

**CASE STUDY:** Ferrara, the children's city: creating opportunities for children and young people

**SECTOR:** Holistic  
**COUNTRY:** Italy

**KEY WORDS:** Children's city, right to play, to move, to use the urban space, right to be informed, to communicate, to speak, right to control the use of time. City council meeting on infancy, participation, communication.



### **BACKGROUND**

In 1993 the working group "Urban spaces and infancy", made up of volunteers, civil servants and politicians of the administration of the City of Ferrara, architects, pedagogists, and associations, proposed to re-think the urban environment from the point of view of children, asserting their right to know and freely experience the opportunities a city can offer. This initiative was based on important international cultural statements: the UN Convention on infancy rights, the Charter of Educative Cities subscribed in Barcelona in 1991, the principles of Agenda 21 (Rio, 1992). On this basis, the initiative "Ferrara children's city" was promoted by a group of citizens as a cultural challenge from 1994 to 1998 and became a programme of the Municipal Administration in the years 1999-2001.

### **GOALS**

In the first phase of the programme, attention was devoted mainly towards general goals relating to the relationships of boys and girls in the city, in order to

improve such relationships and to better organise the space. The aim was to create environmental conditions which can sustain the development of children satisfying their needs of safety, identity, a sense of belonging and autonomy. In the second phase of the project, 1999-2001, another goal was added to the previous guidelines: to make minors visible in the adults' physical and mental space through the construction of a meaningful urban environment. The main themes of the project are the following:

- Analysis of the urban environment as a network of interconnected spaces, in order to avoid the fragmentation of proposals and operations and to improve the quality of the life in the urban space of weak subjects as the elderly and the disabled.
- Development of a program of civic education and participation of minors to contemporary problems (state of the environment, use of resources, quality of the city, social life, etc. ) and support to the initiatives for infancy promoted by institutions and associations.
- Analysis of the urban environment as an educational integrated system which allows to connect the school learning process with the extra-school one.

### **THEMES**

The principles which oriented the initiatives during the first and second phase have been;

- **Right to play, to move, to use the urban space;**
- **Right to be informed, to communicate, to speak;**
- **Right to control the use of the time.**

A series of proposals and experiences, which can be developed from these basic assumptions and concern actions on the following different sectors:

- analysis of the meaning and use of the urban space;
- reduction of the risk of social exclusion and personal discomfort;
- enlargement of spatial references;
- satisfaction of the need of communication and expression.

### **ACTIONS AND METHODOLOGIES**

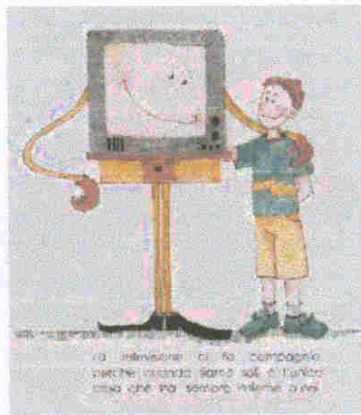
In the first stage of the project, the activities were organised on two parallel levels: the first one concerned the work in the schools with the children, the second one the institutions. Every year a specific City Council devoted to infancy has been promoted and other initiatives (meetings, public debates) are organised with experts, professionals and representatives of associations. As far as the right to use the urban space is concerned, in 1994 an analytical process of the city started, taking into account at first some specific parts and later on more and more areas. A first result consisted in the re-planning of two green spaces with the participation of children. The initiative was developed through the following steps:

1. Delivery of 1300 questionnaires (1040 have been filled in) to the pupils of the basic and middle schools in order to understand their mobility in the neighbourhood, their expectancies and proposals for a re-use of specific areas.
2. Organisation in a number of schools of meetings in order to illustrate the results of the enquiry and to promote a discussion among pupils, teachers and parents. In this debate, architects, pedagogists and administrators have been involved. The discussion took place in three stages:

3. a planning phase, during which some areas to be used as playgrounds have been singled out, and an elaboration of the typology of the green space, together with its general organisation and the type of furniture have been decided. This operation consisted of joint work between children and adults;
4. a research work developed to sustain the project phase;
5. the creative and educational phase, developed on the basis of a "diary" distributed to the families involved, which contained information relating to the history of the city, some sketches and the main results of the work done by pupils



School diary 1995/1996



Conference:  
"Is TV a friend of children?"

In 1996 a "Laboratory of environmental experimentation" was set up in an unused school. It is managed by local associations with the help of civil servants. It is intended to promote the collaboration among citizens, associations and agencies running public services. Starting in 1995 a series of special City Council meetings have been promoted on different topics. The first one concerned the theme of the right to use the space by minors in the city. In the following two years the Council debated on the themes of the right to be informed, to communicate and to speak.

These discussions have been accompanied by initiatives relating to communication in the schools, which produced drawings, videos, school newspapers, reports. All the material was exhibited to the public. A local TV station organised a program on the same topic involving children, schools and families. In 1998 the City Council took into consideration the theme of the right to control the use of time. In order to sustain this initiative and to involve the public, some initiatives were organised. In particular, the main one had the title "The time of the friendly city" and saw the participation of children and parents together with shop keepers willing to become points of reference for the autonomous mobility of children.

In the years 1999-2001 the project "Children's city" was consolidated and re-organised. The program is based on these major points:

- to sustain the collaboration and integration among the different actors involved using in the best way the available resources in order to better define the program and to avoid the fragmentation of the initiatives;
- to maintain and improve the communication between the central administration (City hall) and the decentralised levels (neighbourhoods councils);
- to provide a network system for a better integration between the school and the extra-school activities;
- to assess the costs taking into account the programmed goals;
- to give a preference to those activities which need an experimental phase.

The projects at this stage have been organised within three main areas: the environmental area, the cultural area and the social area

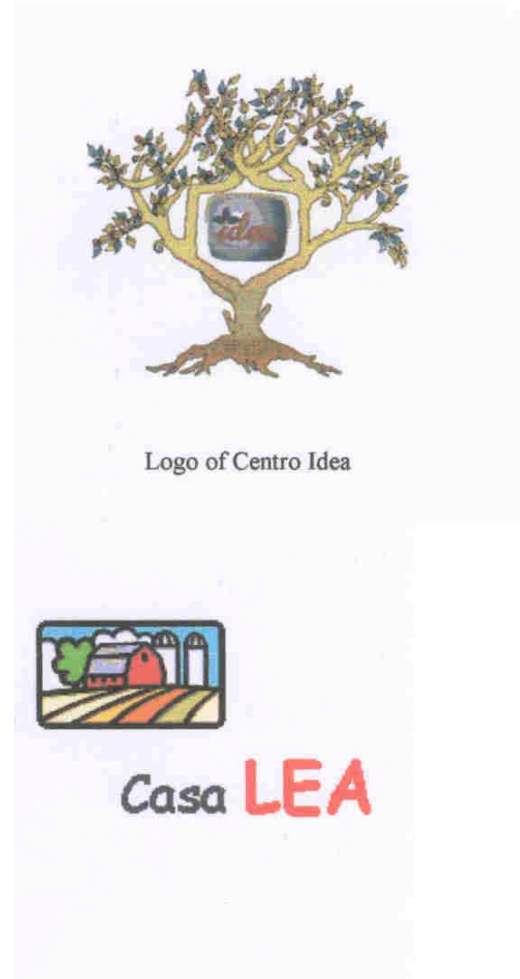
- **The environmental area.** The actors are those who were involved in the first stage, organised into an institutional committee, in a working

group, in the Laboratory of Environmental Exploration (aimed at stimulating the environmental education, the sense of belonging, social and civic responsibility , in particular with regard to the local space)

- **The cultural area.** The projects aim at promoting the access of children and young people to cultural institutions, which are generally oriented towards an adult public (museums, exhibitions, etc.). The methodology is based on a network of the people involved in the management of those institutions interested in promoting the creation of educational spaces, which can sustain the knowledge of the cultural heritage. The result consists in the "House of fine and performing arts" .
- **The social area.** The methodology avoids the creation of institutionalised large structures which are not at the scale of micro-environment (neighbourhood streets, courtyards, etc.) in which children live and move around. The preferred strategy is based on the involvement starting from the daily experience and the use of the school buildings. The initiatives operate at two levels: one oriented at stimulating the adults to reflect on the rights of minors (and other weak subjects), the second aimed at promoting the personal autonomy of children and young people. In both cases a number of groups and initiatives are organised.

### **SUBJECTS INVOLVED**

The Mayor as "Children defender", Council departments responsible for: Street construction and Street furniture, Education, Culture, Social Welfare, School Administration, Unicef provincial committee, teachers and pupils of basic and middle schools, Aqueduct and gas agency, the committees and groups promoted by the project (Centro Idea, Casa LEA).



### **SUSTAINABILITY INDICATORS**

The program "Children's city" took part in the national project "Sustainable cities for children" promoted by the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Social Affairs in collaboration with a number of local and regional administrations. In 1997 the Ministry asked the Italian Committee of Unicef and the Municipality of Rome to elaborate a number of sustainability indicators concerning infancy. They are mainly qualitative indicators aimed at confronting the different experiences going on in Italy in cities willing to be entitled "Sustainable city for children". In short, they are the following:

<b>Environmental Area</b>	
Sub Area: Air pollution reduction	Construction of a noise reduction barrier and a green barrier near a school building Construction of a barrier near a playground Improvement of public transports for students
Sub area: reduction of noise and electro-magnetic pollution	Inclusion of kindergartens and nursery schools in green areas
Sub area: eco-management of waste	Location of containers for separate waste collection near 70 schools; publication of a newsletter on the separate collection
Sub-area: accessibility of spaces	project for an ecological area and a green courtyard in a school "Not only nursery school" initiatives aimed at creating playgrounds in the school areas and a library, open to the public Conference "Accessible, naturally"; on the accessibility of natural areas to disabled, in collaboration with an environmentalist NGO
Sub-area: No physical barriers	"Ferrara ideal city" programme for improving the liveability of the city for disabled
Sub-area: improvement of green areas	Improvement of green areas in different neighbourhoods within the programme "Children's city"; New trees in the urban park of Ferrara
Sub-area: improvement of the interaction man/environment	Programme (3 years) "Together for a better environment" experimental introduction of biological food in nursery schools; "The friend garden" environmental education programme
Sub-area: mobility	Construction of cycling lanes, publication of the brochure "Cities for cyclists"
<b>Cultural Area</b>	
Sub-area: Promotion of socialisation	Theatre plays, visits to museums, art workshops, exhibitions, video production, play-visit to the city, play-market
<b>Institutional Area</b>	
Sub-area: Commitment on the themes of the convention of infancy	Amendment to the Municipal Statutes which recognises the right of young people to autonomy and participation in social life and institutional activity, as individuals and associations
Sub-area: % of municipal annual budget	17.22% of municipal budget in 1997
Sub-area: Participation	The Mayor is the "Defender of children";  Every year a City Council Meeting is organised on the themes of infancy, during which children have the right to speak
Sub-area;	"Ferrara ideal city" programme

No physical barriers	for improving the liveability of the city for disabled
Sub-area: Education	Activation of: a neighbourhood library for children, an advisory office for families and young people, an information centre for young people, a centre for improving the autonomy of disabled people
Sub-area: Time policy	In 1998 in the City Council on infancy, the theme of the right of young people to use their time at their own pace was debated Activation of summer centres for recreation and social meeting
Sub-area: Monitoring , control	A permanent laboratory for a city suitable for children is under organisation. It is intended to promote the connection among the different sectors of the administration, the experience exchange with other cities, to disseminate information and materials.

## ASSESSMENT OF THE RESULTS

The program "Children's city" can be considered one of the best experiences in Italy concerning activities oriented towards the re-formulation and re-organisation of the different aspects and sectors of a city (urban planning, social welfare, cultural activities) in the light of the needs of weak subjects (the elderly, the disabled, the young). Ferrara takes part from the beginning to the National program "Sustainable cities for children", confirming the commitment to improve the results and to enlarge the scope of the initiative. The permanent laboratory is thus intended to be a moment of monitoring and control.