The appropriation of space by children: urban materiality and the right to the city.

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The city is constituted by social relations, which are materialized within the framework of a space organization, marked by buildings, equipment, streets, urban furniture, green spaces, parks and squares, signals, lighting and decoration of places and squares. Life in the city is constructed, therefore, by the meanings and uses attributed to material elements, which enable and constrain social interaction.

The study of children in the city is a subject of wide development, in Childhood Studies. Current researches mobilize interdisciplinary approaches, resulting from the crossing of knowledge between the sociology of childhood, the geography of childhood, urban studies and political science, among others. Main topics have looked at children’s participation in the city, the autonomy of child mobility, affordance theories, the production of children’s imagination about the city, urban policies and childhood, the social conditions of life of children, street children, etc. Less frequent are the studies on children’s relations with urban materiality: signs, structured routes, cultural equipment.

As part of an ongoing interdisciplinary research project in a northern city of Portugal, aiming to construct a “learning field”, through the urban requalification and articulation of non-formal education with school education, counting on the active participation of children, we designed and conducted a visual ethnography of the processes of material appropriation of the urban equipment by the children.

This communication focuses on the ways in which urban facilities are used as material interlocutors in the realization of children’s interactions with each other and with adults. The study of the routes, the use of cultural and leisure equipment and parks and green spaces highlight ways of action that are conditioned by the opportunities that the street design, urban furniture and equipment allows, either in a logic of integration, or in a logic of rupture and transgression of implicit rules, by the children. The construction of “learning fields” from the generated knowledge constitutes an opportunity for political action over urban materiality and a reconfiguration of the possibilities of children’s right to the city.

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