the material so permits, in order to see if the contexts have an effect on what sort of knowledge the children communicate. Since interviews and drawings took place in both countries, it is interesting to compare the results, whereas there obviously is no reason to make cross-national comparisons with the walks and the photographs since each of these only was only carried out in one country.

As mentioned above, the fieldwork was carried out in slightly different ways in England and Sweden, regarding both the contact with the children and the methods. Contact with participating children was made through different, though similar, ways in the two countries. In common for the two studies is the close contact I had with the schools and City Councils.

The choice of conducting the research differently in England was based on my experiences in Sweden. The methods had functioned well but had been severely time-consuming, particularly the walks. I also felt that it would be difficult for me to take the children out for walks due to the
increased social fears in England. I wanted to examine if it was possible to gain similar results by choosing to work with fewer methods. Would, for instance, photography be an alternative to walks or do they generate different kinds of knowledge?

**Age**

The children are eight and eleven years old. The reason I chose to work with these age groups is because I wanted the children to be able to communicate clearly, from an adult perspective, but still not have reached puberty. Studies have shown (e.g. Hart, 1997; Hoff, 2003) that children at these ages, understand and show interest in other people’s activities and opinions. They use local places frequently and have developed verbal and social abilities to an extent that facilitates communication with adults. By eight, the children do not have very developed writing skills and they may have difficulties expressing their views verbally. It is, therefore, interesting to see how different means of communication may affect their ability to express themselves. The eleven- and twelve-year-olds have a growing interest for places outside of the neighbourhood, but they are still very dependent on adults in order to move between places. Children at these ages also often develop high self-ideals and expectations to live up to. Furthermore, they frequently find rules and authorities to be important (Hoff, 2003:25).

Hartman (1986) notes in his research on children’s philosophy of life that children in middle childhood are to a large extent concerned with existential questions, such as life and death, life perspectives, loneliness and life worth. All this, of course, is dependent on the individual as well as on the context, and needs to be seen as a generalisation.

Since I chose to work with different methods, I also had an interest in seeing what different methods enable children at different ages to communicate. Finally, I wanted to remain within the range of primary school and since children in England proceed to secondary school by the age of twelve, children not older than eleven seemed to be a natural choice.

**Interviews with Officials and other Professionals**

In order to get an understanding of the areas in which I conducted the research, I also interviewed a total of 34 planners, youth workers, urban design managers, park engineers, play policy managers, school teachers, volunteers within different organisations and others involved with issues regarding urban planning and children’s living conditions in Sweden and England, and in particular Stockholm and Bournemouth.

These interviews were mainly semi-structured, but also included policy meetings, workshops, walks and informal conversation through which I could gain an understanding of the conditions for the children as well as of the different places. The majority of the interviews – 25 – were conducted in England and the remaining nine took place in Sweden. The reason for this
was that I needed more knowledge of the conditions in England, than in Sweden due to my Swedish background. These interviews are not directly visible in the study but have functioned as background information.

Creative and Interactive Methods

I have chosen to classify the methods I applied by using two characteristics that they involve: creative and interactive elements. These refer to the level of creativity the children engage in when working through a method, the level of interaction between the child and the researched place and, finally, the level of interaction between me as a researcher and the children when they are actively participating in the research. Table 2 charts how the different methods are classified.

Table 2. Creative and interactive elements of the methods.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Creativity</th>
<th>Interaction child – researcher</th>
<th>Interaction child – place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walking</td>
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<tr>
<td>Photography</td>
<td>·</td>
<td></td>
<td>·</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Creativity means the ability to create and is used here to refer to the imaginary and artistic aspects of creating objects that communicate place experience. It refers to how the children engage in making drawings and taking photographs, often with imaginary and aesthetic concerns and judgments. Interaction refers to acting closely with someone or something; it is a mutual, reciprocal action or influence between people or things. I specifically refer to place-interaction, by which I mean that a person acts within a place and affects a place just as that place affects her. Place-interaction includes concrete and abstract experiences of place. I also refer to interaction between myself and the children in the study, meaning that we act together in doing something. Interactive elements, hence, refer both to the interaction between the child and the researched place and the interaction between the child and me as the researcher. Drawings and photography involve interaction between the child and researcher after the drawings have been made and the photographs taken but this will not, at least to any
noticeable extent, affect the material the children produce and has not been considered when classifying the methods.

The interview is classified as including interaction between the researcher and the child, but not between the child and the researched place, nor is it creative, as defined here. The drawing is highly creative, but does not include interaction between the child and the place or researcher. Photography is also creative and involves interaction between child and place. The walk is interactive both between the child and researcher, and the child and the researched place.

The choice to use methods that can be classified accordingly refers to the aim of trying to find out how children can communicate their subjective experiences of place. Deeply subjective experiences may often feel illogical or too unimportant to express; they may also involve memories and associations that can characterize a child’s experience but which may seem too private to express verbally. The hope was that this knowledge would more easily be let out by the children if they were allowed to express themselves creatively or else by turning the power relations around and allowing the children to guide me in their places instead of the other way around.

Creativity can be viewed as being closely connected to play, as suggested by Winnicott (1971), who not only recognises reality and imagination but also spheres resting in between them in which play and creativity belong (Hoff, 2003:17-18). Oates (2003) also sees connections between creativity and play. She writes that creative processes and artistic expressions start with the process of play and that they continue to have their roots there even for grown-up artists. Improvisation, experimenting and a vivid imagination are important aspects of both artistic creativity and play. Art is a practice of the mind and imagination, and it resembles play in its physical activities that have no other obvious goal than the ecstatic liberation of body and mind. Both art and play are used to deal with experiences and express the self. They also have room for modes of expression that manage to capture the continuous flow of energy and thoughts that characterize children’s minds. There is no need to only express one clearly defined thought, experience or view. The close connection between art and play can be a reason why it often is used when consulting children about their views and experiences. Artistic and creative exercises are also considered fun by children and this makes it easier to keep their attention throughout sessions and thereby reach more knowledge.

Creativity has traditionally been divided into four main areas: the creative product, the creative person, the creative process and the creative environment. Here, it is mainly the creative process that is in focus, although the boundaries between the four are not crystal clear and the four areas are dependent on each other. The creative process is thought to consist of a combination of rational, imaginary and intuitive thinking (Hoff, 2003:58).
Creativity is dependent on imagination and a rich inner life, and can be seen as a dedicated and intensified encounter between the world and the subjective experience (May, 1975; Hoff, 2003). Through our imagination, we daydream, relive our past and plan our future (Hoff, 2003:15; Singer and Singer, 1992). By including methods that are characterised by clear creative elements and ‘artistic freedom,’ the drawing or photograph that results will be a child’s subjective representation of place.

The choice to use methods that are based on direct experiences of place was made early and was based on the belief that knowledge of people’s experiences should draw on process-based and participant methods (as proposed by Cousins, 1998; Phillips, 2005). It is an attempt to make it easier for the children to express their subjective experience of place. When the children encounter places, objects and people, it helps them express their experiences, since they then can express the present rather than trying to recall an experience. Tuan (1979:8) writes that experience is a cover-all term for the different modes through which a person knows and constructs reality. Adopting methods that allow the children to reveal their experiences in action should therefore facilitate the construction of knowledge. When the children are active in a place, they can refer to the mental processes that the place awakens within them rather than just recall experiences to describe their concrete use of place.

It is also an ethical decision to construct knowledge on people’s experiences from process- and action-based participant methods, since they allow the participants’ subjectivity to become visible without forcing them to make judgements about a place. There are also suggestions that issues of power, which are crucial when performing research with children (e.g. Fine and Sandstrom, 1988; Christensen, 2004), can be handled through place-interacting methods mainly because they allow the children to display their experiences and knowledge to the researcher, rather than the other way around (Rasmussen and Smidt, 2003; Hill, 2006; Christensen, 2004; Cele, forthcoming).
Approach in Stockholm

In Stockholm, the City District Council of Norrmalm initiated contact by asking if I wanted to participate in a project regarding children’s school routes and local environments. Since their project and approach to participatory work with children coincided in a satisfactory way with my approach and need to get in contact with children, we agreed to co-operate to gain knowledge about the children’s use and value of the environment in Norrmalm. The project was designed and carried out together by me and an official from the project that the City District Council had initiated. Our main aim was to find as good and reliable ways of gaining knowledge regarding the children’s use and experience of the local environment as possible. The City District Council also had the goal of making improvements to the local environment based on what the children expressed to us. After the research had been carried out, the City District Council initiated a series of workshops where officials, parents, children and teachers met to discuss the results. Minor changes to the environment were made as a result and others were planned to be made at a later stage.

Children from the Rödabergsskolan and Gustav Vasaskolan schools participated. There were two different classes involved with a total number of 44 children; half of the children were eight-year-olds and the other half eleven-year-olds. There was an almost equal amount of boys and girls.

Since the City District Council’s project mainly concerned the places children passed on their way to school, it was necessary to use methods that would make it possible for the children to express spatiality and include several different places and qualities simultaneously (Cele, 2005a).

The children were initially asked to mark out their school routes on a map and then to produce an A3 drawing that included things that they encountered on the way. These drawings were used as starting points for interviews, which were held in small groups. The interviews were conducted so that one of us adults was in charge of steering the discussion and asking the questions and the other was in charge of writing down the answers. Although this division was roughly held, we were still both engaged in noting the children’s answers and talking to them. We actively sought an informal atmosphere.

After the interviews, the children were taken out for walks so that they could describe and reveal their places as they encountered them. The children were told that the aim of the walk was for them to indicate and reveal their environment and to describe and talk about the things that they particularly liked and disliked about it.

We did not consider it to be a reasonable alternative to ask the children to perform all these tasks in one day. The drawings and maps were made in advance, but the interviews and walks were performed consecutively. This was necessary in order to make it possible to establish connections between
the drawings and what the children described during the walks. It also ensured that the children would remember what had been discussed during the interviews.

The teachers were given thorough instructions regarding the tasks and they had an active role in instructing the children on how and when to perform them, so that it would be possible to integrate them with their teaching. The children’s parents were informed through parental meetings and by written communication, in which they were also asked for consent regarding their children’s participation in having their photographs taken. However, no parent had any objections to their child’s participation in the project (Cele, 2005a). The parents have received feedback in the form of the workshops mentioned, and a written report was also produced.

Throughout the process, all the research was carried out in co-operation between me and the employee from the City District Council. We worked together with the children while they carried out their tasks, taking great care not to influence them but still being active in the process.

Close co-operation between researchers and officials may sometimes be problematic. Often the aim of the co-operation varies and so can the aim of the research. In this study, co-operation meant that we discussed the layout of the study, with the goal for both of us being to maximise the possibility of understanding the children’s experiences of their everyday places, and we had similar views on how this should best be carried out. The work on the field was carried together. Both of us have had full access to the material and since we were both participating in the different tasks, we also have our own observations and experiences of the children and their places. Although we produced the study in co-operation, our aims with the study were different and so are, most likely, our interpretations. The co-operation must in this case be said to have been successful since we managed to co-operate side by side, supporting each other with practical issues while working with the children and also discussing our experiences, but apart from that we left each other to interpret the material freely according to our different goals.
Approach in Bournemouth

In Bournemouth, it was the mutual recommendations from the Bournemouth City Council and the Bournemouth Children’s Fund that opened my eyes to the possibilities of working at King’s Park Primary School in Boscombe and made co-operation with the school possible. A total of 39 children participated in the research, 21 of them were eleven years old and 18 of them were eight years old. There was an almost equal amount of boys and girls.

Before being able to conduct research with the children, I had to go through clearance from the Criminal Records Bureau and the children’s parents were asked for written consent for their children’s participation in the research.

For practical reasons, a slightly different methodological approach was chosen in England than in Sweden. The work carried out in Stockholm was thorough and involved enormous input from teachers, planners and children. Teaching was interrupted so that the children could participate and all the different methodological steps were severely time-consuming, particularly the walks. It is not reasonable to believe that so much time and effort always will be possible to spend on a project. My feelings were also that the social fears about letting the children out on walks were much more present in England than in Sweden. I therefore chose to adopt a slightly different approach there.

The eight-year-old children were asked to make drawings of their local environments and to include things that they both liked and disliked about their neighbourhood. There was no limitation that the drawings were to describe the children’s school routes, as in Sweden, but the children could include anything from their everyday places. The drawings were made on A3 paper with pens, pencils and crayons.

The eleven-year-olds were handed disposable cameras and instructed to photograph their local environment. No limitations were given about what or whom they could photograph, but they were given a paper with instructions on how to handle a camera and take photographs.

Informal group interviews, with two or three children at a time, were held after the children had finished their drawings and the photographs had been developed. These interviews started with the children describing their drawings or photographs and the conversation then evolved into informal group interviews.
The Four Methods

Interviews

The interviews were conducted with groups of children during school hours and in the school building. I chose group interviews, or focus groups, as they are sometimes called (Driskell, 2002), for several reasons. Since interviews were not going to be the single and main method of research, the additional time necessary to conduct single person interviews would not have been realistic, in terms of the time restrictions of the research as well as the consideration given to the children’s school time. Also, since I was actively seeking to have an informal attitude towards the children, I felt that this probably would be easier to create within a group of children rather than with just one individual child.

83 children from both age groups participated in the interviews. The groups in Sweden had three, or occasionally four or five children, and the groups in England consisted of no more than three children at a time. In Stockholm, the groups were formed with consideration given to where the children lived, but in England, the groups were formed by the teacher. In both schools, the classes participating were chosen by head teachers and teachers. The difference in group size was caused by what was appropriate given the available time that the children could participate in the research. The interviews in Stockholm were performed almost a year earlier than those in England and I decided, based on the experience in Stockholm, that I did not want to interview more than three children at a time in England. I found that having three children was just the right amount to find a balance between developing a sense of the children being a ‘group’ but still making sure that it was possible for all children to speak and for me to keep up with the conversation and understand who said what. With three children, it was also possible to sit relatively close, to have eye contact without becoming authoritative and also to speak using an ordinary tone and level of the voice, all of which are important for keeping the atmosphere as ‘natural’ as possible, i.e. non-authoritative and relaxed. The differences between these approaches may obviously have had some effect on the result.

The interviews were performed with the material from the other methods as starting points. Initially we looked at the drawings or photographs and talked about them. After a while, though, the conversation regarding these objects stopped and we started to talk about other things and the situation turned into an informal and unstructured interview. Since the interviews started so naturally with the conversation regarding the children’s drawings and photographs, there were no problems getting the children engaged during the interviews, because they were so enthusiastic about their own material.
When treating the material, the conversations regarding the drawings and the photographs were easily separated from the rest of the interviews. I have not considered it to be a problem that these interviews and the discussions regarding the drawings and the photographs were held on the same occasions since the divisions between the two conversations were very clear. Obviously, talking about the children’s drawings or photographs made it easier for me to connect with the children and it facilitated finding a natural approach for having a casual and relaxed conversation. Since the children took charge in describing and explaining to me, rather than me taking command by asking the children specific questions, the power structures between us were loosened up, which made conversation evolve more naturally than during a structured interview. Since my main focus during these interviews was to keep the children relaxed and willing to talk I consciously let the children decide what they wanted to talk about, but I did of course sometimes ask them questions to better understand how their lives, thoughts and wishes were constructed, often through questions that followed up something the children had already expressed.

I did have some themes (e.g. Nordström, 1990; Christensen, 2004) that I wanted the children to tell me about, but I generally did not use them as specific questions to the children. Instead, I focused on the conversation and tried to get answers through being active on the children’s terms. This approach made it more likely that the questions I did pose were open-ended in order for the children to be able to describe and discuss their answers rather than simply answering ‘yes’ or ‘no’ (e.g. Larsson, 2004; Doverborg and Pramling, 1993), and it also seemed less complicated to remain reflexive by adapting the interview to the children rather than the other way around. I had, in the beginning of our conversations, told the children that I was interested in understanding their everyday lives, what they liked to do and where they liked to go. Most of the children naturally and without me specifically asking them touched upon the themes I had set out to investigate. The themes were:

- Basic facts: name, age, residential area and family structure.
- Independent mobility: extent, range, reasons. Allowed/able to walk to school, play in public places? Allowed out alone or with the company of friend, sibling or adult?
- Positive aspects of the environment: places, objects, activities and reasons for liking these. Are they appreciated when visited/practiced alone or with someone else? Are different places liked when they are out on their own versus with others?
- Negative aspects of the environment: places, objects, activities and reasons for not liking these. Are they disliked when visited/practiced alone or with someone else? Are different
places disliked when they are out on their own versus with others?

- Special places: are there any places the children have specific bonds to, how and why? Where do the children like to go when they need to be left alone?

It was a primary concern for me that the conversation remained narrative-oriented (e.g. Kjørholt, 2004). Because of this, the interviews had the character of conversation, rather than question-answer interviews; therefore, the themes were not discussed in the order and structure presented above. Instead, they mainly functioned as an aid for my memory. It was common that the children not only presented their views but also put them into a context, such as how things could become better or what needed to be preserved. I did not specifically ask what the children wanted to change in their environment, but as they were keen to explain both what they disliked and also how this could be changed to become better, this was discussed frequently.

In Stockholm there were, as mentioned, two adults present during the interviews. Working as a pair functioned well, because we managed to find a way of co-operating that did not seem to be authoritative towards the children. During the sessions that included five children it would have been difficult to be alone. Even though it functioned smoothly to have two adults present, it is still possible that it affected the children. This difference between the countries may have caused the children to behave differently in the two contexts. In England I was more experienced than in Sweden, and I met the children on my own rather than in the company of another adult.

The interviews in Stockholm were not recorded on tape, but instead we wrote down notes while also keeping the conversation going. This approach worked well even if, obviously, the quotations were chosen immediately during the interviews, so I directly sorted information as being more or less relevant. Keeping notes and aiming to capture quotes by hand is demanding, but possible. It has the advantage that it becomes necessary to remain active while listening, thinking and writing simultaneously; this made me as an ‘interviewer’ much more present in the whole situation compared to just knowing that the tape was rolling and trusting it to catch everything of importance. When noting down what the children said, the tone of voice got lost, and thereby also nuances and pauses, but I discovered when reading through my notes that I had noted down body language and facial expressions as well as tone of voice when it had seemed important. This was pointed out by Näsman (2005) as being an important part of documenting the interview.

In England, I decided to use a tape recorder to see what difference it would make to the end results. I did not, however, choose to trust the tape recorder completely and I still kept some notes. After a few interviews, I
started to note down just as much as during the interviews in Stockholm, mainly because I felt that it was slightly difficult to engage in the interviews without simultaneously being active through writing, and I also experienced that the number of awkward situations with the children increased when I used only the tape recorder. If I wrote, I was not as authoritative towards the children, since I did not ‘stare’ at them when they spoke but rather looked up to confirm that I was listening and that what they said was interesting. The fact that I wrote also made it possible for the children to pause and think when they were talking without the silence becoming awkward or strange.

Having the interviews recorded was obviously a help afterwards when checking if the quotes I had written down were correct and if I had missed anything. It also made it easier for me to understand the role I had been playing, by listening to the tone of my own voice and seeing if I had been asking leading questions. Listening to the tapes also helped bring back the interview situation long after it had taken place. On the whole, though, I did not find that I lost much relevant information when noting down what the children said as compared to listening to the tapes. Using only the tape recorder and later transcribing this, which I did with a few of the English interviews, was the least favourable alternative, since it is very time-consuming and also made me a less active participant.

The memories I have of the few interviews that mainly were recorded are fainter and weaker, probably because I participated ‘deeper’ and more intensely in a situation that I had to interpret and formulate in words than I did when I ‘just’ listened and talked. However, this is very personal and has to do with the experience and preference of the interviewer, and it can not be formulated into general recommendations at all. I can only conclude that in my case, noting down the interviews (i.e. the setting, situation and conversation) actively was the best choice, although having the tape recorder as ‘back-up’ increased the feeling of security of not making mistakes or misinterpreting anything, even if the tapes did almost not bring much extra useful information.

In some of the groups, there were sometimes children who were very close friends and who did ‘everything’ together. This meant that they not only provided similar answers to the questions but also that it is almost impossible to distinguish their own individual answers. Almost no matter how hard I sought to avoid it, they spoke at the same time, filling in each other’s sentences, and they seemed in some cases to almost see their best friend not as another person, but as a part of themselves. In the beginning, when this phenomenon became apparent, I tried to ask the children individual questions to make sure that I understood each child individually. This just perplexed them since, in their eyes, they had just told me what I asked them. There was no point in trying to overcome this phenomenon and it was something that needed to be accepted. These children literally constructed each others’ sentences by speaking a few words each. Even in
the interviews that are recorded, it becomes absolutely impossible to distinguish between some children. They not only finish or start each other’s sentences, but also construct their narratives in mutual understanding.

This ‘best friend syndrome’ did not occur because the children are uncertain or have low self-esteem; in fact, they are rather often chatty, excited and straightforward. The reason for acting the way they did is that these children live their lives intertwined; they are in the same class in school and often sit together in the classroom. They play together during the breaks and spend most of their free time together. They say that they do ‘everything’ together and share the same views on everything. Even if I put in extra effort during the interviews to understand all the children as individuals, I have in some cases chosen to quote some best friends together since that is their normal way of communicating if they are in the same room. There would be no point in trying to separate them.

Immediately after the interviews – sometimes after each individual interview and sometimes after a session of several interviews, depending on the structure of that particular day – I wrote down my own impressions of what had occurred during our conversations, how the children and I had acted, how the group dynamic had been and if any child had seemed uncomfortable, shy or very dominant. I wrote this text as a free-flowing reflection and these notes later proved valuable when analysing the interviews. By capturing my impressions this way, it became possible to, at least to some extent, value the influence I had had on the children during the sessions and also, in some cases, how to interpret the answers of some of the children. A child who is shy might seem, to someone listening or reading through the interview, to have a very poor ability to express place experience. Remembering that the child was shy and preferred to provide me with information on a one-to-one basis shed new light on the rest of the interview and facilitated my understanding of the child’s experience.

When working with and analysing the interviews, I obviously read them through thoroughly in the beginning of the process, in order to learn, understand and remember what the children had been saying. Very soon, different themes emerged in what the children had been saying and I started sorting different parts of the interviews under each of these themes. I treated the Swedish and English interviews separately, but did not distinguish between age and gender, since I preferred to see each interview as individual and free-standing, not prescribing it with too much ‘pre-given’ knowledge. Throughout the process, I returned to the notes I had written after the sessions to the transcriptions I had made of the tape recordings and to my notes from the interviews. I very carefully, however, made sure that I did not read this material continuously and that there were distinct passages of time in between my readings, to ensure that I would read with as ‘new eyes’ as possible. This was successful in the way that it allowed me to continuously
The Walks

Walks with the children were conducted in Stockholm and a total of 44 children aged eight and eleven participated. Prior to the walks, the children had been asked to mark out the route they normally take to school on a map that had been handed out in class. The younger children brought their maps home with them and their parents helped them mark out their routes. The older children performed the task in school by themselves, even though they had some help from their teacher and in one or two cases also from their parents (Cele, 2005a). The aim of the maps was primarily to gain knowledge about which streets the children used to get to school. Many children marked out several different routes and separated them by using different coloured pencils. Approximately half of the children had separated parents and, therefore, had two different addresses from which they had to get to school. Often these addresses were close to each other, but in some cases, staying with one of the parents meant that the children had to get to school by car or bus. Some children also used different routes if they wanted to walk by themselves, or with their friends (see also Rasmussen, 1998). The majority of the children had several alternative routes for getting to school and they often chose their routes according to their mood and the available time. The children were asked to write their names on the maps, and their addresses, which were provided by the school, were compared with the maps that were handed in. These maps were used as a basis for grouping the children for interviews and also for planning the walks (Cele, 2005a). The walks were conducted just after the interviews and in the same group formations of three, and, on one occasion five, children.

The children were told that the goal of the walk was for them to show and describe their environment and to talk about the things that they particularly liked or disliked about it. Getting out for walks just after the interviews was beneficial since this made the walks a natural evolution of the interviews. Just as during the interviews, there were two adults participating.

Although the children were instructed on how to behave in traffic and in public places, they were, on the whole, given free rein to do as they liked. This not only made it possible to closely observe their behaviour, but it also increased the children’s spontaneity.

A digital camera was brought on the walks and the children were asked to point out the things or objects that they, for some reason, wanted to be photographed. These could be anything from dangerous road-crossings, odoriferous bins, beautiful trees, people, or whatever caught their attention. The camera was also used to take pictures of the children and the ways that they used and related to their environment during the walks. The fact that a
digital camera, rather than a traditional camera, was used proved successful since the children were able to see the pictures immediately and approve or disapprove of them directly.

Using photography made it possible not only to observe how the children used their places but also to notice and interpret the objects that the children found interesting (Cele, 2005a).

A tape recorder was not used, nor were any notes taken during the walks. The photographs were the only direct documentation made. This lack of documentation during the walks may be open to criticism. However, it would not have been appropriate to use a tape recorder since it would only have documented sound, and that probably would have been of poor quality because of the movement and the surrounding city noise, and any form of annotation would have made the walks much too formal. Instead, the walks were conducted with all senses present and receptive, with the aim of understanding place and how the children connected and interacted with it.

On the completion of a walk, I wrote down all my impressions and experiences. The writing was instantaneous and personal, with the aim of capturing the physical and sensuous experiences of the places. This meant that the writing spontaneously reflected a wide spectrum of information concerning visual objects, sounds, speech, smell, feelings and how the children dealt with their places. This approach made it possible to gather and acquire a good deal of unique information that would otherwise have been very difficult to record (Cele, 2005c).

Working as a pair proved to be valuable during the walks, whereas one person would have had difficulties giving every child the attention he or she wanted. As during the interviews, three was an appropriate number of children. Working with another person also made it possible to discuss experiences and to be informed about the things that the other person had experienced.

The Photographs

I chose to let only the English children make use of photography mainly for two reasons. Firstly, I did not want to over-use the Swedish children, who already had participated extensively by making drawings, participating in interviews and going for walks. My hope was that by handing the English children disposable cameras and allowing them to photograph their places during a couple of days, it would be possible to allow the children to interact with the places they were referring to. The whole exercise was less time-consuming than the walks, and it produced more concrete material for me to analyse.

21 disposable cameras that each contained 27 photos were handed out to a class of eleven-year-old Bournemouth children. They were asked to carry the camera with them for a few days. They were instructed to photograph places
that held meaning for them, whether positive or negative, and they were handed instructions regarding how to take a photograph, such as to stand still when you are taking a photograph, make sure the light is behind you and so forth. Conversations were later held so that the children could describe their photographs.

My original intention was to let the children share the cameras since I figured that it would be enough to have just over ten photos per child. However, the idea of sharing cameras was not popular and it seemed impractical since it required that someone make sure that each child handed over the camera in time and had not used up all the photos and so forth. Therefore, I decided to allow each child to use up a whole camera if he or she wanted. Some children used up the whole camera while others were quite satisfied with using only ten of the photos. Changing my mind like this meant that I only had 21 children participating in the study instead of the intended 42. I am not sure if the fact that the children were allowed to take so many photos actually meant that the results improved or that I gained much more knowledge. Many photos were of the same objects or places, and as mentioned, not all children managed to take 27 photos. What probably was an effect from allowing the children to dispose of the whole roll of film was the large amount of photos that were the result of experimenting with techniques, such as running with the camera and taking a picture to see what would happen. But foremost, the fact that each child had his or her own camera made the practicalities conflict-free and less complicated. I ended up with a total of 426 pictures.

The Drawings

There were 23 drawings made by English children aged eight and 44 drawings made by Swedish children aged eight and eleven. The total amount was 67 drawings. In England, only the eight-year-olds made drawings, while in Sweden both age groups did. The reason for this was that it was not suitable to ask for more of the older English children’s time. I also considered the amount of drawings by the younger children to be a reasonably large number to analyse.

In both countries, the children were asked to make an A3 drawing of their local environment. In Stockholm, this was specified as the school route, and the children were told to include things that they came across on their way that they liked or disliked. In England, the children were asked to draw their local neighbourhood and aspects of it that they liked or disliked. No further instructions were given, in order to obtain information on the physical, social and cultural elements of place.

The drawings were made in school during school hours. I was not present when the children made their drawings, but the teachers had been provided
with instructions for how the task was to be carried out. The drawings were made with pens, pencils and crayons.

When the drawings were finished, I met with the children in small groups so that we could have conversations regarding their drawings.

Working with School Children

In both countries, contact with the participating children was made through the schools. This is an approach that is relatively common, but it is also an approach that can be criticised. In school, the children are used to being led and dominated by adults and there may be a risk that they perceive their participation in the research as another school task in which their answers will be judged. It is, therefore, a clear problem that the children may try to produce answers that they believe the teacher or researcher wants to hear and not describe what they really experience themselves. To the question of what they perceive as dangerous, for instance, they may name all the things that their parents or teachers have warned them about. This does not mean that they feel afraid of these things or find them to be fully negative elements in the environment, nor do they have to understand the dangers and act on them just because they produce the ‘right’ answers. They may also hold back information on things that they believe are not recognized as ‘real dangers’ by the adult community or, for that matter, by other children. In this study, this problem was primarily dealt with by approaching issues from many different angles and by continually reflecting and striving for an informal atmosphere and casual conversation.

Ethics

The concept and reality of ethics and ethical judgements needs to be continuously negotiated when conducting research with children. Ethics can be defined as the systematic study of morality, which is concerned with what it is to make a moral judgement. Moral judgements are evaluative and include the question of good and bad, where the judgement is that what is good is what should be done (Smith, 2000:231).

Ethics in the study of children involves many aspects (e.g. Thomas and O’Kane, 1998). One of the more obvious and often talked about ethical concerns does not regard the children themselves but rather their parents, caretakers, teachers and head teachers in order to get permission for the children to participate in the research. In England, these requirements are stricter than in Sweden, since it also is necessary for the researcher to prove that she has no criminal record that makes her unsuitable to work with children. All these permissions were sought and gained in the two countries.
Ethical concerns should not stop at asking the adults responsible for the child for permission, but should be a continuous process that also actively involves the children themselves. Children should always be provided with the choice of whether to participate in the research or not.

Other issues to consider might be: Is it right to have the children reveal their ‘secret’ places to adults? How affected is the individual child by power relations between children and adults? Does the child have a realistic opportunity to decline to participate in the research if her parents have agreed, it is conducted in school and ‘everyone else’ is participating? To what extent do the adults (researcher, parents, teacher, etc.) know better than the child, e.g. if the child wants her picture, drawing, quotes to be published with her real name, and to what extent is it ethical to decide that the child does not know what is in her own best interest? Questions like these need continuous consideration.

In this study, the children’s names have been changed in order to protect them and to avoid conflict, but it was done with an excuse to the children who wanted their real names to be included. Some of the photographs that the children took are used as illustrations in the descriptions of Stockholm and Bournemouth in the next chapter. In these cases, I acknowledge the photographers by using their real first names. I did this after careful consideration, but since these pictures are of public places and will not put any child in danger, I considered it ethically right to acknowledge the photographers and to not take it for granted that I could use their photographs anonymously.
6. Description of the Areas

Stockholm and Norrmalm

Stockholm is the capital of Sweden, located on the east coast of Sweden, right where Lake Mälaren reaches the Baltic Sea. This makes water an important feature of the city. Some major parks are also important. The whole city has approximately 771,000 inhabitants and 289,000 of them live in the central parts of the city. As Stockholm is a capital, a variety of businesses and forms of employment are available, and it is common to work in finance, business and cultural sectors as well as within the public sector, such as in health care, education and transport (USK, 2006a). A majority of the dwellings are in the form of high-rise buildings, with flats, detached and semi-detached houses mainly found on the outskirts of the city and in the suburbs. The inner city is, generally speaking, inhabited by people who are financially well-situated. The suburbs have a range of characters, from socio-economically marginalised areas to wealthy areas.

Norrmalm is an area located in the central part of Stockholm. It is characterized by a grid-iron street pattern and is densely built, with relatively few green areas, although it has parks such as Vasaparken and Observatorielunden. Most of the buildings were built in the late 19th and early 20th century, and they often have five floors and homogeneous facades in soft colours (Andersson, 1998). Most buildings have enclosed courtyards that the residents can access, even if these are of varying quality and greenness. A noticeable amount of the courtyards of the buildings where the children of this study live have the character of gardens with trees, plants, seating and, in some cases, play equipment. There are some major roads in the area with heavy traffic, but also smaller and relatively calm roads. Most roads have zebra crossings or are controlled by traffic lights. There is some topography in the area that makes long flights of stairs and walls necessary. Norrmalm is, as are most contemporary inner city areas in Sweden, rather wealthy and the average income is noticeably higher compared to the rest of the Stockholm area. About 62,100 people live in the area, of which twelve percent are under the age of fifteen, which is a lower rate than for the whole city but average for the inner city areas. The unemployment rate is lower than that of the rest of the city and the educational level higher (USK, 2006b). All the children who participated in the study live in flats.
Figure 1. Street scene in Norrmalm.

Figure 2. Gustav Vasaskolan.

Figure 3. Rödabergsskolan.
Parts of Norrmalm underwent a major redevelopment that started in the early 1950s and continued for almost twenty years. Large areas were demolished and re-built in a functionalistic and modern way, something that has been a very controversial part of Stockholm’s modern history (Sidenbladh, 1985). The areas referred to in this text, however, were not part of this redevelopment and are therefore still characterized by the late 19th and early 20th century buildings.

The two schools participating in the study have traditional school buildings. One, Gustav Vasaskolan, is a major stone building with several floors, dating back to the beginning of the 20th century. It has very dominant architecture, with large hallways, pillars and stairs. It is located by a major road that has heavy traffic, but also broad pavements with trees, making it possible for the children to walk to school. The schoolyard is small and consists of tarmac with some play equipment and benches.

The other school, Rödabergsskolan, is located nearby. It is a smaller and more modern building and it has a school yard that consists of some trees, play equipment and tarmac for ball sports. As it is located on a hill, it has a wide view and is surrounded by low walls that the children balance on for play. Just outside of the school are some patches of grass that the children often visit, even if they are not allowed to. The roads surrounding the school are smaller than those by the other school, but there are few crossings and traffic lights, which makes the traffic situation more confused. Neither of the schools has locked gates, fences or walls to keep the children within the school area, even if they are supposed to remain there throughout the day.
Bournemouth and Boscombe

Bournemouth is a city with just over 160,000 inhabitants, and it is located in the middle of England’s southern coast. It is a young city that was only founded in the 19th century. What started as an individual’s summer retreat just where the river Bourne reaches the sea soon became a popular resort. In the beginning of the 20th century, and with the rail connection to London, the number of people both visiting and settling in Bournemouth increased dramatically (Bainbridge, 2000). The city stretches out along the beach line, with the sea, the chalk cliffs and the New Forest easily accessible from the city.

Bournemouth is very dependent on the tourist industry and some areas of the city are dominated by hotels and language schools. It has the reputation of being a place where people move when they retire and even if this is true, the number of young people and families with young children is large. Bournemouth University has several locations in the city, with approximately 14,000 students.

Since the city is so young, many of the original features, including architecture and street patterns, remain and still characterise the city. The streets are irregular and winding, particularly in the city centre. There is a relatively high number of parks, and many places in the city have views over the sea.

The architecture varies of course, but there is a large amount of what could be called traditionally British architecture, with many Victorian detached, semi-detached, terraced and town houses with two or three floors. However, Bournemouth also has many high-rise buildings and a total of 43% of all households live in flats, in comparison to 19% in England and Wales (National Statistics, 2004).

Bournemouth’s attractiveness has led to a flourishing tourist industry, but also to very high property prices with the cost of homes almost comparable to those in London. This has meant that it is difficult for many people to access the property market, and the possibility of renting homes is not only relatively limited but also expensive. Therefore, Bournemouth has several low-income council estate areas, with varying degrees of social problems, located on the outskirts of the city. But there are also households that never access the property market at all, and instead move between different bed and breakfast establishments.
Figure 4. Street scene in Bournemouth. Photo by Natan, 11.

Figure 5. Boscombe Centre. Photo by Josh, 11.
Boscombe is an area that is located east of central Bournemouth. It has its own centre and is characterised by denser and more traditional architecture than the Bournemouth city centre. The roads are narrow, sometimes with heavy traffic, but there are also calm residential areas. There are relatively few light-regulated crossings, but sometimes there are fences between the pavements and the street. There are many lower income households. There is
a higher unemployment rate here than in the rest of the city and there are more visible social problems on the streets, such as homeless people and drug addicts.

The school is located on the outskirts of a major park that consists of vast grass fields, a café, sports fields and trees. There is also a cemetery near the park. The school is in a low building and is surrounded by fences and a gate for the protection of the children. The school yard is a tarmac play area with benches and some flower beds. There is a school garden, called ‘the Coppice,’ with a woodland, a pond, a vegetable patch and flower beds. The children are active in taking care of the garden, but cannot access it freely. The school has, with a limited budget, put effort into creating a calm environment for the children, both indoors and outdoors. Inside the school, the walls are painted in various colours, there is classical music playing in the corridors and there are aquariums in some of the public spaces as well as in the classrooms. The children are actively engaged in taking care of their environment. The school has a set of behavioural rules, called ‘the Golden Rules,’ which the children are taught to follow. These consist of being kind, gentle, helpful, hard-working, honest, and of looking after property and listening to other people.
7. Interviews

Interviews are one of the most common and basic methods used in research and consultation, and they are often necessary to perform even if other methods also are used. They are straightforward and easy since talking to each other is the simplest way of communicating. Interviewing comes naturally; if we want to know something about a person, the simplest way to pursue the task is just to ask that person what we want to know. Children are different from adults but they are not that different; it is possible to ask them questions and receive the information we want. However, having said this, interviews with children are complicated.

No matter how much effort we put into creating an equal relationship between the children and ourselves, there will always be an intricate net of power relations between us. Interview sessions are often formal; we might bring our notebook or tape recorder in order to aid our memory of what has been said, or it might be that the whole situation with the adult interviewer asking children questions feels dominating to the children.

Power is an important aspect of interviews with children. As an adult, I possess and exert power over the children not only because of my adulthood, but also because of my role in setting up and steering the interview (e.g. Näsmann, 2005). The children view me as a ‘stranger’ and an ‘adult’ but they still provide answers even if they find the research subject uninteresting or strange (Christensen, 2004). Children often have clear strategies for handling enquiring adults and they will not expose themselves unnecessarily. Just as adults do, they try to figure out what it is that they are really being asked, not just by listening to the questions but by trying to understand what it is that the interviewer is really asking, what the underlying aim of the interview is. The children act with reference to their image of what the adult interviewer is (Näsmann, 2005) and this might cause difficulties since some may answer what they believe that adults want to hear. Sometimes it is obvious when they do this since it is almost possible to hear their parents’ voices speaking, and other times it is more difficult to distinguish between what has been taught and what has actually been experienced. They may also accept suggestions from me, as the researcher, if I try to help the children in answering, no matter how bizarre these suggestions may be, in order to solve the situation and not reveal their own private experiences (e.g. Larsson, 2004). Hence, a sensitive approach is necessary to adopt when conducting interviews.
During an interview, the contact between me, as the researcher, and the individuals I interview, i.e. the children, is just as important as the questions asked (e.g. Doverborg and Pramling, 1993). As I mentioned previously, I found it crucial to have an informal atmosphere and an important way of achieving this was to engage the children in conversation rather than asking them specific questions. Christensen (2004) and Kjørholt (2004) have also found that this helps the children have control over the situation as well as making it easier for them to focus, since they are active and engaged in asking questions themselves rather than just answering. Doverborg and Pramling (1993) emphasise the importance of answering the children’s questions and also point out that this is just as important as posing new questions to the children. I found that engaging in answering children’s questions was a reliable approach and it both made them feel comfortable and also revealed more information to me.

It was important to not only listen but to also be active in making conversation and to reveal to the children that I knew about some of the places they were referring to. However, I did not pretend to know more than I did and did not hesitate to reveal my lack of knowledge of the children’s realities. When the children talked about their neighbourhoods, I let them understand that I knew the street they were talking about, when I did, or if I did not, I asked questions that made them understand that I roughly knew the place but not exactly. The fact that I did not pretend to know places I was not familiar with made it easier for the children to tell me ‘forbidden’ things since they did not have to suffer any consequences for telling me these things. This proved successful since it made the atmosphere informal and it also altered the power relationship between us. Relatively often, I was the unknowing person to whom the children needed to explain things to. Reflecting on this afterwards, it is a very natural and uncomplicated way to communicate, although in many cases it contradicts the way we want to behave with strangers and particularly the way we often are taught to conduct interviews.

I found that the best approach for achieving a relaxed atmosphere was to loosen up my ‘professional attitude.’ This involved the way I dressed and talked and my body language. I made sure that I did not have my papers in neat piles on the table, and that I did not hang my coat on the hook by the door but instead hung it over the back of my chair. These small things made the interviewing room much more informal and it probably affected me just as much as the children.

The importance of having dialogues with children has been emphasised by Christensen (2004), who argues the necessity of the researcher being able to have dialogues with children in many different ways and also restraining from dominating the conversation in the way that adults do when they normally speak to children. Hartman (1986) also notes that it is necessary to have an open mind and to be able to continually adapt the interview to what
the children express. The interview can in itself be seen as a meaning-making process, a social interaction between people who inhabit different positions in the interaction (Kjørholt, 2004:77). As an interviewer, I should aim at developing a sensitivity to the children’s needs and use empathy to motivate, respect and listen to the children, and I also need to know when to end the interview (e.g. Doverborg and Pramling, 1993; Christensen, 2004).

When talking with children, language immediately becomes a concern, since reality is constructed and reconstructed through language. The type of language that I adopt with children affects how comfortable they feel. There is a need to find the right level between the sort of language an adult academic normally would use in formal situations and copying children’s own language (Hoff, 2003:35). I need, as an interviewer, to use words that the children can understand and relate to. It is also important to allow the children time to think, since they always have something to say if they are given enough time. This is particularly important if a child is shy, as proposed by Doverborg and Pramling (1993).

During the interviews, it became clear how the extent to which not only the words I chose in my conversation but also the coherence and timing are crucial factors, and that children’s and adults’ means of communicating verbally differ in this respect. Adults should not try to imitate children’s behaviour since children immediately see through this. Instead, it is more suitable to present oneself as an unusual adult who is interested in children’s realities, without pretending to be a child.

I chose, as mentioned, to interview the children in groups, which meant that the focus came to be on how the group experiences or understands an issue, rather than each individual child’s experience. Having the children in a group made it possible to listen to, and observe, their discussions, which created an understanding of how the children create place-bound narratives of their experiences. The group dynamics and the children’s interest in listening to each other made discussions evolve and more information was revealed this way. The children were particularly interested in understanding how the other children’s lives were constructed, what they liked to do and what they were allowed to do, and they often questioned and discussed the other children’s narratives in order to understand them better. On several occasions, the conversations evolved without my interference just because the children became so engaged in each others’ narratives.

In Hill’s study (2006) on children’s preferences regarding research and consultation methods, the children say that group discussions and interviews have their benefits, as do individual interviews. Personality and temperament were mentioned as reasons for preferring different forms of interviews. Group discussions/interviews were considered beneficial since it can be easier to talk when there are other children in the room and this might also be more fun and less awkward than talking only to a researcher. Being in a group of children makes it easier to feel confident and relaxed (Hill,
Punch (2002) notes that children are attracted to methods that give immediate pleasure and group discussions can be considered to do just this. However, as the children in Hill’s study (2006) mention, there are some children who may feel shy or uncomfortable speaking in a group, particularly if the topics are private, and single person interviews are then a better choice since it is possible to tell things to the adult without the other children knowing about it. The aspect of children confiding in the researcher during single person interviews has also been found by other researchers (e.g. Christensen, 2004).

During interviews, the individuals in each group affect how the discussion will evolve. If there already is an existing group structure, it is easier to start with the interview immediately, and there is no need for the group members to get to know each other. However, within an existing group, as in my case, there are also always internal power struggles or competitive relationships, in which one or two participants are more talkative and dominant than the others are. It is important to be aware of this and to try to minimise the effect of these phenomena, in respect to controlling the discussion.

The setting of the interview is also of great importance for the results, since children are sensitive to different contexts and power relations within them. Children interpret everything adults say to them in relation to the ‘micro-environment’ in which the research takes place (Hill, 2006:82; Christensen, 2004). A quiet setting is often suitable, and it should be one that the children have no negative associations to, which may be the case for in some rooms in a school building (Doverborg and Pramling, 1993). In a study on how well children remember different events, Larsson (2004) found that if the environment the children were interviewed in was supportive, the children provided fewer wrong answers in terms of remembering particular events and issues. Mayall (2000:123-124) notes that children’s age has an impact on how the location of the interview will have implications for the results. In a study on children and health, she notes that younger children who are new to and enthusiastic about the school environment find it acceptable and even fun to conduct research in school. The older children are bored with school and only appreciate participating in research when it means that they can leave the classroom and do not have to work with school topics. Another study (Stankovic, 2006) suggests that children may be unwilling to perform research tasks in their spare time since such tasks can be similar to school activities, such as writing and explaining, which the children may think that they do enough of in school.

When thinking back to the interviews, I can note that there was a difference between those conducted in Stockholm and those in Bournemouth, which might relate to the setting. Since the interviews in Stockholm were conducted in co-operation with the City District Council, it was important that certain specific information was gained in those interviews. The Swedish children were also slightly more unwilling to speak,
or felt more ‘shy,’ than the English. Because of these reasons, the interviews in Stockholm were at certain times more structured than the ones in Bournemouth. The interviews in Bournemouth were unstructured and were more genuine conversations. The children actively kept the conversation going and not only asked each other questions regarding different issues, but also wanted to know how my own everyday life was constructed. The interviews in Stockholm sometimes got stuck and the children at times seemed to feel insecure and did not at all ask each other questions to the same extent the English did. It was then convenient to ask the children specific questions relating to their use of the outdoor environment and in particular to the way they got to school and related to the environment between and around the home and the school. This ensured that we got our information but it also made the interviews feel more structured and they became more formal this way. In both countries, the interviews were conducted in school, but the room in England felt more informal since it was connected to a special room called the ‘Golden Room.’ The children were sometimes allowed into the Golden Room as a reward for good behaviour or when they needed to relax. It was a room with soft furniture, pillows, and light and sound effects to help the children calm down and relax. The English children associated the room the interviews were held in with something positive, which obviously may have facilitated the relaxed attitude the children had towards the whole situation.

In both Sweden and England, I was a stranger to the children and we had to establish a relationship before the conversation became fluid, even if this went quickly during all the interviews. If I had already known the children, we could have gone straight to the core of the issues and I would perhaps have gained deeper knowledge. I did, however, experience that the fact that the children had no previous relationship to me made it easier for them both to tell me more about personal issues but also to put what they said into a context about when things had happened, since they did not assume that I would understand anything by myself. This effort would probably have been less comprehensive had the children known me from before and believed that I had some insight to their lives.
In Conversation with Children

The interviews were, on the whole, very easy-going and uncomplicated. The children were enthusiastic and active during our conversations and eager to tell me what I wanted to know. In the beginning of our conversations, most of the children had abandoned their normal practice of speech and obviously made an effort to speak ‘properly’ to me as an adult. I tried actively to address the children casually and informally, not trying to copy the children’s way of talking, but using the same tone and words I would use to children I know well. The children picked this up very quickly, relaxed and fell back to their own style of communication. This made it possible for them to interact amongst themselves and not only adopt an explanatory tone towards me whilst explaining things.

When interviewing children, there is one immediately striking difference from when interviewing adults. This refers to the need to hold children’s attention throughout a session. An adult who becomes bored during an interview will try to conceal this fact by acting as if all is well, and they will most likely continue to answer any remaining questions politely. A child who becomes bored during an interview will act very differently, depending on how old he or she is. The younger children in this project clearly announced that they had had enough by sliding off their chairs to hide under the table, by walking away, or, in Stockholm, by repeatedly asking when it was time to go out for the walk. The older children behaved in a similar way but instead of sliding off their chairs they became chatty and giggly. To a certain extent, this type of behaviour can be seen as a way of testing the limits. However, it is also a fact that children of this age are not able to sit still and retain their concentration over long periods of time (Cele, 2005a).

There was a difference between the two age groups in what sort of information they revealed. The eleven-year-olds provided more detailed and contextualised narratives regarding their place experience than the eight-year-olds did. The eleven-year-olds also seemed less affected by power issues and had developed clearer strategies for not answering questions that involved revealing their true experiences if they did not want to. Having said this, the eleven-year-old girls were the group most affected by power, but this mainly had to do with power structures within the groups of children. The eight-year-olds had shorter attention spans than the eleven-year-olds, so the sessions needed to be shorter. It was beneficial to provide them with pens, paper and fruit to help them stay focused and also to allow them to be active in the room. The younger children expected me to take charge and it became more difficult to create a relaxed atmosphere.

On the whole, though, the interviews had the character of conversation and all individuals could be active. This meant that at times the children interrupted each other and even me, not rudely, but as part of the way a casual conversation normally takes place. This made the interviews much
more informative, since the activity of all those present stimulated the group and made all individuals recall more incidents and events than what they had initially done when they started talking. To a certain extent, the children did challenge each other, questioning and demanding more information. They did not do this to undermine the other children’s narratives, but it seemed that they were genuinely interested to hear each others’ experiences and to get perspectives on their own lives and experiences through that.

Achieving an informal situation did, of course, also involve reading situations correctly. This included allowing the children to walk around the room, look under the table or out the window or jump from the chair, as long as they could remain focused on the conversation we were having. It helped the children express themselves if they were allowed to be active. However, it was necessary to intervene on some occasions so that the interview was not abandoned for play, or to figure out whether the children became more physically active because they were tired of the situation. The line between what made it easier for the children to focus and what simply was testing the boundaries of my patience and authority was very fine indeed. I simply chose to ask the children to sit by the table in the beginning of the interview and to let them behave the way they naturally wanted to as long as I felt that they could remain in the conversation and respected both me and their friends. There was obviously no point in asking a boy very deeply focused on telling the rest of us a story to sit down when he got up from his chair, and started walking in the room. I even doubted that he noticed that he got up from his chair, and interrupting him just to ask him to sit down would have completely ruined the trust between us and the story he was telling.

Even though I was seeking to have a conversation with the children rather than a structured interview, I did have to make sure, at times, that all the children were allowed to speak and that they did not interrupt each other rudely. However, as previously mentioned, interruption is a natural part of conversation and must be allowed if the conversation is to feel relaxed and informal. There are, though, different types of interruption. At times, the children interrupted each other to help the story and the child who was interrupted did not even seem to notice it, but rather saw it as a normal way to speak, and continued talking after a brief silence during the interruption. This type of interruption was allowed, but if the interrupting child continued to speak, thereby taking over the first child’s story, I asked the first child to continue telling me what she had said and asked the interrupting child to wait for a short while.

On the whole, the children respected each others’ right to speak, even if there were some children who interrupted others and others who did not seem comfortable expressing their views in front of the other children but seemed to want to talk to me privately after the session. It may be that group interviews were not suitable for these children, who all were eleven-year-old girls, but there is also a risk that the children would have felt more
vulnerable during single person interviews and withdrawn from me instead of actually seeing me as a confidant. I got the impression that the fact that I am a woman made the girls want to tell me their experiences away from the boys in the rest of the group, and they were allowed to do this.

During the interviews, it became obvious to me how my own attitude towards research subjects is different when they are children instead of adults. Without trying to make the children’s statements less valuable or losing the interesting aspects of what they were saying, I noticed that I seemed to try to categorize the children through their answers in a way that I did not recognize doing when interviewing adults. Take these three examples from the interviews:

Albin: Once I heard a man and a woman, they were shouting so loud that I couldn’t sleep. That was bad.

Nazneen: I don’t like the railway, because people get killed there sometimes.

Ellie: There are too many people and people that do drugs.
Millie: How do you know that they are doing drugs?
Ellie: I can smell it of course!

These are all relatively harmless comments but immediately when the children made them, I instinctively tried to put them into a larger perspective in order to understand whether or not these are children who live in difficult social circumstances. Why cannot Albin sleep? Was it his parents who were screaming or does he live in an unsafe neighbourhood? Has Nazneen witnessed an accident or does she know someone who was killed? How come Ellie girl knows what drugs smell like, and finds this natural?

These are all thoughts that naturally and immediately flashed through my head during our conversations and they did so because I felt a normal adult responsibility towards the children I interviewed, and also assumed that I have the right to intervene. If a child says something that indicates that they are seriously abused, then I would ask myself how I should intervene, not should I intervene, which would be the case with an adult. I feel, as all adults do whether we recognise it or not, that children are less knowledgeable and need to be protected. As an adult, I take it for granted that I have the right to exert power over the children and to judge what is good and suitable for them. We have pre-constructed images of what childhood is or should be, and when these images collide with the reality we encounter, we get perplexed and upset and we want to intervene, and this makes research and interviews with children into a continuous act of handling power relations.
Children’s Verbal Communication

At certain times, it was difficult, as an adult, to understand and keep up with the children’s pace when they associated and fantasised about their experiences as they spoke. One fairly typical example of how children might speak was an answer I received from a Swedish girl (age 11) when I asked her what she thought of her neighbourhood.

It’s fun with flowers. And it would be fun with a roller coaster. And then it would be fun with more colours. I usually see a cat on the road and a bird and a man.

This comment may be confusing to understand, though we can assume we know what she likes and what among all the things she comes across on her way to school that she notices and finds worth mentioning. But we cannot at once understand how she experiences the places or what it actually is that she is expressing here.

It would be possible to conclude that what she is expressing is just words and reasoning without connections to each other or to what we really are asking, and that she is not able to provide us with an account of her place experience. This would be wrong since what she is expressing here is bound to her place experience, though she does not refer to place in the same way an adult would. Her thoughts regarding the flowers and the roller coaster are bound to her experiences and thoughts of a particular place. When listening to her further narratives and by asking about them, it becomes clear that she walks past a flower shop and a park where she enjoys flowers. This is, hence, extremely place-bound information and not just something that comes across her mind while we are talking. The roller coaster comment refers to the fact that she and her best friend often talk about roller coasters when they are walking to school. There is a particular place in her neighbourhood where they normally stop and ‘play roller coaster.’ This is, therefore, also place-bound information revealing much about the way she uses and enjoys place.

The key difficulty here is the connection between experience, language and social skills. This girl had many rich experiences of different places and much knowledge to reveal. She was, however, relatively shy and did not appreciate being the centre of attention during the interviews. This meant that she preferred to express herself with as few words as possible, but still had many experiences to share. Therefore, what she comes to express sounds, to the adult ear, immature, illogical and not bound to particular places. This girl is a good example of the discrepancy between the means of conversation between children and adults. Children do not have the same social and verbal abilities as adults, but this does not mean that their ways of experiencing place and reasoning about their experiences are less vivid and
meaningful than those of adults. It only means that they are communicating differently.

**Cultural Differences**

It was during the interviews that I found the strongest evidence for cultural differences between the children. Social competence was a determining factor for how the interviews functioned. This is an individual characteristic, and individual children handle interviews differently. However, it was also a major difference between the two countries. The English children, in both age groups, possessed greater social competence and were more relaxed and active during the interviews. The reason for this is unclear but may relate to the setting of the interview, or to the idea that social competence is more developed in England than in Sweden, or that the English children were more accustomed to talking for themselves than the Swedish. The fact that Swedish children were less comfortable than the English made it necessary to ask more questions during the Swedish interviews. This made me more authoritative and it became less possible for the children to engage in a discussion within the group. This made the Swedish interviews less informative.

During the interviews in England, I was using a second language. This meant that it was more difficult to understand nuances and how the children viewed me, and to adjust to awkward situations. Despite this, though, it proved to be almost easier in England to make sure that the children experienced the situation as informal. I could ask them to call me by my first name and to not use titles and that clearly marked that this was an informal occasion.

With the Swedish children, it was a more difficult task to hold their attention and to get everyone to speak. They had difficulties remaining still by the table and on some occasions the children slid off their chairs when they got tired and then hid under the table. In some of the groups, there were children, particularly girls but also some boys, who seemed too embarrassed to express their views in front of the others and preferred to stay silent and let the more dominant children in the group speak for them. The Swedish groups were also generally more heterogeneous, with some clearly more dominant children and others more reserved. It was also relatively common that the children commented on each others’ answers in a teasing sort of way.

The English children seemed much more relaxed and somehow more experienced with the whole interview situation. They were much more talkative than the Swedish children, and took more initiatives on their own to tell me things, and they expressed their views both on their places and on their whole life-situations. They seemed generally interested in hearing what the other children had to say and they respected others’ answers without teasing each other. The difference in behaviour was evident not only when
we sat by the table for the interview but also when I walked with children from the classroom to the room I was allowed to use for the interviews. On one occasion, when I was walking a group of English children back from the interview to their classroom, I walked past a flight of stairs that could be used as shortcut to the classroom. Since I was unaware of this, I continued walking in the corridor but noticed that something was wrong and asked the children what it was. One boy then answered:

Sorry, miss, but it’s much shorter this way.

This situation, common as it may seem, would most likely never have occurred with the Swedish children. First of all, the Swedish children were not as disciplined and would probably not have walked behind me but beside or even in front of me. If I had walked past the stairs they would have loudly and collectively commented on this and not apologised for doing so or used a title (since this is not done in Swedish) or even my name when addressing me. A similar situation occurred in Sweden during the walks outside; the children reacted as mentioned above and used almost an accusatory tone when asking me why I wanted to walk on a particular street. The reason for this, I believe, is not, what might seem to be an obvious answer, that the Swedish children are particularly naughty or misbehaved, but rather a major difference in how society as a whole looks upon children and social behaviour.

The English children are, to a much greater extent, taught to respect adults and seemed to identify themselves as being ‘children’ more clearly than the Swedes did. The Swedish children only occasionally referred to the term ’children,’ whereas the English used this term extensively and reflected that they identified themselves as children. That the English children seemed more polite and secure may also have to do with the fact that there are more formal codes about behaviour and how to address unknown people. This makes it less complicated for the English children to take initiatives when they need to, whereas the Swedish children need to find their own ways of addressing me and calling my intention. It therefore seemed that the Swedish children were likely to remain quiet or, alternatively, to impolitely shout ‘Hey you’ since they have no established practice to fall back on. This English formality may, of course, also hinder an individual’s personal expression, even if this was not visible here.

Another aspect that may influence the children’s behaviour is how society looks upon them. In England, it is relatively common that children are not welcome in certain establishments, such as pubs and some restaurants and hotels. Swedish children are used to being accepted more or less everywhere. This could explain the difference in the children’s behaviour outside of the interviewing session, but not the fact that the English children are more talkative during the interviews. By comparing English and Swedish
behaviour in general, it is relatively uncomplicated to conclude that the English are more sociable and that they more easily speak to strangers than the Swedish do. It might be that this in combination with how the two different languages are used is the explanation for the difference in behaviour.

The difference in social skills between the English and Swedish children may obviously have an affect on the results. The Swedish children were less confident in expressing their experiences in front of others and hence used fewer words than the English children when they are talking, in order to limit the time they were the focus of attention. Thus, the Swedish children’s narratives are less vivid, but not necessarily much less informative. The Swedish children more clearly expressed their experiences but they did not connect as many associations to them, nor did they display the same interest in the other children’s narratives or ask questions regarding them as the English frequently did. By understanding these differences, it became possible to understand how much of the differences between what the children expressed has to do with their actual experiences versus with how they verbally communicate.

**The Structure of Everyday Life**

When listening to the children’s narratives, it became clear that they had thought extensively about how their everyday life was structured and how this was connected to their free-time and their use of places. This was something they easily expressed during our conversation.

Several children emphasised ambiguity about enjoying doing sports and participating in after-school clubs and other activities in their free time. Several of the children had fully booked schedules from the morning when school started until late in the evening when they returned home after their organised activities. They said that the opportunity for free time was limited, and the combination of having many after-school activities, restricted mobility and little ability to use outdoor space meant that they had very little, if any, opportunity to be spontaneous and just ‘run out and play.’ This seems to be an issue in both countries and for most of the children, although to varying degrees, of course. English girl Josy (11) expresses her view on the subject:

If you want to play with someone you need to, like, arrange it a week in advance because everyone are in clubs and stuff after school. That’s both good and boring, though...’cause the clubs are good but it is boring to never... like... be able think of something and then just do it.

There are several difficult issues resting within this. One is, of course, the children’s wishes to participate in different activities, and another is that some of the activities are needed to keep the children occupied and off the
streets until their parents return from work. The downside of it is that many of the children seem to be stressed about the fact that their schedules are full. They not only attend school but also after-school clubs, or, for the younger Swedish children, ‘fritids,’ and they are often also brought to different sporting activities, usually by their parents. Some of the children did not return home until eight or nine in the evening and then needed to complete their homework.

With everyday activities like these, the children’s free and unplanned time become very limited and this affects their use of public places and their ability to have non-adult-supervised outdoor activities, just as much as limited access to outdoor space does.

But not all children had full schedules until late in the evening every day. Some children were allowed to walk home by themselves after school. For some children, there were adults waiting at home while others had some time on their own before their parents arrived home. In both countries, the most common procedure for the children who returned home directly after school seemed to be to have something to eat and then telephone or just meet up with one or more friends until dinner time. The venue for socialising after school is mostly somewhere around one of the children’s homes.

For the children who had one parent home during the days (this occurred mainly in England, where some children had ‘full-time mums’) the chances of activities such as going to the beach and similar events were greater than for the rest. These children also seemed to be allowed to play outdoors more, such as on a nearby field or a dead-end street where the parent could supervise or at least be within close distance to the children.

**Social Relations with Adults and Older Children**

The children’s experiences of the social relations of place were central and they characterised the interviews. These social relations particularly concerned the relationships between the children and un-known adults. The children said that they often feel that they are being treated unfairly because they are children.

In both countries, the children described feeling invisible and that they received negative attention from adults, some even expressed that they felt that they have less worth just because they are children. The Swedish children expressed this in particular in regard to public transport and the English more in terms of treatment in shops and similar establishments. In both England and Sweden, the behaviour and social life of adults is a source of much thought for the children, who seem to continuously re-define themselves in relation to how adults treat them.

Several Swedish children expressed that they feel that adults push them around in the underground and said that adults should show more respect and help children find the right stops if they are travelling alone. The children said that since they are so much smaller in size, it becomes extra
difficult in crowds and that adults need to be aware of this. Most often, adults seem to disregard children and make sure that they themselves get off the subway or the bus as fast as possible. Other children argue that just because adults are stressed and need to get to work quickly, they should not drive too fast with their cars and risk the safety of others. The fact that many adults treat children with disrespect was an often occurring theme and is illustrated by many different stories told by the children. Swedish Jack’s (11) story is one of these:

Grown-ups never hold the doors, only children do and the grown-ups never even notice. They don’t even say thank you! Me and my friend once held the doors to the underground entrance and about a hundred people passed and only forty said thank you. That’s no good.

Even if Jack’s story does not merely illustrate adults being disrespectful to children but may just as well be an expression of stressful city life where the passing adults perhaps do not even notice that children hold the doors to them. Jack and his friend made an experiment and he remembers this event as something worth describing to others. To them, it shows that adults are disrespectful to children.

Whereas Swedish children express that they feel invisible in the public sphere, the English express something rather different. They feel very visible, but in a negative way. They describe how adults assume that they will behave badly and that they are not welcome in several places. Often, they come across negative comments from adults or at least feel that they are being supervised very closely even if they are doing nothing to draw attention to themselves. It is the fact that they are children that gets them this negative attention. The negative attention that they receive from adults affects their use of public places. Simon describes why he prefers not to walk on one of the streets close to his home:

On one of the streets, there is a lady there who shouts at you, telling you not to be there. (Simon, 9)

The fact that the children are not welcome in some places, particularly shops, is hurtful to them, and if they visit shops on their own, they are very aware of this. It is exiting and thrilling for them to visit attractive stores, such as toy stores or shops that sell computer games or surfing equipment. If they get told off by adults one of the first times they are out on their own without doing anything wrong except for simply being a child, their self-confidence diminishes and so does their wish to explore public places.

Stores that treat children badly quickly get a poor reputation among the children. English boys Will and Jasper (11) have experienced mistreatment:
Some shops don’t allow children. That’s really wrong. Lots of adults don’t care about children at all, like…they don’t even see you...There is this one shop...like…they sit with their feet on the desk and they tell you that you’re not welcome. They tell you not to touch anything and that you have to go with your mum. And it’s like who cares...They have cheap rubbish toys anyway, break easily… So I go with my mum sometimes, but it’s still not good because they are really watching you the whole time. I don’t like that it is so dark there; it’s really a weird place. They have these Freddy Krueger-posters that really freak me out. He looks like he’s gonna kill you. But there are some shops that are nice that don’t treat children different. (Will and Jasper, 11)

In this case, it is also possible to see how the boys find other aspects of the store, apart from the staff’s behaviour, negative. It is not only dark but they also have toys of poor quality and scary posters. This seemed to be exaggerated since they were feeling unwelcome.

The relationship between the children and older children, or between them and adults, can also have more direct impacts. In some cases, certain individuals, adult or teenagers, cause a direct threat to the children and in other cases, this is how the children experience the situation. Several children in both countries had stories to tell regarding this. English Jasper (11) tells this story:

"But it is like that…Some adults just don’t respect you. Sometimes when I’m on foot I feel scared, but not when I’m on my bike. Once when I was with John and we were walking we got followed by a couple of weirdos and that was really scary. But we managed to get home and his mum called the police. There are lots of weirdos, they don’t, like, threaten you or anything but they are scary…they follow you and look strangely at you."

The children are torn between fear and interest when it comes to homeless people and drug addicts. Poppy (11) does not like the homeless people. She feels guilty for not helping them but is also afraid, as she finds that they invade her personal space by shouting at her when she walks past.

"I’m scared of the homeless people. Sometimes they have a go at you if you don’t give them. (Poppy, 11)"

Just like Poppy, many of the children are afraid of what is different, but this also holds enormous interest. They do not automatically accept the warnings given by parents and teachers but instead need to examine and try to understand the homeless people’s different way of life. Swedish boy Wilmer (11) describes how he used to pass homeless people on his way to school:

"I used to pass a place by Sankt Eriksplan where there was this thing...like the Salvation Army or something where they took care of homeless people and drunks. It was pretty fun to walk past them and look at them, you know, if"
they were drunk and sang and couldn’t walk and so. But it isn’t fun if you think about it because you feel sorry for them and you don’t laugh at them but you still find it funny somehow. Sometimes it was scary if they talked to me. I just pretended that I didn’t hear them and walked on. Anyway, that place is gone now and that’s pretty good because you always had to look if there was a nutball there that you needed to get away from. Now I don’t have to care and it’s good. But I miss it.

The children reveal compassion for the homeless people. They ‘feel sorry for them’ and ‘want to help them’ and they also emphasise that homeless people ‘are people too’ and that they can be ‘nice’ and ‘fun.’ It seems in some cases that the children want to defend the homeless from adult prejudices, even if they themselves also reproduce these prejudices and sometimes express that they ‘want to laugh’ when drunks fall over. English boy Will (11) describes his relationship to the homeless:

There are a lot of homeless people and they do drugs and once one of them stole my dad’s laptop. But they can be really nice as well. There is this bloke…like he’s really nice and he makes up songs about you…like he sings… ‘there’s a little boy la la…’ and he just makes up a song about you when he’s singing. He’s cool. You should give things to the homeless.

Will expresses that there are homeless people who are not dangerous and also can be ‘nice’ and ‘cool.’ This is something that is mainly expressed by the English children and might stem from the fact that there is a larger number of homeless people in England than in Sweden. My impression is that people who are homeless in Sweden are frequently heavy drug addicts who also have psychological problems, whereas it is possible to meet homeless people in England who do not seem to differ that much from the average person. It might, therefore, from a very general perspective be easier to look upon homeless people as being ‘nice’ in England.

Much more problematic than the homeless are the travellers who sometimes camp on the fields in King’s Park. When the children talk about the travellers, they do not express any of the openness that they do towards the homeless people. They are curious and describe how they ‘spy’ on them from the school windows or from long distances in the park but there do not seem to be any of the positive feelings that are evident when it comes to the homeless. The children do not hesitate to criticise the travellers and they do this narrow-mindedly. It seems that the main reason for this is that they feel threatened as a result of being shouted or sworn at, and sometimes they express concern for the well-being of the travellers’ animals. Jasper and Will (11) express real concern for the animals and talk about this extensively.

We need security for the travellers, they swear at us. They chain up donkeys. Once they chained a donkey, with like a proper chain, and it looked really
terrible so I told my mum and then we called the RSPCA and they came and took it.

Several of the children say that they try to intervene when the travellers do something they do not appreciate. They tell their parents or teachers so that they can call the police or, in Jasper and Will’s case, the RSPCA (The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals). Others, like Philip, just feel apprehensive about the travellers and change their habits so that they will not have to meet them:

I don’t like to walk past the travellers, I don’t like the travellers at all. I usually try to find an alternative way so that I can avoid them. Sometimes the travellers wreck everything and they litter. (Philip, 11)

It is probable that the children have picked up negative discourse concerning the travellers through adult society or the media. Even if some children say that they have negative experiences with the travellers, there is no obvious explanation for the fact that there is such a difference in how the children refer to the homeless and the travellers. Instead, the most probable explanation is that the children have picked up negative descriptions or feelings and then started to reproduce them. None of the children reveal that they have any experience of the travellers as individuals or have knowledge about their culture. The fact that the travellers are a marginalised group in the society seems to make them frightening in themselves.

**Fears and Negative Aspects of Place**

As I described above, the children easily expressed sociocultural aspects of place in the interviews. Negative aspects of a place were also easily expressed as long as they were general experiences. Fears and negative aspects that affect the children personally were more difficult for them to express. It was, however, obvious that if one child revealed personal fears the others soon followed.

Several of the English children described how they lay in bed at night and heard people shouting on the street. This makes them feel unsafe and gets their imaginations going. When they hear loud voices at night they immediately start to consider what might happen if they perhaps had left their door unlocked or if someone decided to break a window. Will (11) describes how he lies in bed at night:

Sometimes when I’m in bed I can hear them on the street...they’re drunk...and I think what if they will break into our house?

Most of what the children described seems to be people walking home from pubs or football matches. Some children who live close to pubs described how they can hear the bell for last orders and then how soon after that,
people scream and sometimes also fight, and what that feels like, just outside their house. Others describe how they know if a football match has been won or lost depending on the noise afterwards. If the match has been lost, there are fights.

Social contacts that often are loaded with negative tension in both countries are the ones between the children and older children or teenagers, often in gangs.

There are gangs of teenagers on motorcycles and they go after you, hunt you down. But it’s not so often. That’s in Christchurch...but I don’t think it is that dangerous because it is just boys having fun. But it is the wrong kind of fun.

(Philip, 11)

Philip puts on an almost educational tone in his voice when describing how the boys are having the wrong kind of fun. It could be that he repeated something that an adult had said to him. However, the tone of his voice was dark and he looked down on his hands while he speaks, so therefore my impression is that the comment was his own and related to the fact that he really has been scared by the gangs of teenagers.

Violence, or the fear of violence, was mainly expressed by the English children and in general terms, such as violence in society, as well as in more detailed and specific descriptions:

I don’t like living by the pub. Because late at night you can hear the bell for last order, and there is a lot of shouting and fights sometimes. I hear that when I’m in bed and I don’t like it. (Joe, 11)

The children generally expressed negative views on issues that perhaps could have been expected, such as violence, gangs, traffic and littering. It is obvious that they distinguished between what generally can be regarded as negative from a societal perspective and what they themselves regard as negative from their personal viewpoints. This was done in both countries, but the Swedish children were particularly upset by the fact that adults behave badly, such as by speeding in their cars and littering. Overall, the children expressed that they felt safe in their neighbourhoods, even if all of them have some issues that bother them in their everyday life.

The fact that the city environment can be dangerous and daunting is something the children obviously are aware of but they are also proud of being able to handle critical situations. They often compare themselves to their not-so-brave friends just like Swedish Julia (11) does:

I don’t think anything is scary but my friend does. She is afraid when she is going home. There is a tunnel where it is ugly and gross... a lot of graffiti...it smells like wee and there is a drunk there. But I’m so used to it now that I don’t get scared.
All children in both countries get upset by general unsocial behaviour such as bullying, vandalism and littering. The most common complaints regarded graffiti and littering. Littering is considered a completely negative element that is seen as particularly poor behaviour since it makes public places less beautiful and also can make them feel less safe.

The English children expressed particularly negative feelings toward the public toilets close to the school, where general untidiness seems to have become a symbol of what is negative and dangerous.

We don’t like the public toilets. They are disgusting, none flush and they never get cleaned. (Nazneen and Zadie, 11)

Several children mentioned the toilets and their comments mainly concerned the fact that they are unclean and smelly. I reflected over the degree to which they seemed upset about this but could not find another explanation than the fact that children often seem remarkably upset over general untidiness. However, when Will and Jasper (11) made this remark on the public toilets, I could suddenly understand what was lying behind the extent to which the children emphasised the toilets:

They should get rid of the toilets in the park. Once there was a dead man there and they are locked up so they might as well get rid of them.

I have not checked whether or not there ever was a dead man there, but that is not of great importance. In the children’s reality, it is true and something that most of them seemed aware of. Therefore, it brought more emphasis to the negativity of the public toilets. It seems as if particular negative events and incidents, such as there being a dead man in the public toilets or, for that sake, the narrative of a dead man, or some other negative event, make the children prone to more strongly emphasise all the negative aspects that they can think of regarding a specific place. In terms of the public toilets, it seems relatively clear that the narrative of the dead man made the children mention the toilets as soon as we started to talk about negative aspects of the environment.

The example of the ‘dead man’ indicates how myth-building occurs in associations with different places. The narrative of the dead man had spread among the children and probably the story had worsened. The way that children speak among themselves and how they mix reality and imagination means that this phenomenon occurs in similar ways independently from the state of the places they frequent. Their wish for excitement means that places that trigger the imagination will get narratives attached to them, independently of any events ever taking place there. This is particularly true for children, but it also raises questions that refer to society as a whole. Is it
possible to build a city that will be perceived as safe, or will the human imagination always invent places of fear and danger?

Children connect different social factors to the physical environment extensively. A negative social factor, such as the dead man, a mean person on a street or in a shop, as we saw earlier, or a lack of activity, not only makes the children express negative views regarding that particular issue but then they are also more likely to more clearly emphasise the negative physical factors of the place. As Zadie (11) expresses regarding the playing field:

There really should be more activity, there is nothing to do. And it’s muddy.

The social and the physical are closely connected and reinforce each other. The impression of a place not only seems to be twice as negative because there are two negative factors of the places: rather, it seems as though the two negative factors reinforce one another so that, for example, the dead man makes the untidiness of the public toilets worse than it would have been had the dead man not been there at all. This is interesting because it might have a great effect on the results when we study children’s places. Children might express clear and negative views on an object or a place, but these views might be connected to social factors rather than the physical environment.

The English children speak more in terms of certain areas being safe or unsafe in ways that the Swedish children do not. The English children have clear maps within themselves of which areas are safe for biking, walking or playing in. The boundaries between these different areas seem sharp and non-negotiable. Sometimes a road, park or field can act as a boundary for what is safe and what is not. On one side of the boundary, the children say, they feel perfectly safe, but on the other side they do not even consider walking, and they refer to that particular area as not being safe for children. The Swedish children seem generally slightly apprehensive regarding their safety, but they do not express this as clearly as the English, nor do they distinguish between safe and unsafe places.

Graffiti and littering upset the children, mainly for two reasons. The first one is that it looks offensive and makes places less beautiful. The second reason is that the actual acts of painting graffiti and littering are forbidden and that people breaking rules is upsetting to some of the children. As mentioned above, it seems that in this case as well, the offences are worse because they are negative acts in and of themselves. Hence, it is not only the ugliness of, for instance, littering that is upsetting, but also because it indicates forbidden behaviour. Furthermore, negative acts that can harm others, in particular animals, are upsetting. In England, the children were upset about a broken fence where a pigeon got stuck in the loose metal wires and died. This was mentioned by several of the children and was seen as a
symbol of injustice and wrongful behaviour. Tom (8) expresses how he feels:

Pigeons shouldn’t have to die because of broken fences. That’s rubbish.

If human beings want to ruin the environment for themselves that is one thing, but when animals, get harmed by this it is not only wrong but terribly upsetting for the children.

Graffiti really engaged the children but their attitude towards it was mixed. Since painting graffiti is an illegal activity, the children reacted strongly against it. With this in mind, many children were nevertheless attracted to different forms of graffiti, both since they appreciate some of what is painted and partly because they are attracted to the culture that comes attached to graffiti. The children’s attitude towards graffiti was directly connected to the motif of what was painted. Signatures or ‘tags’ were mainly considered negative for the simple reason that they were ‘ugly.’ Artistic graffiti paintings were often considered positive, if they had not ruined something the children considered beautiful. The Swedish children in particular said that some graffiti could be positive and worth preserving. Some children actually expressed sadness over the fact that a painting of a deer that had been on a house near their school had been cleared off the wall. They had appreciated looking at the deer when they had passed it. Some of the Swedish children had found spray tins thrown in a container close to their school and picked them up and handed them in to their teacher. This discovery made the children excited since they associated it with graffiti. Again, the children’s ambiguity towards graffiti was clear.

Graffiti is pretty cool, but you’re not allowed to do it. (Albin, 8).

No, it’s bad! (Agnes, 8, and all children join in)

Cars and Traffic
Traffic and cars were often mentioned by children in both countries. The Swedish children clearly reflect the environmental education that they have received and label cars as ‘bad’ and people who drive are often described in a negative tone. It is, however, possible to distinguish between what is a reflection of what the children have been ‘taught,’ i.e. that traffic is negative, and what the children experience in their everyday environments. Mostly, they view traffic as negative but they also expressed a broader spectrum of views and experiences. A common view was expressed by Ida (11):

There is a lot of traffic and it is not like I’m afraid of the cars but it is like a mess, you’d rather not have them there when you’re walking, especially not if you’re in a hurry. (Ida, 11)
Traffic is considered annoying because it slows the children down and stops them from walking at the pace that they would prefer. Traffic also complicates everyday life since it becomes necessary to deal with crossings and traffic lights. It seems as if the inconvenience factor is more present than the fears of actually being involved in an accident or being disturbed by noise and pollution, even if these factors are also mentioned.

The English children revealed a larger number of different feelings towards cars and traffic than the Swedish did. The car was often mentioned as something private that seems to symbolize both safety and a necessity for mobility and transport. The positive aspects of the car were brought to light by the English children, even if they also complained about speeding traffic and poor behaviour on the roads. The Swedish children only mentioned the negative aspects of cars and traffic, but they did however indicate that the car is important in their families. It became obvious that the Swedish children found the car important, even though they had picked up the negative discourse concerning traffic and cars in the city that had been intense in Sweden at the time of the interviews.

The children clearly reflected the ambiguity towards traffic that characterised the general debate. Traffic is noisy, pollutes the air and makes it difficult for pedestrians to walk down the streets, but on the other hand, it is important for personal convenience and the ability to travel. It seems as if the number of families who do not own a car is larger among the Swedish children’s families, even if they generally seem to be financially better off than the English. The English children’s families seem to own cars but in some cases the children mentioned that the car is expensive and that they sometimes have to walk because the family does not have enough money for petrol. The financial aspects seem to have an impact on whether the children walk to school or are driven. This, of course, also matters in Stockholm but was not at all mentioned by the children, who instead referred to ideological aspects. The public transport system is also more extensive in Stockholm than in Bournemouth. Therefore, it is more possible to choose to not own a car for ideological reasons in Stockholm than in Bournemouth, and this can be an explanation for the difference in the feelings the children revealed about cars.

The children described how they developed different strategies for handling traffic, parallel to the strategies taught by adults. They realised that the correct rules and behaviour that should be practised will not always get you where you want to go. They knew that it is necessary to develop site-specific knowledge to be able handle everyday situations in traffic. Different streets and crossings demand, different kinds of knowledge and the Swedish children in particular showed great pride in revealing how they learned to deal with situations. They also shared situations and experiences with each other during the interview.
**Sensing the City**

In previous chapters, I emphasised how children experience place very strongly and vividly through all their senses and how these senses have equal importance when creating a sense of place. The interviews revealed how, in communicating verbally with adults, the children over-emphasised the visual impression, since this is the least complicated sense to communicate. Smell and sound were also communicated during the interviews, but the main focus was on the visual.

The visual is non-questionable and even if interpretations of and associations with visual impressions are different between individuals, whether child or adult, what we see can be considered ‘the same.’ Since the visual often is stable, it is more likely to have been experienced by more people exactly the same way the child tries to describe it and it is, hence, more likely to be understood.

Smell seemed, in both countries, to be something that the children were very sensitive about. It was often mentioned when the children described how they find their way. It was never referred to neutrally but always marked very strongly as negative or positive. Positive smells that were mentioned were the sea, a bakery, dogs, flowers, parks, the countryside and a Chinese take-away shop. Negative smells included traffic, crowds of people, and, most commonly, what was expressed by Swedish girl Alice (11):

> I don’t like that it smells like wee in hallways and entrances.

Other sensuous impressions, apart from vision and smell, that the children referred to mainly involved sound. Most frequently, the remarks concerned complaints about noise, such as traffic, crowds of people and construction work. Swedish girl Ida (11) referred to road work and noises:

> I usually have to run to school because I live so close and I think that I’ll get there in time but then I don’t and I have to run. It’s easy to find school because I can see it from my door. But right now it’s a bit more difficult because there are a lot of noises from the road work there.

Considering Ida’s comments, Hägerstrand’s words (referred to in Chapter 3) comes to mind. Hägerstrand (1991) notes how certain sounds can cut across all other sensuous impressions and shape the experience of place. Ida expresses that it becomes more difficult to find school because of the noises on her way. She does not further define whether this is what she actually means or if the road work makes it more difficult to cross the road and that she additionally gets bothered by the noise. However, it seem to be clear that sharp sounds, more than other sensuous impressions, can ‘occupy’ places and control people’s experiences.
Positive Aspects

On the whole, both the Swedish and English children seem content with their neighbourhoods and everyday lives. In particular, the English children spontaneously expressed that they appreciated living in Bournemouth and gave many examples of why it is a nice place.

I think it is quite nice here, there are many elderly people and it is pretty. I like it. (Philip, 11)

Bournemouth and Boscombe are really good, we have lots of things. We have free fields that you can do healthy things on. We play with all our friends there. And it is close to everything, all the shops…Chinese take-away shops…and it is beautiful. People have barbeques on the beach. (Jasper and Will, 11)

The reasons mentioned for liking Bournemouth refer to physical and social factors. Several children mentioned the sea and beach and other natural environments close to their homes, such as the New Forest, as well as attributes of the city such as the variety of shops and different events in the city parks. Some of the children mentioned that they appreciate the people in the city, particularly that there are many people from different countries (whether this refers to immigrants or tourists is unclear) and of different ages. Several children also mentioned their families and friends as reasons for liking the city.

The Swedish children were less willing to express good things about their neighbourhood, but when they did, what they said was relatively similar to what the English said, with some clear differences. The Swedish children did not at all mention variety among people as something as being good (or bad); rather, diversity was not mentioned at all. Some children said that they liked to look at different people but they did not refer to age or nationality. In both countries, the children mentioned that living in their neighbourhood is positive since it is so close to different places and facilities. Easy access to service establishments can therefore be said to be something that even children appreciate. Several children mentioned the positive aspects of living close to different kinds of shops, public transport, hospitals and other establishments, and this, perhaps, is not what children most often visit or are presumed to appreciate.

On several occasions, the children mentioned that they appreciate things that are ‘nice,’ ‘beautiful,’ ‘pretty’ or ‘good.’ The objects or places that most often were described this way, among all children in both countries, were green places, plants and animals. Natural environments in general were labelled as positive. Parks, gardens, beaches, ponds, nice views and flowers were mentioned frequently. It was difficult to understand exactly why the children mentioned these things since they could not, or did not want to,
answer even when I asked specifically about this. They apparently found the positive aspects so obvious. The objects and places they mentioned were just ‘good’ or ‘pretty’ and this fact was enough. They did not want to explain further. One Swedish boy explained:

Good things are good because they are good and then you feel good. (Olle, 8)

This comment reveals the discrepancy between his experiences and his understanding of what degree of experience he needs to communicate in order for others to understand.

Not only green objects or places were mentioned, though: one boy mentioned football goals, and others named their own rooms or the house in which they live. Places with popular activities, such as cycling lanes in natural environments in England, were also mentioned as beautiful, not because the place looks aesthetic but because it is a place that the child likes to be in. Some children not only mentioned things that they appreciated visually or because they liked an activity possible to perform there, but they also described sounds and smells as beautiful, such as the smell of freshly baked bread and the sound of music or a bird’s song. They mentioned these things even if I questioned in a way that would make most people refer to visual objects.

Urban Greens, Nature and Animals
The importance of nature, parks, plants and animals in the local environment was clearly reflected among all children in both countries. The children emphasized the sensuous and private experiences of nature, as well as the experiences and exploration of different species of plants and animals. The English children were more open to communicating their experiences of wildlife and nature than the Swedish, who seemed slightly apprehensive of displaying their experiences in front of their friends. This might have its root in the fact that the English children have access to a school garden with woodland, a pond and beds for flowers, herbs and vegetables.

The Coppice is central to the English children’s stories and was mentioned by all the children. The ability to find peace and calm was the main reason mentioned for liking the Coppice. The shelter that the trees provide gives the children privacy and filters the sounds but it is also the ability to enjoy the plants and wildlife found there that is attractive to the children.

The Coppice represents peace but is also stimulating because of the presence of wildlife. The children take care of the Coppice as a school activity and they were willing to tell stories about how this was done. Several of the children indicated that they are proud of their work there and that this responsibility is something that they are glad to take on. The English children clearly expressed that they find it positive to not only have
green elements in their surroundings but also that it brings extra positive aspects to actually have a relationship with the plants and the area. They appreciated that they have the opportunity to care for plants and wildlife, and that they actively interact with it rather than just having access or ability to see it.

The pond is particularly interesting for the children, especially because it attracts so much wildlife, but also because it is beautiful. Grace, Fred and Matt (11) express themselves in the following way about the Coppice.

I love the pond in the Coppice. There is a lot of wildlife there, like dragonflies. We take care of it. It’s good. (Grace)

I like the Coppice and it’s interesting with the pond. Sometimes there is rubbish there, but I like it. It’s interesting with the wildlife and we can grow vegetables. You can hide in the bushes and find interesting species of animals. There are ducks, foxes, dragonflies and frogs. (Fred)

I like running around in the woods. There’s a foxhole there, it’s a nice habitat. (Matt)

It is possible to distinguish three different reasons for mentioning the Coppice and nature in general in positive terms. The first is that nature makes the children feel calm and relaxed. The second is a science-oriented interest in different species of plants and animals and the ability to attract wildlife to the Coppice. The third reason for emphasising the importance of green elements is slightly more complicated and it seems to be that the children value natural elements such as plants and animals because of their own intrinsic worth rather than primarily for the reactions they create within humans.

Allowing urban children to have a green schoolyard where they can grow and take care of plants is very obviously something that the children appreciate and that allows them to relax and create deeper bonds with a place as well as to create a caring attitude towards nature.

Apart from the Coppice, the English children also put great emphasis on the sea and the beach. The beach provides feelings of freedom and happiness, but is also appreciated for its sporting capabilities such as swimming, running and playing volleyball or football.

The Swedish children spoke about nature and green elements as well, but they did not do this in as relaxed a manner as the English. This is interesting, since it contradicts the Swedish notion that Swedes are particularly nature-oriented (e.g. Löfgren, 1995). It may be that since nature is an important part of Swedish people’s lives, it is taken for granted and hence not considered ‘cool’ amongst the children. It seemed as if the children found the liking of nature as being childish. It was also obvious that the English children have had more education about caring for plants and wildlife than the Swedish
and hence did not consider it strange. The Swedish children clearly reflected that nature and animals are important to them but they seemed to find it complicated to express this among their friends. It is clear that it is not seen as particularly ‘cool’ to say that you like plants or know their names. They did, however, speak about different animals and they mentioned that they had seen animals such as birds, a hedgehog and a cat in park.

Pets were mentioned by several of the children in both countries and dogs were particularly popular. Pets were referred to comprehensively during the interviews. Some children have their own pets that they referred to, such as English boy Will (11):

I really like dogs. My mum breeds basset hounds, so we have got seven dogs. I’ve got Daisy, she is mine.

Other children wished that they had their own dog but in the meantime kept track of all the dogs in their neighbourhoods. Some of the girls in Sweden had an extensive record of all the dogs they usually walked past on their way to school. They knew where they lived, what they were called and who their owners were.

**Favourite Places and Playing**

The children’s favourite places depend on what the place looks like, what it is possible to do there and also with whom they usually visit the place. Swedish Nora (8) described her favourite place like this:

I love my courtyard because all my friends are there, and they are of different ages. Everyone plays with everyone, girls and boys. That’s fun!

Her friend Katja (8), who was sitting next to her, also appreciated the courtyard but was very eager to emphasise that it is not only the social aspects of the courtyard that are valuable but that the physical aspects are of great importance as well:

Yeah, and you can climb over the walls and fences to get to the other courtyards.

The main values of the courtyards, which other children also emphasised, are that there are possibilities of playing together with other children there and also that there are exciting and challenging physical structures to climb or balance on. The fact that they often play in groups makes them take more risks when playing and they tend to do more forbidden things. Climbing over the walls between the different residential courtyards is a particularly popular activity; it is also frightening because in some places, there are different levels on each side of the wall, which can make it dangerous to
climb. Several of the children described different tricks for how the walls are best climbed and how it is possible to use walls to climb up on roofs or to swing on lamp posts. But the courtyards are also used sometimes by fewer children for more peaceful activities, such as talking or playing with gravel. Some children also described liking to go out alone in the courtyards and perhaps climb a tree to sit and think in.

The English children play in similar ways to the Swedish children, even if they mostly play in a park or in someone’s garden. The English mentioned sports slightly more often than the Swedish. Biking and basketball are popular activities and they are often performed in school or in parks. Many children also play at home with their siblings. Some just meet up with their friends and go somewhere to socialize or ‘hang out.’

When discussing which places they appreciate, many of the children reflected on climbing in different forms. This can be climbing as an organised activity on playing equipment but more often on common everyday things that surround them, such as trees, gates, fences and walls. But the popular activity of climbing is also connected to the notion that most often the climbing that they do is not permitted by adults. The children described that they often are told off by adults who either believe that the children are going to destroy what they are climbing on or that they will fall down and hurt themselves. In one of the Swedish schools, the children are forbidden to climb the trees by the school and this annoys several of the children. Nora (8) has done some thinking:

We’re not allowed to climb the trees at school because they think that we will fall down. But what if we wore protection? Like the ones you have when you go on your inlines? That could work! There really should be more fun stuff in the schoolyard.

It was common that the children in both countries provided solutions for the problems that they face. They find it difficult to accept that they are forbidden to do certain things, for the simple reason that they find it unfair that adults rule most things in their lives. Instead of just questioning adult authority, most children tried to find creative solutions to minimise the problems, such as the adult fear of the children falling down, and combine it with their own urge to climb the trees. This is noticeable in several examples throughout the children’s stories and includes everything from how the children suggested places could be redesigned to function better to how different social situations better could be solved.

**Changing the Environment**

All children commented on what they would like to change in the environment. Their comments regarded things that they would like to remove and things that they wished that there was more of. Many children
would like to live closer to their friends and asked for different playing areas and sporting facilities, such as a basketball court closer to home and a BMX track by the school. Some also want more things to do in school and in the classroom. There were many wishes for cleaner cities and generally tidier and calmer places. Some children mentioned certain things that they want to have changed, such as to remove dogs’ messes in the park or fish bones from the beach, whereas others referred to a more general need to tidy up the streets. Some children also want to make some grown-ups disappear, such as particular individuals in their everyday lives, homeless people or the travellers. Several of the English children mentioned the green fence where the pigeon died and demanded that it be removed. Some children want to de-urbanize their neighbourhoods to make them more pleasant.

They should take away all the litter and the rats. There should be less buildings and more open space. They could remove buildings that aren’t being used and make more parks. It really should be greener. (Josy, 11)

Less traffic was another comment made by several. The views differ from generally wanting less traffic to specific suggestions on how to change the environment, as Swedish Julia (11) said:

By the Vasa park, there is this place where they are building a garage and there is a crossing there. There should be a traffic light by that crossing.

There is a clear difference between different individuals on how much they have reflected on what they want changed in their neighbourhood. English boys Ali and Matt (11) were talkative:

We would like a new skate park. They took the old one to Bellwood and there is lots of graffiti on it now. More things for skateboards and BMXs, and we want it near cause otherwise it’s pointless. It would be nice with a dirt track for BMXs near Kings Park.

When it comes to views that are site-specific, many of the children suggested that there should be more colours on houses and streets, as well as more imaginative designs of houses and cars. Many children started to fantasize as soon as they are given the opportunity to be creative, and provided ideas such as that they would like to ‘travel with a whirl-wind to school’ or ‘to have fun things that bounce when you push a button,’ ‘travel with airplane’ or ‘I’d like to invent a mini-car just for children so that we can sit on our way to school’ and they mix these fantasies with thought-through direct ideas on things they want to change.
Urban Identity and Relationships to the Suburbs and the Countryside

The children reflected that they see themselves as city-dwellers. They expressed several, both positive and negative, views on the dichotomy between the urban and the rural. Several children would prefer to have a country-like feel to their environment, something which they on many occasions clearly mark as something as being better than the urban. The urban represents something that can threaten and harm, whereas the rural represents a romantic ideal, where the ability to hold animals is positive.

It is obvious that for many of the children, the urban symbolizes something negative whereas the rural represents safety and ‘goodness.’ The city is negative in that it has criminals, the air is bad, it is noisy and crowded and there is limited space for both wild and domestic animals. The rural is, on the contrary, considered healthy, beautiful and peaceful.

The children clearly indicated that they are aware of certain differences in the societal contexts in which they live and how these are connected to places. The division between urban and rural does not automatically mean that the children would rather move to the countryside. Instead, they, as mentioned, see themselves as ‘urban’ and as ‘city-dwellers.’ This is emphasised particularly by the Swedish children, who not only compare themselves to children in the countryside but also, and more often in relatively negative terms, to suburban children. Comparisons with the city’s surroundings are not only made because it is considered to be better there. Generally, when referring to the countryside, this is done in romanticizing terms, whereas references to the suburbs are more negative. The countryside is seen as a place where people are happier than in the city, and it is considered healthier and safer. The ability to be close to nature, to grow things and to drive a tractor are other things mentioned. The wish to be able to hold animals was mentioned by almost all children in both countries. The term ‘animal’ seems to primarily refer to domestic animals such as dogs and cats, but these were mentioned side by side with cows, sheep and horses.

When the Swedish children referred to the suburbs and in particular to children who grow up in suburbs, they did this by comparing their own behaviour to that of suburban children. The city children are always portrayed more favourably than the suburban children. It was most commonly the suburban children’s inability to cope with traffic and traffic situations that the city children were amused by, and which particularly the boys acted out on several occasions. They pretended to be suburban children trying to cross a road, but they failed and got hit by a car, with severe blood shedding as a result. This was acted out on several occasions and was followed by roars of laughter by all the children.

The difference in how the Swedish children refer to the countryside and the suburbs seems to stem from the fact that the countryside represents something idealized that many of the children wish for. Their experiences
from the countryside are mainly from the summer holidays and it seems when the children are referring to the ‘country,’ they do this assuming that it is summer there. They never mention other children, i.e. children who actually live in the countryside but instead picture themselves as being in the countryside. When referring to the suburbs, it is always by referring directly to other children and they never seem to picture themselves being there. The term ‘suburb’ is used without inner divisions, so it is not possible to know what kind of suburb they are referring to.

In one of the Swedish groups, a boy who lived in a suburb participated, something the others at first forgot, but later remembered. They quickly assured the boy that he was not considered a ‘real’ suburban child, as he was just like them and went to their school.

The negative discourse on the suburbs can be interpreted in different ways. It could be that the children have picked up on negative comments in the media debate, or it could just be an expression of the children profiling themselves against children from other neighbourhoods.

In both countries, the children were content with living in a city even if they wished for animals and more green space. Despite this longing for natural elements and animals, these items were not seen as exclusively belonging to the countryside. Rather, trees and plants were seen as much a part of the urban environment as streets and houses.

**Children’s Worlds and Existentialism**

The interviews did not hold any creative aspects and they were not place-interactive, as these terms are defined in this study. The lack of these aspects prohibited the children from expressing abstract experiences of place, something that also makes them considerably less complicated to analyse and understand from an adult perspective. However, having noted this, the interviews also had many deeply entangled meanings.

During the interviews, I tried to focus on concrete issues about the children’s everyday environments in order to keep the discussions on track, and also since this often is considered a way of helping the children express themselves (e.g. Larsson, 2004; Doverborg and Pramling, 1993). Despite this, interesting and more abstract issues about the children’s everyday life revealed themselves during our conversations.

Several of the Swedish children started to contemplate about what they usually thought of when they were travelling or walking to school. Others described how they do not really think of anything but choose to focus on balancing on walls and fences, while yet others:

> Look at trees and think about soil. (Ville, 8)

Some children described how they just think about something but can not really explain why they do so or point to something that is particularly
interesting about that exact object. Swedish Sophie (11) explains her thoughts:

I usually think of a stump. There’s nothing special. I just think about it. There was a tree and a storm and the tree fell. Now there is just a stump.

For many children, the tiny everyday detail is what captures their imagination and these details can have great importance to them. English boy Fred (11) recalls during the interview something that most adults probably would not notice:

There is a crack in the pavement at the playground. I think it looks interesting.

As Sophie and Fred reveal through their narratives, the common everyday object can start processes within children in which fantasies, memories and dreams intertwine and take new shapes. Even the tiniest thing, such as a crack in the pavement, can become important and valuable for the sake of the memories and dreams it causes or simply because it exists and represents something stable and never-changing in the continuous drama it is to be a growing child. The fact that things as tiny as a crack in the pavement, the colour of a house or the shape of a mail box can hold great importance to children is difficult for adults to fully understand and it is even more difficult, if not impossible, to realise which these objects are in the surrounding environment. The objects can be anything that the child comes across regularly and they are rarely connected to the home, which instead has other important values. Something central for how children connect themselves to objects and places with which they form particularly strong bonds is their always present and vivid imagination. It is obvious how the children have energetic minds and how they continuously contemplate, analyse and fantasize in order to find where they belong and how they connect to other people. To put it simply, children tend to think extensively and this is reflected in the way they communicate.

Several of the English children expressed that they have started to think about death, often in connection with the Second World War, in which most of them had relatives who were affected. These thoughts are often directly connected to places such as graveyards or places particularly affected by bombings during the war. Will (11) tells this story:

There are graves from where the bombs fell where I live. From the Second World War, I find that very interesting. There are fossils on the beach as well, from the Stone Age – that’s really cool. Sometimes you can find them in the Coppice as well, when you dig. The school is haunted, you know, it happens strange things here sometimes. I like the history of place. There is a graveyard close to here and close to home, it is really nice. I like to go and sit
there, by my Nan’s grave. I like to talk to her, she was very ill but she brought me this big present! I think the graveyard is one of the nicest places, because it is so peaceful.

Will emphasizes several significant issues in his narrative that are important to take into account when working with children’s places. He brings in different dimensions to his experience of place and he is not only concerned with the physical or social but is just as interested in the history of place; how places have been created and what has happened there brings extra value and can, it seems, make otherwise dull places important and special. Another issue that Will expresses is the need to seek solitude and to be able to find places where it is possible to be on one’s own. This is often neglected by adults who assume that children only need ‘action.’ These children communicate a longing for peace and quiet, an ability to seek shelter from the stress and demands of their lives. Not all children were willing to share with me the places they visit when they need to find peace but common factors for several of the places are that they are in one way or another green and that it is possible to be alone there. The Swedish children often spoke about climbing trees in the courtyards of their apartment buildings and expressed how these trees are useful both for playing with friends and for finding peace in. The children climb the trees as high as they dare and then they sit there contemplating their lives, looking at the branches and leaves and the world below them. Other popular places for being alone are, of course, the home, garden or residential courtyard, but solitude can also be found in physical activity.

English boy Mike (11) described how he often takes his bike and goes away on his own, as on his bike he feels safe and free to think. An eleven-year-old Swedish boy said that he usually sits down with his headphones on in front of his computer since this is the only place where he can be left alone. With the headphones on, he can be in his own world even if there are other people in the room.

How the children experience distance is individual but it is clear that it is not only dependent on the actual physical distance. Social and physical factors have roles to play, but the actual physical distance does not necessarily have to be connected to the experience of the distance. Rather, it is the experience the children have during the time it takes to walk or travel the distance that is conclusive. Swedish girl Katja (11) says this about her school route:

School is really close, but it takes ages to walk there since we have so much to talk about.

Hence, it is the experience they have rather than the actual distance that is most important for how the children experience distance. Places with many
stimuli take time to walk through and around and are therefore often experienced as long even if the children know, as Katja does, that the actual physical distance is short. This seems to be valid if they walk with a friend as well as if they walk on their own. If a child walks alone, it is objects that can be used for play, such as walls to balance on, loose objects to pick up or interesting things or people to watch, that slows them down. Alternatively, objects that stimulate the imagination can have the same function. For some children, the fact that they are walking on their own gets their mind going, independently, it seems, of the environment, and this slows them down since they have so much to think about. When they walk together with other children, it seems to function in a similar way, even if the objects that catch their interest tend to be slightly different. Whereas the single walking child seems to be fascinated by objects that stimulate the mind, children in groups are more attracted to objects and places that they immediately can interact with and climb, throw, kick or balance on. Often, they do things which they would not dare to do when they are on their own.

**Seasons, Weather and Temporal Landscapes**

Several children talked about the importance of different seasons for the places they appreciate. This was particularly noticeable in Sweden, where snow is more common than in England. Snow changes the use and also the function of different places. Piles of snow can suddenly bring play qualities to otherwise dull places. Since the snow often melts earlier on streets and pavements and often remains longer in parks and on other green places, these are places with the most qualities during winter, too. Nonetheless, on some open spaces and squares that normally have no play qualities, piles of snow from the clearing of streets change the accepted use of place. Snow-related play and activities were mentioned by several children. Snow is interesting because it alters the predestined use of place and allows the children to play in places not intended for play. Winter was mentioned because of the ability for different activities that it provides; other reasons for liking winter were not mentioned. The other seasons were mentioned for more diverse reasons. Swedish Robert (11) says this about autumn:

> I like the autumn and it’s fun with all the trees outside school. I love to shovel through all the leaves and to throw them up in the air. And it’s nice with all the colours. It’s hard to walk during winter because of all the slush.

The negative aspect of winter that he mentioned was also present for other children. Certain places are mentioned as negative because they are particularly cold during the winter, such as in Julia’s (11) comment:

> If I live with my dad I have to walk over the Sankt Eriks Bridge and that’s really rough if it’s windy. It’s extra cold during winter.
Complaints regarding the winter season were more common among the Swedish children, but so were the positive comments connected to winter sports and playing abilities. The English children seem to be more bored by the winter months and do not hold as strong views regarding seasons as the Swedish children do. Perhaps not surprisingly, the most popular seasons in both countries are spring and summer. They were mentioned most frequently because it gets warmer or is warm, is green, there are flowers, and it is generally more possible to be active outdoors, such as by playing football. Several of the English children mentioned that they like spring because they can start to take care of the flowers in the Copice.

**Independent Mobility**

The children’s independent mobility varies depending on different individuals, places and, to a certain extent, also between the different countries. Most of the children have some independent mobility but it often comes with restrictions. They might, for example, be allowed to walk to the park or to a friend’s home on their own, sometimes on restricted routes, but not go anywhere else.

A majority of the children walk to school most of the time, even if the Swedish children seem to walk more often than the English. Whether this is because the Swedish children live closer to school than the English or if it actually means that their independent mobility is greater is difficult to say. It was, however, noticeable that a majority of the Swedish children lived very close to their school and therefore had to walk for only five minutes or fewer to get to school. Some actually saw the school building from their home. A few of the English children lived outside of Bournemouth and thus walking was not a realistic alternative. A majority of the English children also walked to school but it was common that they had a walking companion, such as a friend, their mother, a sibling or grandmother. Some children walked by themselves, some rode their bikes and some were driven by their parents. Most children could be driven if the weather was bad or they had a heavy bag to carry.

None of the Swedish children were allowed to go to school on their bikes because of the traffic. The school also had a rule that children under the age of twelve were not allowed to bike since this was not supposed to be safe. A majority of the Swedish children expressed the wish that they be allowed to bike. The reasons for wanting to bike varied from simply enjoying biking to wanting to get to places faster, but some children also said that they felt safer biking than walking. Others expressed that they like to bike because they find it easy to think when they are on their bike and still others had different explanations, such as Swedish Wilmer (11) who said this:
I walk to school, but I’d rather go on my bike because you warm up better before school that way than if you walk. But I live on Sankt Eriksplan so it’s dangerous to bike.

Most children are allowed to play outdoors during their free time, and although many of the Swedish children are allowed to walk to school on their own, it seemed as if they not are allowed out as much on their own to play in public spaces. Instead, they play with their friends in the semi-private residential courtyards rather than in public spaces. Some girls described, however, that they like to walk down the street to ‘window shop.’ They look through the windows and imagine what they would buy.

Some children who are not allowed out on their own stay inside, but not all children accept this. English girl Isobel (8) says this:

I’m not allowed out to play on my own among people. But you can’t sit inside on your own. I play in the garden instead.

The fact that several of the English children have access to their own private gardens does matter for their ability to play outdoors. Most of the Swedish children have access to the semi-private residential courtyards but playing there still involves a more planned activity and also consideration for other people whilst playing. The positive aspects of socializing with others also make it difficult for most children to go outside if they want to be on their own. Public spaces in urban areas always involve the risk or chance of meeting other people. The English children often said that they go out to the garden if they feel sad or want to be left alone. The Swedish children more often stay indoors in their bedrooms when they want to be left alone, since going outside involves meeting other people. English boy Philip (11) contemplates over the restrictions he is faced with as a child and concludes that even if he does not enjoy his restrictions, they are for his own safety and things will become better:

I’m allowed to the park with my sister and to my friend’s house. I can go to some places on my own. When you’re a teenager you can move about more, you get greater freedom.
The Verbal Narrative

So far in this chapter, the children’s verbal narratives have been brought forward. But what sort of knowledge of how and what the children communicate has been present in these narratives?

Generally, these narratives provided opportunities to gain specific and place-bound information regarding the children’s place use and their views on concrete matters of their neighbourhood as well as different aspects of the physical, social and cultural structures that have an effect on their lives. The children’s expressions and views of different sociocultural issues were one of the main characteristics of the interviews. Basic facts about the child and her life were also easily gained. The children were willing to describe their favourite places, as well as their least favourite places, and to explain their views on different aspects of places. They clearly labelled people and places as positive or negative, which facilitated the understanding of which places children use, like and dislike. The main knowledge they revealed during our conversations was the sum of their experiences of life in public places.

The interviews are distinguished by their lack of creative and place-interactive elements, which means that it is the children’s reasoning about place that primarily is focused on, rather than detailed subjective knowledge of their experiences. They provided only limited information about the abstract experience of place, since this makes them vulnerable within the group and since it is difficult for the child to recall experiences of a place while somewhere else.

The children’s main focus during the interviews was to interact with me and the other children in the group, so the places they were referring to in their narratives were secondary to this interaction. The interviews can, therefore, be said to be located far away from the abstract experience that place stimulates within people, but they still provide valuable information that may facilitate the understanding of abstract expression of place through other methods.

The focus on verbal accounts and on interaction between people opens up the possibility of power struggles and prestige issues, and the handling of these power relations is central for the results of the interviews. However, the group interviews enabled me to step back and listen to and observe the group dynamic between the children, as well as to understand how the children created narratives of place among themselves. The narrative culture and power issues between children, and the children and the researcher, may influence the results of a study, and reveal more about how children use their narratives to handle certain experiences or to position themselves better socially within a group than how they subjectively experience place.

The group interviews enabled the children to listen to and learn about the structures of the other children’s everyday lives, something they seemed to appreciate. Listening to each other made the children more reflexive.
regarding their own life situations and also helped them understand how individuals have different experiences and enjoy varying abilities as well as restrictions.

The verbal narratives gave an overview of the children’s place use and value judgements on their places, and phenomena within these places. The lack of creativity, place-interaction and the relatively low level of abstract experiences of place made the interviews rather straightforward to analyse and understand even if interviews also hold many deeply entangled meanings.
8. Walking

A central assumption from which this study departs is, as has been argued, that children are emplaced: they have detailed knowledge of the places they use but can have difficulties communicating this knowledge. Tuan (1977:33) has noted that a child’s imagination is of a special kind, tied to activity.

In order to unveil children’s experiences and knowledge of place, there is a growing interest in taking children out for walks in the places that are being researched. Drawing on ethnographic research traditions, several researchers have adopted this method, albeit using different terms (e.g. walks, routes, the guided commented trip, child-led expeditions, child-led neighbourhood tours) and slightly different approaches (e.g. Hart, 1979; Moore, 1986; Percy-Smith, 2002; Christensen, 2003; Nordström, 2002c; Heurlin-Norinder, 2005). It is from some of these studies that my own interest in walking with children has developed.

Walks offer an interesting alternative to other research methods when studying experience of place. The reason for this is that walking and interacting with a place allows the research subject and the place to communicate, allowing the multidimensional experience of place to flow freely within the participants of the walk. As a researcher, I experience place simultaneously as the research subjects (i.e. the children) do and, hence, experience similar processes but am also able to observe the interaction between them and the place. While moving together through the researched place, the walk itself and also the surrounding landscape trigger conversations that probably never would otherwise occur (Wästfelt, 2004:79). To understand the experience of a place, it is not possible to be only an observer; instead, it is necessary to be a participant, but without losing the ability to observe, hear, feel and touch – to be active and feeling without ever neglecting the clear sight and open eyes of the researcher.

My reasons for wanting to use walks are in line with Phillips’ (2005). She argues that walking means that the participants are invited to walk, think and see simultaneously with a historic width (see also Wästfelt, 2004). This might have effects on geographical thought and research, as it provides an ability to include multi-dimensional experiences in research. These challenges, Phillips argues, have not been sufficiently addressed and the research practice in general is inexperienced in handling the challenges that the practice of performance-based methods bring. The increasing popularity of using walks as a method, according to Phillips, relates to a major shift in
society, where abstract thinking has been replaced by process-based thinking, in which participation and deeper personal experiences have great importance.

Within architecture and the evaluation of housing areas, the use of walks, or so-called ‘gåturer’ (in Swedish, ‘gå’ means ‘walk’ and ‘tur’ can be translated as ‘route’) are popular. These walks mean that a group of preferably not more than ten people and a leader conducts structured walks in an area. They walk to several ‘stop points’ decided on beforehand by the leader of the walk. At the stop point, all the participants make observations and write down their comments, which are later discussed at a meeting that summarises the experiences and makes it possible for the participants to share their views and helps the leader of the walk understand how the participants experienced the walk, or ‘gåtur’ (see de Laval, 1997; Hurtig et al., 1995).

The ‘gåtur’ was developed from ‘walk-through evaluation’ often used in so-called Post Occupancy Evaluations, POE, for the evaluation of buildings (de Laval, 1997:153).

Walks with children can be conducted in several ways. Nordström (2002c) followed in the ‘gåtur’ tradition, walking a predetermined route with a group of children or individual children aged fifteen. During the walks, they stopped at places they had agreed on beforehand and the children wrote down their experiences of the place. Nordström also documented the walk by using a camera and by observing the children’s behaviour. Moore (1986) as well as Percy-Smith (2002) allowed the children to guide them and show their places, thereby understanding the children’s own special and secret places. Christensen (2003:24-25) provided children with a map and a paper listing places they should try to find, and simple questions regarding the places to answer, so they could explore their neighbourhoods on their own. Christensen describes how the walk was set up almost as a game; the children explored their places through active movement and using their senses.

In walking with children, my approach is in line with Moore and Percy-Smith’s, the difference being that I laid out the routes beforehand, although I still allowed the children to guide me and extend the walks away from the determined route. The walks I conducted were hence more structured in terms of routes than Moore’s and Percy-Smith’s, but less structured than Nordström’s (2002c) approach as well as the ‘gåtur’-tradition both in regard to routes and documentation.

Walks are uncontrollable and volatile, and they invite ways of experiencing and writing about places that oppose colonial and elitist practices. It is the individual being’s unique experiences that are in focus. As a researcher, I have difficulties gaining control over places or systematizing them when I walk through them, because I myself am a part of them. I am one small part of all the dimensions that add up to create a place. The direct
experience of a place makes it difficult to keep distance and not identify with the experience. Walking allows individual experiences and invites new and different ways of experiencing that are constantly shifting. A more critical understanding of walks might, according to Phillips (2005), harm and inhibit the creative aspect of the walk. Walks, she argues, can be seen as a methodological experiment but also as a protest against common practices and ways to produce knowledge. Amato (2004:18) also recognises the powerful and symbolic role of walking: how it develops the potential to evoke alternative worlds and experiences. The dichotomy between the need to criticize an exploratory method and the need to keep the creative process free of judgement and criticism might balance the risk of what Phillips (2005:513) calls ‘the romanticism of over-identification with the feet’ (see also Thrift’s critique in Chapter 4).

When trying to define what walking with children can bring to research, it feels relevant to exemplify this with Musil’s text on monuments, as referred to in Thrift (2000:398). In this text, Musil claims that there is nothing as invisible as monuments: city people rush by them daily without noticing what they look like and whom or what they are supposed to represent, until they suddenly one day lift their eyes and see them. I find that walking with children resembles this experience. It might be places, or at least the type of places, that I am accustomed too, but when walking there with children, they suddenly impose a shift in my perspective and completely different places are revealed.

When walking and experiencing places in a physical way, a different type of knowledge is received than during methods that are conducted indoors. Smith (2001:36) describes something similar when she writes about performance, and the necessity to come closer to the subjects: ‘To be with the subjects in a way that enables us to recognize how the various skills are acquired and implemented....’ Experiencing places with children results in the development of deeper insight into the important knowledge related to the everyday physical experiences of place (Thrift, 1996; Ingold, 2000; Latham, 2003a+b). This knowledge is rarely revealed verbally during interviews since it is taken for granted by the participants, but it is often crucial, as it reveals how places function for people. Walks provide an opportunity to try to solve this methodological dilemma (Cele, 2004, 2005b).

Walks consist of movement, perception, observation, conversation and inner processes. Conversation is a central part of the walks; well-functioning, social interaction is an important factor. If the individuals involved do not feel at ease with each other, the walk is not successful and the children will not reveal their places (see Hart, 1979; Moore, 1986; Percy-Smith, 2002; Heurlin-Norinder, 2005). As a researcher, I have to make sure that the situation is comfortable and informal so that the children feel relaxed and can talk about themselves. In view of the fact that so many human perceptions, associations and experiences are illogical, abstract and
spontaneous, it is also important to retain an open mind in order to allow the children’s views to be fully reflected in the material (Cele, 2005b).

In Streets, Yards and Secret Corners

All the children were enthusiastic about the prospect of being allowed out of school during the day. They skipped around on the pavement eagerly, waiting for us to take control and start the walk. The children were at ease and the somewhat controlled atmosphere from the interviews, which had just taken place, changed when the children were allowed to step out of the school building. As soon as we started walking, they began telling us stories and showing what they normally would do on their way, what they would notice and how they would walk on different places.

All the children seemed to have new energy and wanted to get going. It was obvious that they felt some sort of responsibility towards us, since we did not know much about their places. Although we, as adults, decided where we were to walk, the power relations between us and the children had reversed. The children possessed more knowledge of the places we encountered and were therefore in control of the situation while we followed along, attempting to understand the places as they were introduced and revealed.

By acting together with the children, I experienced that we became more equal with them. Moving through places is empowering for shy or unsociable children. There is a whole world distracting us from uncomfortable situations and the loss of words. A long embarrassing silence in an interviewing room can be the end to any good conversation, but during a walk it is always possible to pretend that we get distracted by a bird, a squirrel, the wind or something else. It is even possible to let these things be the trigger for a new conversation. We are constantly presented with new impressions that stimulate us and this makes it easier to let our mind and thoughts remain free.

Conversation is also more enjoyable since it is acceptable to include those valuable pauses. Someone who talks non-stop while walking makes a nervous impression and will also soon be breathless, while indoors, it is more likely that a person who talks extensively will become a key informant and the person who pauses for long periods of time and thinks will remain in the background. During a walk, it can often be the other way around.

Out on the streets, it became obvious how moving through places is a continuous act of associations, fantasies and activities. Children’s paces change continuously, as does their perspective. Their attention shifts intensely and incessantly from high to low, from grand to petite, from house to person and from stillness to activity. As an adult, it is demanding to follow the children’s rapid changes in perspective and pace. I often felt the
urge to ask the children to walk ‘properly’ so that I would have a chance to keep up with their pace and understand their experiences, but I managed not to do so.

It turned out that the fact that I had a camera with me made the children adapt slightly to my slower pace and activity. They had or showed no understanding for me not being up to their level of activity, but they were, however, aware of the fact that the camera needed to be still when a photograph was to be taken. They managed to wait for the photograph to be taken without losing track of their activities or losing focus on what they had been planning to do before I stopped.

Movement through places initiated processes within both the children and me, and this facilitated thinking processes and also the direct physical understanding of place. The concrete experience and use of place is clearly revealed during a walk through observation and those parts of children’s concrete place interaction that they do not communicate verbally become unveiled.

Walking is a method that is highly place-interactive, as well as interactive between all participants. The place-interaction may make it more difficult to distinguish between abstract and concrete expressions of place since these naturally intertwine. The fact that the children are physically present does not mean that they are not mentally acting in a fantasy world, full of abstract processes that affect how they use place.

One of the clear advantages of the walks was that it was possible to distinguish between what the children said and what they did. Body language and the handling of different objects revealed a lot of previous experiences related to the place. The observations were not only concerned with the children’s interaction with the physical environment, but also that of the other city-dwellers, in terms of their reactions and behaviour towards the children. At a psychological level, a lot of the body language and facial expressions were unconscious and, therefore, unintentional, which, consequently, made them particularly interesting to observe.

The children’s narratives during the walks became extremely bound to the places and objects they encountered and not as during the interviews, when a whole range of more general topics are discussed. During the walks, a larger number of details of places and place experiences become revealed, since the place-interactive aspects of the method allowed the children to remember and communicate detail.

All children seemed proud to show their houses, flats, backyards and the things they passed every day on their normal route to school. Not a single child seemed to be disinterested, ashamed or unwilling to participate. It was obvious that this exercise was something they enjoyed and also took seriously. To a certain extent, it seemed as if the children did not really care which streets we were to walk down. No matter which street we chose, the children had narratives to tell and things to show us. If we walked in a
different direction than they had imagined, they just changed their narratives so that it concerned the new street instead. Although many children laughed and played during the walks, the child whose turn it was to show his or her places showed enormous self-control and concentration, neither of which had been possible to achieve during the interviewing sessions. The children also acted as monitors for the other children, telling them how to walk, where to be quiet and how to behave in their places.

The walks functioned well with both age groups and provided only a limited difference in terms of how they expressed themselves. The older children were more talkative and were eager to make me understand how they experienced the places. The younger children were more physically engaged in interacting with place. For both age groups, the clearest act of communication happening was the physical interaction with place, even if this was most evident with the younger children.

The children showed great knowledge and awareness of both the physical and social context surrounding them. Much of this information was triggered by events, or recalled as a response to certain places encountered during the walks. Several children made no distinction between physical and social aspects but referred to them as one. Someone they met every day on their way to school was as much a part of their places as a building or a street. The daily, but also less frequent, passing-by of certain people was also, in some cases, used as an aid to memory or for direction. Some children referred to places as ‘where we usually meet the smoking man,’ or ‘where the woman with the brown dog lives.’ The children revealed surprisingly extensive knowledge of the people living and working in their neighbourhood. They knew where many of the, for them, ‘unknown’ people lived, worked or socialized. The regularity of school schedules and people’s habits and work patterns meant that the children often met or observed the same people over and over again. Obviously people who looked or acted somewhat differently were more easily remembered than others.

**Acting on Boundaries**

All the children reacted strongly when they saw wrong or illegal behaviour or traces of this. This could be groups of older children making noise and not leaving space for others, bullying or vandalising behaviour, stealing, littering or the painting of graffiti, all of which made the children upset.

During our walks, the children continuously and almost automatically pointed out things or behaviours we encountered that they felt were wrong. In some cases, the children were upset and showed no understanding of the behaviour at all, such as with traffic offences, but in other cases, they revealed the ambiguity of knowing that a behaviour is wrong but still appreciating it. It is common, as suggested by Hoff (2003), that children at this age want to follow rules and the breaking of them becomes unfair and upsetting.
However, most of the children seemed to be walking a thin line because they were continuously attracted by the breaking of rules and with ‘unacceptable’ behaviour. They quite clearly distinguished between, on the one hand, breaking rules and laws, which was seen as very negative, and on the other hand, challenging adult cultures and pushing the boundaries for acceptable behaviour.

Two of the eleven-year-old girls were particularly eager to demonstrate how they liked to annoy the employees of an architectural studio. The studio had large windows facing the street and it was possible to see the whole layout of the office from the pavement. The girls walked past the office both to and on the way home from school. According to their story, they often followed the same routine when they were walking together and during the walk, they showed their usual routine while they described it to me.

They stared through the windows and after a while they started banging on the glass. They continued banging and making funny faces until they got attention from the employees. As soon as they showed enough irritation, the girls started giggling and ran as fast as they could away from there. The reason for this being so amusing was that the office looked ‘so important,’ and it was exciting to upset people, although they knew that it was not acceptable behaviour.

After we passed the architectural office, we continued walking for a while. The children tried to avoid walking on the pavement and instead balanced on a low wall. After a while, we came to an iron gate that was intended to keep people from entering a private courtyard. The children immediately ran towards the gate and started shaking it with their hands. One girl exclaimed, ‘I wonder if I can squeeze through there?’ Her friends looked doubtful. ‘You’re not allowed to do that. It’s private.’ Another girl stepped forward, pulled her stomach in and pushed herself through the bars of the gate. ‘Look, I got through,’ she said.
From this act, which they obviously had done several times during their childhood years, they suddenly became aware of how they had grown. It was not as easy to squeeze through the gate as it once had been. Not everyone could get through the bars, and they concluded that they had grown too big and would get stuck if they tried. The children who could not get through the bars relatively quickly decided that it was not a particularly fun activity and that it was also illegal. These excuses were made up in response to the fact that they realised that they were too big to participate in the game.

It is interesting how they chose to repeat the initial claim that entering the gate was illegal since it was private. This statement did not prevent them from trying to enter, but they made it to make me understand that they were aware of public and private domains in the city. It also became a convenient excuse for why they would not even try to get through the gate. Growing up was not, in this particular context, considered positive. Rather, it seemed as if it was almost slightly shameful to the children who had grown too big that they no longer could participate in the playing.

During the walks, different kinds of walls and fences were very attractive to the children. I could distinguish two reasons for this being so. The first one is relatively obvious: during the walks, almost no child could resist climbing and balancing on walls. It was almost impossible to pass by walls, high or low, without climbing or balancing on them. It was not always a conscious behaviour but rather something that they did naturally without considering it. These walls almost seem to have been ‘created’ for the children as a substitute for walking on the pavement. Where the wall began, the children moved from the pavement up onto the wall, and where it ended, the children almost ‘floated’ back down to the pavement. This did not at all
interrupt their other activities. It was not uncommon that I was walking next to a child who was deeply into describing something to me. The conversation always continued uninterrupted while the child just moved away from the pavement and continued walking while balancing on the wall.

The other reason concerns mainly fences but also low walls, and when they represent a border between something, most commonly the private or semi-private and the public, or the border or division between school and the outside world. These borders seem loaded with meaning for children, since they present an easy way to play with what is allowed and what is not. Jumping over a low fence between a private front garden and a sidewalk and then quickly back again is a way of acting out something forbidden – to access private property without permission – and then to quickly seek shelter again in the public sphere. Often these acts are performed by children walking in a group, where one child jumps over the fence and then back again with the cheering support of the others. The possibility of being caught seemed to add to the thrill of the act.

Playing on the Streets

Throughout the walks, it became obvious that a design of the physical environment that allows and encourages the children to interact with it on a physical level is the most stimulating for them. Using the term ‘walking with children’ is something of a paradox, and is perhaps not a correct term to use. I, as an adult, walk, but the children very rarely just walk. The constant challenges that places hold for children, not in terms of being difficult, but rather in terms of being inviting and or forbidden, were revealed during the walks. All objects, rooms and places that are not clearly defined need to be explored. A hidden door needs to be opened, a locked gate needs to be climbed or pushed through and a corner needs to be explored.

Every object encountered could be included in play in a variety of ways, or may just be included in some activity with no real meaning as they were passing by. Such objects included parking meters, flags outside of shops, recessed entrances and sunken basement windows, and they provided the children with continuous stimulus during the walks. Parking meters can contain money, and they also have buttons that can be pressed. Many children ran towards the meters and pretended to put money in them, pressed the buttons and then waited for the pretend parking ticket before checking for change, just like an adult would do when paying for a parking space. When the children had done this, they would continue walking with the rest of the group. Furthermore, it seemed to be an absolute necessity to jump up and try to touch flags and signs hanging outside of shops and this was also done during walks and also without interrupting ongoing conversations.

Other activities that took place throughout the walks and also as soon as the children were out and about in the city at all was an association game they played that involved the registration plates on cars. This was
particularly popular with girls, it seemed. By combining the different letters on the plates, they very quickly formed words almost as though they had no choice, interrupting both themselves and others during conversation to tell everyone what word they had made up. This game was something that many of the children mentioned as an activity that was good because it was possible to do it both alone and with others. It rarely got boring because the flow of cars always provided different combinations of letters.

During the walks, the children continuously scanned the environment for objects and places that could be included in play. This seemed to be an unconscious act. Loose objects lying on the street were immediately detected and it was judged whether or not they were worth picking up. The boys in particular found objects such as sticks, rubber bands, bolts and screws, which they immediately picked up and included in different forms of play. They invariably did this whilst simultaneously talking to us researchers or their friends. Many children also remembered objects that they had noticed earlier, but had not picked up and they wanted to go back and see if they could find them again. They could not always remember where the object was located so that they could give me directions to it but they immediately recognised the place when we got there and remembered the particular stick, rubber band or whatever it was that they had found. It became obvious during the walks, and the children also said as much, that recycling stations were popular places to visit, since the overfilled receptacles often contained objects that might be possible to play with.

Often, the children picked up things they found lying loose on the street. They could not give a particular reason for wanting an item. A common comment was that it could just be good to have, a practical object to carry around in one’s pocket. Almost every time a child picked up an object, she soon included it in playing, which was triggered by particular places. One of the more obvious occasions was when some boys found rubber bands on the street that they immediately picked up and silently put in their pockets. A few streets further along our walk, we passed a place where someone had dug a large hole in the pavement. Without consulting each other, the boys took the rubber bands and immediately starting shooting the ‘monsters and bandits’ who might be hiding in the hole. After that particular place triggered the children’s play, they started playing more casually with the rubber bands and pretended to shoot each other or they aimed at their own reflections in the windows of the shops that we passed.

Many of the children’s activities are based on their natural curiosity. They need to feel, examine and experience places. Places that look interesting, inviting, challenging or secret must be tested to see if they really are so.

The act of hiding, particularly hiding in places where it is possible to spy on or scare other people, was attractive. Recessed spaces such as entrances, windows and corners make excellent hiding places and they were used as such throughout the walks. One particularly frequent event was running and
hiding in the recessed entrances to houses and then ‘scaring’ the rest of the group when we walked past. Scaring the group by hiding in the entrances was a thrilling activity that made everyone laugh and scream for different reasons. The children relatively often accused each other of being ‘childish’ since it was so obvious that they were going to scare each other that no one ever really got surprised. This did not prevent them from doing the exact same thing themselves. This activity involved a lot of energy, as they ran and acted out towards others. Another attractive aspect of hiding seemed to be to seek shelter from the surroundings and be able to observe without being observed. There were also children who wanted to see if they fit into different spaces.

Hiding in different places also involved trying out new perspectives, examining and understanding how the street or courtyard would look from different angles. How would the street and the passing people look from the low perspective of a basement window and how do people act when they believe that no one is watching them? This behaviour seemed to include just as much experimentation with perspectives and ways of experiencing place as it was an act of play and activity. On some occasions, it happened that a single child had hidden or crawled down into a ‘secret space’ and other children wanted to join in. This was only allowed if the child had been outgoing and had announced that she was hiding. The children who hid on their own did so because they wanted their experience to be private and they clearly expressed that the other children were not welcome. They were, however, often content with being left only for a very short moment during which they looked out on the surroundings and moved around in the space, murmuring slightly and feeling the material with their hands. This behaviour was frequent; they wanted the experience to be personal and they made note of the place and the way it existed but were soon pleased with this and moved on.

Just as hiding in secret and narrow places provided the opportunity to view places from down below or inside, places that provide the opposite perspective were just as popular.
Figure 9. Boys playing with a parking meter.

Figure 10. Boys playing with rubber bands and girls playing with gravel.
Figure 11. Children hiding.
This involved climbing different things, walls, trees and other objects such as statues and fences. Just as with the previously-mentioned activity, this was clearly a way of getting a new perspective on places and of course it also involved the act of climbing, but it is also an act of occupying space. Climbing high was in several cases a way of challenging place itself and the adults, who happened to be near. While climbing down and hiding is considered a harmless activity, climbing up high is in many cases a pure challenge to the adult community, mainly since it often is considered dangerous and makes adults feel uncomfortable as they believe the children will not be able to cope with the challenge. It is also thought that climbing up involves more risk of harming the objects involved and it is also socially un-acceptable to climb statues and other public features. Climbing up is, hence, more an act of anarchy than crawling down to hide. Whereas hiding rouses feelings of protection and gentleness, climbing up is viewed as a pure challenge to the order of public space. This was easily noticeable during the walks. When the children hid, most passing adults smiled at them and walked past, pretending not to see. When the children climbed statues, walls and trees, adults immediately reacted and told the children off.

Children have a natural urge to climb objects so this behaviour comes very easily to them. However, when they climbed objects on the street and in public parks, it was obvious on several occasions that they did this to challenge the adult community; they were not oblivious to how adults would
react. By climbing objects, they colonised them, and they made it clear to the adult society that they did not care about their rules, and also showed them that there are activities that children can perform but that would be socially unacceptable for an adult, such as climbing a statue or an art installation.

**Greenness**

Greenness, such as parks and plantings in courtyards, trees on the streets and flowers outside of shops, was an important element to the children. During the walks, which took place during the spring, the children often commented on bursting buds, flowering shrubs and spring flowers in the park. Often, they wanted me to photograph them next to trees and flowers and they very seldom made faces in these photographs, something which was not too unusual in some of the other pictures.

![Figure 13. Posing with plants: boys with dandelions to the left and girl by a tree to the right.](image)

This behaviour was interesting and the children revealed an ethical view of nature. It was as if they could connect to nature and the plants by posing by them. They were seeking to get as close as possible to the plants without harming them. The children were particularly eager to have their photographs taken and they posed a lot, something I did not want them to do, and which they were not interested in doing except by a plant or tree that they found beautiful.
Figure 14. Tree climbing is popular both for seeking solitude and as a physical activity.
Flowers in general made the children careful and they showed protective behaviour towards anything flowering. Some of the boys picked flowering dandelions during the walk. They picked one here and one there when they found flowering plants in cracks of the pavement. At the end of the walk, they wanted their photograph taken with plants and flowers.

Trees were considered interesting, and not just because they were alive, beautiful and possible to include in play. Almost all the children had their favourite climbing trees and they were mainly located in the residential courtyards by their homes. Trees in parks are generally not good for climbing since they are too grand and have tall trunks with no low branches. A majority of the climbing trees that the children used in their courtyards were old, knotty lilac trees. The children easily recognised this particular type of tree even if it was not in bloom, and always chose them to climb if they could. Their behaviour showed that they often visited each others’ courtyards because they had extensive knowledge not only of the climbing trees located in their own courtyards but also of the ones in their friends’ courtyards. Climbing trees was an important activity during the walks and the children described how and why they normally would climb different trees.

Tree climbing seemed to be popular for several different reasons. The physical and mental challenge that came with climbing was obviously one thing that attracted them. The aspect that most of the children revealed as being of particular importance was the tree climbing they performed when they were on their own. Climbing up high in a tree seemed to be a very important way of getting privacy for the children and it seemed to be one of the main ways for them to spend time outdoors on their own. None of the children could go to the park on their own to play. The park and different playgrounds were mainly visited when the children knew that their friends would be there. I got the impression that some of the children who most strongly emphasised the importance of sitting in their favourite climbing trees to find solitude perhaps did not have many friends to visit the park with. This, however, was not the only reason and, as mentioned above, almost all children could describe a favourite branch in a favourite climbing tree.

Animals of all sorts continuously appeared in the children’s stories and actions during the walks. Often, tales of animals were connected to specific places. For example, walking past a particular shrub meant that some children remembered that they had seen a hedgehog there. The children revealed great concern about wild animals in the city. It seemed as if they had some difficulty connecting the rural and natural aspects of wild animals with city life. They were worried about what kind of food animals could get
hold of, where they could walk without getting hit by cars and how they got into the city in the first place. They also had some ethical concerns about whether or not it was right to put up birdhouses in the park trees because that could probably attract more birds and whether that be right towards the animals.

The most popular animal was the dog. We met several dogs during the walks and the children were eager to ask their owners if they could pet them. When petting the dogs, the children who were used to dogs instructed the other children on how to behave. Just like when the children walked close to flowering shrubs and flowers, they adapted their body language and sound level and became careful and silent when they approached the dogs. This change in behaviour could take place very quickly and the children could change from running, screaming and laughing to sitting carefully and silently kneeling down in front of a dog within just a few seconds. By over-emphasising their careful movements and body language, the children demonstrated that they felt respect and wanted to be careful with what they were encountering, no matter if it was a dog or a flower.

Hidden Aspects of Place
During the walks, we sometimes walked past places that from a general pedestrian perspective must be considered negative, with masses of traffic that brought noise and pollution, and without real pedestrian space and greenness. Sometimes, the children expressed discomfort with these places, but on other occasions, they seemed to want to remain there for some reason. I sometimes had difficulties understanding why the children seemed to appreciate these places since I could not ascribe them with any real qualities. Obviously, it turned out that these places had qualities for the children, and it was just that I did not understand them.

At one particular place, there were two different aspects that made the children want to hang around for a while. The first was some big commercial posters by the roadside advertising a world-famous artist’s new album as well as film premiers. The children expressed how looking at these posters made them feel ‘cool’ and ‘important’ and this was why they appreciated spending time at this place. The ‘cool’ feeling was much more important, at least for the short moments of time that the children spent there, than the negative aspects of place, such as design and traffic. This is an interesting comment on the discussion on the commercialisation of the city. The fact that the commercial posters were there made the children appreciate a place that did not hold any ’traditional’ values such as being pedestrian-friendly, having play qualities or being beautiful. The commercial aspect of the place functioned as a strong quality for these children, and was the main aspect to appreciate. The commercial aspects of the place made them feel good.

The second aspect that made the children appreciate this place was a ‘secret door’ that I had not even noticed, but which the children knew was
unlocked. They very carefully tried to open the door and walked in just a few steps before leaving again, and they repeated this a few times. Apparently there was a risk that there were people working behind the door and that they could get angry if someone entered through it.

One aspect that was evident during almost all of the walks was the time and temporal places. The fact that the children were out walking during school hours was exciting to them. Sometimes it seemed as if they were surprised that their common everyday places actually existed and were possible to experience with people from school during school hours. It was one thing that a place existed and was possible to experience outside of school, but the fact that it was possible to experience their favourite climbing tree or their home when they were not supposed to do this was intriguing. This became particularly obvious with one boy who had conducted an experiment after breakfast, just before getting to school. He had thrown out a dishcloth from the kitchen window on the fifth floor. The main aim of the experiment was to hear if the soaking wet cloth made a sound when it landed on the ground (it did) and the second aim was to see if it still would be lying there when he came home from school. The fact that the dishcloth was there when he walked past it on his way to school and that it would be still there when he returned home to his ‘outside of school life’ was one thing, but the fact that his two worlds, that of the home and that of his school collided and the dishcloth still was lying on the ground made the boy very excited. It seemed as if he realised, when we entered his courtyard and saw the dishcloth, that the ‘outside of school world’ still existed and continued to evolve even though he was not present.

Making the Walk Tangible
Children move in a continuous interaction with what they find interesting in life and its context at a precise moment in time. They are very present, exploring the foundations of everyday life that surrounds them, and at the same time, they act within their own remote fantasy world where every movement and breath can symbolise and communicate just as much, or more, than the spoken word. The main communication children expressed during the walks was, therefore, not verbal. Movement and action was the communication that the walks most clearly resulted in.
Figure 15. The cool posters.

Figure 16. The secret door.
Not only the concrete aspects of place experience were central, though; the abstract experiences of place also became apparent during the walks since they took shape in the meeting between place and person. This also meant that I needed to negotiate my own reactions to the places, consciously or unconsciously, while I listened to and observed the children. This was valuable since it provided me with a deeper understanding of the children as well as the places, but it also caused some difficulties, in particular in terms of documentation.

As described earlier, I chose to use a camera for documentation. When I walked with the children and used the camera for documentation, the way that I experienced the walk and the children’s actions changed. By focusing from time to time on the visual representations of the children’s interaction with place, my own perceptions and notions of these places sharpened. I started to more actively focus my attention on certain objects and places that I thought would be possible to photograph, or that the children wanted me to photograph, rather than on how these objects and places were connected to each other and to other places and objects. By doing so, it became easier to understand how the children perceived places and why certain places were interesting, while others were not.

The camera helped me understand and also actually see how children’s places are constructed of ‘islands’ of interesting objects. With my camera in hand, it became easier and more obvious how the children’s experiences of place are ‘snapshots’ of places, how the tiny details such as the feeling you get from something or someone, or how the corner of a place or the sound or scent of something can create the overall impressions of place.

Contradictory as it might sound, using the camera not only made me focus on the visual but also more intensely understand and pick up how all the different senses co-operated in creating impressions of place as well as how the visual could be used as symbols for the other senses. This result contradicts the experiences of Heurlin-Norinder (2005), who found the camera as disturbing and limiting as the tape recorder, which might imply that the best approach to documenting walks is connected to personal preferences and skills.

Since I was also experiencing the places we were walking through, I had subjective experiences that were important for my understanding of how the children communicated their experiences. One main difficulty with this important information, though, was that it was embedded within me. Except for the photographs I had taken of the children, all the knowledge was within my own body. I was full of unique knowledge because of the experiences I had had, but I did not have any real concrete physical material. As mentioned previously, I took extensive notes after each walk and included not only exactly what the children had done but also other factors, including my own reaction to the children’s actions. This helped me remember and
also keep track of the material and be able to distinguish the experiences I had through the different methods I used.

It was during the process of writing that much of the knowledge I had gained through the walks became clear. Through the writing, I had to find words for experiences that I could not define verbally. It was more like a feeling within me, a knowledge that my body carried but that I could not define. I knew that it was important but I did not feel that I could verbalise how or why.

The act of writing released the knowledge I carried within me, mainly because I focused so deeply on writing that my logic and reasoning became of secondary importance. By letting go and losing myself in a state of ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), it became clear to me. Even if time had passed between the experience and the writing, I did not feel hesitant about the level of ‘truth’ in how I remembered my experiences. I recognised the state of creativity and knowledge that suddenly was bursting within me, just as it had during the walks.

The photographs I had taken during the walks also proved to be of great relevance not just to aid my memory of the children’s use of the places, but also to bring back the experience of the walks. The photographs are not just about recalling visual memories but also about how the small details on the photographs, which can seem to be of no special importance, can prove important to bring back vivid images of what the children did and said and also how I had experienced the walks.

The places I could see in the photographs, the children’s body language and facial expressions, the litter on the street, the failed photographs where the children had run away before I managed to take a picture, the wind and the sunshine, the traffic and the people we had passed on our walks were all captured in the images and helped bring back the walks to me, not just as vague memories but as experiences.
The Narratives of the Walk

The narratives the walks result in are vivid and highly contextualised. They are multi-dimensional, simultaneously ethereally abstract and physically concrete, and often take forms other than verbal communication. This narrative involves a high level of body language, movement and intense physical interactions with place. Playing, climbing, jumping, hiding and running are the clearest acts of communication.

The walks concerned a total experience of place, communicated and experienced simultaneously by the children and myself. All the senses cooperated, which helped to create an account of the multi-sensual experience of place. Movement through places initiates processes within both the children and the researcher that stimulate thought-processes and also the direct physical understanding of place.

To bring children out for walks through their places proved to be a straightforward approach for understanding how they use and interact with different aspects of place. It simplified the understanding of how children referred to place, since it became possible to connect their verbal narratives and actions to specific objects and places. Their accounts became place-bound, as places triggered conversations as direct responses to experiences.
Interacting with place allowed the children to react to specific places, objects and events rather than trying to recall a memory of them. This meant that there were more details in what they expressed. The boundaries between expressions of the abstract and concrete experience became more blurred through the walks, since place triggered subjective and abstract processes from within the child, something that also affected the child’s interaction with place. This made it easier for the child to display the physical use of the environment that she was not aware of doing, and it also facilitated the expression of the abstract experience of place when these processes were active.

The walks include a combination of conversation, unstructured observations and experiences. They provided excellent opportunities to observe the children’s responses to all aspects of place, how they behaved and negotiated the abilities and restrictions they were faced with.

The conversation during the walks was very informal. While walking, we continually reflected on place, life and other issues that came to mind. Sometimes, the children specifically commented on things they had an opinion of regarding the place we were walking through and sometimes I asked them about issues, often in connection to objects or places we were walking past. These conversations were extremely valuable since they were very non-authoritative; I did not question the children and I was also the one who knew the least about the places we were walking in, whereas the children had extensive knowledge. The traditional power structures between child and adult were, hence, reversed.

Having emphasised the importance of the ability to observe and talk to the children, I can say that the most valuable aspect of the walk was the fact that I was participating with the children physically in the same places they were. This meant that I simultaneously dealt with my own impressions and experiences of place and also those of the children, plus how they interacted with place. The inclusion of my own subjectivity and experiences made it possible for me to gain a deeper understanding both of the children’s concrete use of place and their abstract associations.

Walks are highly interactive; they involve interaction between researcher and child, and between child and place, as well as between researcher, child and place. It is this interaction that makes them successful, but it is also an aspect of the walk that puts pressure on the researcher to be active and alert in order not to lose any of the information.
9. Photography

The underlying thought of using photography was based on the fact that I had experienced the benefits of place-interactive methods during the walks. Walking, though, is time-consuming and I was eager to investigate if it was possible to use photography as a more straightforward method but still be able to enjoy the benefits of actually having the children out and about when reflecting on their experiences of place. I was also interested in investigating how to capture places in other ways than through verbal narratives.

The use of visual methods, such as photography, is not common in social sciences even if it is practiced. For as long as the means have been available, though, they have been practiced to varying degrees as a way of collecting data. Since the 1990s, there has been an increased focus on the visual (Knowles and Sweetman, 2004b:1).

The development of digital and computer technologies has made photography easy and relatively inexpensive to use. Since much of our knowledge of the world is built on the visual, it feels logical to use these methods, and the interest for them has sharply increased.

Also, in research on and with children, photography is gaining popularity as it allows researchers to gain insight into children’s lives without intruding on their daily schedules or following them around. As I have mentioned, I was hesitant about taking the English children for walks due to the increased social fears there, and I found that photography provided an ethical alternative. The use of photography with children is also a means of allowing them to express their experience of place while interacting with it, and without the researcher bringing the children into a constructed situation that may alter the results (e.g. Rasmussen, 1999, 2000; Young and Barrett, 2001; Wilhjelm, 2002; Rasmussen and Smidt, 2003; Harper, 2004; Knowles and Sweetman, 2004a+b).

Children’s outdoor explorations of the physical and sociocultural aspects of place are closely connected to their explorations through media such as television and computer games, as suggested by Rasmussen (1998:215). This implies that combining visual media with place-interaction would provide interesting opportunities for children to communicate place.

What might photography bring to research on children? Hart (1979, 1997) argues that photography provides an effective way of getting children to focus on positive and negative aspects of places and also helps them
document and reveal places that are difficult to access and reveal during walks.

A photograph shows the relationship between the photographer and the subject or place in the image. This data reveals how people interact by themselves and with physical places (Heath and Cleaver 2004:77; Harper, 2004). Photography may, hence, allow me as the researcher to become a participant in the children’s lives and places, even when any form of participant observation is unsuitable. This is something that has proven particularly valuable in sensitive settings such as in Young and Barrett’s (2001) study on street children in Kampala.

Photography includes both creative and place-interactive means of communication and it is both deeply subjective and objective. It reproduces an objective physical reality but is never free from the photographer’s eye and subjectivity and in the end, this will be what decides the analysis of the photograph.

It is possible to distinguish between the child’s photographic eye and the child’s photographs. The photographic eye refers to the visual perception that is the base of a photograph. It not only reveals a motif but also insight into the child’s perception. The photographer’s way of looking at the world is reflected through her choice of motif and perspective (Berger, 1977; Rasmussen, 2000). The image then tells two different stories – that of the photographed object and that of the photographer. The image holds many questions, such as why the photographer chose to take the picture from that angle at that precise time. These questions turn the focus of attention from the image itself and instead focus on the photographer.

There is almost a contradiction between the ‘objective’ and the ‘subjective’ aspect of a photograph. It is objective, on the one hand, since it may be seen as nothing more than a process of recording, and subjective on the other hand, since it is a cultural product of human labour that cannot be disconnected from the individual who holds the camera (Damisch, 1980).

The conflict is between meaning and showing. The objectivity or subjectivity of a photograph varies considerably; photographs can be primarily records or primarily constructions (Chaplin, 2004).

Wilhjelm (2002) mentions the double meaning and use of photography. For architects and in planning, the use of photography as a method may seem uncomplicated since these groups often limit the meaning of the image to what objectively is photographed, whereas for researchers the emphasis on the subjective meaning of the image makes the photograph more complex.
In the use of visual methods in research, it seems as though when the subjects are allowed to freely express themselves visually, the material become loaded with meaning and subjectivity. Holliday (2004) reflects that in her use of video diaries, the results tended to become very confessional.

A major issue in the discussion regarding the use of photography in research is that of ‘representation’ (Burgin, 1982:4). Eco argues (1982:32-33) that a simple inspection of any representation, a drawing or a photograph, reveals that the image possesses none of the properties of the object represented. What the image does is to reproduce the conditions of perception, though not all of them.

It would perhaps be naïve to generally argue that the image represents an objective and existing reality, but since it is a reproduction of the physical world at a moment in time, it is also impossible to argue against the fact that sometimes, an image is just an exact objective representation of the physical world (Knowles and Sweetman, 2004b:6).

Grady (2004:18) writes that images represent complex subjective processes in an extraordinarily objective form. Images have extensive amounts of information in a single representation. The information is framed contextually in time and space and presented on a flat surface that facilitates seeing objects and places clearly. An image contains many possible interpretations and is always sure to capture the attention of anyone coming across it. Images are interesting to people and, as Grady continues, it is as if they cry out to us to give them meaning.

Photographs involve creative and artistic elements. Hart (1997:184) emphasises how the artistic dimensions of photography can sensitise children to the beauty of place. But to what extent are photographs artistic and to what extent are they documentary? The answer is probably somewhere in the middle, as Burgin (1982:153) notes; the photograph is neither a window to the world, nor is it just a romantic aesthetic expression of the artist. Watney (1982:176) writes:

We can safely abandon the Romantic quest for some perfect photographic mirror to reality, since it is clear that its pieces are scattered through all our various lives.

Photographs record the world, but they also discover things that our minds have failed to register. The photograph never records neutrally, though, as it is made at the same time it is constructed. It does constitute a trace, but how that trace is visually presented is the result of many subjective and often aesthetic decisions. The photograph is rarely treated as a photograph; instead, we tend to focus on what has been pictured. A photograph is an utterance, but one which can be seen as incomplete as a message, in that it is dependent on external conditions and presumptions for its readability. The photograph communicates not only with the physical shapes it reproduces
but also through associations with hidden and implicit texts (Sekula, 1982:84-85). The meaning of the photograph is dependent on the context it was taken in, and the context in which it is viewed (Chaplin, 2004:36). Whincup (2004) writes that it is essential to understand to what extent the concrete objectification of the photograph can provide tangible forms to visualizing the intangible.

A photograph consists of two parts, one that is planned, i.e. the main motif, and one that is largely unplanned and random, i.e. everything that happens to surround the main motif of the picture. Both the planned and unplanned objects contain important information and together they add up to create the composition, balance and message of the photograph. The planned part of the photograph holds the main meaning of why it has been taken, the message of the photograph. The unplanned is random and it tells us something about the context that exists outside of the photographic frame.

Knowles and Sweetman (2004b:2) suggest that people and places demand visual representation in order for researchers to be able to communicate what they see in more than words. With this in mind, photographs offer an ability to capture expressions of place and people, since our empathy with expressions of common human conditions bring us closer to lived experience.

Christensen and James (2000b:164) have criticised the use of photography as a method, since they fear that the children’s comments on their photographs may be just that – comments – and that they need to be complemented by, for instance, participant observation to become truly successful.

That the photographic images should not be used alone is also mentioned by Rasmussen (2000), who argues that the use of photography as a research method generates two different outcomes: the photographic image and the narrative attached to the photograph. These narratives play an important role when the researcher and the child meet to look at the images, and they can refer to the objects in the photo or objects, places and people just outside of the photographic frame.

Rasmussen suggests that the use of photography mainly has three advantages. It adds to children’s power and independence since the children themselves are in charge of the camera and they can bring the camera to arenas where they often are dominated by others, such as in the home or in school. Secondly, the camera helps to create unique qualitative material that provides a visual insight into children’s lives. Thirdly, the photographic method offers freedom of speech in several different ways: bodily, verbal and written freedom of speech, as well as visual media-related freedom of expression.

When analysing the photographs, the children’s narratives were of great importance. A verbal analysis of the photograph is complicated since the revelation of experience does not easily lend itself to verbalisation.
Nor do verbal narratives reveal everything, so it is also necessary to look closely and analyse the images as well. Back (2004:135) reflects that part of what is compelling about photographs is that they contain voices that are present, yet inaudible—we have to listen to them with our eyes. Becker (2004:195) notes that it is the subjectivity of these voices that is bothersome to the critics of visual methods. They fear that the choices involved in making the photographs are not ‘scientific,’ but, as Becker continues, these critics fail to recognise that the same kinds of choices always also occur in the use of other methods that involve recording, transcribing and interpreting (Becker, 2004; Knowles and Sweetman, 2004a+b).

Visiting as many of the places as I possibly could was also beneficial for understanding what in a place the children had photographed and how their perception related to the place and also how the object or place was connected to its surrounding. Obviously, it was not possible for me to visit all the places in the children’s photographs, but when it was possible, it was beneficial. I did not persist if the children seemed hesitant to tell me were the place was located, since the children had already revealed so much ‘secret’ information to me that I did want to push them into sharing more confidences. Rather, I felt it to be important that they were allowed to keep places and objects secret if they so wished.

One of the important, and also useful, aspects of using photography is the fact that the children immediately get something in return for participating, as discussed by Punch (2002). Using the camera, being allowed to take photos and then later to see their photographs and get their own copies of them are all activities that the children can gain from and find enjoyable. Photography is not only useful from the researcher’s perspective, but the children also get ‘rewarded’ for their participation since the participation in itself is enjoyable. It is important that the children are not seen merely as sources of information. Photography is useful this way since the children seem to find photographing as much their own personal activity as something they do because an adult has asked them to. They adopt the method and make the project of taking photographs their own. When looking at and talking about their photographs, the children were engaged and interested, and it was also possible to note that after being given copies of the photographs, the children continued to closely look at them with deep concentration, sometimes mumbling to themselves.
Photographing Place

The children were very positive towards the method. Since photography is not commonly associated with schoolwork the same way interviews, writing and perhaps also drawings are, the children seemed to consider cameras and photography something special and almost ‘luxurious,’ and they were very interested in participating. This interest seemed to be partly because they seemed to make the children feel important and I could distinguish at least two reasons for this.

One was the increased power that the children seemed to experience, just as Rasmussen and Smidt (2003) have expressed. Having a camera and bringing it into different arenas made them exercise power by choosing who and what to photograph or not to photograph. The children who did not have a camera were interested in the photographing and in some pictures, it is possible to see that there are small groups of children observing what the child with the camera is taking a photo of. The exercising of power and the joy of actually taking photographs was one reason for appreciating this method.

The second reason was that the camera gave the children the opportunity to photograph people and places of importance to them. The more private and secret the photos were, the more important they were to the children. They did not mind telling me about the photographs but preferred to talk directly to me instead of acting out against the children in the group, which they were more interested in doing with the more general images.

The children were energetic and engaged when presented with their photos. They browsed through their photos at a high speed and made remarks and exclaimed their opinions with raised voices. I immediately recognised Rasmussen’s (2000, 2004) description of the expectations that the children experienced when they were presented with their photos. I found it to be extremely valuable to be present when the children were allowed to see their photographs for the first time.

I gathered children in groups of three and we sat down with their photographs. It was an advantage to have several children in a group since the conversation loosened up and it was also possible for me to listen to the conversation they were having amongst themselves regarding the photographs. This was beneficial, since it became obvious how different individual children’s perceptions and experiences can be, and still how it also is possible to distinguish certain things that are common to children and that seem to refer more generally to what it means to be a child, not to individual experience.

The atmosphere during our conversations was informal and almost chatty. This was not something that was planned. I had prepared questions for a sort of semi-structured interview based on the photographs, but having an interview-like conversation would have felt very unnatural. The informal
atmosphere was possible to a large extent because of the fact that the children took their own photographs very seriously. This was something I had experienced previously; children are very keen to be understood and they want to present their views and experiences to adults. This might have to do with the fact that children rarely are properly listened to by adults in relation to what they think and experience outside, perhaps, the domestic sphere.

One at a time, the children told me about their photographs and since some children had very many images I first thought that this would be too time-consuming for them, but this was not the case. The focus and attention that the children revealed in connection to their photographs was remarkable. Christensen and James (2000b) write that children’s descriptions of their photographs may be just ‘comments’ and therefore need to be combined with other methods. The result here was completely the opposite, with all children offering vivid and extensive descriptions of their photographs. They were interested in comparing the mental images they had had of their photographs with how they really had turned out. Some wanted to see what their places would look like in a photograph while others had conducted experiments with the camera that they wanted to examine the results of. In almost all the cases, the photographs encouraged the children to describe and tell stories about everything that was not actually in the picture; everything that was outside of the photograph’s frame but that still was important to their experience of that place and thus an underlying reason for taking the photograph. In some cases, the children had believed that the camera would have captured more than what was the case. The photograph had a smaller piece of reality, fewer people and objects or a more narrow perspective than it did in their mental image of the image.

The children’s stories branched out but surprisingly often kept focus and actually were about the photograph. They told me stories about the image, their relationship to the motif, the history of the motif and what they believed would happen to it in the future. A photograph of a place would often contain stories of the people and animals who usually visit it, events that have taken place there or special things that the children like to do there and also, surprisingly often, the things that the place makes the child think of.

It was possible to distinguish some different categories of photographs that the children had taken.

- Everyday places: school, home, shopping centres, gardens.
- People: friends, teachers, family.
- Animals and natural environments: dogs, birds’ nests, beach, the Coppice.
- Secret places: dens, hide-outs.
• Special places: places connected to the self and existential thoughts.
• Strange places: mysterious, un-explained and un-explored places.
• Photographic experiments.

**Everyday Places**

Many of the photographs in this category that the children took are mainly representative in form, meaning that they were not taken to display any particular emotion or opinion but are rather evidence of what the child sees as representing her everyday places. Most of these photographs could be labelled as objective representations. They are normally photographs that the children can easily use as illustrations of their narratives but to which they rarely connect any deeper meaning or extensive narratives to. Grace’s (11) picture of the street she lives on is a good example of this category (see Figure 18). This is a picture she has taken to show her home to me since I was asking her about it. There is nothing special that she wants to tell me about it, yet it has great importance to her everyday life and identity. This is a place she feels that she belongs to and appreciates, and she explained that it is safe to play on the street, which she does with her friends.

The street represents home and there is nothing negative to be found in either her picture or the narrative she attaches to it. The street looks fairly typical for the area: it seems calm and peaceful. The houses are low, and there are gardens with each house and trees along the pavement. The cars that are parked along the street represent no threat to Grace, according to her narrative, as she knows the drivers, they are her neighbours and they are aware of her and her friends playing on the street.

A similar kind of photograph is her photo of the school building. There is nothing special that she wants to reveal with this photograph; she took it to illustrate the narrative of her everyday life. Obviously, she has many feelings and stories attached to the school, but they were not underlying thoughts when she took the photograph. These kinds of photographs were taken by all the children, and they present us with an understanding of, and knowledge about, the kinds of contexts the children live, and spend time, in. These are the kinds of places that the children will remember as home and much of their emotional attachment to place in the future will have roots in the relationships they have with these places.

In many cases, the photos were taken for documenting one main motif, one story that the child wants to tell or one object that for some reason is of importance. But a photograph may also have many different objects of importance, some of them visible while others may be in the context.

Looking at Philip’s (11) photograph (Figure 19), it is not immediately obvious what he wants to show. There is a main road with traffic, some trees, a lamp post and signs for a pub. On first glance, it looks like an
ordinary street scene in the outskirts of a city. There is no specific focus and all the objects seem to be of equal importance. In Philip’s mind, though, the image has many meanings. The picture was taken on the road on which he lives and shows the street on which he walks, or sometimes goes by car, to school and to meet friends. The traffic intensity or eventual threat of traffic is not something he considered while taking the photograph. Philip communicates much more subjective attachment to place through his photographs than Grace did. The sense of belonging to the place is strong since he feels attached to his home, which is just outside of the photographic frame. The pub also has significance since it is so close to home and he sometimes has trouble sleeping because of the noise from the pub customers. He can often hear the bell for last orders. The trees have importance as well, because they are big and beautiful and there are bird nests in them during the spring.

The everyday places the children photographed often also include places of very little importance, but which contain certain features or issues that the children either appreciate or are extremely annoyed about. These are features or issues that can occur in different places, so they are not place-bound. A good example of this phenomenon is roadwork, which several of the children photographed. The children seemed to be annoyed by the roadwork because it makes the street scene unclear and confusing, and is noisy and slows down the traffic, including pedestrians and cyclists.

Several of the pictures taken of everyday life are not of whole places but rather details of the everyday, such as close-ups of objects the children use or encounter in different ways. One girl in particular photographed many domestic details such as tins of hot dogs and macaroni and cheese and a packet of cheddar cheese, and then the dog’s food bowls, a computer, a television set and several of her toys. Whincup (2004:80-84) has explored how objects like these may seem trivial but found that since they are used on a daily basis, they are often meaningful and deeply symbolic to people. These images perhaps do not tell us about what kind of outdoor environments she appreciates, but they do give vivid evidence as to what kind of life she lives and the structures of her everyday life. As this girl also photographed family members, and indoor as well as outdoor environments, including her sister playing in the pool in the garden, a park and the Coppice at school, her images provide very strong evidence of her life.

There are also several photographs of objects the children use during the day and that represent different activities they find important. There are photographs of bikes, basketball hoops and footballs.
Figure 18. Grace’s street.

Figure 19. Philip’s street.
Many of the photographs of everyday places were taken to display a message of ‘good’ or ‘bad.’ There are extensive photographs of littering and graffiti, which are considered negative, and there are also many photographs of things the children like, such as flowers, their bedrooms or bikes. Fred photographed something that many of the children mentioned: the gates and fences surrounding the school area (figure 20). He said that the fences make him want to escape, even if he recognises that they are there to protect him.

The public toilets that were frequently mentioned during the interviews were not at all a dominant feature in the photographs. They did occur and were commented on in a negative way, but they did not seem to be of as special importance to the children as they did during the interviews. This might suggest that the places and objects photographed more clearly reveal the places that matter to the individual children and that some of the issues that came up during interviews are examples of the narrative culture among children and how they hear stories and then repeat them to each other while the content may be exaggerated. The dead man in the public toilets mattered when the children were having conversations about place; he had a role in their culture of verbal communication but was not an aspect of the place that affected the children’s own personalities and subjective impressions of place.

**People**

People do not occur particularly frequently in the photographs even if most of the children took at least one photo containing people. Most commonly, these people are family members, such as a mother or a sibling. Children outside of the family were photographed by some, most often a close friend. A few children seem to have gone out to photograph together with a friend and the friend is sometimes used to enhance the message of the photograph.
The friend could either be in the photograph pointing at something or else taking the photograph, so that the child whose camera it was may be in the photograph. Some children took several photos of social situations at school, in the classroom or somewhere near the school facilities. These pictures are often blurry and all the children are laughing, as if they were playing with the camera whilst taking the photograph.

The most commonly occurring people are siblings, both younger and older, in playing situations at home. It is obvious that the siblings are closely connected to the children’s identity, safety and belonging. Such photos were also a way of capturing play on the photographs since the photographs of the siblings often are in playing situations.

There are some photographs of people whom the children do not like for different reasons. Most commonly these people are other children, often older children in gangs or groups of different kinds, but also the travellers, whom the children spoke extensively about during the interviews, are in photographs. These photographs were taken secretly by the children, through windows or from different sheltered positions, so that the people they photographed did not notice it. The boys seem to be slightly more bothered by the travellers and they photographed them more often than the girls did.
Animals and Natural Environments

Green places are the most common places in the photographs. Most frequent are playing fields, home gardens and the Coppice. Some children chose to take almost all of their photographs of green places. There were different reasons for photographing these places. The playing fields were mainly appreciated because large open spaces make the children feel good and eager to run around, but also because the children enjoy the activities they normally do there, such as biking or playing football or basketball. The photographs of home gardens were taken for several reasons. The garden, obviously, is one of the main places in which the children spend their time and where they play, so it is an appreciated place and a representation of the home. The children were also keen to present their home and they photographed beautiful flowers, flower arrangements and plant borders in order to document beautiful things in their home. This has both an aesthetic and a privacy and safety dimension.

The Coppice at school was also very frequently portrayed in the photographs and the reasons for this are that it is the place in school that the children claim to appreciate the most. Also, the Coppice has different qualities and features that were photographed. Some children took pictures of places they find peaceful and where they like to go if they feel stressed or sad. Wildlife and natural habitats and particular plants are other aspects of the Coppice that were photographed.

*Figure 22*. The sea photographed from the cliffs.
It is possible to detect that the boys were more likely to be fascinated by different species of plants and animals. Boys especially photographed individual flowers rather than whole places and they particularly pointed out the names of plants. The pond was very frequently photographed for the wildlife it attracts. The third reason is that the Coppice is beautiful and that the children are proud of the fact that they help to take care of it and plant the flowers. The beach occurs very frequently in the children’s photographs. This is not surprising since it is one of the main features of Bournemouth and something that nearly everyone in the city seems to have a relationship to. The children expressed the same kind of longing and wish for freedom that adults often express in relation to the sea. The children mentioned the things they can do on the beach, such as swim, play sports and have picnics but the main quality of the beach was the sense of freedom that it provides them with. It functions as a stress reliever and makes the children feel generally ‘good,’ but it is also a place that makes them feel ‘free’ and ‘strong.’ The notion of independence, ability and freedom makes the children think of the future. Several children, particularly girls, explained how the beach made them think of ‘getting away,’ living another life and what their lives would be like when they grow up. The sea and the beach seemed to empower the children and free their thoughts. As one girl explained:

I love the beach. I feel I can do anything when I’m there, that I’m strong and everything will be all right.

Obviously the children are also able to enjoy the beach and the sea for the activities that they are able to do there. Existential thoughts and the sea’s empowering abilities are almost always present, but are most frequent when the children are on their own, or with other people but wander off on their own for a while. If this is not possible, sitting peacefully or walking by the shore are activities mentioned by the children as being good for thinking. Activities on the beach also are empowering and make the children feel free, but in a less contemplative way.

Some children mentioned the beach and the freedom of the sea as separate from the activities of the pier and beach facilities, such as ice cream stands. Social and sporting activities, including mini-golf, biking, rollerblading, watching dogs play in the water, visiting cafés, watching people, visiting beach parties and playing with balls are activities photographed by the children. Some of the children also mentioned that they appreciate the beach for the many different things possible to do there and that it is possible to enjoy the beach no matter if you want to be active and play sports or socialise or if you seek solitude, since both types of activities are possible to perform there.
Often, the children have very close and emotional relationships to natural places or features. It seems that they are not only popular places to visit or represent since they are beautiful in a general sort of way, but also children connect spiritually to these places or features. These are places or features that go beyond being pleasant or beautiful; they seem sacred to the children. Large and old trees are over-represented in this category. The largeness and oldness of the trees makes them special and important and very closely connected to a child’s self. This makes them belong both here and in the category of secret and special places. The reason for not putting them in the category of special places is that these places or features are always natural, and there are no special narratives or thoughts that the children were willing to connect to them during our conversations. They cannot, or are not willing to, explain why these places are important; they just are. It seems that the fact that the trees are old is one key aspect. The children know that these trees have been growing on the same spot for a very long time and that they have ‘experienced’ the past. They might have seen the children’s parents as children and they were standing strong throughout wars. The trees become a living link to history, a neutral, but living feature – or subject – that is important to place and that humans have no right to harm or demolish. These trees have a worth connected to them and the respect that the children ascribe them is best described as sacred.

One boy had photographed only trees, something that was unusual since most children had a great variety of photographs. This boy had photographed all the trees he knew, or believed, held bird nests. Birds were his biggest interest and he had extensive knowledge regarding which birds had nests where. This interest was so important to him that he used up all pictures to show his knowledge of the birds. He clearly revealed how he had knowledge not only regarding the trees in his garden, but also of trees in public parks, in the school area and in other places he visited.

Dogs were frequently photographed, both the children’s own dogs but also unfamiliar dogs that they saw when they were walking around with their cameras. It was particularly the boys who photographed dogs and also talked about dogs most frequently. Only positive aspects of dogs were mentioned. The dogs seemed to represent something safe and almost ‘homelike’ for many of the children. Particularly for the children who had dogs in the family, seeing or petting a dog made them feel safe and relaxed. One boy explained that if there was a dog present he would immediately feel at home wherever he was. The children who mentioned dogs but who did not seem to have their own explained that seeing a dog made them feel happy and exhilarated. No child expressed any fear or negativity towards dogs.
Special and Secret Places

Dens and secret places were photographed but the children were not particularly interested in discussing these photographs. The secret places could be anything from proper dens to sheltered places that the children had slightly adapted to suit their own needs, but they could also be corners of different rooms indoors. Philip (11) was one of the children who had no problems displaying his secret place after making me promise that I would not try to get there without his assistance since it was difficult to get in if you did not know how to do it:

This is where I hide when I want to be on my own. But you need to be careful to get in there ‘cause there are nettles and a prickly bush there, holly, so you need to know how to get in or you’ll get hurt.

The connections between places and thoughts were very obvious and were sometimes the only reasons mentioned by the child to why the photograph had been taken. Jasper (11) explained his photograph like this:

This place makes me think of rain…so I took a picture of it. I like it.

Photographs of places that the children describe as appreciating because of what they think of when they are there are often places that they visit on their own and are often strongly connected to sensuous impressions of place. These are frequently places that are important to the children but are perhaps not places they visit on an everyday basis. Rather, these places are visited less regularly but they hold importance and are of great value.

There are photographs where the children wanted to capture a particular moment of time rather than a special place, person or object to photograph. These pictures are often of physical places connected to a feeling or an event that they have wanted to keep in mind. The photographs become symbols of a moment, and it is as a memory of a moment that the photograph holds greatest value. An example of this is a photograph taken by Ben (11) when the sun suddenly shone through the clouds in the evening after a grey day:

This is exactly when the sun came out in the evening.

Another example is a photograph taken by a girl who was walking home from school with the camera in her bag. She described how she had been feeling tired and angry when she was in school. Then suddenly when she was walking she felt happy again and stopped to take a photograph of what was just in front of her to capture the moment she became happy again.

For some children, it is clear that the fact that they were equipped with a camera made them look at things and reflect differently on their places. One boy described how he had had the camera in his pocket ‘all the time’ and as
soon as he saw something that was important or beautiful, he took a picture. He explained that the best photograph he had taken was when he and his mum had been walking out of the supermarket and he suddenly saw how beautiful the sky was. He immediately took a picture of it and was pleased with how he had started to look at things differently, and how he suddenly saw things to photograph everywhere.

Some of the places that were photographed were included because they made the children long for different things. One photograph of the vast playing fields by the school was not taken because the girl in question, Poppy (11), likes to play there. She took the photograph because the fields made her think of the countryside and she longs to spend time in the countryside, even live there, because, as she explains:

In the countryside you are free, you are absolutely free to do anything.

As we have seen here, the photographs can actually be representations of associations or feelings rather than images of the places that were photographed.

The graveyard, which is located close to school, was photographed by several children. Some had relatives who were buried there, whereas others appreciated the graveyard because it is a place that is calm and quite.

Strange Places
As revealed through the interviews earlier, the railroad is connected to the fact that the children have heard stories, or otherwise experienced, that people have committed suicide there. The children, therefore, have very different emotions towards the railroad. On the one hand, it is positive since they know that it is important for transport and there is also fascination with trains, how they function and how fast they can go. On the other hand, trains represent a way of dying and since many of the children see the railroad on a daily basis, this makes them contemplate life and death. Many of these children have existential thoughts and they expressed being aware of how easy it would be to die. Several of them explained that the only thing they need to do to kill themselves is to climb over the fence to the railroad. This was not at all said in a way that made me worried that the children wanted to do this; it was rather that they had understood that life is not an ever-present given, that there are ways people can die and that this can even happen in their own everyday places. Nor are they themselves immortal; all they have to do is climb the fence and jump in front of the train. They seemed fascinated by this but also expressed relief that the fences are so high and with spikes and barbed wire that they are almost impossible to climb. That way, no one might jump in front of the train by mistake.

The photographs in this category do not necessarily have to be scary or have a criminal history; they may just be peculiar or unexplained. Millie’s
(11) photograph of the ‘strange store’ is an example of this. She took a photograph of a store that she passes frequently, but she can not really understand this store. According to her experiences, it is always messy and untidy both in the store and outside of it; it never seems to be open and no owner is ever seen there. These things have made her wonder what kind of store this really is and how they can make a living out of it since it does not seem ‘proper.’

Jasper’s (11) photograph of the deserted house (figure 25) is another photograph from this category. The photograph is of a deserted house that he finds strange. It has been deserted, according to him, for a long time. The windows are covered with boards, there are signs telling people to keep off the premises and the fence is high with barbed wires on top. The house was not photographed because it was considered interesting, but rather because he considered it a waste that it was deserted. When Jasper described the deserted house, the other children in the group joined in and also had views on the use of the house. The children agreed that the house should be either renovated so that people could live in it or demolished so that a park could be made. Jasper did not, and neither did any of the other children, want a new house to be build there if the present house was to be demolished.

Photographic Experiments

The final category is about how almost all of the children conducted some sort of experiment with the camera. This includes running or spinning around while taking a photograph, photographing one’s own feet or lying on the ground, taking pictures of the sky. Also, in several of the photographs that were not pure experiments, the children tried different approaches to photographing. If they wanted to photograph a road with moving traffic, they often took a photograph both of cars that were moving and then also a photograph of cars that were stopped for red lights, since they were not sure whether the photograph with the moving cars was going to ‘be any good.’

The experiments were not just experiments in photographic techniques but also aesthetic experiments, such as photographing a beautiful sky or a sunset, although they were instructed to have the light behind them while taking a photograph. Sometimes they took close-ups of beautiful things.

A person, whether adult or child, who is thinking of taking a photograph changes her vision, the way she looks at objects and places. She looks for a main motif, and she considers balance, light, proportion, and harmony, and she looks for what best will represent the story she would like to tell through her photograph. Some people do this process knowingly and wander around for a while before deciding when and where to take a photograph, while others do it unthinkingly in a matter of seconds. By looking at an environment in this way, the photographer filters many of the sensuous impressions she would otherwise get of the place. She concentrates for a
while on the visual impressions, because that is what she can capture with her camera. Sometimes, however, these obvious limits of the camera can be compensated for by the simple act of including something in the photograph that we know provides us with other than visual impressions. For example, a flower can be included in a photograph not because it is colourful or important in itself, but because it smells good and the photograph can help bring out the memory of the scent. A photograph does not need to be the image of the reality that it seems to be. Its meaning can be deeply embedded within the photographer. It was apparent when looking at photographs in this category that what might seem to be the obvious focus of the photograph might just be a dominant feature accidentally captured in the same shot as something predominantly smaller but with significantly more importance and meaning. One example of this is a photograph of a smiling boy standing on a street. When talking to the child who had taken the photograph he explained that the photograph really was of a tree that once had been there but, as he said:

There was a tree there but you can’t see where, because Joe is in the way.

This clearly points at the necessity of connecting the photographs with the children’s own narratives, so that the true meaning of the images can be revealed.
Figure 23. The graveyard.

Figure 24. ‘All we have to do to die is climb the fence to the railroad.’
Figure 25. Jasper’s deserted house.

Figure 26. Fred’s picture from lying on the ground, looking at the sky and the canopies.
The Photographic Narratives

The photographic narratives discussed in this chapter reveal how photography is a place-interactive and creative method, which makes it possible for the children to express abstract and concrete experiences of place. The children expressed their subjective and abstract experiences to a large degree through the photographs and were creative and experimental in their approach to visual communication.

The photographs the children took included a large variety of places, as well as different aspects of place and place experience. The photographs included both abstract and concrete aspects of place, but taking pictures proved to be the most successful method for the children to express the abstract dimensions of their place experiences. Many of the photographs referred to the children’s inner processes. A photograph of a place did not necessarily document the place as a concrete reality but the intention of the photograph may have been to capture a feeling, a thought or the passing of time. Consequently, the photographs can be representations of associations rather than images of the place that actually was photographed. This means that photographs may seem objective but can be deeply subjective and misleading since what seems to be the main object in the photograph actually may represent something else. This emphasises the importance of having conversations with the children, so they can describe their photographs.

Taking photographs of the places that hold meaning was a highly creative process for the children, and photography is also a method that allows the children to interact with the places they express through the camera. The combination of creative and place-interactive elements may be the reason for the children expressing such as large degree of abstract aspects of place experiences through a method that is mainly based on visual evidence. Since the children are interacting with place and are involved in a creative process, it becomes clearer to them when and how certain places awaken feelings within them and it then becomes easier to capture the moments and places that make them feel or associate in certain ways.

The narratives the children revealed through their photographs were constructed over a period time, since they carried the camera with them for several days. These narratives are not bound to one particular moment in time and include several different places and a variety of aspects. The photographs provide thorough evidence of the children’s everyday places.

Some of the photographs were taken as an objective reproduction of places children use and visit frequently. There are, for this reason, many photos that can be used to understand children’s concrete relationships to
places and objects. Compared to the other methods, the photographs involved a larger number of different places and a higher degree of private and secret places. This may put the children in a vulnerable situation and needs to be considered ethically. However, as a method, photography still provides the children with the ability to withhold information as it generally does not become sensitive until they ascribe their images with meaning.

Photographing was remarkably detached from power struggles between the children and between me and the children. No child expressed any discomfort with the method and all took photographs to which they immediately connected extensive and vivid narratives.

The concrete experience and abstract use of place was revealed and this makes it an interesting alternative to walks, since it allows place interaction but is less time-consuming. A certain amount of meaning must always be connected to photographs, though, since this is a main aspect the children communicate through them.
10. Drawing

Drawing is a media that seems to be what adults often come to think of when doing research with or consulting children. Thus, to include drawings in this study felt like a natural choice since it is a classic method, as well as something children often willingly do from an early age.

Methods that involve creative and artistic elements are beneficial to use with children since there are no strict frames to narrow for the children’s imaginations and experiences. Artistic and creative methods do not just allow a child to document her experiences and thoughts, but the creative aspect also encourages the child to dig deeper into her experiences.

There are extensive examples of studies that have used drawings to find out about children and their everyday places, within both academia and planning practices. There are, however, several general problems with using drawings. One of the more obvious and general problems refers to how adults can understand children’s drawings and another is how children’s drawings are used in research and planning practice, as described below.

Children have a different relationship with drawing than adults do. For most children, it is a natural means of expression which, at least for young children, is free from demands of skill and presentation (e.g. Di Leo, 1970; Goodnow, 1977; Hart, 1997; Young and Barrett, 2001). Christensen and James (2000b) make the following reflection from when one of them was asked by the children in their research to join in and draw during playtime at a rainy day in school.

The researcher, pencil in hand, was suddenly nonplussed. She realized, rather belatedly, that she did not know how to draw in the way that the children did. It was a skill she no longer had. Trained in art, for her as for many adults, drawing had come to involve an act of interpretation, usually from material object to visual representation on a page rather than a ‘free-flowing’ experiential activity. (Christensen and James, 2000b:168)

For the children, the authors continue, drawing is something that is carried out as an ordinary activity, as something to fill up the time with and socialise over. Most children consider themselves and other children competent and it is a common cultural practice among children to draw, whether in groups or on their own. Drawing, for the ten-year-olds in their research, is not limited by right or wrong, or success or failure, and is seen as a natural means of communication and personal expression.
An important aspect for me in choosing to explore drawings is that they are based on creative and artistic elements. Drawings allow the child to draw what is most important to her and may provide a good description of the child’s everyday life and her thoughts. All graphic work can be seen as a means of visible thinking (Goodnow, 1977). In a study on drawings and creativity, Hoff (2003:110) found that drawings are highly creative and also can be used as a measurement of creativity. Hoff also found significant differences between the girls and boys in her study: the girls tended to use more imaginary motifs than the boys.

It is important to recognize that a drawing is a mental impression of a place or an object and not a visual observation. The drawing is a representation rather than a reproduction, and this representation has emotional and imaginative meanings. A drawing reveals more about the child than about the object or place that has been drawn (Di Leo, 1970).

In the literature, the concepts of ‘drawings,’ ‘cognitive maps’ and ‘mental maps’ are often used inconsistently, all three of them suggesting that the child (or adult) graphically reproduces her experience of place or neighbourhood. The mental and cognitive maps often focus more clearly on a neighbourhood or an area, which is why the child is asked to include several different places, whereas the drawing may be only of a particular place or detail. Throughout this study, I use the concept of ‘drawing,’ but the drawings also include representations that can be labelled mental or cognitive maps. When I asked the children to express their movements in places and to preferably include several different places, the children automatically drew maps, or map-like drawings, to express this. These drawings can be labelled mental or cognitive maps.

The mental map or drawing is a construction of the moment of drawing or describing it. The form it takes is not based on the image the person has in her head but is adapted to a form of presentation that is possible for other people to understand, and it is related to the form of presentation we are accustomed to through vision-based media, such as television, photographs and maps.

Cognitive or mental maps entered geography from cognitive psychological thinking (see, for example, the geographical work of Gould and White, 1974). Extensive research has been made on children’s mental and cognitive maps (e.g. Lynch, 1977; Hart, 1979; Matthews, 1980, 1984; Blades and Spencer, 1986; Lazlo et al., 1993; Portugali, 1996; Klasander, 2003; Garcia-Mira and Real, 2005). The use of the concept of cognitive and mental maps has sometimes been criticised, since there seems to be no proof that these maps, or other mental constructs, actually exist, nor is there certain knowledge about how they relate to the representation drawn or described (Rodaway, 1994:18-19). Rodaway refers to Tuan (1975:213):
It cannot be assumed that people walk around with pictures in their heads, or that people’s spatial behaviour is guided by picture-like images and mental maps that are like real maps.

Hart (1997) prefers the use of maps to drawings since he finds there are more difficulties in interpreting a drawing than a map. Young and Barrett (2001:144) see advantages in making both drawings and maps. They note that since drawing is action-based, most children find it enjoyable and they are able to take the time they need and can therefore provide the ‘truest’ representation possible, since they can return to the drawing and amend it. The average map, they continue, includes a larger number of places than the average drawing, but both display the child’s individuality. Matthews (1992:112) notes how, by studying and aiming to understand how children map and draw their everyday places, it is possible to begin to reveal how children see and feel about them:

We should not make the mistake of seeing them [the drawings] as imperfect replicas of adult representations, but rather as data sources in their own right. (Matthews, 1992:112)

Sobel (1998) has looked into how children graphically reproduce places in drawings and maps. He found that it is common that younger children use a panoramic or pictorial view, in which they can draw houses, trees, people and animals as actual objects instead of symbols. It is common for these objects to be depicted in an aerial view of the street pattern, or an overview of the environment. The older the children, the more their ability to produce aerial maps, in which objects are reduced to symbols, increases. Younger children often focus on objects with which they have a relationship, and with which they can connect an experience. This may be beauty, fear, comfort, secrecy or similar things, which are often relatively easy for the researcher to identify (Sobel, 1998:13-19).

The interpretation of drawings may, as indicated earlier, be complicated since the drawings involve several major difficulties. One is understanding what it is that a child has drawn. It is important to have them talk about their drawings and describe them, and I argue that how this is done is crucial. Many children are aware of the discrepancy between their drawings and what they label the ‘reality.’ This does not seem to be problematic while the children make their drawings but it does become visible during the conversations about the drawings, particularly with the older children. Hart (1997:162) emphasises how children are used to adults not taking their drawings seriously and how adults pretend to do this but then only show limited interest in their content. Di Leo (1970) points out how children’s drawings are loaded with meaning and that they are highly representational even if this is not immediately recognisable for an adult. It is, therefore,
important to engage in a conversation about the drawing, but not to ask the child what it is she has drawn since this may emphasise the child’s feeling of not being taken seriously or being understood.

A second difficulty is related to the first as it involves the attitude of the researcher and also that of other adults. Whereas methods such as photography and walks can be empowering for children, since they are in control of the processes and can lead the unknowing adult into their premises and everyday lives, drawings more clearly mark out that children are different than adults. When children express themselves through photography and walking, the adult researcher cannot necessarily distinguish children’s skills in those areas from adults’. Rather, many adults are impressed when they discover children’s abilities. With drawings, however, one of the first impressions an adult gets, and some of the first judgements she forms, is in terms of how skilled the child is at using different drawing techniques and how true or similar the motif is to how an adult would reproduce the physical environment of a certain place.

Children produce drawings that adults find ‘cute’ or ‘amusing’ in one way or another but this must never be revealed in front of the children. This can be particularly problematic since it is a social act among adults to find children amusing. This is a central issue that needs to be considered when using drawings with children. The children’s drawings are loaded with meaning and individuality and this must always be taken seriously. It is worth considering the extent to which adults really are capable of taking children’s realities seriously. We may believe that we are and we may try, but the exercise of power exists in the glance of an eye and in the hidden smile just as strongly as in clearly oppressive acts.

A further difficulty is that since a creative process is a product of a certain time, place and stage of the child’s life, it is impossible for me to return to the children after a period of time and ask them about their drawings, because they will not be able to answer. For a short period after the creative process is completed, they are able to remember what made them draw in a certain way or what their drawings mean to them. Later, they only have their memories of what they did and they do not recall the actual meanings of the objects and places they included.

Since the children themselves have developed and moved on, their priorities and their intellects might have changed. What at that time seemed mysterious and interesting might now have been explained and the documentation of the phenomenon will have lost its magic. So the part of the interpretation that is dependent on the participation of the children is momentary.
Drawing Places

When the children were asked to make drawings, they engaged seriously in the task, considering how best to reflect their experiences through their drawings.

The majority of the Swedish children drew colourful map-like drawings, in which their home, school and other interesting things that are located or take place between the two were included. The English children’s drawings were not as map-like but resembled more traditional children’s drawings in the way they pictured places and people from the child’s own perspective.

Many of the Swedish drawings were made using an aerial or semi-aerial view of the places, while almost none of the English drawings were this way. This difference partly comes from the fact that half of the Swedish children were eleven years old, and the rest were eight, while all the English children were eight. It is relatively well-known that the older children get, the more likely they are to start using an aerial perspective, as Sobel (1998) describes. Another explanation may be that the Swedish children had previously been asked to work with maps and mark out their school-routes. Hence, it was probably easier for them to think in a ‘map-like’ way when they were asked to draw. The English children more clearly focused on specific places, such as their home, school, a park or street and sometimes they pictured several places side by side on their drawings but chose not to use a map for practical reasons, since the places they pictured are located far away from one another.

Generally, the drawings made by the younger children were the most informative and included more objects than the older children’s drawings. The eleven-year-olds constructed map-like drawings that helped them show several places on their school route. The younger children in Sweden made both drawings and maps and were inventive about how to include houses, people and roads in a picture-like way, while the picture still resembled the form of a traditional map.

The English children did not construct maps but they experimented with different approaches to include the things they wanted in their drawings. The young children also often included themselves and attached several papers to one another in order to include more things without changing their scale. The older children’s drawings were much more restricted by their urge to picture things the ‘right’ way, rather than how they actually experienced them. Their drawings did not include as much information as the younger children’s did, but on the other hand, they were much easier to interpret since they seemed to have be more thought-through and also were drawn with stronger lines and a more determined hand. So even if their drawings were not as packed with information as the younger children’s were, it was easier to get information from them.
Children from both countries tried very hard to communicate a message through their drawing. This means that they seemed to exaggerate expressions to make sure that they underlined important facts clearly enough. Hence, ‘bad places’ are often drawn with many thick lines and in black or other dark colours to make the picture as intense and negative as possible. ‘Good places’ are drawn with a much lighter hand and generally in happier and softer colours.

The drawings made by the Swedish children contain more moral judgements than those made by the English children, and the Swedish children also made notes using almost a tutorial tone to instruct the viewer about what is good and bad in their places. The Swedish children seem to have wanted to display their knowledge in how to behave in public space, whereas the English children more clearly focused on values in the private sphere, such as the home, garden, friends and pets. This could be an effect of the English children’s more restricted independent mobility, but the difference in independent mobility did not seem to be as large as the difference in the how the children chose to make their drawings.

The English children made their drawings in a more realistic and detailed way and they drew their places in a careful way; the trees have leaves and in many cases also fruit and berries, there are English flags in the windows of the houses supporting England in the World Cup, a phone in a phone box is pictured with every numbered button. Several of the English children also included the layout and the interior of their homes and most of the homes are labelled in a detailed way with addresses, and there are labels not only for the main object in the drawing, such as their own house or favourite place, but also for surrounding buildings.

When analysing the drawings, it is necessary to look at them and understand several different aspects of what was drawn. Obviously, there is a need to understand the main motif of the drawing but there are also other aspects to consider. The overall atmosphere of the drawing, as created by the lines, could be thick or thin, straight or curved; the colours could be vibrant, weak, strong, many or few; and the details could be lacking or extensive and loaded with meaning and message. Several of the children hid messages of different kinds in their drawings. Common details of that sort may be ‘smilies’ by different places and people: smiling faces indicate that the place is loaded with positive meaning and angry faces have an opposite message.

The Swedish drawings were generally drawn using fuller lines and a more resolute handling of the pencil, and they also have more and stronger colours. This may have something to do with their experience with drawing but may just as well have something to do with the time and material they were given to complete their drawings.
Figure 27. Street scenes by Swedish girls. The top drawing and the one below left were made by eleven-year-olds. Below right is a detail of people drinking water made by an eight-year-old.

It is obvious how drawing is a subjective interpretation of the direct experience of place combined with memories, wishes, moods and relationships with people, animals and places. The children seem to have wanted to capture ongoing city life with many tiny details that reveal themselves one at a time the longer the viewer looks. Even several of the children who made their drawings from an aerial perspective tried to include people, animals and movement in their drawings. There are people walking
around wearing hats and carrying handbags and there are colourful cars driving on the streets.

Figure 28. Some children used ‘smilies’ to attach different values to features on their drawings. The left drawing illustrates a traffic jam ‘a lot of cars.’

Many of the Swedish drawings picture the city as a living place with several different places featured in a drawing and many people moving about and getting on with their lives. There are people walking their dogs, driving their cars, travelling by bus, talking by the bus stop and making deals on street corners. A common approach to indicate crowds of different kinds, such as in traffic jams, is not to draw many cars but rather to draw them as if they are all in a pile. The space around them may be left blank, but the pile of cars, or whatever it may be, acts as a symbol of a crowd and saves the children from drawing lots of cars. In some drawings, there are only cars drawn on the zebra crossings and no cars at all on the rest of the street, indicating that there often are cars when the children want to cross the street.

Representations of Everyday Life

Most of the children made drawings consisting of several places, objects and people. Some children chose to only draw objects that were important to them in their everyday lives. They took the objects out of their contexts and placed them next to each other, numbered in the order that they are encountered during the day. One Swedish boy, aged 8, drew the following objects:

1. The checked floor in his hallway.
2. A tree on the street he walks to school.
3. A blue car as a symbol of the traffic.
4. A crossing with traffic lights.
5. The school building.
This way of describing places tells us exactly what it is that he notices on his walk to school but it does not tell us anything about the context, the broader picture in which these objects exist in reality. Nor do they tell us anything about what he thinks about them. An immediate thought is, of course, that the car is negative and the tree is positive, but this is only our interpretation since it seems most logical to our grown-up way of thinking. This particular boy was unwilling during our conversation to label the objects on his drawing as positive or negative. He had simply drawn what to him symbolized his trip to school. Several other children said quite clearly that things were ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ or at least described the objects in such a way that it was relatively simple to form such a conclusion. But this boy very clearly portrayed something that also occurred with some other children during the interviews: not all objects or places are loaded with positive or negative meaning for them. Rather, they are important just because they exist at a particular place or time in the child’s life. These objects do not even have to be important or useful to the children in any specific way. But they exist and are therefore important. The most likely reason for this is that this is an object or a part of an environment that, by its very existence, seems to contribute to their sense of place. The conclusion we can draw from this is that some of the drawings have great meaning and are loaded with the children’s feelings, memories and dreams, while others are maps of objects that capture a child’s attention during the day, whether good, bad or neutral. This is also valuable information since it tells us what the child notices and what she recognises as a place’s identity.

The most commonly drawn objects in the Swedish pictures were cars, zebra crossings, trees, animals, people, shops and the home. Traffic and crossings generally indicate that it may be difficult or time-consuming to cross the street, while the trees and animals symbolise positive things, such as beauty and freedom. The people are both positive, such as the children themselves, their best friends or family, but there were also people experienced as negative, such as alcoholics, drug addicts or poorly behaved people in general. The shops are used both as symbols of directions but also have their own worth and this is particularly true for bakeries and antique shops. The home was sometimes drawn as a place loaded with meaning and details and sometimes just as an indication of where the child starts her explorations.

In general in the English drawings, the home was the most commonly drawn place. The home was often drawn with more detail and ‘feel’ than the way the Swedish children drew it, and the English children included their gardens, pets and family members. They also often drew the family car next to their home, something that none of the Swedish did.

The drawings made by the English children are focused on the home, or at least more clearly defined places, such as a specific place, house or object. None of the drawings use an aerial perspective exclusively but some children
drew road crossings or other objects using that particular technique. The reasons for drawing the places that they chose of course varied from child to child. Looking at the English drawings of the home, it seems clear that the children drew symbols of safety, but it is also obvious that they are proud of their homes and families and wanted to display this. In some of the drawings, the houses are brought out of their surrounding context, lacking both neighbouring houses and connecting roads. However, to a larger degree than in the Swedish drawings, the neighbouring houses are also included in a detailed and personal way.

This difference might be connected to the fact that the Swedish children all live in high-rise buildings and most of the English live in detached, semi-detached or terraced houses with no more than three floors. It is likely that the connections to the surrounding houses feel more direct when one lives in smaller buildings with gardens.

Some objects, such as cars, were often drawn as if they were alive. In many drawings, the cars have faces showing different moods. Cars that are positive, such as cars with children in them, are drawn in strong colours such as red and yellow and they have excited and happy faces. Cars that are drawn to indicate poor drivers or speeding cars are grey or black and they have angry faces, as do the drivers; these cars often look like they are going to attack, like angry predators. Interestingly enough, the Swedish children, who during the interviews revealed the most negative attitudes towards cars and traffic, were more likely to draw the cars with faces and most of the cars are actually smiling. This discrepancy may have several reasons. It was obvious during the interviews that even if the children experienced traffic as negative, they were partially repeating the environmental education they had received. They repeated what they had heard adults tell them. In the drawings, this education did not reflect itself as clearly, and the Swedish children revealed more of the same attitude towards cars as the English children did during their interviews. In the English drawings, the cars were not as important and were, on the whole, not as loaded with meaning as in the Swedish drawings. The same meaning that the English children gave the cars during the interviews, the Swedish children revealed in their drawings. A family car is something that exists in most of the children’s everyday lives and is important to the children as it is part of their identity in the same way the family home is. It belongs to the family and is therefore important. Heavy traffic and other people’s cars are, on the other hand, often seen as negative, but this was still more evident in the Swedish drawings than in the English. The drawings allowed the children to display what they notice and experience in places and it became possible to understand some differences between children’s and adults’ experience of place. Major features such as a supermarket, subway station and other things that adults would choose to include were often not included in the children’s drawings.
Figure 29. Details of cars and a bus. The top left drawing was made by an English eight-year-old girl, and the top right drawing by an English eight-year-old boy (with rude remarks indicating a poor driver). The bus was drawn by a Swedish eight-year-old girl. The bottom left car was also made by a Swedish eight-year-old girl and the ‘angry’ cars to the right by a Swedish eleven-year-old girl.
Instead, features such as a bakery and a fish store, places with very distinct smells, were included in almost all the drawings, even by those children who did not pass right by them on their way to school. Not only physical objects, such as houses and streets were included, but also features whose main importance lay in their social or emotional meaning. People whom the children often met on their way to school, homeless people, dogs, pleasant or unpleasant sounds or smells, and places good for activities, such as playing, climbing or running, featured prominently in the drawings. The older the children were, the fewer objects they included. The objects that were included for their meaning rather than their physical existence, also reduced, the older and more ‘mature’ the children were.

**Distance and Detail**

The drawings not only include the experience of present and well-defined places but also compressions both in time and space. Distances are erased and events from past, present and future are featured as occurring simultaneously.

Many children put great emphasis on getting details right, for instance if there is pavement, every paving slab has to be drawn to get the right effect. Dogs’ messes and litter are also drawn rather than written down as commentary. In many of the drawings, objects and places were taken out of their context, so that only the important houses and streets were drawn. For instance, a scene of a street linking together the home and school, together with a bus stop, park and one or two interesting objects can be cut loose from the surrounding city and drawn as if it exists alone, with sky and clouds surrounding it.

Another common approach to cope with the issue of context and distance was to choose a number of important objects or places, as in Leo’s drawing (Figure 29), which has the home, a slide and the school, and then erase the distance between them so it looks like they are directly connected to each other in time and space. In Leo’s drawing, he can take the slide to school. This could be seen as a wishful thinking, as though he would like to be able to do this and hence his information should be of no use to us. It is much more fruitful to view his drawing as a clever way of bringing together objects that are important to him but that are geographically distant from each other. By drawing them as if they are close to each other, he can draw them with sufficient detail and does not have to reduce objects to symbols. By drawing them from a regular perspective and relatively large, he can work with colours and also create the kind of atmosphere that he wants. His home, slide and even school seem to be loaded with positive meaning since they are colourful and filled with movement and details such as plants, curtains and lamps. He also manages to bring the urban setting into the picture by drawing the traffic in the background.
Another approach to cope with distance was to emphasise distance by keeping it long, and making objects or places smaller and almost reduced to symbols. These drawings mainly consist of white paper, with thumbnail-sized houses and places drawn with very long and thin lines connecting them over the white paper. The main space in these drawings consists of ‘unimportant’ and empty space to indicate distance. I could not find out if these children are driven to school and that the reason for them drawing like this was that they had few experiences to express, but it is clear that not all these children were driven by their parents.

To mix several different perspectives in one drawing seemed to be a simple way of coping with the difficulties involved in drawing place. Eight-year-old Swedish girl Katja’s drawing is a good example of this technique. She wanted to draw how she walks from her own door, over a scary crossing and then she passes through a major roundabout that has a park with trees and benches in the middle. By drawing the crossing and the roundabout from an aerial perspective, she made it easy for the viewer to understand what was in the picture. But when she wanted to draw her own door and the trees in the park, she used a regular perspective so that she could draw the right atmosphere and, again, make it easier to see what the objects are.

All children but one in Stockholm had relatively short distances between their homes and school. Their school routes are relatively short and they move mostly within the same kind of environment. But one of the boys lived far out in a very distant suburb and he had to travel some distance to get to school. First, his father drove him to the train station, then he took the train, either on his own or with his sister, and finally he caught a bus that took him to school. This boy chose not to draw his school route but to write it down.
The complexity of the different means of transport, all the stations he had to remember and the far distance just made the whole task too complex for him to manage. The fact that he is different from the other children because he lives outside the city was something that obviously bothered him slightly and it seemed that if he were to draw this difference, it would become even more tangible. By just writing it down, it was not as visible. His written narrative was very informative regarding how and where he travels but did not include anything regarding his feelings and experiences, such as whether or not he likes to travel on the train alone or not. It seems from what he wrote that the main thing he does during his journey is to remember the names of the stations, which he correctly listed. He also mentioned all the alternative ways he can travel to school, all the different train lines and the numbers on buses, and which one normally would be his first choice and all the others that are possible.

This boy’s story does not reveal anything about his experiences, and yet there is no reason to believe that he has fewer experiences than his friends. Rather, the opposite might be the case. So what is the reason that he chose not to tell us anything about them? There are, of course, several possible explanations. He may have interpreted the exercise as simply to describe how he got to school and nothing more, and the task to get to school is so complex to him that his description of place is dominated by train lines and bus numbers. Another explanation, which we should seriously consider, is that he actually did not want to tell us about his life and thoughts. As Rasmussen (1998) writes, silence may be resistance towards the exertion of power. He may consider it his own private sphere or it may be difficult for him in some other way. It is not always so that children who do not wish to participate in research have a realistic opportunity to decline, even if we believe that we have provided them with a choice.

Creativity and Representation of Experience

The drawings are creative, but included no interaction between the child and place or between me and the children when they were actively making the drawings.

The creative aspects of drawing bring challenges to the process since there is a risk that the joy of expression takes control and that the imaginary aspects of the process become more important than the expressions of experience of place. However, it is impossible to judge when a drawing includes more exaggeration and fantasy than ‘real experience.’ What is possible, on the other hand, is to understand during analysis which drawings are suitable to use for gaining knowledge and which are too personal, abstract or imaginary for an adult to understand and interpret.

The creative aspects of making a drawing get the children engaged in reflecting about place on both abstract and concrete levels. For younger children, it is the meaning and message of their drawings that are in focus.
This is positive for researching experiences, but it is not uncomplicated since the generous way that they use and communicate through drawings means that their style is free and also difficult for adults to fully understand. The image that a child has of, for instance, a bike when she draws and later when she looks at it in her own drawing, will not necessarily look like the bike an adult would imagine.

Looking at the drawings, it becomes obvious that the different individuals have experimented and used artistic expression to different degrees.

By comparing the English drawings to the actual places that were drawn in them, it becomes obvious that the English children drew detailed and naturalistic pictures, whereas the Swedish children in several cases drew places ‘prettier’ and also often less urban than in reality.

Some of the Swedish children drew their very urban homes in high-rise buildings as pretty cottages with flower beds outside. Dense city environments with high-rise buildings surrounded by heavy traffic were transformed to rural, village-like areas with homes drawn as pretty cottages with flower beds outside.

This can be interpreted in many ways but the most obvious explanation would perhaps be that positive places are made to look prettier than in real life to enhance the ‘goodness’ of the place. Another explanation could be that the children express a longing for the countryside. Or is it simply more fun or less complicated to draw a rural idyll instead of the urban reality? One girl (aged 11) used this last explanation when she described why she had drawn her home and school as a small cottage with lots of flowers in the garden and a colourful wooden gate by which she placed herself as a smiling and waving little figure:

It doesn’t really look like that, but it’s much more fun to draw something pretty.

Here, it becomes interesting to recall the findings of Hoff (2003), who has seen that girls often are more creative than boys, particularly when making drawings. The drawings that were most altered from ‘reality’ in this study were all made by eleven-year-old girls, and this might be a reason why the Swedish eleven-year-old girls drew like this – it may be an expression of their creativity.
Figure 31. My house. The top drawing is a realistic representation of an eight-year-old English boy’s home, the bottom left is an urban house made more rural by a Swedish eleven-year-old girl and the bottom right is a realistic representation of an eleven-year-old Swedish girl.
Wästfelt (2004:61) brings up an interesting aspect in relation to this. He describes how his four-year-old daughter, after a holiday during which they visited a farm, explained to him that they had not visited a farm, but rather an animal park. The simple reason for the farm not being a farm in her eyes was that there were no pigs on the farm and, hence, it could not be a proper farm. In her world, a farm was defined as a place in the countryside with cows, pigs, horses and hens, just as it always is in children’s literature and on television shows. Her definition of the concept of ‘farm’ was then very clear; if there are no pigs, it is not a farm.

Children’s popular culture involves stereotypic images of places, symbols and people. Just as Wästfelt’s daughter defined farms as having many different animals, it is possible that the children participating in this study were influenced by how the concepts of home and neighbourhood most often are described by children’s popular cultures. Both Sweden and England have romanticised images of the countryside as ‘good’ and ‘safe’ and it is disproportionately often the setting of children’s stories in different forms. Urban environments are rarely documented as places for children and are often described as deprived, if they feature at all. It may be that this shapes children’s representations of the concept of home and neighbourhood as rural, even if it their everyday setting is urban. If they are asked to draw their home, they draw their representation of home, i.e. the rural cottage, but they lend it some characteristics of their urban high-rise buildings, such as the street outside or the colour of the façade.

Considering that the eleven-year-old girls produced the most imaginative drawings, this is also the group that produced drawings that differed from each other the most. Some drawings are highly imaginative and colourful, whereas others seem anxious and mostly consist of blank paper. On the whole, girls more easily expressed themselves through drawing but some were unwilling to describe their drawings in front of other children. This seemed to have to do with the social context rather than the drawing media. No eight-years-olds showed discomfort with drawing and they also used a lot of colour all over the paper, as the creative eleven-year-olds also did.

Some drawings, made mainly by boys, were drawn to clearly reveal the child’s message. These drawings are often clear of clutter and imaginative expressions, were drawn with the use of a ruler and show one or two important places or objects and nothing more. Boys in both age groups were more likely to use rulers and make ‘realistic’ drawings. The few children who had difficulties drawing and chose to write instead were all boys.

The drawings included places, people and objects. Some children divided their drawings into two halves; in one half was a ‘good’ place and on the other a ‘bad’ place. It was also common for children to exemplify why a place was reproduced by making a close-up sketch of an important detail. For example, one drawing included a good place that was an antique shop
and next to this was a close-up of a book in the shop’s window, which the child would look at on the way to school.

Some children actively chose to not draw their homes, but instead houses they appreciate or see. At times, my impression was that children had drawn houses in which they would like to live rather than the ones in which they actually do live. One English eight-year-old boy described why he drew a particular detached house surrounded by large pine trees and a blue sky:

It is better than my [house] and it is tidier than my [house] and they have better flowers.

He chose to draw something that he finds generally better than his own house since it is tidier and has more beautiful plantings. There are, of course, several different reasons why he chose to draw that particular house. It might be as simple as that he just wanted to draw a house that looked like that because it was a more interesting task than drawing his own house, or he might be embarrassed of where he lives.

Without knowing the background of this particular boy, I can say that several of the children from the school come from families who have trouble getting in on the property market because of the high prices in the area. Some of these families live in council housing and others live more permanently in bed-and-breakfast establishments. This might be a sensitive issue for a child and a clear reason why he does not want to display the way he lives in his drawing but instead focuses on a more positive thing, such as what he finds good and beautiful.

**Visual Inspiration**

The fact that the drawing is highly subjective and has been arranged by the child means that it is not likely to include random objects. The reproduced objects and people in the drawing are chosen because they have some sort of meaning for the child.

It seems clear that most objects in the older children’s drawings were drawn for a reason. The younger children, though, seem to have started making a drawing and figured out their message while drawing. The older children more determinedly gave accounts of the objects on their drawings, and even if some of the objects, people and places were of no importance and may have been added as a creative thrill in the process, the children could often describe how and why they thought of that particular object. The younger children’s drawings included more movement and action in the way they are drawn. The older children seemed more inspired by vision-based media such as photographs, television and computer games, whereas the younger children seemed to picture their places with a slightly less predetermined view of how a drawing should be. The younger children were more imaginative in their approach whereas the older ones were more likely
to copy the way traditional maps look or what a photograph of a place would look like. This means that the older children’s drawings are more focused and slightly easier for an adult to understand, but they are also less informative and more adapted to communicate a message instead of expressing experience.

Some children made their drawings and used the style and expression of computer games and comic albums. For example, one Swedish eleven-year-old girl made a drawing (Figure 32) where the people were drawn with clear inspiration from the ‘manga-style,’ something she also expressed during our conversation.

![Figure 32. A drawing made by a Swedish eleven-year-old girl with clear inspiration from vision-based media, such as computer games and also comic albums. The girl by the cat is a self-portrait, and she usually sees the cat and the man on her way to school.](image)

She made a combination of a drawing with regular perspective including herself, a cat she meets on her way, a man, a red car and a tree with a bird in it. On the top left side of the drawing, she made a map resembling an overview of a level in a computer game. It was drawn with aerial perspective, with a bird on the top to indicate the perspective, and it is a description of the route she walks to school. Her home is labelled ‘start’ and arrows show which way she walks. Objects such as playing equipment, trees, houses and people are drawn the way they look and are not reduced to symbols. She labelled the names of the different places she walks past, sometimes with comments such as ‘nice tree,’ ‘Alva’s house’ and ‘ugly
place.’ Sometimes she added information about the kind of stores she passes, to help the viewer locate herself in the drawing. She also indicated which places on the map-like overview she chose to draw as a regular drawing.

It is also possible to find other features in their drawings where the children obviously were strongly inspired by how these objects have been drawn or modelled in other places and on other occasions. One of the more obvious is perhaps the Swedish children’s way of drawing cars that look just like the popular sweet named ‘Ahlgren’s cars,’ which are sweets shaped like small cars in different colours. It is obvious that drawing cars in the typical way the sweet looks like made the complicated task of drawing cars much easier for the children.

In some drawings, it is also possible to see that the children were influenced by each other while drawing; they ‘copied’ each other by drawing people, cars or houses in the same way. As suggested by Christensen and James (2000b:169), copying in this way should not be seen as if the child had nothing individual to express, but is rather a way for children to express a ‘sense of sameness’ and belonging. It was clear that it was neither the message nor the places that had been copied, but rather how to draw a person or an object. It did not seem to have had an effect on what the children communicated, but rather how they chose to picture it.

The Drawn Narrative

Now, how can we distinguish the narratives of place that the children express through the drawings? It is possible to see that the drawing is a subjective interpretation of the concrete experience of place combined with abstract processes. The drawing includes not only the experience of well-defined places in the present but also compressions both in time and distance. Since drawing is a creative expression, there are several aspects relating to this that may influence the results, such as the child’s self-esteem, imagination and how experienced she is in communicating through creative methods.

The children included very specific places and objects in their drawings and made it clear whether their relationship to the place or object was positive or negative. It was common that they included this type of very concrete information regarding their place use side by side with more abstract and symbolic representations. These representations could be memories, thoughts and dreams that were connected to specific places.

Most drawings are characterised by how the children tried different approaches to including the places, objects, people and events that they wanted to have in their pictures. Distances were erased and events from past, present and future were featured as occurring simultaneously. It is common that a drawing contains several places, seasons and weather, as well as
different time perspectives that provide a multi-dimensional and very subjective narrative of place.

The drawn narratives have both concrete and abstract meanings, but as an adult looking at a child’s drawing, there is a risk that the abstract message of the drawing overshadows the concrete since the abstract aspects can be difficult for an adult to understand. If abstract features in a drawing are interpreted as meaningless acts from the child’s imagination, then it may be difficult to correctly interpret and understand the concrete aspects that refer to the child’s actual use and views of different places. The abstract features should not be seen as undermining the credibility of the concrete, but rather as additional dimensions of their relationships to place.

The conversations in which the children described and discussed their drawings were central for understanding what the children wanted to communicate. They also provided information regarding the children’s everyday lives and how the children think about place use and experience. Conversations should be considered necessary since the drawings cannot speak entirely for themselves, unless the meaning is to focus on picture analysis or children’s artistic expressions.

The context in which the drawing is made is not crucial to the content of the drawing, even if it obviously has some effect. Since the drawing is not an interactive method with a place or the researcher, it is the past experiences and context that affects the motifs of the drawings, and that means that the child’s inner and abstract processes are very important.

The present is also important when discussing the drawings afterwards, as the social context influences what verbal narratives the child attaches to the drawing. Since the drawing may be viewed in terms of drawing skills, there are children who will feel uneasy with displaying their drawings in front of others.
In the four previous chapters, we looked at how the children communicated their experiences of place through various methods and what knowledge this generated. It has become evident that different methods help the children communicate different aspects of their experience of, and attachment to, place.

In this chapter, I will bring together the different findings and connect them to the questions asked in the introductory chapter. How did the children communicate their experiences and what were these experiences? How did the different characteristics of the methods affect what they communicated? Finally, how and when is it possible and suitable to use these methods in order to understand children’s experiences of place?

Different Methods – Different Aspects of Place

The study has showed how children’s place experiences are multi-dimensional, consisting of both concrete and abstract processes, places and objects. The different methods reveal different aspects of these dimensions and the children have shown rich evidence of their experiences of place in regard to physical, social and cultural aspects. The methods’ different characteristics, such as creative and interactive aspects, and how power relations are reflected through them are determining factors as to how and what the children communicate.

Abstract and Concrete Aspects of Place Experience

In the beginning of the book, I classified place experience as consisting of two different aspects, abstract and concrete. The concrete experiences were defined as where and with what the child physically interacts. The abstract processes refer to how places make the children feel, but they can also refer to dreams and imaginative thoughts the children have attached to places. These two aspects are, of course, intertwining and inter-dependent, as they are based in subjective experiences and actions. This classification was suitable to use in order to clarify what the children expressed through the methods, as the abstract and concrete aspects of place experience often were easily separated from each other.
The interviews gave the children the opportunity to communicate specific information regarding how they use and view places in their neighbourhood. The information the children revealed was mainly on their concrete use and experience of place; abstract experiences were mentioned but not frequently. The children drew on experiences they had had over a period of time as well as their expectations and dreams. They referred to what used to be, what is and what should happen. Their views and experiences were not always bound to specific locations, nor were they always detailed in terms of physical objects and attributes; rather, they were often generalised views, contextualised to include social and cultural dimensions of place, such as the child’s relationship with the adult community. The interviews provided more vivid accounts of the social relations between children and adults than the other methods did. The interviews described social, cultural and physical aspects of place. Basic facts about the child were easily gained as well as information regarding the child’s favourite and worst places.

The interviews were mainly focused on the concrete aspects of place, and the children’s subjective views of this, which also included a temporal dimension emphasising the children’s thoughts about the passing of time. What is then the difference between an interview and a method such as walking, where the children can interact with place simultaneously as they communicate their experiences? Walks also mainly focused on the concrete, but the communication revealed during the walks was more focused on the total experience of place, and the abstract processes were much more evident as reasons for communicating the concrete than during interviews.

Through the walks, the children revealed the details of place and the extent to which their places consists of micro-geographies, and the way corners and ‘unimportant’ aspects of place and their interaction with the tiny and close-up construct the most important aspects of children’s place use. The concrete and physical aspects of place were emphasised, the children revealed where and how they use specific places, and they also expressed, although in a more limited way, abstract aspects of place. They could reveal which pile of sand they preferred to kick as well as show how certain places made them reflect on life. The boundaries between the abstract and the concrete were sometimes blurred as the children acted physically on abstract processes, such as thoughts and feelings, that were awakened within them by place.

Photography also allowed the children to interact with place whilst communicating, and in comparison to walking, this communication was not based on direct physical action or conversation but instead visual evidence. It proved that this visual evidence made the children communicate a high degree of abstract and non-visual experiences of place. It is probable that the creative form of photography was the reason that the children expressed so many abstract experiences, along with the concrete. On the whole, the
photographs involved the largest amount of abstract meanings of all the methods.

The drawings made it possible for the children to communicate many abstract and concrete experiences. The motif is their subjective interpretation of the concrete experience of place combined with the abstract processes of these experiences. The places or objects drawn are often very specific and well-defined. The concrete aspects of place experience may seem more direct and are easier to interpret and understand than the abstract. It is, however, important to recognise abstract aspects as crucial and place-bound information and not as ‘wishful thinking’ or ‘acts of imagination.’ This is important for ethical reasons as well as for not losing the valuable information contained in these abstract aspects. There is a risk that the abstract expressions in a drawing may be judged from an adult perspective based on concepts of skill in drawing techniques.

It is obvious that different aspects of sensuous experiences of place are expressed depending on which method the children communicate through. During the interviews, the children mainly expressed the visual, and they tended to emphasise negative aspects of certain visual evidence. The visual can be experienced as the least subjective sense and hence the least complicated to express. Sound was mentioned in the form of disturbing noises, such as from construction work, and smell was mentioned in terms of finding the way and enjoying walking in certain places. The photographs also focused on the visual, but in this case the visual was used on several occasions as symbols of other senses. A photograph, i.e. a visual representation, of flowers or food or other such items had in several cases been taken to display taste and scent. A greater variety of sensuous impressions was shown in the photographs than during the interviews. The walks involved all the senses but their place-interactive character made it particularly attractive for the children to physically feel and use objects. Thus, touch was more evident here than in any other method, even if sound and scent had an impact on the children’s narratives and movements. The drawings contain visual representations of objects and places, just as the photographs do, but they also clearly express different smells, such as a bakery, and sounds, such as traffic jams, loud gangs of teenagers and road works.

Now, if we compare the methods with each other, what sort of places do we gain knowledge of and how is this bound to the character of the method? The interview is clearly dependent on the social context in which it is conducted. The narrative cultures among the children present during the interview largely influence the sorts of places they reveal. Obviously, the children’s experiences form the basis for their discussions, but it proved that certain, often social, aspects of place were more important than a more multi-dimensional experience of place.
The walk was bound to a certain area, it connected different places in the child’s environment and it was about these specific places that information was received. The route of the walk and the places it included had in this case not been decided by the children. The places the children could communicate their place experiences of were the places I permitted them to interact with. Although the walks in this study were laid out to include what was assumed to be the children’s everyday places, it can not be assumed that ‘all’ places of everyday importance were included, and the children had relatively limited abilities to reveal places that were far from the determined route, which obviously affected the results. This could be solved by adopting the approach of Moore (1986) and Percy-Smith (2002), which means allowing the children to guide the researcher to their places. On the other hand, not even that assures that ‘all’ important places are included and it would make it much more difficult to perform the walks during school hours, as they were in this study, as it would be nearly impossible to structure the time for the walk.

In Hart’s study (1979), he found that walks include more details than drawings. This study confirms the high level of details revealed during walks, but the drawings also proved to include details and close-up aspects of place. The difference was that the details included in the drawings were carefully selected by the children as special objects or details, and not all children did that. The walks offered detailed information of all the included places by all the participating children, though the places were not the ones selected by the children.

Whereas the walk is bound to the places it includes, methods like drawing and photography include places that are located farther away from each other, and these places are chosen freely by the child. These methods are not bound to a specific route or to being located within walking distance, as the walk is, but can instead include places that are not connected to each other and that may have greater importance to the child. The drawing and the photograph might include more special places than the walk, but there is also a risk that these places are not places of concrete everyday function to the child. They may not be used on a daily basis but instead have a high symbolic value. These places can be important since the child has strong bonds to it, and they can reflect the child’s self-image or be connected to something or someone the child cares for. This symbolic value reveals the places that the child connects to for different reasons. These places may still be very important to the child in her everyday life, as places to long for and connect to. It is fully possible that a child has less affection for places visited on an everyday basis than places not visited as frequently. The commonly visited places construct the framework of the child’s mobility and everyday life, but they may also be bland from the child’s perspective. The walk includes these places as well as places with greater importance, whereas the drawings and the photographs mainly include places loaded with positive or
negative meaning. The drawings and photographs are documentations of specific and defined places, while the walks included the ‘unimportant places’ as well, the routes, the streets and pavements that the children frequently use though without attaching enough meaning to them to consciously reproduce them, just as Moore (1986) found.

Creative and Interactive Aspects of the Methods

Two prominent characteristics of the methods are what I have chosen to call the creative and interactive elements. Creativity was defined, in the beginning of the book, as the aspect of the process in which the children engage in expressing themselves ‘artistically’ through drawings and photography. Creativity involved allowing the imagination to flow freely, thereby focusing on individual expressions. I defined the interactive elements as the interaction between child and place, as well as between child and researcher.

The place-interactive elements of the methods allowed the children to be physically active and to perceive place while communicating their experiences. This was particularly beneficial for the younger children, who had more difficulties than the older in verbally expressing themselves to their satisfaction. Place interaction made it possible for them to communicate through movement and play on their own terms.

The different types of knowledge gained through the place-interactive methods clearly show how communication is context-dependent. Interacting with place meant that it became possible for the children to use their physical activity as a means of communication. This proved to suit the children better than asking them to express experience verbally. By borrowing Christensen and James’s (2000a) concept of the children’s own ‘cultures of communication,’ it was shown in this study that when researching place, this culture includes motion and physical interaction rather than primarily verbal accounts. Place-interaction is in itself a way for children to communicate their experiences.

Since the walks are place-interactive, the places that children reveal through the walks are temporal, their full dimensions are unique at that moment and the place experience the child communicates exists only in the meeting between child and place at that certain time. A walk can never be fully returned to, or experienced the same way twice, as it is dependent on the volatile experiences of the moment. The knowledge gained from the children is place-bound, multi-dimensional and has many sensuous experiences. Conversation takes place as a direct response to place and it is also possible to observe different visible aspects of the children’s interaction with place. The walk reflects the temporal experiences of place; it is bound to the time and context in which it takes place.
The walk is bound to the places that it includes and other places are not discussed, whereas in the photographs, children can include a wide spectrum of places located further away from each other. The children’s photographs made it possible for me to enter places that would not have been available otherwise. There were many private places, such as the home, or secret places like dens or hiding places. These places were most likely communicated by the children only due to the method’s place-interactive character. The photographs allowed the children to show different places as they carried the camera with them for several days. That the abstract aspects are much more evident in the photographs has to do with the creative aspect of photography, since creativity facilitates the expression of inner processes.

The main differences between the place-interactive methods of walking and photography are the aspects of time, distance and abstract processes. Time and distance are connected as photography allows the children to communicate during several days and therefore includes a wider range of places. It is clear, though, that interacting with places is beneficial for the children, as this gives them the ability to react directly to place, which in this case seemed to enable them to communicate free of the demands of right and wrong. The combination of creativity and place-interaction resulted in many expressions of abstract place experiences.

Creativity encourages freedom of expression, which allows the child to construct new places in the drawing as well compressions of both time and distance. People and places from different times and locations can be featured as occurring and existing simultaneously and next to each other. The place in the drawing is an expression of important features from the child’s everyday life that she has brought together and created a subjective interpretation of.

The creative aspects of the drawings and photographs had, just as the place-interacting aspects did, an effect on what the children communicated. Looking at the drawings and photographs, it becomes obvious that the children experimented with aesthetics and were creative in their choices of techniques and objects. They not only used methods as means of communication but also took the opportunity to use the methods’ full potential and expressed themselves in imaginative ways, which brings more to the material than just their experience of place. The creative process has its own worth and is just as important to the children as the display of their experiences.

Creativity is contextualised and dependent on the individual; it depends on the engagement and joy of the child and it is not possible to ‘order’ creativity to appear. It did not seem, however, that the children had trouble being creative as adults sometimes do. No child in this study complained about feeling uninspired or not creative enough. Creativity proved to be something that came easily to the children, and this is why it is beneficial to
use it in research, since it can act as a bridge between inner experiences and outer expressions.

The creative elements of the methods made the children more engaged and this benefited the results, but it also raises something that could be called a ‘creative dilemma.’ The creativity released by these methods brings energy, free-thinking and new perspectives to the process. The children recalled incidents, people and objects with more ease through creative methods and found their own personal ways of expression. However, this energy could also mean that the creative element takes control, thereby overshadowing the place-bound experiences to be told through the method. The ability to reproduce reality includes the temptation to alter it slightly, to make it more suitable, more pretty or less frightening, or the opposite. The creative process, then, becomes more important than the ‘product’ that is supposed to be the result. There is no obvious solution to the dilemma since it is the creativity that evolves from the methods that makes them unique and valuable, while it also can jeopardize the results. By talking to the children, it became clearer to what extent the level of creative freedom in their expressions influenced the result. Vivid and creative expressions in drawings or photographs may just as well be a truer expression of a child’s subjective experience of place than a more ‘naturalistic’ reproduction of place, which may be easier for an adult to understand but also have less meaning. It is also difficult to understand what a creative expression is and what an expression of the child’s abstract experiences of place is.

The creative methods may also involve restraints, since not everyone is comfortable with these expressions. There might, therefore, be differences between what a child wishes to communicate and what she feels able to do through a particular method. The issue of how to technically manage to draw or photograph something may also have an impact and it is fully possible that the participants do not draw or photograph what they actually would like to, but instead choose something that is easier to draw or that looks prettier as a picture. Here, this was noticeable in the drawings but not at all in the photographs.

What is then the difference between the messages the children express through the different creative methods? Drawings and photographs are representative and static; whatever place that is created through them will be possible to visit over and over again. A place in a photograph is a frozen moment, a piece of captured reality, whereas the drawing, even one intended to be an objective presentation, will have been arranged by the child. The artificiality of the drawing means that it is not likely to include random objects. The reproduced objects and people in the drawing are included because they have some sort of meaning to the child whereas the photographic image includes one or two objects with meaning and several random objects with no meaning at all. The photographs may seem objective but can be deeply subjective and misleading since what seems to be the main
object actually may represent something else or have been captured by mistake.

Apart from place-interactive and creative aspects of a method, I also distinguish when methods provide interaction between me and the children whilst they were communicating through the method. The interview and the walk both included interaction between me and the children, but there was a major difference between what kind of interaction this was. During the interview, the interaction between adult and child is sensitive, and often marked by power. The children may feel uncomfortable or feel like they are being questioned. The walks included relationships of another kind, as the children had more knowledge than me and were in charged of describing rather than being asked about their experiences. Walks are also place-interactive, which allowed me to include my own experiences of place as well as the children’s interaction with place, and this facilitated my understanding of how child and place function together.

An interesting aspect that became evident through the methods is time. There have not only been differences in what aspects of place the children have communicated, but also differences in the temporal dimensions. The interviews provided knowledge about their experiences, i.e. from the past and present, but also their wishes for the future in relation to themselves, place and society in general. The drawings also included places, people and objects from different moments in time, as did to an extent the photographs, whereas the walks mainly focused on the present.

What does this tell us? Interviews are neither creative nor place-interactive, and drawing is creative but not place-interactive. What is it with these methods that make the children include a wider time spectra than the others? It would be reasonable to believe that it would be the creative methods that encourage the children to think more widely in terms of time, but this was not the case. The creative aspects encouraged abstract expressions but this was not connected to the aspect of time. What we can conclude is that the place-interactive methods did not encourage the children to include several time dimensions. The photographs showed how the children included time aspects in the abstract experiences of the places of the present, but they did not include expressions of the past and future to the same extent as the interviews and drawings did.

It seems clear that the place-interactive elements of walks and photography made the children focus on the present, whereas the methods that did not include place-interaction more easily made the children think beyond the present.
That power is a sensitive issue in research with children has been emphasised previously (e.g. Fine and Sandstrom, 1988; Christensen and James, 2000c; Mayall, 2000; Christensen, 2004). In this study, it became evident that power not only concerns child-adult relationships but also the relationships between children. This is a central finding, as this issue often is neglected in discussions of power, as Gagen (2004:415) has pointed out. It was also revealed how power affects the children to varying degrees depending on which methods were used. The different characteristics of the methods and the context in which they are conducted affects how power can be negotiated both between children and between child and adult.

The place-interactive aspects of the methods seemed to minimise the negative effects of power and could even be empowering. Creative processes were liberating but the conversations that are necessary to perform afterwards included relationships of power.

Interviews lack creative and place-interactive aspects, and this facilitates interpretation since it is mainly the verbal accounts that will be analysed. These characteristics and the emphasis on the verbal accounts increases the risk of having power struggles. Interviews with children do, hence, need to be conducted with sensitivity to the children’s ways of being and communicating. As an interviewer, it is necessary to be aware of the existing power relations and to act on them to make the children comfortable.

The discourses that the children expressed during the interviews were more negative than during the other methods. Since an interview puts the child in a vulnerable situation, whether in terms of the rest of the group or the researcher, she might not expose herself by expressing issues and places that are really meaningful to her and then risk that the other children comment on this in a negative way. By complaining about different issues and places, or by expressing positive views on harmless things that may not be of great importance to the child, she feels safe and fits in with the rest of the group, without exposing her deeply personal views. Hill (2006) has found that children value methods based on how ‘embarrassing’ they are, and it is likely that proclaiming your views verbally is considered to be just that. This is an effect of the power relations within the group of children.

In taking photographs, a process that is both creative and place-interactive, the children shifted freely between photographing abstract and concrete aspects of place, something that gave them the chance to take photographs of abstract processes in relation to physical places. The use of photographs was uncomplicated and the children did not seem affected by power relations when taking photographs or while displaying and talking about them. They seemed to view the photographs as objective reproductions rather than subjective expressions, even when they expressed their subjective reasons for taking them. The uncomplicated character of photography makes
it suitable to use in a wide variety of processes, and the different aspects of the photographs that are revealed depend on how the conversations about the photographs are conducted. Because what is visible in the photograph is an ‘objective’ setting, a physical and concrete place, it becomes possible for the children to hide the ‘real’ subjective expression, if they so wish. The children are not exposed through their photographs, as it only is the children’s verbal narratives that display the subjective construction and abstract dimensions of the photograph.

The drawing is more sensitive to power relations than the photograph, since the drawing may have to do with how ‘skilled’ the child is at drawing. This is mainly an issue with older children and was in this study evident with some of the girls. This, however, seems to relate to the sociocultural context rather than the drawing media itself, since all the girls made drawings, but were just unwilling to display them in front of other children. The younger children seemed unaffected by these issues.

The drawings and photographs provide a more direct link to the child’s subjectivity and inner thoughts due to the creative aspects of the methods. Positive issues and places become more visible than during the interviews and it is possible to get information about the child’s secret places and thoughts. This is positive for the researcher but also involves a more sensitive and understanding approach, since the child has trusted the researcher with secrets and inner thoughts and the researcher must be able to handle them in a respectful way.

The power structures that were evident during the interviews and the display of drawings were not at all apparent during the walks or, for that matter, during the display and discussion of the photographs. The fact that there was such a difference between the display of the drawings and that of the photographs relates to the fact that the children did not consider the photographs to be as subjective as the drawings. A photograph of a place was something that the children considered a reproduction of a place rather than an artistic and subjective interpretation as the drawing.

During the walks, the children, rather than me, were in charge of the situation, and this turned the traditional power structures between child and adult around. Power was also easily handled by the children. Movement as well as place itself provided the ability for the children to act on power and uncomfortable situations, since they could turn the focus to different features or objects and away from uncomfortable issues.

The children’s personalities were crucial for how they communicated their experiences and it became obvious at an early stage in the process that this was of greater importance for how the different methods would suit them rather than factors such as gender, age and nationality. Age had a certain impact as to how the children expressed themselves through the methods; there were, for instance, differences in the way that the eight-year-olds and eleven-year-olds drew, but neither group had difficulties expressing
themselves through the drawing media. A difference was that the older children were more aware of, and restricted by, certain social structures that made them feel that their drawings were of less worth and could be regarded as ‘ugly’ and ‘bad,’ but this was not something that was particularly common. It was slightly more common with the eleven-year-old girls in Sweden than with any other group.

Most children easily drew their narratives of place, but there were some differences between the drawings made by younger versus older children, as well as between girls and boys. The older children often made drawings that were more focused on expressing a message than on displaying their experiences. The younger children focused more clearly on their experiences. The older children were influenced by visual media of different sorts and produced more easily recognised pictures. This aided the understanding of the drawings but it also made them less informative. The younger children’s drawings contain the most information and more clearly displayed experience of place. The older children more clearly showed a message and were more restricted by how a drawing ‘should’ look rather than how they best could draw their experiences.

There were no major differences between the English and the Swedish children in how they expressed themselves through the drawings, although some differences were visible. The Swedish children were more tutorial in the comments they wrote on their drawings and also included more moral judgements. They instructed the person looking at the drawing about certain issues regarding ‘how things are’ at that place. This was not done by the English, who more clearly focused on displaying their homes and private places, rather than their knowledge of behaviour in public space.

There was no notable difference to how boys and girls took their photographs or were able to express themselves through the method; it seems as though all the children enjoyed the method and all took a wide range of photographs. It was only the eleven-year-old English children who photographed. It would be interesting to see how younger children would handle the camera, as well as how the eleven-year-old Swedish girls, who were most affected by power relations, would communicate through photography. It is probable that photography would have helped them express themselves, just as the walks did.

Social structures of different kinds, in relation to gendered behaviour, were also evident during the interviews, particularly in Sweden where there seemed to be more of a struggle between the sexes than in England. In Sweden, the girls were both more dominant and more insecure than the boys. This meant that they expressed feelings of being ‘worthless’ and not wanting to express their views in front of the other children or, for that matter, display their drawings. They did not seem to have any problem with the method in and of itself as long as I as the adult researcher was the receiver. At the same time that they showed this self-questioning and insecure
attitude, the girls also acted out on several occasions and were noisy, giggled in class and disturbed the boys, according to the boys’ verbal narratives. In England, tensions like these were not evident at all during the interviews; rather, the children acted respectfully, though still in an informal and relaxed manner, towards each other. The English school works intensely with getting the children to respect each other by following a set of ‘Golden Rules,’ aimed at getting the children to be kind, honest, helpful and respectful towards each other, and it is possible that the children’s attitudes towards each other were an effect of this work.

The interviews revealed how the older children were more aware of the social structures within the group. They did not provide accounts that would put them in embarrassing situations and it was also clear that they had strategies for dealing with adult questions. With the younger children, it was more difficult for them to remain focused and seated and it helped if they were physically active whilst talking.

Boys more clearly referred to specific use of places such as which activities they did and with whom, whereas girls often commented on how places made them feel or made them long for another life, growing up and moving away. Generally, girls referred more willingly to abstract processes and experiences of place. However, the most detailed and personal accounts of these processes and feelings connected to place were made by eleven-year-old boys in England, who took the task of explaining their personal relationships to place more seriously than any other group.

The question of gender is central to the study of how children experience, use and communicate place, as this has been, and partly still is, a neglected area of research. Traditionally, boys have been considered to have more spatial needs and abilities, an idea that now is being questioned. Matthews et al. (2000) have found that girls’ use of public places actually is more frequent than boys’. As was referred to earlier, Gagen (2000) has argued that children’s experiences of place is affected by the fact that the performative aspects of gender are not recognised and that normative practices reproduce gendered place behaviour.

In this study, I have not focused primarily on gender, but rather found individuality an important factor for communication. It has, though, been evident that there are structures that are connected to gender identities and that this affected the study, in particular during our conversations. Therefore, I see a need for more gender-focused studies, preferably involving feminist critiques, both in regard to how children use and experience place and how they communicate their experiences.
Children’s Places

The children expressed a wide variety of affordances in the places they use and these varied depending on which method they communicated through. When bringing together the findings from the various methods, it becomes possible to see that the children expressed a need for a diversity of places with which they can interact and it becomes clear how they are constantly aware of, and negotiate, the social game of adults.

It has been confirmed how different forms of natural elements, such as parks, gardens and beaches, are important for children’s well-being (e.g. Nabhan and Trimble, 1994; Kahn and Kellert, 2002; Faber Taylor and Kuo, 2006) as well as their experience of place. The strong emotional attachment the children revealed towards nature and animals connects to Kong (2000). The children have limited independent mobility, partly because of the physical structure of the environment but mainly because of the social fears of their parents and other adults.

The experiences of place that the children in this study expressed are particularly interesting in comparison to studies referred to in the first part of the book (e.g. Ward, 1978; Björklid, 1982; Moore, 1986; Matthews, 1992; Rasmussen, 1998; Percy-Smith, 2002; Karsten, 2002; Kyttä, 2003; Christensen and O’Brien, 2003; Agervig Carstensen, 2005; Blades and Spencer, 2006). Research from at least three decades and from assorted western countries reveals that children prefer green elements, varying urban design and services of different sorts, and that they get upset by traffic, poor behaviour and lack of respect from adults and urban decay, such as littering and graffiti. Even if there obviously are differences, the similarity of these results, as well as those from this study, point to the fact that across social, cultural and individual differences as well as differences related to time, there are still certain issues that relate to what it means to be a child. The main issues that the children express regarding their places are being able to play outdoors, being able to meet friends and being social in public places. They need green places for play and contemplation, and they enjoy city life with its social and cultural structures as well as places for consumption.

The extent to which children connect social and physical aspects of a place became evident in this study mainly through the interviews. In particular, this was the case with negative social aspects, which seemed to emphasise and reinforce the negative physical aspects of a place. This seemed to mainly be an unconscious process within the children. The opposite relationship was also noticeable, but not at all to the same extent.

The degree to which the children communicated sensuous experiences through the methods in this study was clearly noticeable. They connected multi-sensuous dimensions to their experiences of place and all senses were of importance, as has also been suggested by Tuan (1979), Rodaway (1994) and Matthews (1992). What became particularly clear in this study was the
extent to which children emphasised sound and smell in particular as means of direction rather than the visual objects adults often use. The walks generally made it clear how sensuous impressions my adult consciousness sorted as secondary information were considered primary information that the children acted on and used for constructing a sense of place. This emphasises how children create and negotiate sensuous landscapes rather than physical structures when interacting with places.

The importance of allowing children to interact with an environment so that their senses and minds are awakened by the experience has been argued in this study. The direct and bodily interaction with place is central to the children’s experiences and also to their ability to communicate place experience. Comparing this to other studies (e.g. Karsten, 2002, 2005; Kyttä, 2003, 2004; Prezza, 2004a+b, 2005), it is also possible to see that children can develop affectionate relationships to place by experiencing them in a secondary fashion, as through a car window. Place becomes symbolic and the child creates relationships to the symbolic character of places.

Secondary experiences of place were communicated in this study through all the methods, except walking. There were photographs and drawings of places the children could see outside of windows, and the children also referred to these places during the interviews. The question is whether or not these relationships develop as compensation for the lack of direct experience of place and restricted independent mobility or if there is an increase in children travelling by car and bus and hence an increase in the ability for them to develop bonds to places by experiencing them in this secondary way. The children who expressed secondary place experiences in this study did not seem to have less independent mobility than other children; on the contrary, they seemed to have strong bonds to their environment. It is probable that relationship to places that are experienced in a non-immediate way can develop as compensation for a lack of place interaction or for children with strong and intense relationships to their places.

Hartman (1986) found that children in middle childhood are greatly concerned with existential questions, such as life and death, life perspectives, loneliness and life worth. This is confirmed by this study, since the children expressed exactly these issues through the methods. These thoughts are clearly connected to specific places, sometimes symbolic places like the churchyard or the railway tracks, and sometimes natural places or other places where the children can find solitude and reflect on life.

An intriguing aspect that was visible in this study and needs to be raised is the extent to which the children expressed wishes for their ‘own’ places, places where they can relax and contemplate. The English children said that they had such places in the Coppice or in their gardens, as well as on the beach. The Swedish children described fewer of these places since they do not have green schoolyards and since they live in houses without gardens. Some Swedish children use the courtyards in their buildings for this;
however, with many children living around one courtyard there is not always room for quiet contemplation. Climbing a tree and sitting in the canopy to think is one solution the Swedish children have. In a previous study (Cele, 2001), I found that children who lived in detached houses with gardens more often referred to certain places as their ‘own,’ whereas children living in flats in Norrmalm did not use this term. They also often used indoor places if they were seeking solitude. Since these findings also come up in this study, it is necessary to argue that children not only need places for activity, sports and play, but also outdoor, and preferably natural, places that they can use for private explorations, contemplation and solitude.

It is interesting to consider how the children’s socioeconomic situations are reflected in how they communicate their experiences of place. As was mentioned in Chapter 6, the Swedish children can be regarded as upper middle class whereas the English are middle class or slightly below. Was it then possible to see any pattern in the material regarding how they expressed themselves? The Swedish children’s places are denser and less green than those of the English children, who have access to a school garden, and many of the English children live in houses with gardens whereas the Swedish all live in flats. The social fears in England are greater than in Sweden and this restricts the children there. It is common in Sweden for families who belong to the middle class and above to have a country cottage that they visit on weekends and holidays. Even though this was not specifically asked about during the research, it is reasonable to assume that this was the case with the children from Norrmalm. Since the children’s narratives are contextualised, it is very likely that the fact that they were consulted in their urban environment made them express fewer experiences of nature and animals than they would have if they had been in the countryside.

It was not possible to detect that the English children, whose families generally had worse finances, communicated specific information or behaved in a particular way that could be related to this. Some children said that their family did not use the car if they could not afford petrol and in some cases, I suspected that the children did not draw or photograph their own homes but instead reproduced something they found more beautiful, but whether this has to do with socioeconomic factors (i.e. they were ashamed of their homes) or a wish to show something beautiful is difficult to say. The English school worked hard getting the children to respect other people and this probably was a reason for the children being so calm and polite. This does, however, return to the school’s approach of teaching the children and the engagement of the teachers rather than economic factors.

Since it is not possible to see any major differences between the groups, it feels relevant to look back to Chapter 3, where I refer to Moore (1986). Moore distinguishes ‘hidden dimensions,’ which he sees as influencing children’s use of places. These dimensions could be relationships with parents, cultural attitudes in the community, perception of hazards, the
influence of school, youth organisations and other institutions, individual characteristics and time spent watching television. That is to say, all aspects of the child’s life have an effect on what she experiences and communicates, and these aspects are not primarily tied to economic factors. Ward’s studies (1978) revealed how children living in deprived urban areas had an ability to find enjoyable places for play. It seems evident that it is mainly the physical and social structures of place rather than economic factors and ‘class’ that affect children’s place use. These categories may be independent as well as dependent on one another; it is the overall context surrounding the child that is the determinant.

It may be that if more ‘extreme’ groups on the economic scale are used there would be more distinct differences in what the children communicate, but not how they communicate, as this proved to depend on individuality and individual experiences more than anything else.

Implications

Children may be asked about their experience of place for different reasons. Research, obviously, is one of them, and consultation and participation projects regarding physical planning is another, while environmental education is a possible outcome for the children. This study has emphasised how the knowledge of different aspects of place experience is gained depending on which methods are chosen. The aim of the consultation, hence, needs to be to decide which methods to use, and when they are appropriate.

Research is probably most often focused on understanding both the concrete and abstract experience of place, or alternatively one or the other. If the abstract relationship to place is in focus, photography is the most suitable alternative, followed by drawing and walks. Conversation with children in connection to these methods is always necessary, so that the children can describe the intentions behind them. If children’s use of places and the knowledge of how they physically interact with place is sought, walks offer the most suitable alternative, but photography and drawings may also be appropriate if the children’s abstract expressions are not believed to undermine the results and are dealt with ethically. Group interviews provide a good overview of the children’s lives and social and cultural contexts as well as how children value and use different places. Interviews must always be carried out with sensitivity to and respect for children’s ways of being, and the degree to which the adult exerts power over the children must be considered. If this is not done, interviews alone can not be recommended as a suitable way of approaching children.

It had been suggested previously (e.g. Christensen and James, 2000c) that it is suitable in processes involving children to use a combination of methods. This would bring different evidence of their experiences together.
like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, in order to create as full an understanding as possible. This was confirmed in this study, but it also became evident that different methods are more suitable to combine with each other than others, and that combining methods may on occasion just provide overlapping information while at other times offering deeper knowledge of the children’s realities. Interviews are particularly suitable to combine with other methods to capture the fuller meanings of children’s experiences of place and to allow the children to connect meaning to a drawing or a photograph. Combining methods also helps all children express themselves according to their own preferences and abilities, which is an ethical aspect, since all children have something to tell but possess, as Rasmussen (1998) also notes, different ways of doing this.

Combining interviews, drawings and walks as I did in Sweden provided solid information and an overview of the children’s experiences and reality. Having said this, it is possible to question the benefit of the drawing. There is an obvious risk that drawings are used only as something to start conversations, ignoring the expressions of place that the child has drawn and thereby losing the subjective and personal experiences of place. Although, if the aim is to understand the children’s concrete use of specific places, drawings may work well to open up the conversation. However, this needs to be done with respect so that the subjective expressions of the drawings do not get misused by adults who do not understand the child’s expression. In England, the combination of methods included photography and interviews, and, for the younger children, drawings and interviews. The combination of photography and interviews was the one that included the fewest methods and offered deep and place-bound information. It is, however, highly advisable to combine this with the researcher walking and spending time in the children’s neighbourhoods, even if they are places familiar to the researcher, as another type of seeing and experiencing is central when doing research on place. Combining drawings and interviews, as with the younger English children, provided insight into the children’s places but the experiences they communicated were mainly abstract. There was a need for an extensive analytic effort in order to connect the children’s accounts to concrete places and experiences. This makes drawings and interviews as a method combination with young children less suitable to use when knowledge is sought on their concrete use and experience of places.

In urban planning, it is possible to consult children about their experiences and use of places through place-interactive methods such as walks and photography, in order to include this information in GIS-systems used by planners, as discussed earlier. It is important that the methods chosen to consult children with not only include where the children spend their time, but also that they are able to express positive and negative aspects of places. Map exercises may also be suitable to use; however, the interaction between child and place, as well as between planner and place
can never be emphasised enough, and the most suitable approach would include interaction between planner, child and place. Berglund and Nordin’s criteria (2005), which were presented previously, are crucial for the involvement of children in planning processes. The methods used need to be suitable for children and planners, and a well-functioning practice for participation needs to be developed. As long as children’s participation in planning processes is dependent on individual efforts and initiatives, it will not become established practice.

The methods used in this study can be useful means of connecting children’s multi-dimensional bodily and sensuous experiences to urban planning since they reflect these aspects of children’s relationship with place. Kylin (2004) points out that these aspects are the ones that get lost in the physical planning system, which obviously makes it difficult to plan suitable places for children since this is central to how they use places. If these methods could be used for including children and the information gained brought into GIS-systems as well as the planners’ minds, the issue of planning places suitable for children as well as adults would become less complicated.

Walks are a suitable method to use when children are to be involved in planning processes. A walk consists of two main dimensions, the concrete experience of place and the abstract. These aspects make the walk suitable for different purposes. The first dimension regards how observations and participation during the walk makes it possible to observe how children use places and also ask them questions regarding a concrete act or setting. This makes it possible to create an understanding of how children encounter objects and places. This is an easy and straightforward approach that is suitable for research and consultations when the focus is on how children use the physical structures of place and also, to a certain extent, how they deal with social structures. Used in this way, the walk may be suitable for urban planners, architects and others who want to gain concrete information about the children’s interaction with specific places.

The other dimension of the walk refers to the abstract aspect of place experience. Here, the involvement of the researcher’s own subjectivity is central since it is through her that the abstract dimensions of the place experience are channelled and filtered. The researcher needs to use her own mind and consciousness fully when participating with children in places, since this is the most suitable approach for understanding the subjective and abstract dimensions of the children’s experiences of place. This was clearly revealed in this study, where it became obvious that including my own subjectivity was the most uncomplicated approach for gaining an understanding of the children’s place experiences.

Walks would be suitable to use in physical planning for several reasons, and not only because they provide an opportunity to get knowledge on children’s relationship with place. Just as walking in my study areas gave me...
extensive knowledge about and experience of these places, giving planners the opportunity to walk in the places they plan would bring place and multi-dimensional place-bound knowledge back into the planning system. In planning, place is often reduced to symbols, plans and maps without clearly connecting them to place-bound experience. This is one of the reasons that planning and the maintenance of places often collide with the lived reality of places.

If planners were given time to actively experience and create their own place-bound knowledge and experiences of the places that they plan, many mistakes would be avoided, and the social and cultural life of the city would become more prominent during planning. Walking provides the researcher or planner with the ability to use her own body as a tool for understanding place and creating situated knowledge.

When participating in the research, the children actively listened to each other, creating new understanding for one another of what it means to be a child and how their everyday lives and places are constructed. The children were genuinely interested in each others’ lives and it was evident that participating in the research provided new and expanded perspectives on their own and other children’s lives. When talking about the drawings and the photographs, the children continually made reflexive remarks on the techniques they had used, the pros and cons of them, what they had managed to reproduce and what had been missed, as well as how they could have adapted their techniques to better express what they were aiming to show. Participating in research and consultation is, hence, of value to the child.

Processes of this kind are related to environmental education. By interacting with place and reflecting on their own and other children’s experiences, children are encouraged to think independently about their experiences, and they are provided with abilities to understand that other children live different lives than they do. Place-interactive and creative methods provide a good base for environmental education, but only if this is conducted with a non-authoritative approach by the adults. The knowledge the children should gain from these processes is to reflect independently about places and their own position within these places, and not what is a right or wrong way to behave, express or experience. The adults participating with the children should take one step back and let the children’s explorations, creativity and expressions be of primary importance. This does not contradict the need for projects to be clearly structured or led by adults. There simply should not be an adult expert telling children what to experience or express.

Processes regarding children’s place experiences demand sensitivity and respect from the adult community towards children as individuals. These processes should not aim to be primarily educational for the children, and nor should the goal be to make planning processes more successful or to produce more cutting-edge research. Children’s experiences of place are
what form and construct their lives. Therefore, when we ask children to participate, the focus needs always to be steadily on how children will enjoy and personally benefit from the process.

When Should Children be Consulted?

Children’s participation in societal and democratic processes, such as physical planning processes, is of great importance, but should not be exaggerated. Children are capable of expressing their experiences and views, but they cannot and should not be asked to create a child-friendly society or environment. Children need to be included but on their own terms. It is up to adults to change their perspectives to understand and to commit to see the structures that restrict and harm children as well as those that empower children and make them happy. Roberts (2000) comments that there is a difference between listening to children and hearing them. There is no reason to continuously consult children if the adult community is not willing to hear and understand what they are communicating. It is important to keep in mind that the adult understanding of children’s communication of place is not the same as the children’s communication of place. Nor is children’s communication of place the same as their experiences. Fine and Sandstrom’s (1988) remark, adopted in this study and referred to in the beginning of this book, describes what should characterize the relationship between children and adults in consultation projects. A relaxed approach with a high degree of positive contact and low degree of authority provides the most reliable result.

It is necessary to ask when children should participate in processes regarding their urban environment. How is it beneficial for the children themselves to participate in, say, a physical planning process? Do the children themselves benefit or is their participation for the benefit of the adult conscience or perhaps a general benefit for children living in the area in years to come?

What a child will gain from a process is dependent on the methods used and the people involved. For the individual child, a well-organised consultation can be a rich source of exploration of the nearby environment. Getting to know places by experiencing, contemplating and expressing oneself about them can be a way of having a richer life and establishing a social platform for interacting with people and places in the future.

If there can be benefits to the participating children, there are, of course, also risks. One is that the children are brought into ‘projects’ because planners are instructed by higher authorities to do so. There is a risk that children’s participation will not leave any real mark on the planning process and that the children are exploited as symbols for democracy.

Sometimes, the aim of consulting children may not be to give them any real influence and this should not, as sometimes is the case, be condemned.
Perhaps the interest is to investigate what children think or know about certain things or places and then to use this information for other purposes than to primarily include it directly in urban planning. The important thing is how children are approached. There is no need to tell children that they will have any influence if this is not true. This will only raise their hopes and then leave them disillusioned when they never see any results from their efforts. Also, if the aim is to actually let the children have influence, great care needs to be taken since children’s time horizons differ significantly from adults’, and particularly from that of Council officials and the slow machinery of urban planning. Even planning processes that can be considered very rapid could be seen as failures from children’s perspectives, as the same amount of time could feel like an eternity for them.

Great sensitivity, reflexivity and willingness to understand children’s realities are qualities that are needed when consulting children. Looking back at the childhood memory I presented in the introductory chapter, it is obvious that these qualities were lacking in that process. Since the adults did not take our lived reality seriously by understanding how and why we reasoned and communicated, we did not take them seriously and, hence, gave them wrong answers. This study has shown how it is necessary for adults to be engaged and to work with children on their terms in order to understand how and what they communicate.
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