

## ***Prachi Patil***

***Prachi Patil is a designer focusing on children and their play culture. She graduated with an MFA in Child Culture Design from HDK-Valand in 2022. Before moving to Sweden, she worked as a Product Designer at the early childhood learning company Magic Crate in India. She now runs Studio PP, creating joyful, meaningful and artful experiences for people of all ages and abilities. Her practice addresses the root of social inequalities and explores the role of cultural projects in bridging the social gaps with children.***

# **Vår Festival**

## ***Design for Co-Design***

**Prachi Patil**

### ***Abstract***

**Vår festival (the noun vår is Swedish for 'spring' and, when used as a pronoun, vår means 'our') focuses on community building from a participatory design perspective within a multi-ethnic small town in Sweden where 7 to 9-year-old children are deprived of participating in their local community and influencing its culture. During this project, I used my position as a Child Culture Designer to investigate the realities of child participation and aimed to expand children's agency and belonging in their neighbourhood.**

**Vår festival explored the possibilities of curating a public festival with children. The goal was to democratically imagine, together with children, the shape and the form of this social event that would invite the local community to participate, triggering the self-driven exploration of new festivities and community culture.**

**The project took place over eleven weeks (February 2022 - May 2022) at a creative recycling center, ReMida, in Skillingaryd. 'Festival Committee' (i.e. design team of three adult and six child designers) planned, designed and built various experiences of the festival through collaborative workshops. The Vår festival was then celebrated with the local community of Skillingaryd on 10th May 2022.**

**Using the Vår festival project as a case study, this essay sheds light on the design tools and methods that emerged in this journey of trial and error that could be important when involving children in a participatory project.**

***Keywords***

**co-design, community building, social innovation; participatory design**

## ***Introduction***

**Immigration occurs for various reasons. Whether the decision to move from one country to another is motivated voluntarily or forced because of social or political oppression and unrest, exposure to new people, cultures, and customs is inevitable. Migration from one's homeland to a foreign country can be described as an exciting journey of new challenges or as something that causes despair. As an intricate psychological experience, the immigration process impacts an individual's sense of self and his/her perceived identity (Nekby, Rodin, Ozcan,2009; Paat, 2013). It is even more critical for children because one has little control over the 'culture' existing inside or outside the door as a child.**

**According to a report published by 'Statistics Sweden', In 2021, just over 90 000 persons immigrated to Sweden (SCB, 2022). The consequences of immigration become more visible when (some) people's feelings of belonging are increasingly disconnected from the locality and the local community. They tend to experience localities and local communities not as 'locals' but as 'strangers', and of course, this implies that the places in which people do not feel that they belong as 'locals' are also likely to be shared with others who they consider to be 'strangers'. As Sophie Watson (2006) has pointed out, the more such discourses of fear, risk, and danger get to circulate, the more they produce the circumstances they speak. So, for example, as broadcast news and social media sources emphasize the 'us v/s them' narrative, rather than creating awareness, we move more towards segregation in society.**

**Skillingaryd is a small town in the south of Sweden with about 13,500 inhabitants. It is part of Vaggeryd municipality that has**

welcomed many immigrant families into the community. And although the group has lived in the city for a long time and, in many cases, has jobs and driving licenses, there is a feeling that they are not part of society. The social bonds they have formed over the years are often limited to people from the same cultural backgrounds, leading to prejudices hindering a healthy multicultural community.

According to Fincher and Iveson (2008), expanding our identities through engaging with diverse identities is essential to encourage a positive perspective on diversity. They introduced a conviviality concept that describes stranger encounters with specific intent or purpose. These encounters may be short, but they depend upon the settings where strangers can explore identities through shared activities. A planned public festival could create opportunities for encounters to work towards diversity in cities; the festival holds power as a disruptive event where everyday hierarchies and norms are momentarily suspended or even inverted. The idea for the festival project was born with this discourse.

Conventionally, the idea of a public festival for a child is linked to religious festivities (e.g. Christmas, Eid, Diwali etc.) and often decided by other adult authorities (e.g. town carnivals, harvest festival) but never by the children themselves. Therefore the notion that the festival offers a glimpse of an unconventional world also felt like an excellent opportunity for inviting children as equal contributors to help set a new standard for children's participation and make a visible impact on the community culture they are part of. I hoped that It would eventually increase children's self-esteem and bring more willingness to exercise their right to be heard as they grow older, making them active citizens.

## ***Design for Co-Design***

**Vår festival aimed to be a participatory design project focusing on social innovation emerging from bottom-up design processes. I used Research for Design and Research through the Design approach, which involved developing and testing tools and generating knowledge from design experiments. In the project's first phase, I gathered insights through reading literature, analyzing existing similar practices and projects, and conducting discussions and workshops using participatory design research methods and tools to get familiar with children and the context. In the second phase, we (the children & adults' creative team) dreamed and co-designed the festivities through collaborative workshops. The third phase was about building the props for the event.**

**Every participatory project needs methods that are custom designed for that project depending upon the context, target group, location, duration, stakeholders, expected outcome and timeline. The following are a few insights gathered during the project that helped create a space for children to participate as equal contributors.**

## ***Making a Brief Together***

**When it's time to start the actual meetings with the children, it is important to share information about the broader picture of the project and then define the project brief together with the participants.**



### ***Collaborative Project Brief***

**As a method to recognise children’s areas of interest, I decided to use Generative tools. It allows collaborating partners to create collage images to communicate their thoughts, feelings, and ideas about ‘Festival’ as a concept. The festival elements to be designed or the themes for the workshop were derived from this mapping exercise.**

### ***Representation***

**Name badges may seem small, but they bring great emotional value. It instills confidence in the team as it represents authority and responsibility at the same time.**



***Name badge and festival maker's kit***

### ***Festival Maker's Kit***

The bag was inspired by a carpenter's tool pouch belt and is symbolic of the let's get to work' emotion. I wanted to play with the idea of the bag being the committee's uniform that shows a sign of authority but simultaneously has a functional purpose. It became a common link between all the young and old members and brought us to a level playing ground.



***Festival committee members with name badges, kits and festival stickers***



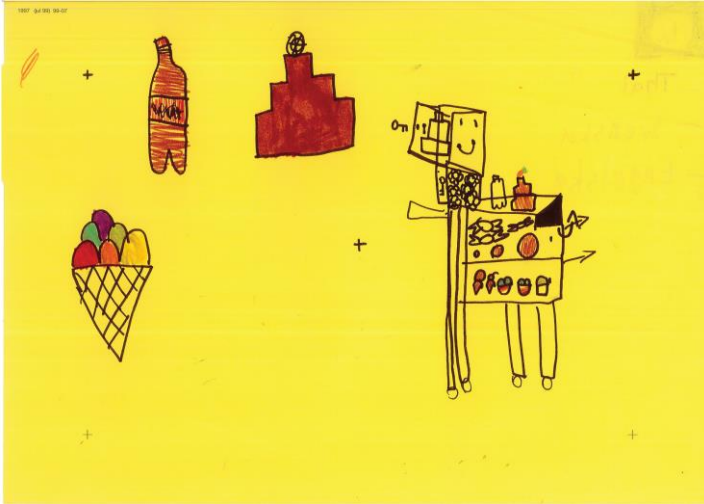
**Festival committee members took an oath and received the kit in the second meeting. The kit acted as an invitation to spark excitement. It helped children identify themselves as part of the festival committee members and brought a sense of belonging to the committee. It even became a part of the festival designing ritual.**

### ***Germination time***

**Designing with children through participatory methods is a slow process. Building trust is essential to create a safe space for expressing views and opinions, which needs constant encouragement and longer duration. During the actual process, negotiating a diversity of meanings to make shared decisions became a complex process and demanded significantly more time than I had. Hence, the festival committee's design process involved a combination of children's independent findings, adults' independent decisions and adult-children's co-decisions.**

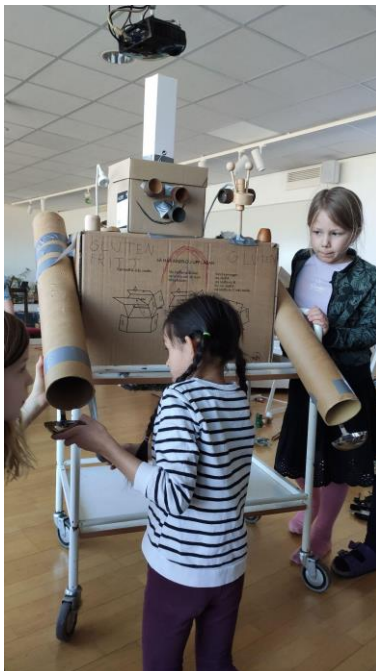
### ***Balancing the openness***

**Children have a sense of ownership over the process when the tasks balance ambiguity and clarity. The plan for collaborative workshops in the festival project was deliberately kept open for flexibility. It built on the output of the previous meeting because I wanted the children to feel like they directed the workshop content.**



### ***Design sketches***

**The discussion about playful ways to serve 'Fika' (coffee snacks) triggered drawings about 'cookie machine' and the drawings produced in this meeting were used to inspire the next meeting- Prototyping a cookie machine, where we provided an extensive collection of loose parts available at ReMida with a metal food cart.**



### ***Cookie machine***

Loose parts ranged from wooden furniture parts, egg cups, graters, wheels, cardboard boxes, tubes, spatulas, candle holders, and buttons. This encouraged children to imagine stories & scenarios, and in the process of hacking the food cart, children brought their drawing cookie machine to life.

I realized that the children were most engaged with the task when they felt like experts, and play was their most intuitive way to express themselves. Having a range of 'loose parts' at Remida opened up, Therefore, I tried to provide a variety of objects to allow for different kinds of games and give the children an opportunity to shape the experiences of the festival.

### ***Child-led documentation***

The Reggio Emilia approach to documentation informed the decision to stress the importance and need for documentation during the project. It considers documentation central to primary education, especially when documentation is child-led and organized. Documentation is used as a means of collaboration and sharing between children, teachers and art teachers (Schroeder Yu, 2008).



***Festival reporter tool***

The "Vår festival reporter" tool was my attempt to try this approach. The Microphone uses a wooden leg of a table and a go pro camera. The camera does not have a display, which adds to its ambiguity making it more comfortable for the reporter and the responder. The reporter tool helped capture children's perspectives on the experience of the festival. It was yet another way of enhancing children's participation.

### ***Conclusion***

I intended to expand my knowledge of designing a bottom-up community culture with children. Starting point hypothesis based on the literature was that co-designing with children at a public festival would lead to building Community and consequently fostering children's agency and belonging in the place. It was evident that during almost 13 weeks, our feeling of WE has grown within us. We who have worked for the festival designed it for our community (limited to our friends and families). Through children's conversation, I felt this feeling of 'we 'is not yet very inclusive of all the others in the context. "festival Committee " feels more solidarity. However, this again has a danger of perpetuating the same dividing attitude we are working against. Hence, involving varied community actors in the process would help make We more inclusive.

The process added a lot to learn about involving children as equal partners. My initial aim to democratically imagine a public festival needed to have been revised in the project's planning. I soon realized that the language barrier helped in so many different ways. Firstly it was humbling as it brought me ' an adult designer' on a level playing ground; second, children felt more competent and confident around me, willing to work with my shortcomings. Third, they were patient with my communication struggles,

**reminding me to be patient with their attention spans and interests. Many such instances led to a shared understanding of our skills/gaps and were valuable for co-design. It made me realize that co-designing with children is a complex process, but the most important is making children's input visible in action and keep iterating on it.**

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