

## **THE PLAY TOWN –**

A model for new learning

*„When I entered the sports complex at the Olympic Park where the children’s town of Mini-Munich was set up for the first time and was looking down from above into the maze of rooms, alleys and squares, I could not physically move for a long time, I was so fascinated by the view,“ says Gert Selle, professor of Aesthetic Education in Oldenburg, summarizing his first view of the Play Town and continues: “ As a modern pedagogic attempt, the large-scale project of Mini-Munich, has proven itself magnificently ...why was I, the level-headed observer with a different perspective, suddenly so enchanted by the visual quality of the place, where all the action solidifies – by the town on the floor of the hall, recreated every day, brought to life by the children milling about, protected, charged with the promise of participation in an hitherto unknown life full of new events?*

*... On a daily basis an intended answer to the situation is created in the form of a ‚social sculpture‘, like Beuys might envisioned it: the constantly self-reproductive, self-renewing Play Town action as a process or structure in time at this place as a network of social perceptions, relations and productivity.”*

*(from the magazine „Poiesis“ by Gert Selle, Prof. for Aesthetic Education, Oldenburg)*

Whether one is considering the Play Town Mini-Munich as a game of children, always arranged in a new way and rich in variations, as a visionary project or a stand-alone aesthetic-artistic project, a permanently changing social sculpture- it is always worth the discussion, irrespective of the chosen perspective.

Considering its basic structure, it defies the rules agreed upon and the didactically legitimized orchestration, all standard pedagogic habits. The rules as well as the setting only serve the purpose of creating a productive frame, within which the children can act in a self-organized way.

Those who will take the time to actively grasp how the many individual actions and activities are related to one another, will inevitably notice that all this can only be described as „life“. The Play Town represents a current reality for children. It may differ from the real adult world, but draws on its experience and references, which are used by the children in their own game.

## **THE CHILDREN’S TOWN AS A GAME**

The idea is as simple as it is universally applicable: A city landscape made available as scene of action with different institutions – shops, workshops, banks, post office, town hall,

refuse collection, library, garden centre. The roles offered can be assumed by the children, expanded and interpreted according to their own ideas.

Depending on their previous experience and knowledge regarding these institutions, the children take up the different roles and one by one arrive in the joint game: they develop relationships, create networks and make agreements.

The town landscape is filled with life.

The basic rules, work, study, earn and spend money, cultural and political activities are quickly agreed upon. They have to be –as in all games – confirmed by the children or newly established amongst each other. Simple rituals make it easier to enter the game, to get a city identification card or the obligatory visit of the employment office at the beginning of the play-day.

In order to place the individual institutions of the city and the roles in relation to one another, an agreed-upon exchange is required. One means of exchange known to all children is money, play money, which can be earned in the different institutions of the city and also spent there. The thus created dynamics of city life will be increased by taxes, fees, a regulating banking system as well as real incentives to work.

„We pretend that it is a town ...“ – that is the basic agreement. Within this simple setting the game can get into full swing. Especially when the materials and the basic setting allow the actions to be serious and binding.

Different interests and abilities, background of experience (age, gender, origin, etc.) take effect, when the children themselves can have a strong influence on the roles.

This effect is even more enhanced by the individual actions and activities having „consequences“. Furniture, which can really be used, is made of wood, goods which have been produced in the workshops of the Play Town, are sold in the shop, food is served in the restaurant, which has been prepared in the kitchen by the children.

This is only feasible, when adults let the children run the Play Town themselves. The high level of stimulance, which comes with the way companies and workshops are set up as well as their equipment with materials, tools and their projects, has to go hand in hand with the trust that children will embrace these challenges.

The basic functions of the workshops have to be plausible on the one hand, on the other, the way the tasks are perceived and fulfilled, has to remain the creative task of the children.

## **COMPLEXITY AS CHARACTERISTIC OF A CITY**

Cities are dynamic structures. Life in a city is at the same time concentrated and accelerated. Whenever one comes to a strange city, one does not know, how this city “works”, how its

spaces are to be used, who lives in this city and in what way it is different from other cities. We behave in a different way, depending on what our interests in a city are, whether we want to live there or to visit it as a tourist. Cities have a great attraction to people and as systems, are able to integrate many newcomers into their development in a short period of time. It does, however, take time to become part of a city.

Cities have developed different formal and informal procedures to include new citizens. The basic rule of having to register in order to become citizen of a city, is known to everyone. It is more complicated, but also much more exciting to slowly discover the patterns of finely-woven rules, informal agreements and arrangements, which have developed on the basis of experienced knowledge as well as traditions of the different groups of inhabitants. The higher the requirements towards a city are and the more varied the needs of its inhabitants, the stronger the role of informal exchange processes.

The same also applies to a Play Town like Mini-Munich. It is especially fascinating for children, because in many aspects it creates exactly this complexity through its different participants or “inhabitants”.

A Play Town becomes all the more complex, if more different children of different ages and interests play and participate, if the internal agreements and interim agreements are made and given up again in more differentiated ways and the more interwoven the processes of social interaction become, which grow on the basis of the game structure.

Each new player starts by exploring these structures. Step by step, and especially if he is not pushed, he becomes able to explore the possibilities of the game and to get carried away. Just the way children play.

### **CAN THIS WORK? RISK AS A PEDAGOGIC CATEGORY**

Although pedagogic processes are never straightforward and always complex in their effect, therefore also contain certain risks, it is an often-explained aim in consulting work, to organise these, if possible, in such a way and reduce them so that they remain manageable and that in the end exactly that is achieved what has been intended.

We have also observed the following phenomenon: Whilst complexity in real social development processes is increasing, pedagogics often moves in the opposite direction- simplification, reduction, separation and modularisation of actions. This is accompanied by a set choice of methods and – if possible- the predictable determination of learning objectives following a set period of time. This minimizes the risk maximally for those responsible for this type of pedagogics.

The risk for future generations thus increases constantly: complexity is experienced as massive factor of uncertainty and one comes under extreme stress, if one can no longer

interpret actions or has not fully understood instructions right away. This is dramatically influenced by the fact that the daily routine of children takes almost exclusively place in spaces which are of a formal pedagogic design, while at the same time open spaces become less and less populated by children. Orientation in the many realities (analogue, digital, medial, social, etc.) becomes more and more difficult for them.

Although Mini-Munich per se constitutes a protected, didactically planned space, it is a source of differentiated, as well as extremely different social interactive patterns and actions. To a certain extent handling complexity can be practised in a protected context, together with peers. A prerequisite is that the pedagogic organizers are interested and commit themselves to the venture of admitting and supporting a maximum level of differentiation of the game. Making such spaces available is not a given, especially if the prerequisite is that the maintenance of its dynamics results solely from the rules and requires no instruction.

The following challenges have to be met by pedagogues:

- Of course there will be children and teenagers who will be overwhelmed by the Play Town and its dynamics: too loud, too chaotic, too many children in action, too emotional and too intransparent. The helpers are advised to be attentive observers – also outside their institutions, because the Play Town also has many corners and niches – and to show children possibilities to enter the game, but everything cannot be solved.

And then there will inevitably be children and teenagers, who would like to become „bank robbers“ or „real estate speculators“ – always hard on the edges of reality, always looking for gaps in the game or for opportunities to find out about the limits of the game and to expand them – in their favour. Some children develop a fine sense for how “stable” the game on the whole is and drag others along. This has to be negotiated on a daily basis in different variations, between the children themselves and with the helpers.

A further challenge consists of the fact that in a Play Town like Mini-Munich real drills, sharp kitchen knives, complicated printing facilities, steam irons, sewing or sanding machines, hot frying pans and so on... are used by the children. This is necessary, because the things which are produced or processed are also real. They will find their further use in the city, they will be sold in the department store, consumed in the restaurant, or used as a means of transport/taxi in the streets. This makes participating to a certain extent „dangerous“ and requires thorough observation and low-key support by the helpers and above all a generous trust in the children so that they can learn to handle things responsibly.

## **THE PLAY TOWN – A PEDAGOGIC VISION IN PRATICE**

Mini-Munich is often referred to as a „miniature city“. Also implying „how sweet, children play adults and learn how to work and earn money ...and.“

A total misunderstanding, when you look at the matter more thoroughly. The children and teenagers do what they would like to do elsewhere as well. They take possession of their environment, try out, explore, research and test – this also refers to complex cultural contexts and complicated social facts. They experience it as exciting, to move about in the quasi public space of the Play Town and they – constantly- learn.

At the same time they get “their money’s worth”, play enthusiastically and satisfy their needs for exercise, being loud, curious experimenting, affective-emotional actions, joint activities as well as communicative exchange. They don’t just play adults, but are creating a world in accordance with their needs. Their shop might for example bear a sign, succinctly inscribed „Closed due to wealth!“.

Didactically speaking: Playing and learning are connected as a productive unit. A basis is laid for education which also takes place in non-formal and informal contexts. This requires generous and inviting room for action, which has not been determined down to the last detail, which is made accessible to the children in a meaningful way and which can be worked on creatively.

The Play Town as a pedagogic model is such a room for action.

Just like Mini-Muenchen, for example, which opens its gates every two years for three to four weeks. The influence of a Play Town, however, is much larger, because it begins in the heads of the children long before the beginning and ends long after – it encourages to continue under one’s own steam.

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