

Blueprints for hope: engaging children as critical actors in urban place making

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Third- and fourth-grade elementary school students have been contributing their ideas to the redevelopment of their community in San Francisco, using a methodology known as Y-PLAN (Youth-Plan-Learn-Act, Now!). This article explains the process and describes the ideas the children have come up with – and how key areas and insights are being incorporated into the new community design.

‘I can come up here in my tree house at night and lay down and look at the stars and be peaceful.’ This is what Donte Jones, a fourth-grade student at Malcolm X Academy (MXA) in San Francisco, dreamily imagined a few years ago when he presented his scale model of a tree house to students, teachers, community members, civic leaders and local developers as part of his overall vision for creating public spaces within the HOPE SF housing community, about to be built adjacent to his school. The vision was cultivated during a school year which adults said was a ‘good year, because we only had a few lockdowns’ (due to shooting in the neighbourhood).

Donte was a participant in ‘Y-PLAN Elementary: An Architecture Think Tank’, where over 175 third- and fourth-grade students have been investigating questions and issues related to the redevelopment of housing surrounding their school for over 6 years. This work is part of a larger, city-wide redevelopment strategy called HOPE SF, which aims to transform the Bay View and other painfully neglected parts of San Francisco into vibrant, healthy communities. Driven by public funds from federal, state and local levels, HOPE SF is the nation’s first large-scale public housing revitalisation project to invest in high-quality, sustainable housing and community development while also enabling current residents to stay in their homes, replacing them ‘one for one’ rather than demolishing them wholesale and displacing an entire community.

Young people often constitute more than half of a public housing neighbourhood’s population, and while they are willing and able to contribute meaningful insights about the places where they live, they are rarely involved in community redevelopment visioning and design

processes. San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) decided to partner with the UC Berkeley Center for Cities + Schools (CC+S) to bring the Y-PLAN civic engagement and educational strategy to the Bay View. Through the Y-PLAN methodology, CC+S engaged young people of all ages in mapping out the assets and challenges of this Bay View neighbourhood and began to work with the local elementary school to see how the schools could be directly involved in re-visioning a new, opportunity-rich community.

The Y-PLAN methodology

Grounded in over a decade of educational research, the Y-PLAN methodology’s well-defined yet flexible process of critical inquiry builds the capacity of young people to contribute their own data and insights to the planning and policymaking process.¹ It also builds the capacity of civic leaders to value and use the insight of young people to create better plans, policies and places (McKoy *et al.*, 2010). The Hunters View project is the first large-scale effort applying Y-PLAN to elementary schools recognising the critical role young people of all ages play in redesigning and re-imagining their communities (Buss, 2010). Y-PLAN has five core components, all of which have been adapted for elementary-age students for the Malcolm X project.

1 Authentic civic client

For the ongoing project at Malcolm X the students have been engaged as ‘co-researchers’, working directly with civic leaders from the Mayor’s office, school district, HOPE SF and the developer, John Stewart Company. They have worked with professional architects, landscape architects and planners who have had the power to listen to and act on their ideas. Together, the students and adult partners are continuing to address this question: ‘How can young people help the Hunters View HOPE SF housing developers forge stronger connections between the school, the neighbourhood, and the larger community?’

2 Focus on place making and the built environment

Y-PLAN engages students in a critical analysis of the places where they live. Students are examining and finding solutions to critical community issues through the lens of



Some of the community resources students identified as being most important to integrate in their neighbourhood were: library and tech resource centre; performance space/theatre; places for creative expression and inspirational public art; art galleries and community gathering places. Photo • Courtesy UC Berkeley Center for Cities + Schools

elements of the built environment: housing, transport, public space, and schools, services and amenities. This place-making initiative has required reciprocal learning between adults and young people and has driven another key question: ‘What are some of the ingredients that will make the Hunters View neighbourhood a healthy, sustainable and joyful community?’

3 Y-PLAN 5-step methodology of critical inquiry

As students moved through cycles of the five-step Y-PLAN Roadmap they have learned civics by doing civics. The students have engaged in research about their school and community through mapping, interviews, observation and analysis. The Y-PLAN methodology is modelled on the participatory planning process and scientific method, including problem definition, community research, generating visions for change, and presenting evidence-based solutions for a client and panel of authentic stakeholders with the power to act on young people’s ideas.

4 Academic fit

Y-PLAN projects are aligned to academic goals and designed to equip students with experience and tools for career, college, and community readiness. At Malcolm X each year the teachers and facilitators have crafted the Y-PLAN curriculum to augment academic learning objectives focused on applied mathematics, sustainability, and cultural influences in design. The programme has created a context within which to honour students’ voices by creating opportunities for oral and visual presentation and respectfully showcasing their drawings, models, and artefacts in a public arena.

5 Social justice and equity focus

Y-PLAN projects change the status quo by opening traditional avenues of power and decision making to young people and community members who tend to be left out of the city planning and decision-making process. Racial and economic inequalities are deeply

rooted in the Bay View. Through Y-PLAN, young people are recognised as critical actors in transforming current conditions and interrupting deep and historic patterns of inequality.

What students wanted

Over the years, the students have generated eight main ideas to make public spaces in the new community child-friendly, safe, accessible, healthy, sustainable and joyful.

1 Artistic and safe gateways and pathways

Each year, as a top priority, the students have lobbied for the creation of safe, artistic, and delightful routes to connect their home environments to local resources, businesses and the school. These public corridors would be alternatives to the street and would include both footpaths and bike paths to be used during and after school hours. Inspired by Michelle Obama's 'Let's Move' campaign, the students have been excited about promoting healthy, active living. With this goal in mind, their proposals for pathways include exercise trails, featuring places to move, work out, stretch, walk, run, or lift. They also could incorporate fun and adventurous elements such as a swing, mazes, rock hopping, or innovative playground elements made from recycled materials.

Student proposals also included gateways to mark and frame special places such as entry points into the school, views of the San Francisco Bay, or access routes into Hunters View. Their proposals for gateways included creative and artistic features. For example, gateways into the school could symbolise the entry into the realm of learning and knowledge. Gateways into Hunters View could represent pathways and connections with the larger community.

2 Vegetable gardens, fruit orchards, flowers, trees

Using the 'edible schoolyard' at Martin Luther King Middle School in Berkeley as a model, the students are interested in incorporating fruit and vegetable gardens, fruit orchards, and decorative flower gardens into outdoor open spaces. The goal is to create a source

of locally sourced healthy food and to add restful places of beauty to the everyday environment. These gardens could contain fruit and vegetable beds as well as flowerbeds, and orchards. The students included signage, fences or walls around the garden areas with 'super graphics' promoting health messages and featuring images of fruit and vegetables.

3 Heroes Wall, walkway or sculpture

Over the years during our sessions many of the students have been inspired by images we showed them of the Heroes' Wall at Jefferson High School in Los Angeles. This wall features images of famous people from the community who attended that school. In between their photos are mirrors so that the students can envision themselves as heroes as well (either now or in the future). Malcolm X student proposals have included a Heroes Wall, walkway, or sculpture featuring images of local leaders, national icons, and historic figures such as Malcolm X, Ruby Bridges, Sojourner Truth, Michelle and Barack Obama and Sonia Sotomayor. Their proposals for the Heroes Wall also include spaces for images of their teachers, fellow students, and alumni of the Malcolm X Academy.

4 Natural and wild places for play and enjoyment

The students have been excited about the possibility of creating 'wild spaces' or natural elements into the park settings or open spaces within Hunters View. These could be places of adventure and play, but also places for reflection and refuge. Naturalistic settings to explore and find sanctuary might include: water features; large rocks for landscaping and free play; wooded areas; an outdoor amphitheatre using the natural topography of the site; or even an adventure playground. One group of students proposed an observation tower to offer students special views of the San Francisco Bay.

5 Gathering spaces and reflective circles

While the students' proposals have often focused on activity and play options, they have also included the desire for places of refuge, rest and rejuvenation. Some of their design ideas have included quiet outdoor gathering places, resting places, nooks and sweet spots off the

beaten path, including tree houses, and clubhouses. They have envisioned these as areas for quiet reflection, observation, 'looking at the stars' and reading. Additionally, inspired by Danielle Diuguid of SFUSD's Education Outside programme, the 2014 group proposed including a 'reflective circle' as a place for students to come together as a group to resolve conflicts, discuss issues, and participate in community meetings.

6 'Education outside' learning labs

Over the years the students have proposed tree houses, clubhouses, and other outdoor learning labs as special places for people of all ages to relax, play and learn. These would be places to congregate and enjoy, but also could be retrofitted to demonstrate principles of sustainability. The proposed 'buildings' would illustrate and teach how to capture the energy of the wind and sun, harvest and conserve rainwater, and use earth and plants as both food and building insulation. They would showcase green building features such as windmills, water conservation strategies, solar panels, living roofs and walls, and recycled materials. These outdoor learning labs would also be accessible, inclusive, maintainable, and would encourage active living and eating nutritional foods. The 2014 group collaborated with Diuguid to generate proposals for a more formal outside learning lab, where Education Outside workshops could be conducted.

7 Intergenerational places for games and sports

While it wasn't the highest priority for the Hunters View community development, many students in the Y-PLAN Think Tank have emphasised the importance of having clean, green, safe and accessible places for playing group games within the community. They have expressed the sentiment that there should be some dedicated and flexible spaces where people of all ages can play informal games, and some organised sports.

8 Linking housing, school and community resources

Finally, the students – especially those in the first 2 years of the programme – expressed the need to integrate community resource nodes into their residential neighbourhoods, and in turn to link those nodes to the

school. Some of the community resources they identified as being most important included: library and tech resource centre; performance space/theatre; places for creative expression and inspirational public art; art galleries and community gathering places. As the plans for Hunters View have evolved, the students have seen some of this happen already. As Hunters View continues to take shape, more recently they have focused on how to link those resources to the school as well.

Progress and next steps

Inevitably, it has not been possible to incorporate all of the students' ideas. While the developers loved Donte Jones's tree house idea, for example, they had to explain that because of 'risk management' constraints it had to be rejected. Nonetheless, many of the ideas about open space, wild space, places for picnics and barbecues, and public space have been partially incorporated – although scaled down to fit the budget. The fruit trees and sustainable plants that they recommended have been planted as part of the original landscaping budget. We are currently working with the developers on incorporating students' ideas about gateways, pathways, and a Heroes Wall.

Y-PLAN has been a totally new experience for the developers and their team of planners and architects, and they are eager to expand it. It offers a powerful case study about reciprocal learning between adults and young people, and authentic community engagement. Above all, as students critically analyse the places in which they live, they learn the process by which places get transformed and the important role they themselves play in that transformation process.

References

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Note

- 1 For more information on the Y-PLAN methodology see: <http://y-plan.berkeley.edu>