

Challenges and limitations when working with children

As described earlier in the section on ethics, working with children presents many challenges and limitations, as can be seen in some of the experiences reported above. Here, I highlight some other challenges of involving children and call for further theoretical and empirical discussions and research systematisations to improve both these processes and the outcomes of collaborating with children.

The first concern relates to the use of the gathered data and the development of meaningful outcomes for children. In most cases, the data gathered from these activities are extremely symbolic; they are not always sufficiently specific or reliable for use in research and design. Collecting data while keeping children engaged is also a challenge that requires a lot of energy from research groups planning activities. A group of students made the following observations:

It wasn't easy to have a straight-forward collaborative design process either since kids receive and share information in more abstract ways than adults might. We also had to pay special attention to keep the process collaborative because of the inherent hierarchy when working with children. We tried to keep a balance between providing the children with examples and options to choose from without restricting their creativity in any way and between being well-prepared while staying flexible and openminded.¹

¹ Extract from the Ebook of the Studio Insurgent Design: unlearning practices through marginalized spaces (Juliana Canedo, Tuanne Monteiro, Qusay Amer, Maureen Abi-Ghanem and Francesca Ceola), TU Berlin 2024. Students: Annika Hopster, Sari Hallak, Valentin Keller, Milon Thomsen, Ida Duge.

The second aspect is managing emerging issues among groups of children when using dynamic tools. This can be particularly difficult because students and practitioners in architecture, planning and design may not have training on how to manage violence among children, such as bullying, among other types of group behaviour and interactions that are beyond the facilitators' skills and expertise. Should researchers always ensure the presence of a social worker during these types of activities? Although including a social worker would be invaluable, it may not be practical in many contexts, especially when exploring spaces in the Global South.

In addition, decisions about how to organise the group, the size of the group, the children's ages and whether the study group should remain the same throughout the process or change over the time can create several challenges and opportunities. In the words of a group of students that worked in a public space with no predefined group,

it was difficult to control the group sizes of children within each workshop, and as a collective agreement within our group since the initial workshop, we have decided to experiment with those big and open groups of children and aimed for an inclusive experience for all. We have worked with many children, of different ages, language capabilities, and ethnicities, leading into many perspectives. This has certainly helped us with learning and unlearning our ideas and assumptions along our framework, where many possibilities were opened by always being prepared with different methodologies we can test in a single workshop, in order to account for the imminent unexpected limitations.²

Despite these challenges and limitations, collaborating with children and planning their spaces is extremely relevant not only to introducing their perspectives into spatial analyses and designs but also to allowing them to perceive their role as co-producers of urban spaces.

2 Extract from the Ebook of the Studio Insurgent Design: unlearning practices through marginalized spaces (Juliana Canedo, Tuanne Monteiro, Qusay Amer, Maureen Abi-Ghanem and Francesca Ceola), TU Berlin 2024. Students: Annika Rüther, Salma Elbasty, Hannah Langels, Amalia Ardian, Lilli Reinkensmeier.