

# "THE BEST OBSERVATIONS": CHILDREN FROM BAIRRO DA TORRE AND THEIR VISION OF THEIR WORLD

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This photographic essay originated from part of the empirical data collected by the organizers for their PhD theses, one in Architecture and the other in Design, both in progress, who used the photovoice (or participatory photography) as an interactive technique suitable for research processes with children. The photovoice at the origin of this essay aimed to get closer to the view of children living (or who used to live) in Bairro da Torre (in the parish of Camarate, municipality of Loures, Portugal), a neighbourhood in Greater Lisbon: how did they see their place? Their neighbourhood? And their city? How did they produce their playing spaces? Starting from these questions and through children's memories, narratives and opinions expressed by means of photography, the immersion into their daily lives was carried out from their own point of view,



made explicit in the photographs themselves and in the following conversations about what they had photographed. The research was implemented between March 2021 and November 2022 as part of the study *Vozes do Direito à Cidade* (Voices of the Right to the City)<sup>1</sup>, involving children from a previous action of the same study still living in Bairro da Torre, and others who had been rehoused by Loures municipality (CMLoures) in other neighbourhoods.

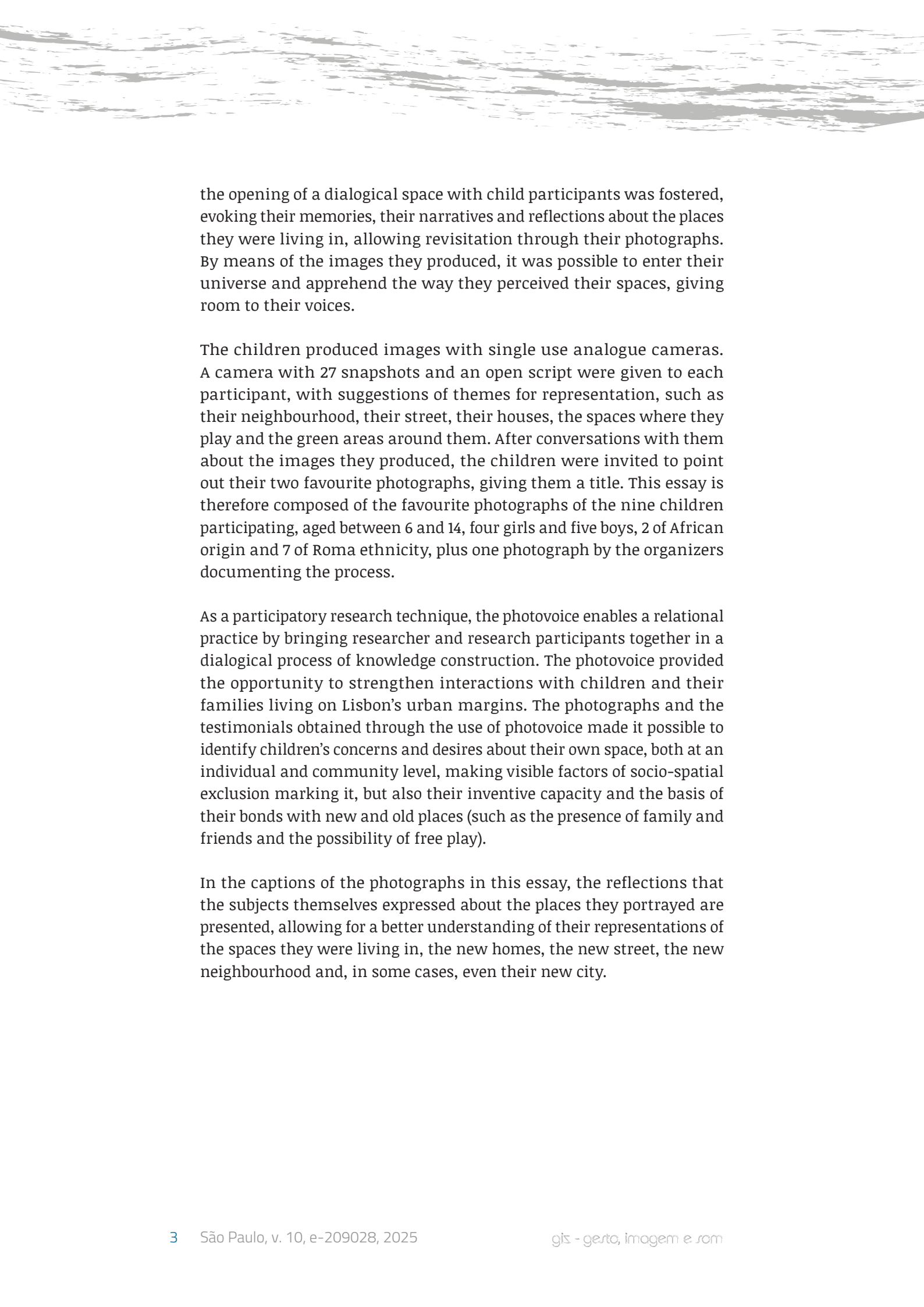
For decades, Bairro da Torre was built by its residents' hands. Over time, a community of mostly Roma families and families of African origin from São Tomé and Príncipe was formed. In 2007 and 2011, the CMLoures removed and rehoused the families under the PER - *Programa Especial de Realojamento* (Special Relhousing Programme). Some of the families not included in this programme had their houses demolished, but they rebuilt them in a more precarious way, with the most varied materials, including cardboard, but remained on site. The neighbourhood had serious problems in terms of infrastructure (namely access to water, basic sanitation and electricity), public space, equipment, in addition to the precariousness of the houses. Given these conditions, after a power outage in 2016 and a fire in 2018, the neighbourhood underwent another rehousing process, more intense, and all the remaining families were rehoused (until 2023) by the Municipality with support of IHRU - *Instituto de Habitação e Reabilitação Urbana* (Institute for Housing and Urban Rehabilitation), but in a dispersed way, including outside the municipality of Loures. Since 2012 and still today, the association *Torre Amiga - Moradores do Bairro da Torre*, directed by Ricardina Cuthbert and Maria Cardoso, fights for the rights and better living conditions of these families.

Stigmatized and marked by social inequality and socio-spatial exclusion, Bairro da Torre revealed, at the same time, diverse and rich experiences of appropriation and self-production of space (ARMA, 2022), including by the hands of children in relation to their games.

The images presented in this essay were produced by them, in the context of the participatory photography process (the photovoice) conducted by the organizers, while carrying out their research on participatory processes and upgrading of the self-produced neighbourhood in Greater Lisbon (in the field of Architecture) and on children's participation in the planning of playing paces and equipment in urban margins (in the field of Design).

Through the photovoice, a research device that allows the use of photographic images produced by the research subjects themselves,

<sup>1</sup> Through the Africa Habitat research project coordinated by Isabel Raposo (GESTUAL), architect-urban planner and professor at FAUL, and funded by FCT - Foundation for Science and Technology and by Aga Khan Development Network.



the opening of a dialogical space with child participants was fostered, evoking their memories, their narratives and reflections about the places they were living in, allowing revisitation through their photographs. By means of the images they produced, it was possible to enter their universe and apprehend the way they perceived their spaces, giving room to their voices.

The children produced images with single use analogue cameras. A camera with 27 snapshots and an open script were given to each participant, with suggestions of themes for representation, such as their neighbourhood, their street, their houses, the spaces where they play and the green areas around them. After conversations with them about the images they produced, the children were invited to point out their two favourite photographs, giving them a title. This essay is therefore composed of the favourite photographs of the nine children participating, aged between 6 and 14, four girls and five boys, 2 of African origin and 7 of Roma ethnicity, plus one photograph by the organizers documenting the process.

As a participatory research technique, the photovoice enables a relational practice by bringing researcher and research participants together in a dialogical process of knowledge construction. The photovoice provided the opportunity to strengthen interactions with children and their families living on Lisbon's urban margins. The photographs and the testimonials obtained through the use of photovoice made it possible to identify children's concerns and desires about their own space, both at an individual and community level, making visible factors of socio-spatial exclusion marking it, but also their inventive capacity and the basis of their bonds with new and old places (such as the presence of family and friends and the possibility of free play).

In the captions of the photographs in this essay, the reflections that the subjects themselves expressed about the places they portrayed are presented, allowing for a better understanding of their representations of the spaces they were living in, the new homes, the new street, the new neighbourhood and, in some cases, even their new city.



**FIGURE 1**  
Authors' record during the process.

Each child was given a single-use camera that they kept for about a month. They took photos of their houses, their neighbourhoods, their playspaces, elements on their way to school or along walks with their family.



**FIGURE 2**  
Untitled. R., 14 Years-old. Bairro da Torre (Camarate, Loures).



“This is the vegetable garden. ... I stay there, I used to stay there many times during the day. ... to help. ... I liked it, it was funny!”. At the time of the conversation about his photographs, Ricardo had already been rehoused. Seeing his photographs taken in Bairro da Torre, he remembered when he used to take care of the vegetable garden, the vegetables that grew there and the animals he helped raise, especially the chicks.



**FIGURE 3**  
“Friendship”. R., 14 years-old. Bairro da Torre (Camarate, Loures).

“This van helped moving, also with food collection .... Everyone was welcome”. For Ricardo the van represents the activities that the association *Torre Amiga - Moradores do Bairro da Torre* develops and that he supports, such as the collection and distribution of food to families in need. He chose this photo as his favorite because the van and the painting “Welcome to all” represent the spirit of solidarity and mutual help in his former Community, which he recognizes as values.



**FIGURE 4**

"The best observations" (1). M., 14 years-old. Quinta do Mocho (Sacavém, Loures).

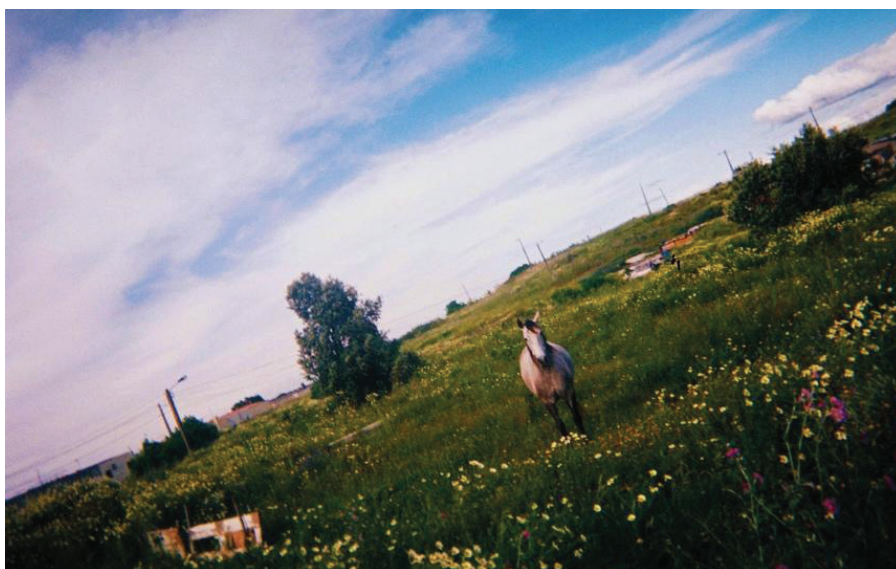
"I took the photo of the trees here in front ... up here in the window .... It's to represent, as we have a lot of trees here, here in the neighbourhood, so it means we have more oxygen here!". M. took this photo from the window of the living room of her new home. Although she can see the treetops and the Vasco de Gama bridge from this window and she likes the view, M. reported she likes her old neighbourhood more, for the greater possibility of free and autonomous play (beyond adult control).



**FIGURE 5**

"The best observations" (2). M., 14 years. Quinta do Mocho (Sacavém, Loures).

“They were giving things, food, some food and clothes. ... I saw that they were doing a good deed. This community event caught M.’s attention and she decided to photograph it, finding it beautiful when the community comes together for parties and for people to help each other.



**FIGURE 6**

Untitled. C., 12 years-old. Bairro da Torre (Camarate, Loures).

C. said he built, in the summer of 2021, together with his cousins and friends, a large corral, with abandoned boards and old doors they found in the neighbourhood, where they organized races with his horse Rayane. “Here. In the picture of the horse. These boards ... with the boards we made a corral ... we raced with the horse Rayane”. This is his favorite photo.





**FIGURE 7**

Untitled. C., 12 years-old. Bairro da Torre (Camarate, Loures).

C. reported that a swimming pool was also thought up and self-built by him, his cousins and his friends in the summer of 2021. “ Just a day and a half to finish all that!”. They dug a very deep hole with a hoe which they covered with a tarpaulin. A tyre was used to fix the tarpaulin and at the same time served as a trampoline, along with an old slide, from which C. would “backflip”. He confessed that it was his mother who made this photograph at his request.



**FIGURE 8**

“Memories.” “I used to live there!”. M., 14 years-old. Currently living in São Sebastião de Guerreiros (Loures).

Despite having already been rehoused, M. took most of his photographs in the old neighbourhood (Bairro da Torre), where his grandmother was still living and where he had his bike and more freedom to play.



**FIGURE 9**

Untitled. J., 6 years-old. São Sebastião de Guerreiros (Loures).

J. spoke about her new neighbourhood through this photograph that portrays the façade of the pink buildings that she now sees all around her and where mostly Roma families live.



**FIGURE 10**

Untitled. J., 6 anos. São Sebastião de Guerreiros (Loures).



In this photo, the young photographer portrays one of the parks of her new neighbourhood, parks that were lacking in Bairro da Torre. Nevertheless, in that neighbourhood “there was more space”. She often plays there with her younger brother. In this park there was a swing that is now broken and was her favorite toy.



**FIGURE 11**

“A school”. L., 13 years-old. Bairro das Sapateiras (Loures).

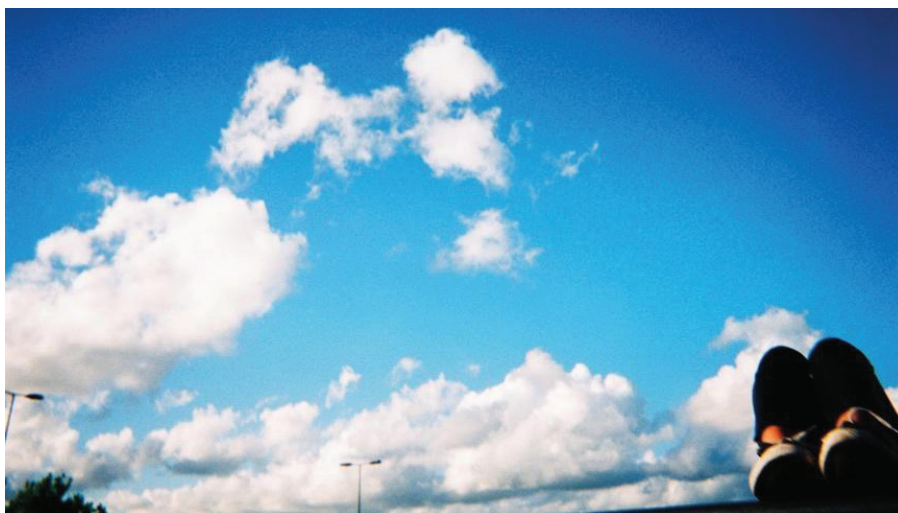
L. photographed the school and other facilities around his house where he usually goes, as well as the spaces where he usually plays and meets up with friends and family. L. took almost all of his photographs through the windows of his new house.



**FIGURE 12**

Untitled. L., 13 years-old Bairro das Sapateiras (Loures).

L. also wanted to represent situations of daily family life that make him happy inside his home, such as, for example, Preparing, with his mother and sisters, the “candy apples” that he likes so much.



**FIGURE 13**  
“Bat-like”. M., 13 years-old. Bairro das Sapateiras (Loures).

“I play the bat ...It’s a handrail for doing gymnastics”. This photo is M.’s favorite and was taken by her Sister, with whom she shared her camera, and with whom she often goes out to play in the park near their house where they use the equipment in a “subversive” way. In the case of this photograph, a gymnastic bar offers the possibility to look at the world upside down. The sky is a constant presence in the photographs of the two sisters.



**FIGURE 14**  
Untitled. M., 7 years-old. Bairro das Sapateiras (Loures).

In this photo, M. depicts her sister on top of a toy that they use to climb to sit up there, resembling “a mountain ..., a castle”, or “when we are climbing the trees”.



**FIGURE 15**

Untitled. J., 13 years-old. Bairro de vale Figueira (Sobreda, Almada).

In this photo, J. portrays the entrance to his new house. In this social neighbourhood, the houses are connected by a common balcony. He likes his new neighbourhood and prefers to live here, because “there is misery there (in Bairro da Torre), here there is not. Here there is a football ground, and there isn’t one there!”

Football and drawing are his current passions. It was through football that he made new friends in the neighbourhood where he was resettled.

#### **ABSTRACT**

In the research that gave rise to this essay, we wanted to get closer to the vision of the children who lived in *Bairro da Torre*, in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area (Camarate parish, Loures municipality, Portugal): how did they see their place of residence? Their neighborhood, their city? How did they produce their playing spaces? From these questions and through the children’s expression through photography, we were able to learn more about their world and their daily lives. By using photovoice, a research device that enables the use of photographic images produced by the research subjects themselves, we were able to open up a dialogical space with our child subjects, evoking their memories, reflections and narratives about the places they currently live in, enabling them to revisit these places through their photographs. Through the images they produced, we were able to enter their universe and understand their place through their voice.

#### **KEYWORDS**

Participatory  
action-research;  
Photovoice;  
Childhood; Urban  
margins.



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