

The City Jewel Project

A living recognition memorial with and for children, youngsters and adults who experienced trauma during childhood time

<https://cityjewel.org/> , SOS Kinderdorpen & vzw Espero – Ter Wende

Sabine Vermeire



For years, I am on a search about what can be valuable conversations and therapeutic journeys we have with children, adolescents but also adults who had painful, often traumatic experiences in childhood. Often they have lost connection with their bodies, their emotions and their sense of self..., just as their responses have been understood in often single-storied, negative ways. The many efforts, relational involvements and so, their hard work in trying to go on often not having been recognized. Their pain and suffering often got individualized and decontextualized. They also lost connection with the important people in their lives and the communities they belong to. They got trapped in time or as some would say 'frozen' in time (in stories of the past, present or future). Their sense of agency, belonging and coherence is lost.

How to put their experiences and stories at the center in a way that it is manageable in our conversations?

How not to do over what has been done a thousand times?

And how not reproduce violence and dominant discourses that keep them trapped in single stories and time?

How to invite them from the very start as active participants, co-researchers, co-directors of our journeys and becoming a 'collective research and learning community'?

Serious playfulness and playful seriousness off the beaten track proved to be a particularly valuable antidote to dominant discourses of how one should deal with all these challenges and obstacles. Using all kinds of art forms and creative ways, I try to go on a quest together with these children, youngsters and their networks in order to find new openings. We make meaning and actions fluid again, we reconnect and interweave past, present and future and facilitate new actions. The icing on the cake of such processes is that they also eventually culminate in relational and social recognition and constitute a form of social action in which peers, significant people involved and the community become linked in solidarity.

This last year I got really excited by a powerful collective artwork, symbolising childhood trauma and resilience and offering vital recognition for childhood trauma survivors on journeys of recovery. There has been created a beaded string 95 metres long that will be placed at 4 metres high pillars at an important Square in Brussels, Belgium with 650 beads made in paper mâché (each with a diameter of around 10 or 20 cm!).

About 150-200 children, young people, and adults were interviewed over the last year and invited to create and put together their own mini-bead kit with a bead representing the painful experiences in the past, the grief or suffering in their lives; another bead representing their responses or ways of keep on going, skills & knowledge, wisdom to hold on to and also one bead representing their resources, team of support... or whatever they liked. All these beads were brought together and will be hung in the artwork. On 9 October 2024 all participants, as well as carers, people involved but also politicians came together to inaugurate the artwork. A goosebump moment!



This process will be repeated for 5 years and the string of beads will keep on growing. There is also a website where each bead, the naming of the bead and the stories linked to it can be consulted as a kind of archive for other children, youngsters and adults. <https://cityjewel.org/jewel/>

This project and memorial was made possible by the relentless efforts of the people from SOS Kinderdorpen (SOS Children Villages) & vzw Ter Wende-Espero (2 youth institutions in Belgium) who had long worked on ways of recognition. They gathered support and funds so that they could launch a competition for artists to design this monument. Laura Nsengiyumva, a Belgian-Rwandan artist, conceived this monument based on a number of ideas from the book "Unravelling trauma and weaving resilience" and working with beads in contexts of trauma. She considers public space as a social fabric and art as collective design.



Years ago, during a trip to Borneo in Kuching, I discovered a global tradition around beads that represents, symbolizes and documents experiences, radical events, transition periods and the stories linked to it. At this International Conference on beads, bead making and bead necklace weaving, from all corners of the world, in all possible shapes and materials, beads were made and this with a kaleidoscopic possibility of meanings. They could function as an amulet, offering protection or a rite the passage and document special skills or knowledge. This inspired me to use beads with youth in youth care. Bead strings or necklaces form a lifeline, where each bead represents a multilayered story populated by people, places, encounters,... Through this path, young people can re-dis-cover a sense

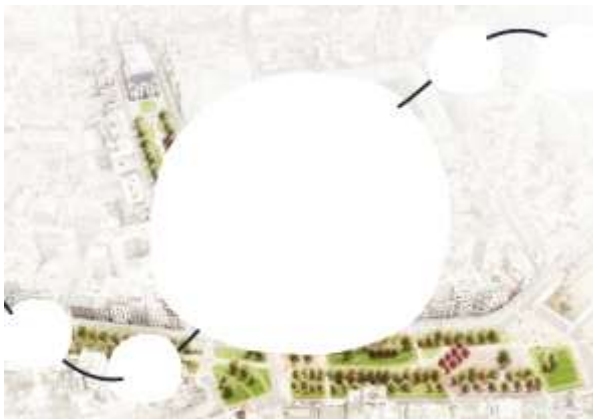
of agency and re-experience a sense of coherence through their life stories. Each important moment, both joyful and painful, is given a tangible place in their bead string.

Young people with traumatic pasts often feel they no longer have any influence over their own lives and relationships. When we collect beads together, step by step they regain common threads, what they want to keep close to them, hold precious and what they want to leave behind in their life story. This process not only helps to restore their “sense of agency,” but also can acknowledge their responses and efforts to survive and keep on going. The layering and many facets of these stories help them re(dis)cover a richer, multicolored understanding of their lives and identities. Acknowledgement of their suffering is considered crucial in these contexts. Noticing their experiences relationally and socially create the possibility of regaining a place in society and a sense of belonging.

The City Jewel project responds to this by making visible the multifaceted stories of survivors of childhood trauma. Children, youth and adults with childhood trauma and their networks work together to create a work of art that becomes visible in the public space, in society. They create beads that represent their pain, missing, hardship but also their responses and sources of resilience and support. These beads are not just works of art, but a kind of containers/boxes of the stories young people carry with them. The project breaks the silence around childhood trauma and invites everyone, young and old, to participate. The message is clear: “I am not alone.” This approach emphasizes the importance of acknowledging, giving and co-creating meaning and making visible again their efforts to cope and their sources of support, thus making trauma no longer the only thing that defines survivors.

Some ‘Bead’ stories

The various participants could choose in which setting they liked to design and make the beads. We found it important that they themselves could indicate what contexts felt appropriate to them and offered enough comfort, safety and creative space. Some chose to do it in the privacy of the therapy room together with a trusted facilitator, others opted for scheduled workshop moments together with peers or experts by experience. Still others wanted to make it with their parent, grandmother or grandfather, sibling or partner. One person even felt it was hugely important to make it in the presence of her dog and two cats. Also the place could vary. Their familiar bedroom in the children's home, the garden of an unknown therapy center, the refectory of a school for unaccompanied refugee minors and the creative space in the rehabilitation center became design places. They got a template to develop first on a piece of paper the characteristics of the bead or could make it in clay to have a notion how it could look like.



We started the process by asking what their hopes were in participating in this projects and creating beads. Often their first aim to participate had much to do with being helpful and supportive to others.

Through the making process it became clearer to participants what it also could mean to them. I remember two days of workshops at the Interactie-Academie (my working place, a training and therapy center). During the day, it became like a sacred event where people of all ages were working together making beads in papier-mâché and in all kinds of colors and shapes. And where at one point boundaries almost disappeared between who is the person with trauma experiences and who is the counselor, the therapist, the partner, friend, parent or foster parent. It became a kind of collective, participatory event. While that was a hope we had at the start of the project, I never imagined that it could actually become so impressive. Many of the children, youngsters and adults stepped into the project almost hesitantly, from a stance, 'If you think, Sabine, that this can be meaningful, then I want to participate. And if you think I have something valuable to say about this, or to contribute to that, then I want to do it.' That provided the stepping stone to then discover that participating in the City Jewel also gave them something.



The Bead of Defragmentation & The bead of Sparkles

These two beads were made by a young woman who experienced sexual abuse in the family. She wanted a bead that symbolized the unthinkable, the experiences of crumbling and defragmentation and a crater was to be made in the bead from which the lava of anger, sadness and pain could flow. The black colors tell something about loneliness, feeling misunderstood and working hard to hide it. While making the bead of the support resources and many small actions to bravely keep going, not giving up, step by step the realization came to herself 'I still got a lot done, isn't it?! She made sparkles for her sporting club, the dance classes, studying and getting a diploma,...



The beads of 'The Vortex', 'My Cats' and 'Escape from Reality'

Made by L. (17 years). She didn't went to school for several years, just being at home. She went through a lot of hardship but since no one had to tell what exactly had happened in their lives but rather could express in colors, shapes, symbols what the events meant to them facilitators very often did not know what the participants had experienced. Participants just could share the stories they wanted to share. In this way they kept ownership on their stories. L. wanted a vortex bead for being completely sucked in and no longer able to straighten out. She designed a bead for her two cats but also a bead for the support and hold she found in Tim Burton's films and the Alice in Wonderland books (on the back she glued a text excerpt from the book).



The Star Wars Bead

T. (13 years) was very interested in the bead project when I showed him some of the beads already made. He wanted to be part of the project but didn't want to make beads for himself. He was convinced he couldn't do this. He was living since he was 4 in a foster family and didn't saw his dad for a long time. His mum was living at the other side of the country and visited him 3 or 4 times a year. There were a lot of things troubling his life. I asked him at a certain point in a meeting with foster care and his foster parents.: '... Suppose you did cooperate, what would you like to make a bead for anyway?'. He was very clear: not for pain, anger or sadness but for Star Wars and Luke Skywalker (A good Jedi in the Star Wars Trilogy and we were already for weeks making and playing Star Wars with Lego). A foster care intern, a young man, also present in the meeting, replied that he is actually a Star Wars fan as well and would be happy to make a Star Wars bead for him or with him.



T. was surprised and moved that this trainee made this bead specially for him. He found it so beautiful that he also started to doubt if he wanted the bead in the monument or cherish it in his bedroom so he could keep it close to himself. Finally, after 2 months of doubting, he decided to hang it in the memorial. This bead also opened a way to talk all together about what is still important to him and together with his uncle he went to the inauguration day, proud of being part of this collective.



We left a lot of autonomy with the participants, both in the making and in the stories that people wanted to bring out in the public space. We were mainly facilitators of the process who offered possible, new routes. It is about giving experiences and stories of injustice the right to exist in the relational and social world. This also meant that working together on the City Jewel was in a different kind of atmosphere than what could be seen as 'trauma therapy'. Therapeutic conversation about trauma in childhood time can have a certain heaviness. Being in a small group with each other, putting our shoulder collectively under the project, the enthusiasm in finding the right materials, choosing the colors, created something of a lighthearted, connected atmosphere. There was also a lot of humor in these gatherings. And of course, sometimes also some frustration in turning their drawing into 3D, because not all ideas fall so easily into a bead or 3D image. People finally found the courage to create something around their experiences and put something of that out into the world. It became something that comes out of the shadows and doesn't stay in an isolated therapeutic space. It can be shared with their own local context and broader contexts.

The beads made with a boy of 7 and his mum



Lately the boy was in the grip of temper tantrums and his mum wasn't sure if he would collaborate in the project or even talk to me. But very quickly he decided that the first bead had to represent the anger (red side) and the sadness (blue side) of the loss of his dad. It had to be painted over with dirty spots for the confusion that it evokes. While we were co-creating the beads together with his mum, I asked if he had any idea if his mum also had Sadness and Anger on a visit now and then. Sadness, yes, he taught so but Anger, he was doubting. In further exploring what was a good antidote to The Sadness and Anger, it seemed to be the cuddles his mum was giving him and the jokes and the humor he was offering her by making faces. They decided to put both their hands on the bead (one with painted nails and one with funny faces). Also eating MacDonalds had to have a place on the bead, he insisted, as it was very helpful just like the comfort of his cat! Together they worked for two and a half hours making these beads and in the evening I got a message on my phone and a wonderful picture of them eating an extra-large MacDonald hamburger on the road back home.

Engaging the neighborhood and society

The monument will be placed in a parc in Brussels, Square Marguerite Duras and the choice of this site isn't haphazardly but well-considered and meaningful. It is a place characterized by diversity through the people who live and work there. The homeless people, refugees,... as well as the cultural workers got a role in the project and were invited to collaborate. An important church nearby often giving shelter to people and neighborhood organisations that work with people in vulnerable contexts were very helpful and engaged in also being part of the whole project. The aim was to give everyone a voice in this string of beads and the monument. People can pass by, sit down, take a pause, reflect and find hope.

The City Jewel also triggered a process in some teams and among social workers and therapists. It was nibbling at the dominant ideas and discourses about trauma, people who experienced trauma and the ways of coping with the tentacles of trauma. And even in the broader community, it opened a larger perspective on these children and adults. By co-creating this monument we make a statement. The difficulties these children and adults are struggling with are not just individual problem but also relational and social and they are not just 'traumatised people'. In doing so, we take a political stand. 'What you went through should never have happened. It is not your fault. Your responses were responses to painful, unsafe contexts.' It seeks to raise awareness and richer understanding on the impact of trauma in childhood. Trauma has not only to do with what happened. It also has to do with how we respond to it - in the intimate circle, in the neighborhood, but also how we look at it and deal with it socially and in communities. By organizing conferences, podcasts, ... and providing the website, the City Jewel is a public, collective action that also tries to influence policy and dominant discourses. In that sense, The City Jewel is a form of social action that is being continued and hopes for monumental recognition.

<https://cityjewel.org/>

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<https://dulwichcentre.com.au/unravelling-trauma-co-creating-relief-and-weaving-resilience-playful-collaborations-with-children-families-and-networks-by-sabine-vermeire/>

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