

Trend note #12

Designing child-friendly cities

March 2023





Editorial



Thierry Paquot
Philosopher, author of "Pays de l'enfance" (published by Terre urbaine, 2022)

“
The more adults consider children as full human beings, the more joyful and welcoming their territories will be – and also, the more open they will be to 'grown-ups'... It's time we made room for the children!
”

Make room for the children!

Few children play on the pavements, go to school alone on foot or by bicycle, or take the bus or metro.

Most of their time is simply spent inside the family vehicle, which drops them off in front of the school, the stadium, the art class or at the home of the grandparents, who look after them while their parents go to work.

Such situations were unknown some 50 years ago: so what happened? The car has become ubiquitous in cities, as well as in villages and housing estates, making it dangerous to use the street. Parents amplify the dangers faced by their children to the extent that they confine them to their screens at home, or behind the fence of a playground, with a restricted perimeter.

The only way for children to experience inner growth is by experiencing the things they experiment with. Their bodies, their five senses, vocabulary and imagination develop only with the games they continually invent.

Boldness, balance, self-confidence, discovery of one's environment and friends, etc., are all the result of independent learning. This can only take place in and from themselves. That's why all children are drawn to the outside world, as they constantly seek to find themselves elsewhere! Outside their own bodies, their rooms, their classes, their streets and cities; this is how they can experience the geographical and temporal aspects of their own existence. They are also world-makers who come into the world to add their own worlds to those already there, and in this way, imbue them with meaning.



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Image credit: ©Frato'oo (Francesco Tonucci)
Source: <https://www.lacittadeibambini.org/en/>



Introduction

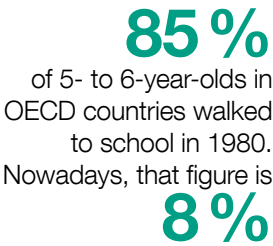
Children seem to have disappeared from cities, public squares, building courtyards and pavements. In just one century, the car has spread right across the urban space, bringing with it its share of consequences: a menace to pedestrians, a greedy consumer of public space, noise pollution, air pollution, and so on. The city seems to have become a dangerous space, hostile to its own inhabitants, in which children (and also teenagers, people with disabilities, the elderly, etc.) have no place.

To what extent can reinterpreting cities through the prism of childhood make our cities more welcoming and desirable for every inhabitant – whatever their age? What are the links between 'child-friendly cities' and cities that are more ecologically and environmentally aware? How can we unlock children's ability to contribute to, and participate in, discussions about the transformation of our urban spaces? What initiatives and success stories can be replicated in other contexts?

This document presents the issues surrounding the inclusion of children in the city. It aims to highlight projects and initiatives from a variety of urban contexts, in which steps have been taken to improve the experience of children in the city. **It explores their benefits and potential.**



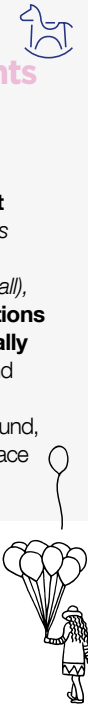
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Reference:
School Bernard Cadenat, Marseille
Image credit:
©Claire Meunier and Paola Sierra



Source: Thierry Paquot

What expectations do children and adolescents have of their urban environment?

According to a study by UN Habitat (the United Nations Human Settlements Programme which aims to promote sustainable cities to provide shelter for all), **children and adolescents' expectations of an urban environment are basically the same as those of adults:** safe and clean streets, access to green spaces, clean air, activities, the ability to move around, the freedom to see their friends, and a place in which they can feel at home.



Local communities committed to children

Through the international Child Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI), launched by UNICEF in 1996, communities around the world are making commitments to respecting and facilitating the rights of children in their communities.

Since its inception, the CFCI has been adopted by more than 3,000 municipalities in 57 countries. In France, the *Ville amie des enfants* network has 297 communities committed to the 2020-2026 mandate. Through this initiative, cities make a commitment to the well-being, non-discrimination, education, participation and awareness of the rights of 0-18 year olds within their geographical area.



Issues

Urban policy issues for children vary around the world. Thinking about the place of children in the city necessarily means rethinking strategies and methods, but it also means considering a host of variables linked to the local context, such as sociological, political, economic, cultural, ecological and demographic factors.

Many challenges must therefore be addressed if we are to rethink our urban policies. These include: rebalancing the place of the car in the city for safer, less polluted and less noisy streets, calming and re-naturing public spaces for greater resilience, encouraging the creation of social links for a relational city, and involving and co-constructing urban development with the children and adolescents of our cities.

In 1989, the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) adopted by the United Nations (UN) provided recognition for specific rights for children and a means of ensuring that they are upheld. Consideration of the place of children in the city is a conscious political move that includes the right of children to participate in the construction of their living environment. It is a paradigm shift that brings together public and private stakeholders and civil society around a common challenge: the city for all. Designing urban spaces for and with children is the key to a joyful, recreational, ecological, intergenerational city... in short, a city for living in!



“Consideration of the well-being of children and young people is undoubtedly a key issue for the future, as it determines the development possibilities of our societies.”

David Olivier
Teacher/researcher at the University of Rennes 2

IN FIGURES

39 M
children under 5 years old were overweight or obese in 2020 (WHO)

Citizen involvement



Create the city with children, not just for children: listen to children and young people, take their needs into account, and involve them in decisions on urban strategies. It was in Schiltigheim that the first children's municipal council was created 40 years ago in France.

Inclusion



As the CABE study published in 2017 states, public space can contribute to reducing social inequalities if it is accessible to all and evenly distributed throughout the city.

An even distribution of public spaces, good-quality green spaces, and access to free family activities reinforce the “right to the city” for all, and especially for the youngest.

Public policies



Cities such as Lyon, Lille, Rennes and Grenoble now have “child-friendly city” or “child-sized city” councillors and representatives to make allowance for the interests of young people in the redevelopment of public spaces and to involve them in decisions and projects.



Good to know

Residents of neighbourhoods with communal green spaces are more likely to have strong social ties than those surrounded by communal concrete spaces (The Lancet, 2008).

Social connection



Well-designed facilities can promote community living and access to outdoor spaces. The neighbourhood or village, far from being a mere backdrop to life, can become a “resource space” (Lehman-Frisch, 2011) for young people and an important place for socialisation. Workshops on co-constructing public spaces with adolescents can improve social relations and trust (ARUP, 2017).

Well-being and health



According to the WHO, physical inactivity could be one of the top 10 causes of death and disability in the world. To fight against sedentary lifestyles and obesity, joint and shared examinations of the role and strength of architecture – and from a wider perspective, of urban planning – in the design of real estate and urban projects can make daily physical activity more accessible, encourage it, and make it fun.

Safety



The feeling of insecurity, and actual insecurity, takes on an important dimension when it restricts the use of the city by children and their families, preventing or limiting their daily practices and movements. According to a study by the Policy Studies Institute (2015), car traffic and its associated hazards are the main factor explaining the loss of autonomy of children and teenagers when travelling in cities.

Moving

The way people live in and experience the city varies according to various factors: age, gender, socio-economic level, cultural background, etc. Thinking about the place of children and their mobility within the urban space means rethinking our ways of conceiving the city by taking all these factors into consideration.

The importance of promoting spatial autonomy in children and adolescents

Learning to find their way around and to master their immediate environment – the neighbourhood and the street – helps children to develop at different levels and promotes encounters and even social attitudes in the city.

After all, “for the child, getting out of the house, walking the streets on their own and finding their way around is an important dimension of both social and cognitive development” (Tonucci, 2019). However, many studies report a decline in independent travel by children and adolescents, with negative consequences for their health. Driven by environmental, health and lifestyle objectives, many mayors are taking measures to reduce motorised traffic in certain areas of their cities.



IN FIGURES

In the 1970s,
82%
of European children
cycled to school. By 2012,
the figure had fallen to
14%
(CityCycling, Pucher
& Buehler, 2012).

Over the past 40 years,
young people
aged 9 to 16 have lost
25%

of their physical abilities;
they run slower, and
for shorter periods. On
average, a child could run

600 metres
in three minutes in 1971;
today, it takes four minutes
for the same distance
(Tomkinson, 2013).

Pontevedra: an ambitious soft urban mobility policy

In 1999, Mayor Miguel Anxo Fernández Lores ran for office with a programme to drastically reduce car use in this Spanish city of 83,000 inhabitants. As a result, car traffic has fallen by 90%, pollution has decreased by 50%, and schoolchildren have made the streets of the city their own. To support the redevelopment of the city, 8,000 free 24-hour car parking spaces have been built around the city.

Since the introduction of these initiatives, Pontevedra has received many international awards for its urban mobility policy, and for its accessibility and quality of life. In the commercial city centre, the space dedicated to cars has been reduced to a strict minimum, and now represents only 25% of street space.

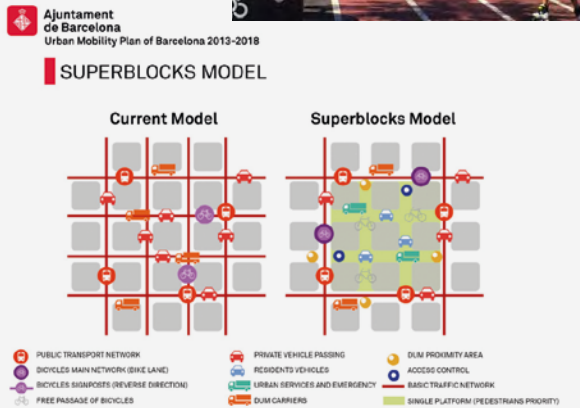


Reference: Pontevedra city centre
Image credit: ©RdA Suisse →



Barcelona: the concept of superblocks to calm public spaces

The superblock concept introduced by Barcelona City Council aims to reduce the presence of cars in the city centre. The goal is to limit traffic to the main roads around the checkerboard areas (400m x 400m superblocks). The inner streets become “citizens' spaces” with safe green spaces for soft mobility, culture, leisure and community activities.



Reference: Superblock
in the Poblenou district
Image credit: ©Col· SuperillaP9 ↓



Reference: Traffic developments
with the introduction of “superblocks”
Image credit: ©Col· SuperillaP9 ↓



Initiative: “Les rues aux enfants” (Streets for children)

The phenomenon of “streets for children” originated in the English-speaking world (under the term “play streets”), as a response to the increase in car traffic and the decrease in urban space for inhabitants.



Reference: Once of the first “play streets” in London - England
Image credit: ©Clavim

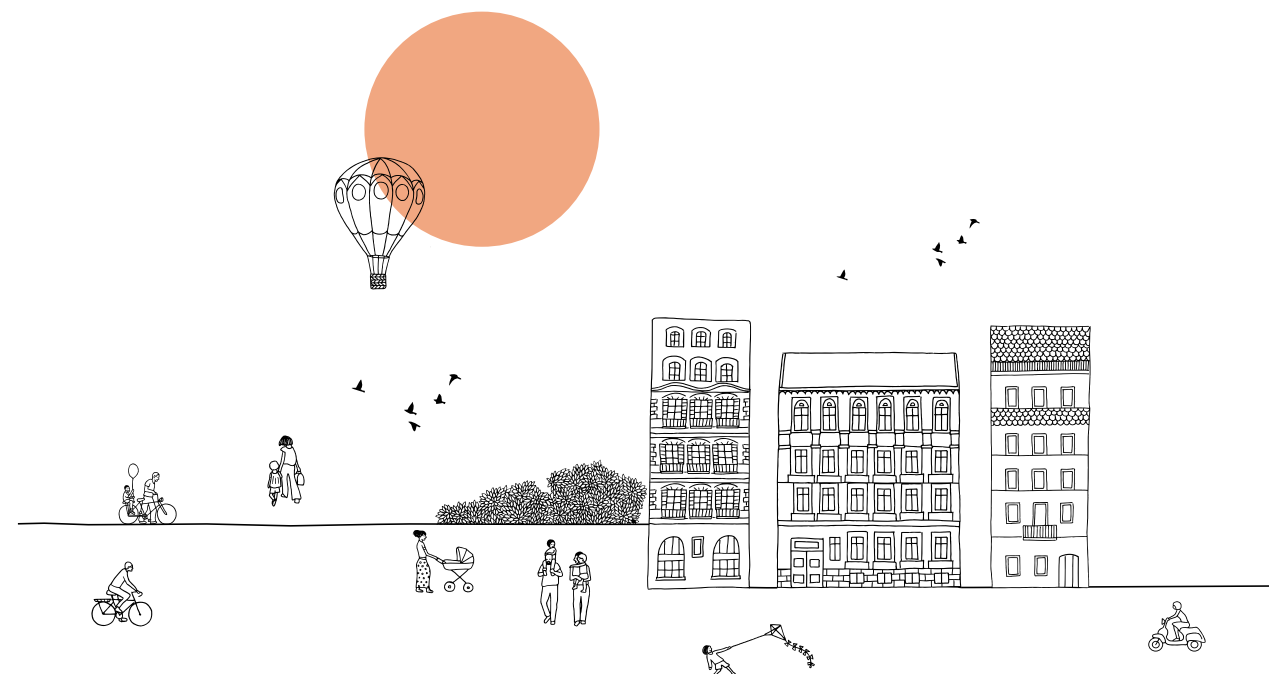


Today, such initiatives are gradually developing all over the world. And associations are often the instigators of proposals for new activities to contribute to the (re)appropriation of the streets.

In France, the “Rues aux enfants, Rues pour tous” national collective (Anacej, Cafézoïde, Rue de l’avenir, Vivacités Île-de-France) has resulted in the creation of more than 150 children’s streets. The approach consists of setting a street aside for children for a whole day, so that residents, children and adults can organise activities on the pavement which has become free and safe. This dynamic, supported by the municipalities, invites the inhabitants to devise new uses and to reimagine urban planning approaches to streets. More broadly, it raises awareness among elected officials, teachers and parents about the place of children in the city.



Reference: A play street, Pont-de-l’Arche, Normandy, France, 2018.
Association du Temps Libre des Enfants Archépontains
Image credit: ©D.R.



The Basel experience: “Les yeux a 1,20 m” (At an eye level of 1.20 m)

“1.20 m is the average height of a nine-year-old child’s eyes. At this height, the way in which the environment is perceived is very different from an adult’s view. You can easily see this by, for example, getting down on your knees”
(Guy Morin, President of the State Council of the Canton of Basel-Stadt).

Created in 2006 in a district of Basel, the “Street of the Future” initiative focuses on children and adolescents. This initiative is inspired by the recognition that their realities and needs need to be considered more in urban development. The aim is to involve them as active agents in the whole process, from planning to implementation and evaluation of the projects that are implemented. More broadly, this initiative aims to raise the awareness of the whole community (administrative entities, or associations, economic and cultural agents, etc.) through their participation.



Learning

The central role of the school

As a place where the family space and the city overlap, the school plays a central role in how children relate to the city.

As children's spatial autonomy has fallen, schools could be one of the most suitable spaces for implementing policies that promote the transmission of urban knowledge from older to younger children. As a place of education, the school could allow the learning of principles, values and prevention and safety routines, enabling children to acquire the skills to enjoy the city: to walk, to play, to meet each other, in safety and confidence, for themselves and for those around them. Sociologist Émile Durkheim saw the school as "a small society"; a fine example of an observatory for thinking about the city differently through the prism of daily practices, interactions, experiences and time considerations.

“Children do not need to be protected; rather, they should be “armed”; that is, equipped with tools, skills and autonomy.”

”
Francesco Tonucci



Bouygues Construction



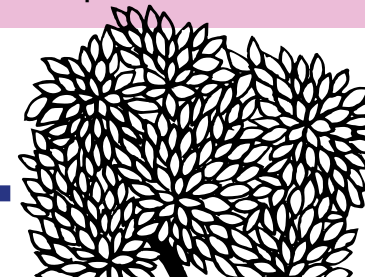
Learning outdoors

Countries like Canada, Denmark and Sweden have been taking their classes out into the open air since the 1950s. In France, similar initiatives were launched through the “Écoles de plein air” movement in the 1930s with the inspiring example of the Suresnes outdoor school. Since then, many studies have shown the benefits of having an outdoor classroom: greater motivation among pupils and teachers, better school results, and the development of cooperation within the class. There is now a strong revival of interest in this type of initiative, which is providing food for thought, particularly during times of health pandemic. For example, the Belgian collective “Tous Dehors” supports teachers who choose to move their classrooms outside the school walls.



Greening the school grounds

In addition to outdoor classrooms, other initiatives have been developed in Northern European countries and Canada, such as green schoolyards. Much research, such as the Canadian study “Gaining ground: The power and potential of school, ground greening in the Toronto District School Board”, (Dyment 2005), indicates that such approaches help to reduce tensions between students. In France, the greening of schoolyards was initially developed with a view to adapting to climate change, to limit heat islands and circulate rainwater, as shown by the example of the “Oasis” schoolyards resulting from the Paris resilience strategy adopted in 2017. The objective of reconnecting students with nature has gradually become more and more important. By extension, schoolyards could be used as neighbourhood squares, enabling everyone to benefit from natural spaces close to their homes.



↑
Reference: Outdoor class, St Zotique, Canada
Image credit: ©NicolaDiNarzo

“All of life's most important lessons come through play.”

”
Francesco Tonucci



↑
Reference: The Oasis courtyard - at the Emeriau nursery school - July 2021
Image credit: ©Théo Ménivard / CAUE Paris

Meeting/playing

The role of socialisation and play in childhood

Social interaction is necessary at all stages of an individual's development and is particularly important in childhood and adolescence.

Although children are largely socialised through school, this process does not happen entirely through institutions. Free play, in which children can play independently and at their own pace, is particularly important. As Thierry Paquot points out in his book *Le pays de l'enfance*, "the proper function of the child is to play", which is the main way in which children learn. However, as several studies show, the amount of free creative play time fell by about a third between 1987 and 2002 ("Tous Dehors" collective, 2016).

Importance of the outdoors and free play

Outdoor play brings several benefits to children: "decreased anxiety, reduced hyperactivity, increased self-confidence, improved concentration skills, emotional development" (A'URBA, 2021).



IN FIGURES

The creative abilities of 12-14 year-olds appear to have declined by **20 %** ("Tous Dehors" collective, 2016).



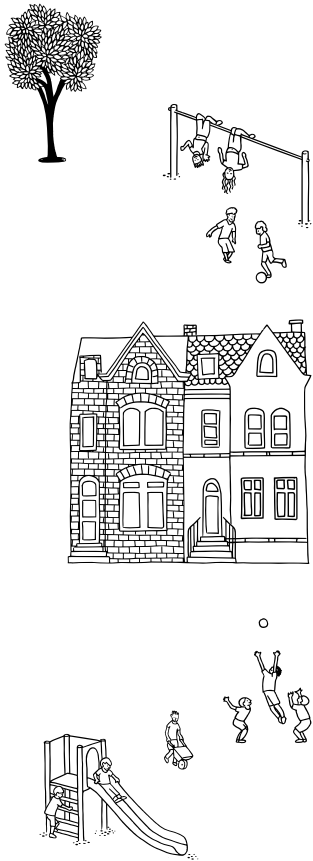
Children's outdoor play time has decreased significantly: for example, in Switzerland, from a figure of three to four hours per day in the 1960s, it has now dropped to an average of **47** minutes, of which 29 minutes are independent (Pro Juventute Foundation, 2019).

The city as a playground?

Although play and daydreaming play a major role in children's development, the facilities offered by the city are often standardised, even stereotyped, and offer little room for imagination or discovery. "Children are (...) taken to squares, areas surrounded by bottle-green fencing and privet hedges, where they are permitted to ride a duck on springs and slide down a piece of plastic." (A'URBA, 2021).

One of the benefits of play is "learning to anticipate danger, to control it, and to feel the immense joy of doing so: climbing, moving fast, using dangerous tools, being near dangerous elements (water, fire), fighting, and walking alone, out of sight of an adult" (Ellen Beate Hansen Sandseter, et al. 2023).

Public spaces in the city, whether playgrounds, parks, or green spaces, play a crucial role in providing children with a safe place to meet and play with their peers, but also an environment that allows them a certain amount of freedom and autonomy. Several initiatives have been developed in various countries to create safe and less standardised spaces, such as adventure playgrounds, or playful urban design.



Reference: Adventure playground, Clos-Coutard
Image credit: ©Arnauld-Delacroix
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What is an adventure playground?

In 1943, landscape architect Carl Theodor Sørensen created the first adventure playground in the suburbs of Copenhagen.

A second adventure playground was set up in London in 1948, and another in Minneapolis in 1949. These areas are empty, open spaces for children and teenagers to use, where they can give free rein to their creativity and create with the elements at their disposal, small games, huts, etc. In France, such spaces were not developed until the early 1970s.



→
Reference: "La petite plage" adventure playground
Image credit: ©Petite plage

TAPLA (Past/Future Adventure Land)

Through action research and with the aim of recovering the history of adventure playgrounds, understanding their changes over time, and encouraging new initiatives in France, an interdisciplinary group of researchers has created the TAPLA project, supported by the University of Paris-Nanterre's Laboratory of Excellence. tapla.hypotheses.org



Good to know

What is playful urban design?

Playful urban design is an initiative that facilitates explorations of the body and physical postures through the installation of furniture and equipment of different sizes and shapes.

The use of colours and textures helps to create a playful, attractive environment. These facilities are generally simple and not designed to be spaces that are closed or dedicated only to an audience of children; rather, they are intended to blend with the urban context, generating a sense of "freedom" and free movement.

Active design is a tool for integrating play and sport activities into the heart of the city.

The benefits of active design:

- a solution for combating sedentary lifestyles and obesity by encouraging city dwellers to get moving;
- a response to the problems of security in the city via the development of facilities that contribute to generating flows and social control in public spaces;
- an inclusive space with facilities that are non-gendered and accessible to all.



→
Reference: The redesign of the Quai de la Fosse, Nantes by the ase agency
Image credit: ©Sonia Lavadinho

Removing the obstacles

There are a number of obstacles to making urban spaces more dynamic, attractive and safe for younger populations, and to enabling greater autonomy for children and adolescents in cities.



Barriers related to security and the feeling of insecurity

The increase in road traffic and the possibility of unwelcome encounters has led the city to be seen as a dangerous place. Faced with the fear of potential aggression and danger on the road, adults prefer to accompany their children on their journeys at all times. Researcher Clément Rivière cites two main risks for children in public spaces. "Firstly, the risk of the traffic accident. Secondly, the risk of an unwelcome encounter with a male figure... a rapist or paedophile who abducts the child" (Rivière, 2021).



Cultural barriers

With children's spatial autonomy having disappeared over the last few decades, depictions of children "alone" in a public space can be perceived as negative, leading to suspicious comments on the parents' educational standards. The aim of such questioning of parental responsibility is now to characterise anyone who takes a hands-off approach to the actions of their children in the public space as a "bad" parent (Authier, Bathellier, Lehman-Frisch, 2016).



Behavioural barriers

The reduction in the use of outdoor spaces by children and teenagers has resulted in an increase in the amount of time spent indoors, particularly on screens (television, computer, tablet or telephone). Children's free time in public spaces is also limited by their extra-curricular activities, where economic circumstances permit.



Insurance and regulatory barriers

Certain legal and regulatory frameworks concerning the safety of young people limit potential experimentation with new uses of public spaces. The city may face issues of legal liability, hindering the development of less standardised play areas, such as adventure playgrounds, which contribute to children's development.

The benefits of a child-friendly city

Thinking about the city from a child's perspective allows us to re-examine our ways of doing things and design urban spaces that are calm, relationship-centred, inclusive, resilient and hybrid, and constantly changing in anticipation of future uses.

Social links

- Strengthening social interactions
- Valuing local links
- A relationship-driven, inclusive city
- Intergenerational activities



Sustainable communities

The creation of sustainable communities can be supported by developments that facilitate intergenerational interaction; for example, by providing a mix of active and contemplative public spaces. Activities that facilitate interactions, such as shared gardens, can also help to strengthen this intergenerational link.

Well-being and health

- Physical activity
- Mental well-being
- Activities accessible to all



Reference: Public spaces in the Cantinho do Céu complex, in São Paulo, have been used to mitigate inequalities. (ARUP 2017)
Image credit: ©Daniel Ducci

São Paulo

In one São Paulo neighbourhood, many children rarely go out because public spaces are considered too dangerous. The Criança Fala project has transformed public spaces through play and art, making them cleaner and safer, with the help of children.



Safety

- Calm and accessible city
- Safe streets and public spaces
- Pedestrianisation and soft mobility



Nature in the city

- Increase in green spaces
- Protection of biodiversity
- Development of adventure playgrounds



Resilience in the city

- Developments to combat heat islands
- Cities prepared for climate resilience



Local economy

- Reinvigoration of public space
- Promotion of local businesses
- Local consumption, short chains



The city for children: a catalyst for urban innovation?

As noted in the ARUP (2017) study, a child-friendly urban approach has the potential ability to bring together a range of initiatives (health, well-being, environment, resilience, safety) and act as a catalyst for urban innovation.



Stakeholders & Initiatives

An example of a partnership that brings us closer to a child-friendly city: Linkcity and the City of Marseille

The community of stakeholders who are joining forces to build a city in which children and adolescents have their own space is beginning to emerge, as shown by the collaboration between Linkcity, the city of Marseille and the CitizenCorps association responsible for such initiatives as the Grand Bain project. Linkcity has drawn upon its conviction that being a private player in the real estate world means having duties – and above all a responsibility towards future generations – and has chosen to engage with this issue in Marseille from a variety of angles.



Linkcity project: *Les Fabriques*

The *Les Fabriques* development project, developed by Linkcity, between the city centre and the districts to the north, aims to offer the first urban ropes adventure facility in the region: attached to the gable wall of a soon-to-be-delivered car park building, high platforms and fun walks will be offered to children (accessible to adults too!) to bring the urban space to life!



Image credit: © CCD Architecte

Interviewing “stakeholders”

Talking about children is good, but getting them to talk for themselves is even better! For this reason, Linkcity co-organised a workshop with the CitizenCorps association, which is responsible for the Grand Bain project, to hear what children have to say about their experiences of the city. The aim of this Grand Bain project is to develop knowledge of other people and create empathy by pairing up children from schools in socially diverse neighbourhoods: by getting to know those who are different and daring to take a step towards them, fear and apprehension can be overcome.

What children feel:

- too much space is given to the car;
- there is an excess of rubbish on the pavements;
- there is a lack of public urban spaces open to children;
- there is too little greenery, etc.

Future workshops could focus on a dream city for children. The aim of these workshops is to take into account the issues raised by children in urban policies and planning projects.



Reference: Drawing by a second-grade student at the Breteuil school, Marseille. Workshop devised by Linkcity and Bouygues Construction in partnership with Le Grand Bain. February 2023.



Creating a child-friendly city means giving ourselves an opportunity to build it for everyone. In a radical departure from standardised cities designed by and for white men and organised around the car, it's high time we introduced the era of sensitive cities.



Mathilde Chaboche

Deputy Mayor of Marseille
responsible for urban planning and
harmonious development of the city



Conclusion

At a time when we are seeing fewer and fewer children and teenagers in public spaces, initiatives around the world are developing to give them a place and encourage their spatial autonomy. The aim is to improve their development and health, while increasing their independence, social opportunities and life experience, through the implementation of urban planning, construction projects and public policies.

Limiting the use of cars in the city, creating safer and calmer routes and spaces, building and rehabilitating adventure playgrounds, redesigning and planting schoolyards... all these initiatives will help to give children back their place in the city!

Will the presence of children in our cities be the next indicator of well-being and of living well in our cities?

Reinterpreting cities through the prism of childhood does not just mean creating spaces dedicated to children and/or teenagers. Above all, it means offering hybrid developments that are accessible to all, inviting a diversity of uses and a generational mix. This means experimenting with other ways of conceptualising urban space through the co-operation of public and private stakeholders and civil society around a shared objective. This then makes public space a forum for expressing citizen involvement; people are interested not just in wanting things, but also in doing them!

Let's give children a voice again, let's take their experiences, their practices, their ideas into consideration, so that they in turn can become “makers of [our] worlds”. In this way, we can make our cities more peaceful, inclusive and desirable.



Going further



Workshops and conferences

- Afreloce workshops, “Les enfants et la ville.” magasindesenfants.hypotheses.org

Case file

- “La ville des enfants et des adolescents” in *Annales de la recherche urbaine*, 2016.

Portals and newsletters

- La rue de l’avenir. rue-avenir.ch

Initiatives

- Terrain d’Aventure du Passé / Pour l’Avenir – TAPLA. tapla.hypotheses.org
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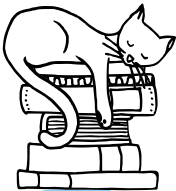
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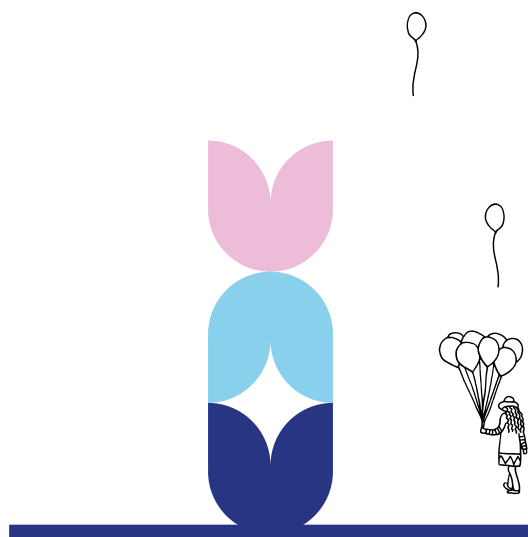
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Credits

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