

Post Scriptum

#Chilling Around Town.

**The Making of Exhibition on Urban Youth and
Children at the Eesti Rahva Muuseum
(Estonian National Museum)
May 16th 2014 – Jan 11th 2015**

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Video Still Marko Raat

The Making of

This book project emerged from planning an exhibition on public urban space of children and youth at the Eesti Rahva Muuseum (ERM) (Estonian National Museum). The last section of Hopeless Youth!, 'Post Scriptum', involves three short pieces, bringing together an insight into the background, starting points and development of this exhibition along with two short case studies from a longer list of topics, the exhibition was exploring. Unlike the previous parts of the book, Post Scriptum also looks at children as a particular age group, as the original project involved exploring the urban lifeworlds of both youth and kids in a museum context.

Making of The Challenges of Exhibition Production

#Chilling Around Town was an exhibition about growing up in cities and the ways the young generation creates its urban experiences through quotidian practices, starting with localised experiences of children's ages up to being youths, who simultaneously

move in physical, local and digital, global spaces. Our curators team set out to grasp the urban everyday life through the eyes of children and young people, leaving aside the view of adults: parents, teachers, youth workers or urban planners. The curators worked with mapping experiences and collecting stories of children and young people in major Estonian cities. They asked: what do children and young people notice in the urban environment? Where do they go and what they do in the city? How do they understand public spaces and what kind of urban “domestication” tactics do they implement. The resulting exhibition is the first stage in developing a section of the permanent exhibition at the new ERM building due to be opened at 2016. When planning a permanent exhibition at a cultural historical museum, the exhibition strategy, balancing stability and change within the exhibition is the key to successful result. Permanent exhibitions of big central cultural historical museums tend to be rather conservative and there is a perception that these exhibitions should be based on a museum’s own collections. Striving towards a conservative solution also means that museum curators might be eager to choose the framework of positivism as a “secure approach” of telling a trustworthy story.

When starting to prepare this particular section of the future exhibition in the current and temporary settings of ERM’s Exhibition Lab, the core guiding principle of setting up the project, was challenging the abovementioned assumptions of how to make an permanent exhibition. Our decision was to involve youth and children into the production process and not to link this exhibition with the already existing collections of the museum. Our aim was to make the voice of youth and children more central to the process rather than engage them later with educational programs and side projects to a ready-made exhibition, as would be the usual way to organise the work. Since the decision that the exhibition should be based on cooperation and collaboration with schoolchildren, setting up the whole project became a challenge for the working group. We needed to find a good balance between the goals set by the fields of cultural participation and of social research, on which the project was based. The idea of

cultural participation in museums is part of the development of new museology, which itself has roots in a broader field of cultural studies “from which it takes its bearings”, as new museology is “interested in questions about the ways in which power is socially deployed” (Witcomb 2012: 580). This means that on theoretical level, participation and cultural research share common grounds. In practice, designing cultural participation in a museum institution is different from designing a research project in social studies, where a researcher collects data according to established theoretical and methodological framework. Cultural participation has to be flexible and activities might range from inviting people to take part in the practices of a cultural institution (where their role is limited to voluntary contributions), to participatory actions with a strong collaboration among the participants themselves (whereby the participating community carries the agency, whereas the initiator becomes a host and a facilitator). Cultural participation in a museum aims for democratic engagement (Runnel, Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt 2014) whereas a research project aims for producing knowledge within disciplinary boundaries and in a verifiable way.

When planning cultural participation in a museum context, the crucial questions for the museum are located within the zone of shared cultural expertise of the curators, but also within the ways existing working practices might be affected by the initiative. From the aspect of cultural participation, the production approach of #Chilling Around Town challenged the traditional ways in which museums collect data about youth and children, but also the ways, the participant’s stories were involved and became visible at the exhibition.

As a research project, making the exhibition was located at the intersections of ethnology, urban studies, human geography and media and communication studies, which outline the importance of the city as a social, cultural and material place. On a more general level, the project approached the experience of modern childhood and young adulthood. Setting up the study was inspired from a socio-constructive approach to childhood sociology, in

which children are regarded as competent social actors. We also stressed the physicality and bodily nature (Merleau-Ponty 2005) of children's interactions with their environment. Within a general critical theory stance we looked at the emerging childhood sociology, in particular to its studies on children's neighborhoods.

The whole process followed a strand of current youth and child research, where studying children has been replaced with studying with children. The decision to approach children and youth as a key source during the research for the exhibition project meant turning around the traditional balance and changing the point of view. A participatory approach challenges traditional social research, where studies on youth and especially children have mostly involved collecting information from the children's parents, teachers and other adults. As researchers point out, information acquired from the children themselves has been considered of secondary importance (Kyronlampi-Kylmanen and Maatta 2011). It has even been proposed that in social studies, there have been insufficient attempts to take children seriously and understand their lives 'in their own terms'. To a great extent, this starting point – to take children's own words at face value and as the primary source of knowledge about their experiences – goes against tradition in sociology. In this scenario, researchers have been concerned that children's roles will remain marginal in society if their own empirical information is not regarded as valuable (Kyronlampi-Kylmanen and Maatta 2011). More recently, across different disciplines, change is indeed taking place and children are emerging as a key source for understanding the dynamics of their everyday lives (Christensen and James 2000; Barker and Weller 2003; Einarsdóttir 2007).

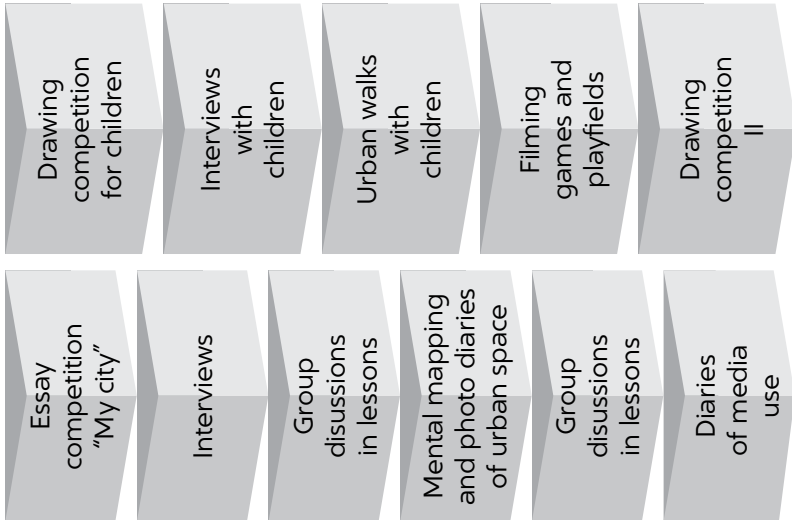
Studies with children and youth require creative research methods in sociology, psychology, education etc. Often the creative methods are synonymous with the production of visual material, such as drawings or taking photos (MacDonald 2009; Masoumeh Farokhi and Hashemi 2011; Young and Barrett 2011) or multimodal digital storytelling (Alexander 2011). Willing to acknowledge both research and cultural participation aspects of the project, the

team decided to employ an experimental multimethod and multisited approach. This approach would treat children and youth as research subjects as if they were adults, while acknowledging they have different communication skills from adults, possess different competencies and engage in different modes of communication, such as telling tales, writing stories, drawing pictures or taking photos. The central idea behind this approach is to provide knowledge about aspects of social life that may not be accessible with traditional qualitative research methods (Gauntlett 2007: 182).

Therefore, each step in the research conducted between 2012 and 2014 had to be designed to adjust to the daily practices of children and teenagers throughout Estonia. A significant portion of participants lived in Tallinn, Tartu and Pärnu. The research started at the end of 2012 with an essay and drawing competition “Me in the city”, in which participants described their own spaces in the city as well as perceptions of the good and bad aspects of urban life. The drawing competition was followed by in-depth fieldwork in a few selected schools. Eventually, two different research paths evolved, where Path 1 focused on children (under 10 years old) and Path 2 on youngsters (10–16 years old) (Figure 1). The decisions about the ensuing steps in the research process were not made with final exhibition objects in mind, but were based on the need to acquire more knowledge regarding the emerging topics. The applied methods involved sets of semi-structured and unstructured individual and group interviews and experimental contributory exercises relying on expected competencies of children, such as drawing, telling and writing stories, which enabled them to show relevant places and describe their daily activities.

Figure 1: Research path 1 (upper) followed the urban imaginations of children and Research

Path 2 (lower) applied experimental multisited research of young people.



– Research path 1 with children involved drawing competitions, urban walks and filming exercises. Audiovisual material was recorded in 2013–2014 in Pärnu and Tallinn. The filming was preceded by the drawing contest "Me in the city". More than 400 drawings were submitted by the 6–14 year olds, showing what children do in the cities, what they dislike or are afraid of, where are their favourite shopping malls, cinemas, but also secret hiding places. These covered their highly personal perceptions of urbanity: fear, security, freedom and play, noise and anxiety, but also excitement related to the events and social interactions in the city space (Runnel and Järv 2014). Urban walks with children and adolescents were set up as audiovisual explorations of their own, in some

cases “secret places”. On these video-camera accompanied trips, children met with friends, often a variety of outdoor games spontaneously started. Through this stage it became clear that the games involving the building of play houses are very popular among the children, thus a second drawing initiative to map architectural imaginaries and design approaches of 1–6th graders was organised (same volume, pp).

– Research Path 2 dealt with young people, involving sets of their familiar formats, such as essay competition, interviews, and a range of visual research methods, such as working with city maps to explore participants memories and get to know their stories about places in the city which are meaningful for them, keeping photo diaries and visual documentation of one’s media use. Classroom discussions outlined the significance and centrality of smartphones in young people’s social lives. Instead of a series of semi-structured interviews, a participatory monitoring program of young people’s own media use in public space was designed. This enabled the curators to combine geographical and digital aspects of smartphone use at the exhibition (see in more detail same volume, pp).

Conclusions

The experience of the team members, carrying out fieldwork along with experiments suggests that the strength of this kind of approach lies in making the role and skills of the participants prominent in the research. Many of the experiments could be carried out in natural settings, making research part of school activities. This means that the students working with the researchers established through the work a community, in which meaning was

negotiated and established. In a group discussion, the researcher was able to observe how participants of the study give meanings. At the same time, from a social study point of view, the experimental approach is not establishing objective facts, which used to be prominent building blocks of cultural historical permanent exhibitions at museums. Experimental work with children and youth helps to uncover previously hidden thoughts, the outcome of the experiments also might be shaped by group behaviour or participants' desires to be approved by their peers in whatever they are doing.

Thus, when starting to develop the actual exhibition objects and multimedia solutions on the basis of the generated material, the decision-making was close to an ethnographic research process, which added mostly interpretational and analytical depth in creating the exhibition as an interpretive space. Rather than developing a coherent narrative as a definitive result, this space is open to creating sets of cognitive sense-making paths by the visitors themselves.

Although managing the exhibition project as both a cultural participation initiative and a research project was challenging, eventually the exhibition has confirmed the success of the experimental and participatory production processes in many ways, especially in terms how visitors relate to the exhibition. Observation of visiting dynamics suggests a change in the ways youth and children relate to the exhibition. A typical school group visit to the museum exhibition is a form of interaction between museum professionals, students and their teachers in a specific education setting, where learning happens across different sites and contexts. When visiting an exhibition, usually teachers with or without with accompaniment of a museum educator would be the ones to set the agenda and define visiting outcomes in terms of seeing, experiencing and learning. #Chilling Around Town, which was produced in collaboration with children and youth, triggers young visitors to become the active agents of the visit, being those who shape the situated dynamics of talk and interaction among the participants. As part of the social interaction at the exhibition,

children actively create intercontextual linkages which bridge and create connections between different learning experiences. They also lead and shape the visiting experience of the adults and thus the overall meaning making and explanation process of the participants, by pointing up and explaining exhibition objects related to their own prior lived experiences. Thus the preliminary observations of the exhibition visits suggest that exhibition also serves as a good case study, contributing to rethinking the role of the audiences inside exhibitions.



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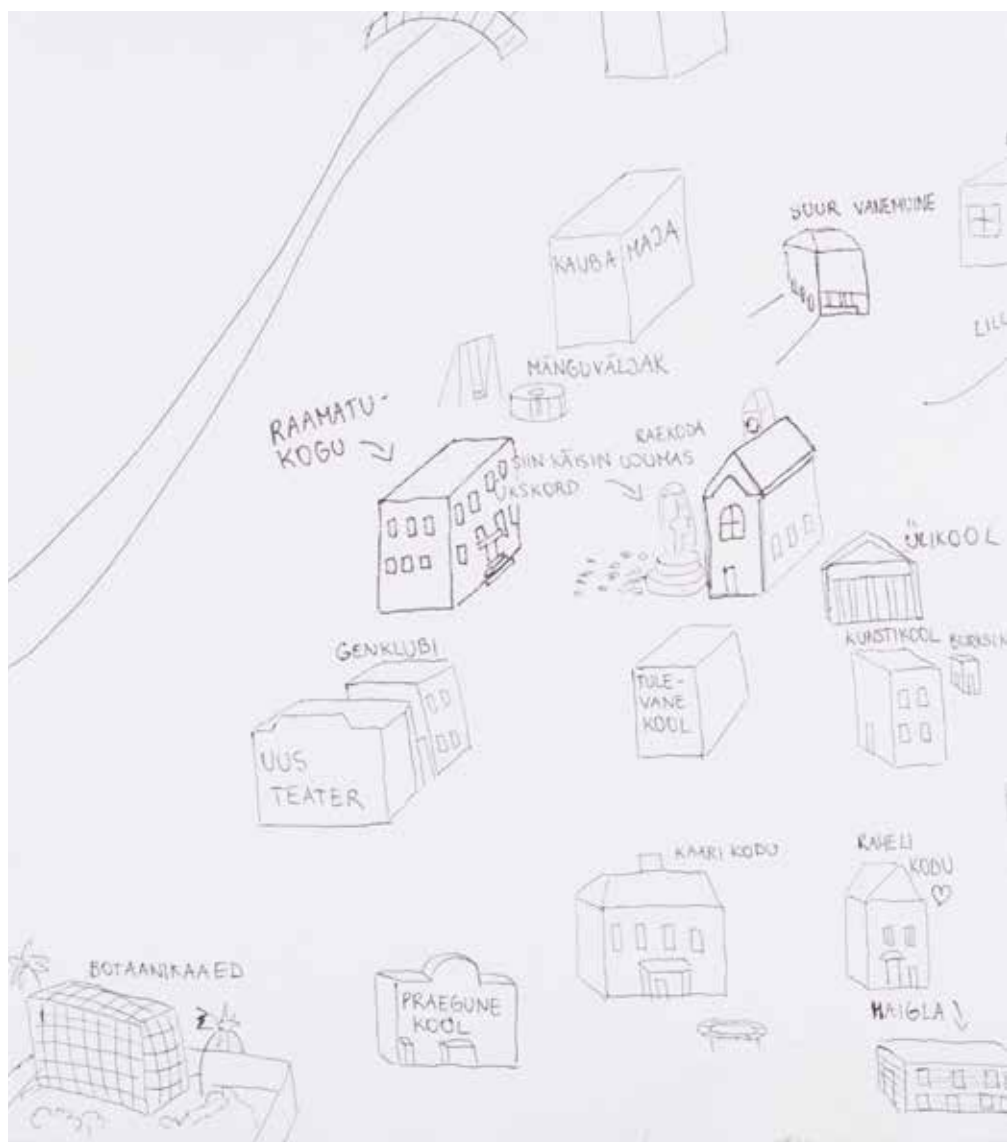
Outdoor fieldwork session to map children's games
in urban public space.

Photo Ehti Järv.

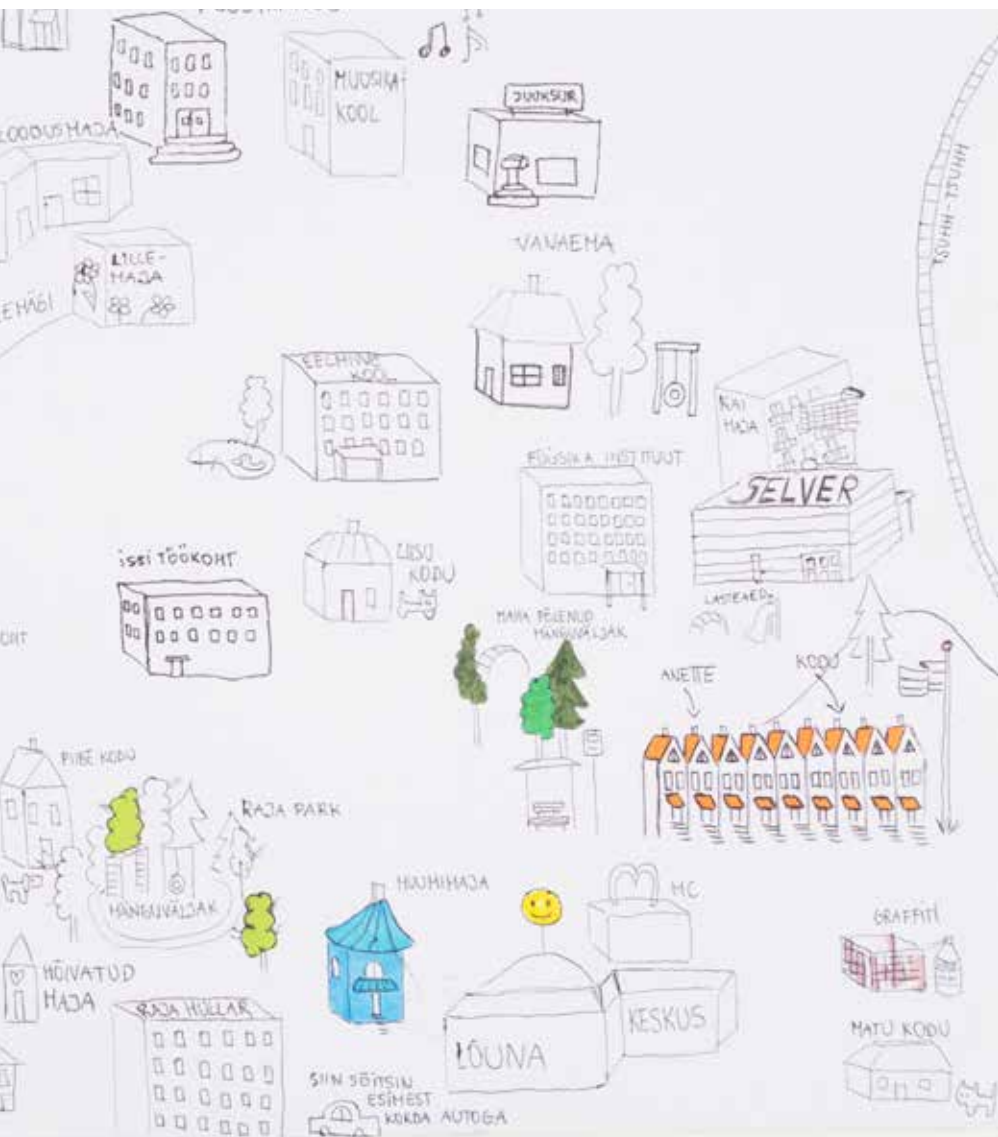


Video triptych at the exhibition of children's outdoor games.

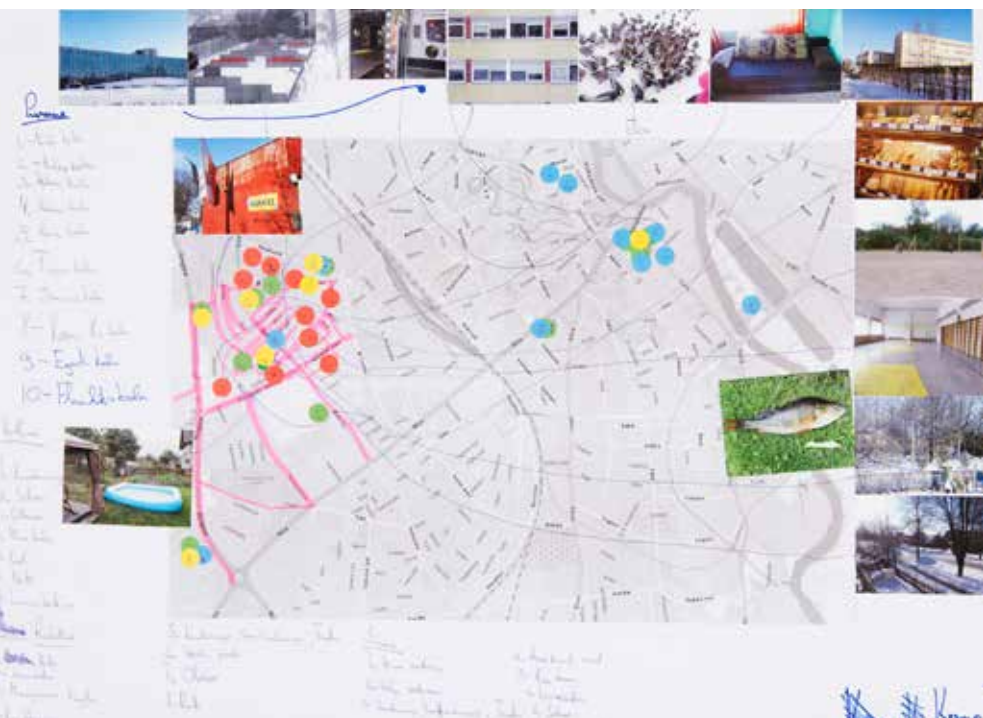
Photo Arp Karm.



The creative methods used to understand how young people perceive urban space included drawing mindmaps of the city.







Maps were used when collaborating with young people to trigger stories about their urban experiences.



Collaboration with children started with a drawing competition called My City.



Architecture according to children: Tree House World

Urban experiences

When you are a 5-10 years old child, your engagement with public space is likely limited to the proximities of your home, neighborhood and city district. These all form your potential playground, becoming step-by-step your space of freedom and zone of independent experimenting, play and joy, as you get older.

In reality, adults shape and frame the urban public spaces that children use and experience. Excluding the legal and social dimensions of the design and planning processes, there are visible and physical aspects of 'play areas', on which the childhood experiences of the planners and designers are as influential as perceptions of safety and professional competence. The outcomes in city environments are structured, fenced and controlled play areas in cities. Playgrounds as sites of experiencing and exploring the surrounding environment are accompanied by increasingly privatised spaces and a decrease in the independent mobility of children, especially amongst those families living in newly established neighbourhoods with private family housing.

There are no easy ways to explore the dynamics of freedom and restrictions that determine how children experience the urban spaces surrounding them – playgrounds, neighbourhoods, streets, squares, small open places and architectural infrastructure. Yet, to understand the diversity of children’s urban worlds, it is crucial to understand the kinds of spaces and spatial infrastructures they find usable (and in which ways) besides spaces, designed specifically for them. The debates about children and architecture are usually not about ‘children’s architecture’, but about ‘architecture for kids’. In order to accommodate only the first notion, the curator’s team when preparing the #Chilling Around Town exhibition, added an extra step to the research process. The step focused on children’s architectural drawings of playhouses

So what is the essence of the resulting exhibition objects as well as the collection of 452 children’s play house designs, collected by the museum as a result of the drawing competition? Is it a novel way of looking at the development of modern architecture? Or is the resulting collection of drawings a representation of non-pretentious fantasy playgrounds of children and teens? From the research point of view, we saw the drawing competition as a powerful methodological tool, where drawing became a mode of critical re-imagining of urbanity which provided access to the children’s points of view of their everyday surroundings. The aim and relevance of organising the drawing contest did not stem from the expectations of discussing the participants’ perceptions of ‘good cities’ in the context of the discipline of urban planning. We were interested in the material representations of children’s personal, internalised experiences in public spaces rather than about shared and expressed experiences. Also, many of the urban practices or their visible/material traces are often more subcultural (street art, skateboarding) than general and are representative of a particular generation. Skateboarders or street artists are expert users of urban spaces being capable of re-inventing and re-articulating urbanity. Private uses of public urban space are often related to mobility (people walking in or passing through), structured by practices and temporal complexities. We saw drawings of children’s play houses as representations of personal spaces

where the space stands still. Play houses are “moments” in urban practice, becoming visible to the others through the materiality of design. Playhouses provide a frame of communication and thus a possibility of contact with other users.

Designs of children’s dream play houses represent their ideal worlds, giving hints about how they relate themselves to the urban space: do they break the rules or follow the prefabricated ideals borrowed by the world of adults? Or is it mid-way between the two? Childrens’ drawings propose that play houses can be built anywhere: in the underwood behind the garage, in grandma’s garden, even inside the house. Consequently they may vary in shape and size, from the classic wooden tree house to sci-fi robot tree houses. The drawings suggest that a ‘play house’ should be located in secure places, in a home yard or a landscape covered with bushes, where no-one else walks. It is important that the playhouse is hidden from strangers’ eyes, as it a secret place, available to just a few good friends. A playhouse built in the tree behind grandmother’s house would be a good place to simply hang out. But totally different notions are also possible, as other hut designs confirm. If, when imagining a playhouse, a larger group of friends is under consideration, the place need to be spacious enough play and dance, attractive from outside and located in an easily accessible location like the middle of the lawn.

Architecture of informality

We asked children to imagine they were architects preparing the project of a building. We asked them to include a plan view of the play house as well as explanations about the materials, main elements of the building, its location and usage. The designs varied from descriptions of exclusive private villas with pools and high-quality building materials to tiny, cosy huts made out of cardboard and blankets found at home. Lot of projects involved

the presence of mature trees, which served as the base structures for the playhouses.

When approaching the designs from the aspect of architecture, children largely appear to explore the concept of 'miniature home'. Some of the child-designers are seekers of independence, who prefer small structures that provide safe environments. If these designs were produced adult professionals, they would not adhere to the regulatory control of bureaucratic restrictions such as building codes or safety regulations but merge into the wider corpus of the 'architecture of informality' (Dovey 2013). Children oriented towards cooperation and interaction tend to replace the concept of a small shelter with spacious spaces, capable of hosting a child's entire social network.

The designs operate at the intersection between play and the contemporary city and involve the conceptual value, potential and limits of the intersection. The designs also reveal hidden correlations with architectural movements and building styles. Some designs clearly involve the potential of an iconic 'microarchitecture' (Slavid 2007). This movement deals with implicit aims such as the resistance of construction materials or timelessness versus ephemerality, as their creators change or move away towards other significancies. The children's drawings presented buildings we could "read" as garden huts and garden houses, sustainable tree houses, forest refugees and meditative domes, each sensitive to its surroundings. It's almost to see the play of light through the branches and leaves surrounding the structure built in the tree, where the residents enjoy privacy, while enjoying the views. These designs have been driven by the character of the site, where the design absorbs and internalizes the quality of the place, to borrow it as part of the spatial experience.

Another set of designs deals with the issues of dwelling: micro-apartments, summer containers and cardboard houses, based on the quality of 'found objects', and also extra spaces for community activities and social interaction – the most exclusive spaces had high degrees of potential for entertainment, including swimming pools, home cinemas and even spas. Naturally, when

required to express one's imagination and playfulness, fantasies occasionally merged with creativity and turned playhouses into space stations or boutique showrooms for military armouries.

Drawings provide hints about ongoing material innovations: while mostly relying on traditional building materials derived from nature (the issue seems to be familiarity with the material rather than any environmental-friendliness), occasionally a playhouse design introduces a radical innovation in construction materials, resembling the single-mould polycarbonate object by Philippe Starck. Starck approaches plastic as the most aristocratic but democratic contemporary material, which is designed to help people to have a better life. "Why plastic? Because plastic is created by us, by human intelligence. We have not created stone, we have not created wood. We have created plastic. And because almost everybody can have a product of very high quality for affordable price." (Starck 2014). Children, as designers, do not think explicitly in the categories of democratic design. They are driven by an attempt to improve the quality of their own lives, facing high technological challenges just to "bring some space under control" (Douglas 1991: 289) in order to produce happiness.

Explanatory texts accompanying the children's playhouse designs confirm that for them, the important factors are the sense of excitement and the use of their imagination. These abstract notions largely conflict with the discipline of urban planning, as they both assail the order and control that basically constitutes the agenda of urban planning. How children's spaces are planned and organised in the adult's world, affects the spectrum of children's activities spaces can accommodate. Often, the activities not catered for are those offering opportunities to experiment or improvise. Thus the idea of a playhouse also constitutes feelings of protection, security, freedom, as well as independence and personal liberation.

Design process

In retrospect, it appears that the competition of drawing and describing one's dream play houses was a conceptual move in producing the #Chilling Around Town exhibition. We took children-as-creators from their normative experience of creating through playing and building and moved them to a design-playground of children-as-architects. But while the two 'playgrounds' share the same tools the processes of creation are fundamentally different from each other. A professional architect's thought processes towards design is different from that of children beyond the basic knowledge and skills of using drawing as a tool, understanding conventions of representing architectural ideas or the training of the eye.

When concerning the design process as a way of relating to the notion of space, architects use drawing as a way of thinking about architecture, but the object they are working with is to be built and thus spatially realised by someone else. Drawing is hegemonic over the end result, but the two are closely linked to each other. McFayden (2012) uses the ideas of the architectural historian Robin Evans (1997) when exploring previous studies examining how architectural drawings translate into built objects. McFayden points out "in architecture you can think through drawing, but the building never materializes. Drawing precedes building in architecture, but painting follows from it in art" (McFayden 2012: 104-105). As another architectural historian Jonathan Hill explains "The major currency in contemporary architecture is the image, the photograph not the building" (Hill 1998: 137, cited in Redström, 2012: 83-99). The professional architect, while not actually involved in the physical activity of construction (built design) has created the schemes, plans and drawings (drawn design) that have resulted in the outcome. As far as the children were concerned, drawing and building are not linked to each other in the design process. Drawing, based on experiences and imaginations, became the dominant activity, because it was as a tool of communication with the exhibition curators. At the same time, these drawings (drawn designs)

are disassociated from any actual playhouses (built designs) in children's design practice. In the absence of an organised drawing competition, the children would have focused on building an actual tree or playhouse (built design), which they could begin to use, neglecting the drawing (drawn design) altogether.

The design process for actual tree and play houses constructed by children is largely based on mental images created by the imagination as opposed to schemes, plans, drawings and other visual, two-dimensional representational images. Research into children's design processes emphasizes the inability of children to connect design drawings with an actual product (Hope 2005). Drawings are products, rather than a tool for future planning. The children's play house designs were not architectural plans to be realised and then used.¹ Although real play houses are built, rebuilt, developed, and sometimes destroyed by children, their creative experience does not start with planning and drawing on a sheet of paper.

Children as designers of play houses more closely resemble artists than architects. Children do not treat drawing an intervening medium or tool for something else, but the object of their thoughts or concrete representations of previously seen or experienced real tree or play houses. A drawing submitted to the competition was an end point. The whole event could be considered as literacy practice rather than design practice. Yet, in the drawing process, children were, in contrast to architects, also producers (Bruns 2006). This is the aspect that makes the drawing competition relevant for the curators attempts to understand children's points of view regarding urbanity. When working with the designs, children were primarily not working with the structures of the buildings (although many of the drawings resemble

1 When preparing the exhibition the curator and designer team rethought the original plan to use drawings as simply a methodological step in accessing children's perceptions of public space and created four different playhouses or their models for the exhibition on the basis of the drawings, in addition to developing an interactive database of kids „Tree Hut World“ for the exhibition.

an architectural drawing), they rather approached their task as thinking about usable material objects or collections of objects, linked to their own everyday lives (irrespective of how distant their dream playhouses appeared to be).

Interiors of the playhouses represent children's interests and values, but also reflect what they consider lacking in their home lives. Some children dream of a room with modest interior space, as a place for reading and meditation. Others describe a fantasy house, full of entertainment opportunities. The influence of mass media on children's interpretation and usage of the urban space is manifest in their 'play' worlds, with some designs depicting fortresses, equipped with military gadgets and security systems, others providing opportunity to replay elements from their favourite films seen on TV.

The drawings submitted to the contest outline a variety of objects at the dream playhouses accompanied by descriptions of their uses:

"Three cactus-shaped cameras are guarding the hut, one camera, which is above the door and one is on the balcony. The entrance is through the stairs. The roof of the hut carries three solar panels, which help to produce electricity in the electricity room, needed at the second floor. The second floor also has a buffet. There different foods will be kept and served. On the first floor a lounge, gym and cinema are located. These are needed so that we can train ourselves to become soldiers with friends"
(Mihkel, grade 3)

Children's drawings open up an imaginary world, inhabited by people, but inspired by reality. Found objects in children's playhouse designs also work as material representations of spatiality and describe the ways their composers are related to the space surrounding them – it becomes one's spatial representation. Playhouse designs became maps of these processes, which bring the described objects and elements together to the same

location. Playhouse designs became stories of children's creativity, operating at the intersection between imagined and remembered worlds and innovations. The ideas derived from children's experiences about using these playhouses become the preconditions, not the results, of spatial creativity.

The design approach adopted by children who participated in the museum's drawing competition is essentially phenomenological, based on personal knowledge and subjectivity, formulating their personal perspective. The drawings are not representations of object-oriented design, which can simply be viewed, but represent relational spaces, domains of communal exchange, which children as composers intend to become part of. This type of design acts as a kind of choreography for moving and locating bodies in the (imaginary) spaces. The starting point for children in designing imaginary playhouses are relationships and human interaction.

Motivations for creating the playhouses and participating in any social interactions related to these constructions are based on the identities of children as creators. These include imagined future developments, as in the case of Mihkel (quoted above) whose playhouse design is based on his plan to have a military career. He uses the environment as a support structure for his intentions.

The play house designs varied in how, and to what extent, the constructions merged into the surrounding (public) space. Some designs were less integrated, whereas others applied a 'responsive design' in regard to locating a construction according to the surrounding environment. In the particular instances, the playhouses role had become part of prospective guests' environmental experiences by being highly aware of the built and natural surroundings. The central design idea seems to be one of activating the surrounding environment and triggering interest to explore it further, thus confirming children's holistic design strategies.



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The tree house on wheels Ltd.

"My tree house is built in an old truck. There are five spaces in my tree house. Different games can be played in these rooms. There is enough activity for all my friends. It is a swell tree house."

Playhouse designer: Artur Soo

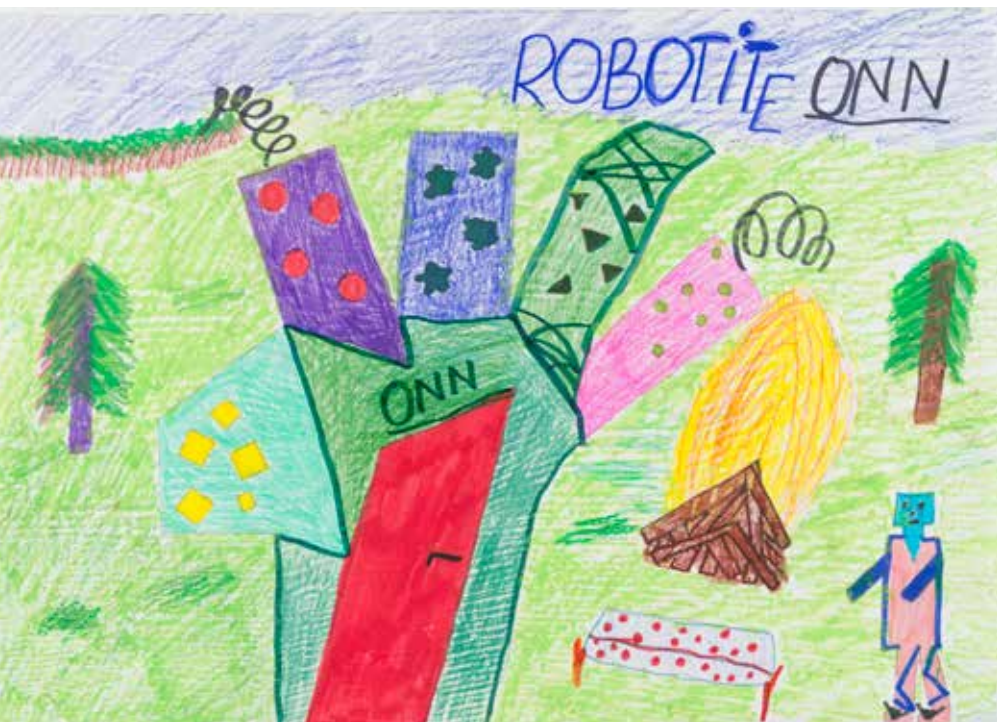




The tree house.

"My dream hut is made of old wooden planks, re-used and newly painted slate, branches and nails, old boarded up windows, my own beds, old lamps, stool and a desk and yet all the other stuff. My hut is on the top of the tree and it is single-decked. Inside there are two beds and rest of the equipment is located in the attic. I would play board games over there and also computer games."

Playhouse designer: Henrik Leier



Robot's hut.

"This is a robot hut, because it resembles robots a bit. This hut has nine rooms, in one room one can even dance. Silent rooms are located separately. Over there, each kid has a private room with spa. Robot's hut can move from one place to another with robot steps. I hope that future play houses look like this."

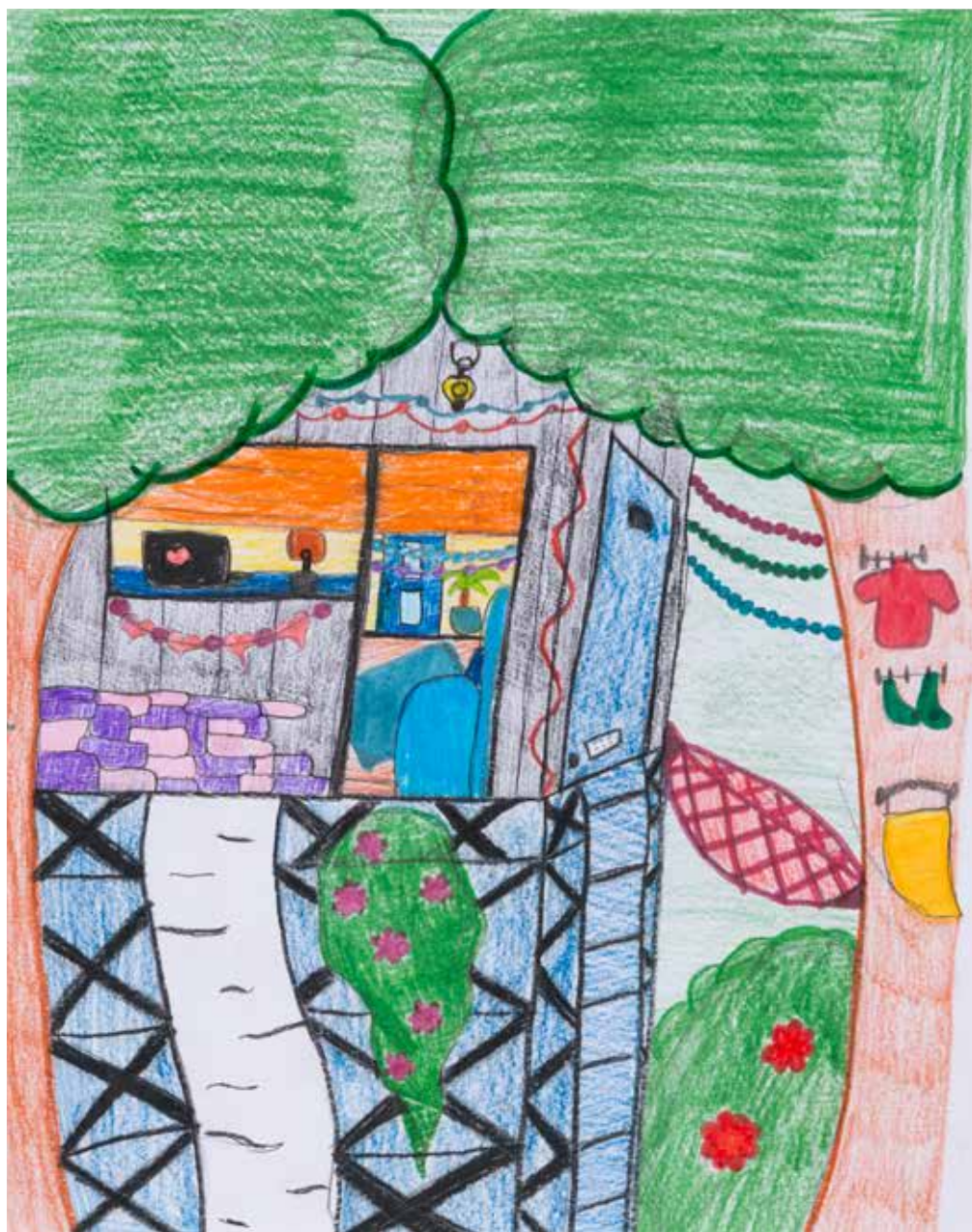
Playhouse designer: Kristin Rüt

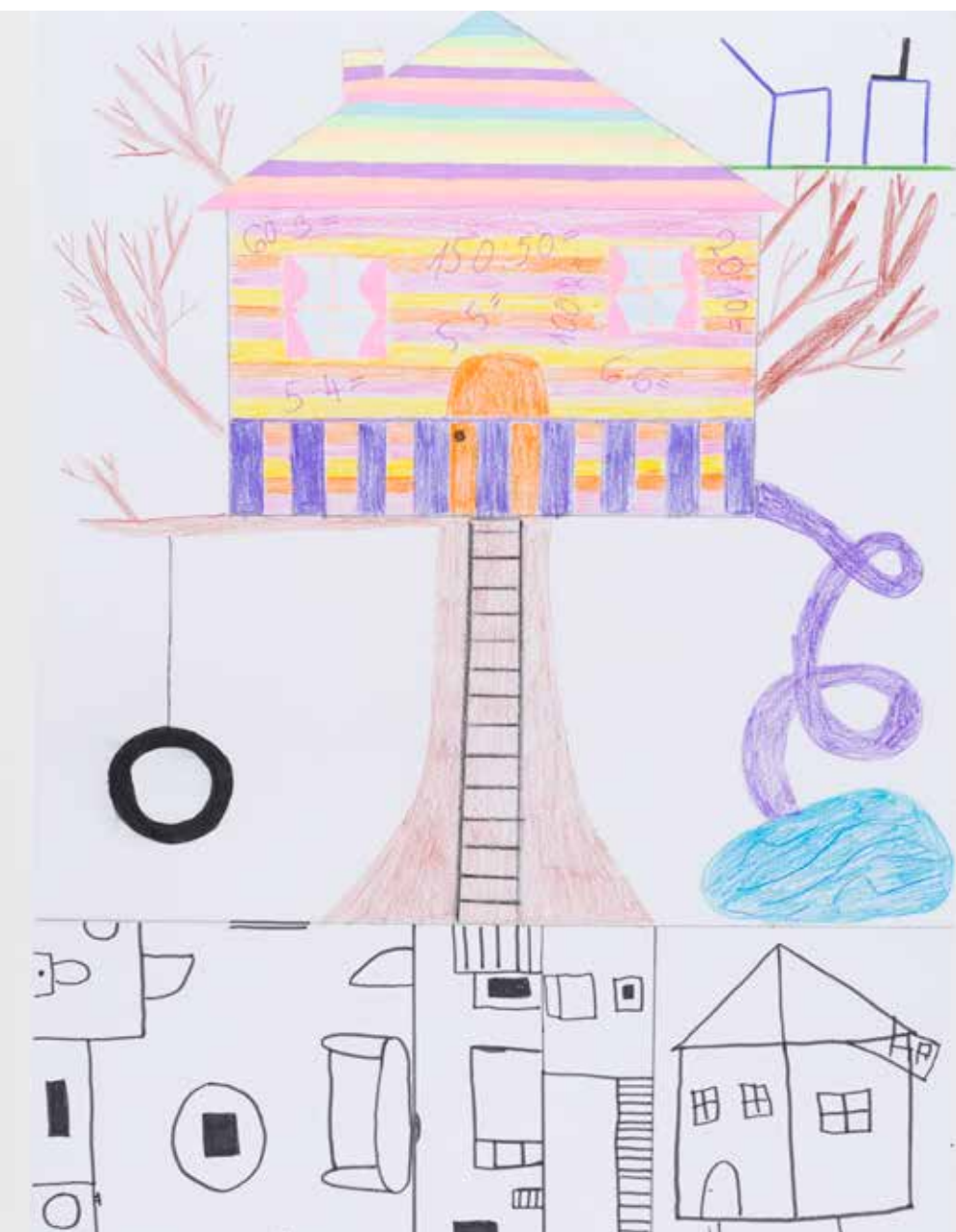


Some of the play house designs realised at the exhibition.



Digital database The World of Tree Huts and Play houses of play house designs sent in to the drawing competition for 1st to 4th graders was presented at the exhibition. A database enabled exhibition visitors to get an overview of the variety of hut and playhouse designs of Estonian children. Designs of children's dream playhouses represent their ideal worlds, giving clues about how children relate to urban space: do they break the rules or follow the prefabricated ideals borrowed by the world of adults?





Urban youth: studying 'hanging out' when everything is mediated

Pille Runnel

Living in a secular society, Estonian youth probably did not notice the message of Pope Francis, who urged in his speech to 50 000 German altar servers who had come to Rome on a pilgrimage in August 2014 that they not to waste time on the Internet, smart-phones and television, but spend their time on more productive activities (Scherer 2014). "Maybe many young people waste too many hours on futile things," the pope said (ibid.). Whether the relationship between youth and the internet is futile or a way to embrace the opportunities of an digital age, is a debate which goes beyond the information age into history, further back than television and probably the printing press. But pope Francis is right at least about one thing: the internet and youth go together. Everywhere. Walk into any young-people filled environment today and you'll find it media-saturated: a mix of smart phones and other digital media, most likely in use for socialising and connecting, content creation, information searching or viewing and reading digital content. It is not society that has become media-saturated, it is a condition, where 'everything is mediated' (Livingstone 2009: 2). Indeed, in the early twenty-first century it seems that a core societal value is that of connection. In our public and private lives, at micro and macro levels, getting more connected is called for,

planned for and celebrated. Connections are heterarchical, agentic, creative. They can overcome barriers and blockages to facilitate interaction, hybridity, flexibility and flow. (Livingstone 2014: 55) The overwhelmingly mediated connectedness of youth and its spatial aspects became the second pillar of curating the #Chilling Around Town exhibition.

It is widely recognised that today's complex empirical media landscape requires equally complex theoretical approaches (Drotner 2002). Our interest in exploring young people's urban lives as media rich experiences was located at the analytical intersection of two different theoretical frameworks. Firstly, in the area of media studies, looking at youth as a digital generation, where understanding media-rich lives of youth is also informed by mediation theories. The second framework has to do with the 'relationality' of (urban) space. This concept is used by Henri Lefebvre when he discusses this space as a result of human activity. Instead of thinking of space as static continuum to be filled with something, it is rather constantly produced or reproduced by human interaction (1991 [1974]). Lefebvre's idea of relationality is complemented by Michel de Certeau's (1984 [1980]: 93) idea of how the city is written 'from down below' by the stories that the intersecting wonderings of ordinary urban dwellers compose, thereby escaping the attempts to impose upon it an imaginary totalisation 'from above' (De Certeau 1984: 96). The concept of 'relationality' is topical also at the time of digitisation of the urban space, where the multi-layered nature of the space becomes especially vivid. These two lines of thought can be brought together when approaching young people's spatial practices, as the practices are closely linked to the ICTs and the strong presence of portable digital devices.¹

1 Audience scholar Seija Ridell suggests that to be able to describe adequately the nature of urban spatial transformation it is actually necessary to update Lefebvre's (1991 [1974]) relational notion of space and take note of the interrelationality of space, as the latter notion not only directs attention to the hybridity of urban space but also raises the issue of people's complicity with the intricate dynamics of social power in the software-sustained cities onto the agenda (Ridell 2014, 239).

When exploring digital urbanity, we were interested in how young people use digital devices to manage, bring together and hold apart the public and the private in their daily lives, approaching as a particular generation, while at the same time being aware of the need to keep critical undertones while doing so. One can assume that this generation, living their media-rich lives, is accordingly more independent, curious, innovative and open. Social network sites, online games, video-sharing sites, gadgets are now well established in the fixtures of youth culture (Ito 2010). Yet, 'digital generation' and 'digital natives' are widely used, although contested concepts, being criticised because of technological determinism and because they encourage a denial of actual digital stratification inside the generation (Kalmus 2014). The only domain where the young display features characteristic to the digital generation becomes apparent when looking at the usage of social media channels for communication and self-representation (ibid.). Self-representation appeared as a key domain in the extensive group work sessions with youth, when the curators were working with the exhibition preparation:

20.30 back home, browse through Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr (Participant's media diary)²

When I came home, I had time to listen to music and talk to friends (Participant's media diary)

Exploring the mediated experiences of the young for the #Chilling Around Town exhibition was an exercise in mediatization research. From various scholars discussing the meaning and relevance of mediatization in approaching the situation, where everything is mediated (Lundby 2009; Couldry 2014; Hepp 2013; Krotz 2009) the most relevant work to provide theoretical grounds for the exhibition curators was that of Friedrich Krotz (2009: 24-25). Krotz sees mediatization as a meta-process – just like globalisation or individualisation – that refers to how “media in the long run increasingly become relevant for the social construction of

² This and following quotes from young people's media diaries.

everyday life and sociocultural reality as a whole" (ibid.). Rooted to some extent in the early 1990s media ethnography approach to media-rich everyday life (Silverstone and Hirsch 1992) the concept of mediatization is important if we seek to understand everyday realities and socialisation. Families, peer groups and schools are still the fundamental institutions in socialisation. However, they are also mediatized and cannot be understood without the media (Krotz 2009).

During the Estonian language course I used Twitter.

During Biology we watched a film.

During History we watched a film.

During Physics we watched a film.

And we watched a film in Chemistry.

I checked what is interesting out there on Instagram.

(Participant's media diary)

Another German scholar, Andreas Hepp, applying a transmedia perspective points out that the communication that is part of the process of "constructing" (Berger/Luckmann 1967; Knoblauch 2013) families as well as public spheres is not simply based on one medium but on various kinds of media (Hepp 2013). For families, this might be (mobile) phones and the social web, (digital) photo albums to share pictures, letters and postcards, or watching television together (ibid.). This means that when trying to grasp anything, from families and groups of friends to states and transnational public spheres, the different media (both traditional and digital) describing them have to be taken into account. Young people, wherever they are and whatever they do, have access to a set of media and media functions, i.e. they act in a media-rich environment.

Despite the fact that studies in contemporary media-rich lives are not limited to particular uses of media and media content, research discussing particularly urban localities as mediatized communicative environments is somewhat rare (Couldry

and McCarthy 2004; Falkheimer and Jansson 2006). In audience studies, including studies of young people and children, the household has remained the main context of studying media use, despite portable devices becoming increasingly the main device used to access the internet. When using mediatization as a framework informing our empirical work as exhibition curators, the starting point of actual field research was not so much following the domestic and public contexts of media use. We had to depart the usual contexts and try to learn about young people's engagement with different forms of mediated communication in the everyday space.

Acknowledging that "contemporary cities, physical urban places and virtual space become profoundly entangled with one another in the networked and mobile uses of media and technologies" (Ridell and Zeller 2013) we set out to explore how urban spatiality is (re)produced in young people's media-related and technology-mediated activities. We designed a research path to uncover their mediatized daily activities of communicating, networking and learning. We attempted to study media usage in an experimental, iterative way so that the data was partly analysed between the phases of working with the participants at the fieldwork sessions. Various methodological steps moved back and forth in order to learn about a set of questions: where and under what circumstances do young people use media technologies? How are media technologies involved in how youth experience, understand and use urban spaces? In which ways are digital technologies involved into how young people relate to their surroundings? How do technological gadgets bring social relationships to the public urban space?

The whole process applied participatory research methods. During this cooperation, students at Kristiine Gymnasium in Tallinn filled out two sets of homework. As classwork and homework, young people kept a diary and a photo diary about their daily media use. This self-documentation approach sought to uncover participants' personal perspectives and experiences and helped to map what kind of media technologies and applications youth

used in a set of physical and geographical locations, including home, school and urban surroundings. Students monitored and documented their use of media across various situations encountered during whole day – both when settled and while on the move. Apart from being a participatory data collection exercise, this approach was beneficial to the curators in terms of enabling an insight into activities and places to which the researcher as a grownup from outside would not have had access.

The fieldwork carried out by the curators enabled them to develop exhibition objects, in cooperation with media artists, that explored and portrayed how the digital generation manages space through digital media tools: the *In My Own Bubble* installation and a touch-screen-based item called “How Are You Tweeting, Estonia?” Both show how, through primarily social and creative uses, mobile phones have given urban space a new life for young people.

The *In My Own Bubble* installation showed how young people constantly moved between social media channels, contextualising these switches into the spatial management of public and private in public space. This exhibition item, developed from the fieldwork data, presented a fast-forwarded day of young people based on screenshots of their activities on smartphones and in photos, tracing the places they had been in the city. At the installation, a set of lamps hanging from the ceiling depicted the different media channels they had used, while a set of computer screens showed both the created and used media content they uploaded throughout the day.

While the 19th century flâneur was someone who actively sought urbanity and a relationship with urban space, the contemporary wanderer portrayed by *In My Own Bubble* might switch back and forth between spatial layers. By going online one barricades oneself from encounters with the immediate reality: “When on the

bus I quickly read through my Twitter feed and listened to some music,” a participant in the study notes in her media usage diary. One might experience moments, or a full mode of, complete disconnection from one’s surroundings, disappearing into a bubble created by a digital portable device whenever possible. At the same time, digital portable media serves as a tool of nonstop connection with user’s social realities: one’s remote, but familiar social circle of friends and family³.

The technological layer between urbanity and the self enhances the hybridity of the urban space, which combines private, public, virtual and real. While often being the tool of disconnection, portable digital devices make relating to urbanity still possible, as one can link to specific locations and make one’s particular location meaningful and one’s privacy public through technological mediation. This was explored by the second exhibition item, which offered visitors the possibility to explore hybridity via a touch-screen-based database of contextualised tweets called “How Are You Tweeting, Estonia?” The touch screen displayed real-time Twitter messages sent in Estonia. The appearing tweets were linked to their tweeting location and showed spots and clusters of tweets emerging in real time. By zooming in to this amazing set of ‘big data’, the exhibition visitors were able to distinguish media content on a very small scale, for example, tweets from one neighbourhood, public square, school house or perhaps even home. Significantly, the content of the tweets with geolocation does not necessarily deal with the author’s surroundings.

The media *In My Own Bubble* installation was also a representation of ‘thirdspace’ (Soja 1996), which is based on ‘hanging

³ According to the recent report (Mascheroni and Cuman 2014), smartphone use has diversified both locations and devices of internet access, while the home remains the main context of use. Using it, while on the move, comes second. According to the study, with smartphones, kids value privacy and convenience more than mobility (*ibid*), but this is also partly, why smartphones actually are used, while on the move: smartphone is a constant link to one’s social network (*ibid*).

out' in consumerist spaces or in a square, park or street alone or with friends. Hanging out changes the status of a place, creating a "third space" – a "bubble" with a temporary character that is strongly supported by digital gadgets⁴. It appears that while young people are crosscutting the online and the offline, hanging out both on-site and online simultaneously, they are making public urban space more private. Originally the concept of "thirdspace" was created by Soja (1996), for whom this notion referred to the space which is located between the spaces of adults and children (Matthews et al. 2000: 69), but this concept also holds in the case of space created by media technologies, where personal digital gadgets amplify the experience. Waltrap (2013, 565) suggests that for their users, this kind of non-place is part of semi-public personal landscapes, and that the media is involved in a way that is crucial to the dynamics of being invisible to outsiders. By hanging out in this private space it is possible to communicate with friends untroubled and at a distance from those who would place restrictions, such as family or strangers.

This phenomenon of the changing status of the place has been explored in various studies. For example Kopomaa (2000) argues that mobile phones entering the street and other public spaces changes these locations into places of sharing and collecting information, and of creating and maintaining social relationships (Kopomaa 2000: 11). As Mascheroni and Cuman (2014) show, young users associate mobile devices in general with a rise in the volume of peer communication. Full-time access to friends is praised as one of the major opportunities of smartphones. Many interviewees in Mascheroni's and Cuman's study believed they are more 'sociable' since they had a smartphone. Along with smartphones,

4 This phrase was introduced as a key concept for interpreting youth urban practices at the exhibition by Ehti Järv, the chief curator of the exhibition. It is derived from Mary Thomas (Thomas 2005: 591), for whom 'hanging out' as a theoretical category involves various space-related practices for temporary preoccupying the space for social activities, including walking, driving around, shopping, sitting, talking in public or private spaces.

particular affordances, such as new messaging services, became available. For young people this means that communication facilities are perceived as being always 'at hand'. Communication through social media is free of charge, thus encouraging a continuous, intermittent flow of communication and the practice of 'broadcasting' (Mascheroni and Cuman 2014), which is an important feature of group communication for youth. Waltrap, who studies the media use of Danish Muslim girls claims that on so-called techno-landscapes, such as Facebook or other social media channels, online and offline are not entirely separate from each other (Waltrap 2013). Public places where one is invisible among the masses, linked to the opportunity of media use, offer privacy that is not available for the young at home (privacy from parents and families) (Waltrap 2013: 564)

In both our exhibition-related research and previous studies the issue of the public and private aspects of space seem to be the key point when managing urban experience. It is also significant that the distinction between public and private in a public space can be created (or lost) with just subtle changes, and that 'public' and 'private' can mean different things for different people. In Waltrap's study (2013), taking photos, text messaging or 'tagging' oneself and others become part of an event. By creating and uploading media content intended for the remote but immediate social circles, one can create additional audiences that one is not aware of⁵. In these 'spaces of appearance 2.0' it also becomes possible to negotiate sensitive moral issues in new ways, which, again, may challenge the traditional spatio-cultural boundaries between the public and private spheres of life (Ridell and Zeller 2013). Potentially, spatial distance combined with knowledgeable use of media technologies makes it possible to control one's social connections better than in face-to face situations. In our study, the media diary of a participant in the youth groups that were

5 Yet the How Are You Tweeting, Estonia? exhibition installation, which presented real-time Twitter messages caused surprise and triggered conversations about the digital literacies of youth centering on failed attempts to protect one's privacy when tweeting.

involved in making the #Chilling Around Town exhibition demonstrates how he organises simultaneous chats with several of his female friends.

...so it is the last day of school!

Only tomorrow?

It's today for us here

Cool! :-) Today we had the reception of the student council and the last school day only tomorrow

Christmas party today. nervous :/

Us too :-) and especially as I am at the dentist's now
#Nervous #worstdayever

Drinking behind the teachers' backs, not joking

You too?

Not really, I am on coke

"Not really"

Dunno, here all are sober this year :)

(Participant's media diary)

This phenomenon of creating 'bubbles' separated from their surroundings has been called 'public privacy' by various researchers (de Souza e Silva and Frith 2012) or 'portable public privacy' (Kleinmann 2007; Gumpert and Drucker 2007; Drucker and Gumpert 2011). We might think of parallel chats as simultaneous 'privacies' where not only boundaries between the private and the public, but also boundaries between various simultaneously created private social spaces, are managed using media.

Our study, designed to fit into the production path of the #Chilling Around Town did not set out to cover all aspects of how personal media and public urban space are related. The study nevertheless points out some suggestions for further research into urban media audiences. Our fieldwork suggested that digital media usage changes not only how informed young people

feel about their surroundings or the kinds of patterns of social relations they develop, but also influences how they experience public urban space outside their personal digital media-enabled bubbles. Being on the move through the city while shifting from one social situation to another means navigating in hybrid space, which becomes one's immediate reality.

The installations we set out to create for the #Chilling Around Town exhibition considered the spatial dimensions of the relationship between ICTs and social networks more widely, pointing to the fact that the ways in which technology is used by people has a broader significance with regard to urban change. The 'new spaces' created by ICT are closely linked to physical spaces.

We did not comprehensively study the aspects of linking one's digital media use back to one's immediate spatial reality, such as the phenomenon of on-site collective spectatorship at big cultural or sporting events, where verifying and documenting one's participation through digital portable devices has become important. Analysing the collected data showed that we did not learn much about young people's awareness and the possible interplay between one's social media audiences and those in close physical proximity (such as people taking the same bus). Switching in and out of one's digitally-enhanced 'bubble' also means that a person is switching back between audiences online and in physical space.

It is acknowledged that digital media technologies facilitate spatial transcendence and mobility. According to Urry (2002), virtual travel comes with a greater need for physical proximity. Studies that indicate that mobile and on-line activity deepens rather than undermines social networks (DiMaggio, Hargittai et al. 2001; Licoppe and Smoreda 2005) point out that shared urban experiences, such as blogging or mashups (Hardey 2007), as well as sharing one's physical location with one's social network, are part of this increased sociality.

The need to check in through social media and the usage of location-aware portable devices to circulate public representations

of being somewhere to those who are not physically present can be interpreted not just from the point of view of its communicative power. It can also be understood as a personal urge to mark a space with one's presence. Digitally enhanced space is not a backdrop for interaction (Crang and Graham 2007) but carries agency itself. Crang and Graham (2007) even explore the notion of 'sentient cities' as the collective of spaces of interwoven digital and real experiences. These 'hybrid spaces' (Kluitenberg 2006) are the enablers of visibility, as ICTs "allow spaces to both remember and anticipate our lives" (Crang and Graham 2007: 791). While being aware of this dynamic, we were surprised that for the participants in our case study, marking one's presence consciously and in real time, such as updating one's geographical location as a status message or check in, was a rather peripheral activity in terms of social media use. It was more likely that the young people in our study 'checked in' only when stepping outside of their regular daily trajectories, for example when going to an unusual place or when travelling abroad. These were clearly the situations in which one's spatial experiences were enhanced.

Despite acknowledging its importance for understanding contemporary mediatized urbanity, the exhibition project also decided not to explore young people's interactions with screen media in the public urban space. Especially in big global cities, such as New York, Hong Kong or Los Angeles, public space itself has become a media environment. In Estonian cities, the density of public screens is significantly lower, although we acknowledge that even in these less media-rich urban settings, public media (digital billboards, information screens and other elements of smart cities) are continuously mixed with personal digital gadgets, covering public urban space with invisible networks. These are part of the everyday for local contemporary urban audiences.



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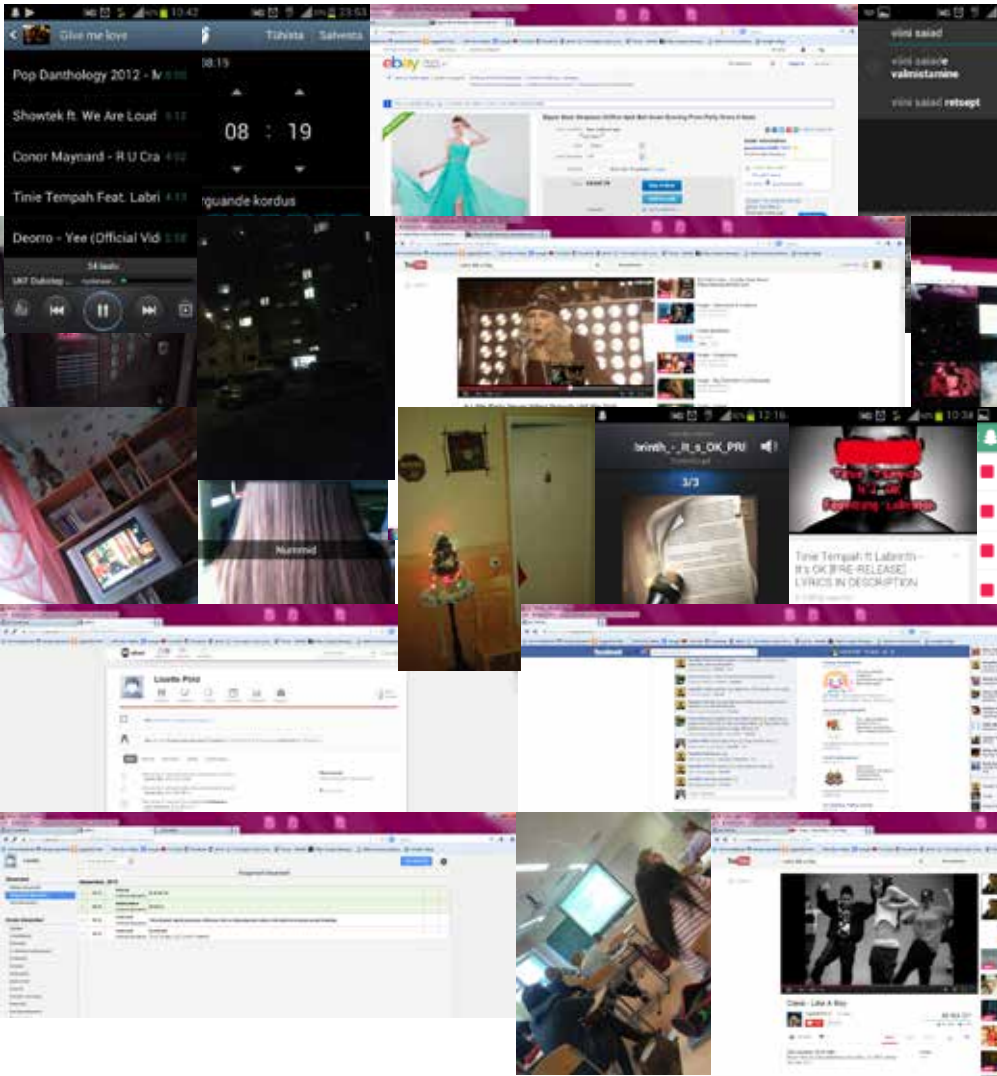
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The In My Own Bubble media installation by Timo Toots.



Young people who participated in the exhibition project monitored their media usage throughout the day, then as part of subsequent workshops discussed how media consumption was linked to their daily trajectories. Images from the media diaries of two participants.

