ISSUE 2 June 2025

play RIGHTS magazine

ipa international play association
promoting the child's right to play



Barcelona's Plan for Play

Play Sufficiency in Leeds

UNCRC Catalyses Play in Swedish Municipalities

Mexico City's Play Policies and Programs

Bhubaneswar's Efforts to Mainstream Play

Bratislava reimagining childhood freedom and play

planning for play

FOCUS ON CITY GOVERNMENTs

ABOUT IPA AND HOW YOU CAN JOIN

The International Play Association (IPA) is a dynamic, cross-sectoral, membership-based international non-governmental organization founded in 1961. It has members in almost 50 countries and branches in 19 countries. It has active groups throughout the world and enthusiastically welcomes new members and new energy!

IPA is at the forefront of developing a global understanding and increased visibility of the child's right to play (article 31, UNCRC) as a fundamental human right. In 2013, IPA reached a significant milestone with its leading role in crafting the General Comment (GC) on article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). GC #17 deepens our understanding of article 31 as a whole, and especially of play as a child right.

IPA recognises that the well-being of children is a global issue, and that opportunity for play is an important element of well-being. Play is children's natural behaviour and their healthy development is dependent upon sufficient time and opportunity to play.

IPA is an interdisciplinary organisation that brings together people from all professions who work for and with children. For over fifty years, national groups have initiated various projects promoting the child's right to play.

IPA's worldwide network promotes the importance of play in child development, provides a vehicle for interdisciplinary exchange and action, and brings a child's perspective to policy development throughout the world.

IPA welcomes you, or your organisation, to join its international network and participate in its campaign to promote the value of play around the world. You can contact IPA through your national representative listed on our website.

Visit ipaworld.org, or email the IPA Membership Officer at membership@ipaworld.org.



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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

In our rapidly evolving world, play is a crucial element of child development and a fundamental aspect of human culture. As members of the International Play Association (IPA) World, our mission is to advocate for the child's right to play and ensure that this vital activity is given due consideration in every sphere of public and private life.

In this edition of the Play Rights magazine, we delve into the interesting theme of "Planning for Play" and explore the dynamic interplay between municipal government policies, international legal frameworks, and planning visions shaping the landscape of urban play. Cities around the globe are recognizing the multifaceted benefits of play, not only for children's health and well-being but also for community cohesion and urban liveability. As custodians of public spaces, municipal governments are pivotal in crafting environments that facilitate and encourage play. It is exciting to witness city planners increasingly considering the diverse needs of their communities, ensuring play spaces are accessible, inclusive, and reflective of the cultural tapestry they serve.

Together, through thoughtful planning and collaborative action, we can ensure that play is recognized as an essential right and facilitated in ways that enrich our communities across the world.

Urban planning, zoning, and public health policies and laws must incorporate provisions that protect and promote the right to play. When crafted with foresight and compassion, these legal instruments serve as powerful tools to empower communities to reclaim play as a natural part of urban life. This issue examines case studies and successful interventions spotlighting city government efforts that can act as catalysts for vibrant, playful environments. We cannot help but see the opportunities this presents for embedding play as an essential part of urban design and development.

Visionary leaders, both within and outside of government, play an important role in championing the cause of play. IPA World's membership is full of leaders who are all quietly making a difference in their communities. This edition introduces you to some of these wonderful play champions and emerging leaders in the field of planning for play. Their commitment and innovative ideas inspire us to transcend traditional boundaries and explore new possibilities for how play is integrated into our daily lives.

As you read and reflect on the articles and insights within this magazine, I encourage you to reflect on the invaluable contributions of the various stakeholders. Together, through thoughtful planning and collaborative action, we can ensure that play is recognized as an essential right and facilitated in ways that enrich our communities across the world. How lucky we are to have such committed people! And how lucky we are as members of IPA World to have all found each other and our place as members of IPA World!



Thank you for being so dedicated to fostering environments where play thrives. I hope you find this edition both enlightening and motivating as we continue to advocate for the transformative power of play in communities worldwide.

Yours Playfully

Robyn Monro Miller AM
President
Play Rights, IPA World

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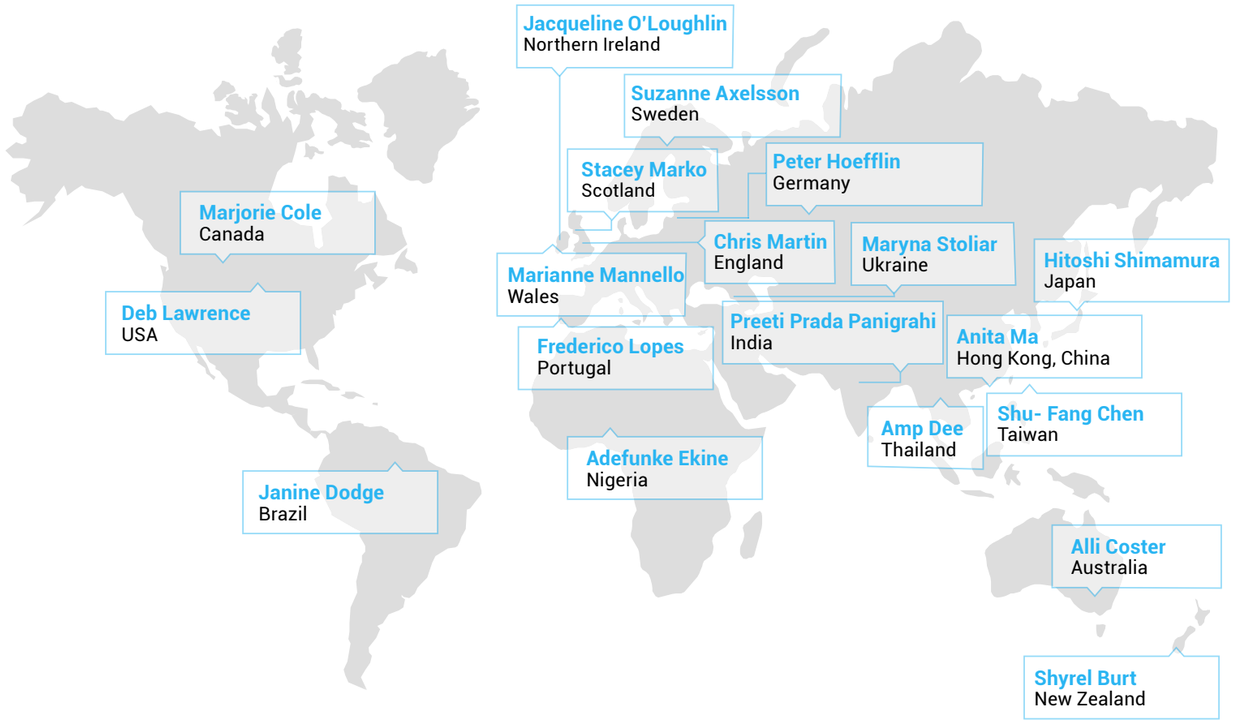

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EDITOR'S NOTE

A systematic literature review in the Journal of Planning Literature in 2024 indicates that urban planning for play has gained attention, particularly since 2010.

Yet, most research focuses on formal play spaces rather than citywide play opportunities.



In the 1950s, well-known urban planner Kevin Lynch at MIT encouraged his planning students to reflect on their childhood environments. Their essays revealed a preference for playing in informal urban areas over organized playgrounds. Inspired by these insights that suggest the potential of the city as a whole for nurturing rich childhood experiences, Lynch initiated the "Growing Up in Cities (GUIC)" project in 1970, supported by UNESCO, opening up a new frontier in planning studies. Around this time, in 1968, Lady Allen of Hurtwood published her book, "Planning for Play," urging planners to create environments that meet children's needs instead of forcing adult ideas of order and safety on play spaces. Nearly 30 years later, in 1996, UNICEF and UN-Habitat launched the Child Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI) to make cities more inclusive for children. The CFCI has driven the creation of public spaces for children in at least 24 countries.While some view creating child friendly urban environments as a supply-driven effort based on evidence and planning expertise, others focus on the demand side, ensuring children's voices influence planning decisions under their participation rights. Both perspectives highlight the need to address increased traffic, loss of play spaces, and reduced outdoor play opportunities due to current planning practices.

General Comment No. 17 (GC-17) on Article 31 of the UNCRC (2013) emphasizes the importance of play as a spatialized activity. It highlights how inadequate recognition of play leads to insufficient investment, weak legislation, and children's invisibility in planning processes. GC-17 then goes on to outline the responsibilities of municipal governments to promote children's right to play based on the principle of sufficiency. Since the introduction of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, urban planning has increasingly been recognized as a means to create more liveable cities with green, accessible, and safe public spaces that promote play, social inclusion, climate resilience, and urban health. The SDGs further contributed to a boom in child-friendly planning thinking. UN organizations, global foundations, and think tanks published several manuals and toolkits for influencing child friendly urban planning and placemaking for children post-2015. A systematic literature review in the Journal of Planning Literature in 2024 indicates that urban planning for play has gained attention, particularly since 2010. Yet, most research focuses on formal play spaces rather than citywide play opportunities.

In this edition of Play Rights magazine, we explore the increasingly popular concept of "Planning for Play" that city governments use to create more playful cities within the larger approach of child friendly planning. Featuring articles from Barcelona, Leeds, Swedish municipalities, Mexico City, Bhubaneswar, and Bratislava, along with an opinion piece, we examine the motivations and achievements of different cities in promoting playability as an urban quality. Key factors include strong political will at different levels, the integration of child rights into planning, a data-driven understanding of children's play needs, and city council endorsements that prioritize and scale up planning for play as part of existing local government systems and structures. The Mexico City and Bhubaneswar articles spotlight how strong political champions, dedicated advocacy, and evolving legislation can shift deeply entrenched adult-centric planning policies towards a child-centric approach in the global South.

This rich collection of articles significantly contributes to the literature on planning for play. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the many peer reviewers who upheld high standards of research integrity and collaborated with me to ensure the articles were of the highest quality. I sincerely thank Anupama Nallari, Jackie Boldon, Maria Nordstrom, Marie Williams, Matluba Khan, and Tassy Thomson for their valuable contributions to the peer review process—and a special shout-out to Marjorie Cole for her excellent proof editing of several articles.

Sudeshna Chatterjee
Editor-in-Chief
Play Rights, IPA World

Other examples of planning for play across the world

We spotlight seven children friendly cities—Barcelona and Leeds that are part of UNICEF's CFCI, two Swedish municipalities that are reimagining municipal planning in the era of incorporation of CRC in Swedish law, Bhubaneshwar's attempt to leverage the Urban 95 programme, and Mexico City and Bratislava remaking public spaces through mayor driven agendas for urban children. At least three other recognized child friendly cities have notable approaches to planning for play, upholding children's right to play, and making playability an important quality of child friendly cities.

REGENSBURG
GERMANY

The Masterplan for Play in Regensburg is a legally binding planning instrument designed to make the city child and family-friendly. It was developed in 2010 as part of the city's broader agenda to attract young families and enhance city competitiveness. The approach integrates child-friendly urban planning into all city initiatives, prioritizing children's spatial needs. Masterplan for Play involves participatory planning as befitting a UNICEF-recognized child friendly city, where children are actively involved in assessing public spaces and proposing changes. The city's youth welfare planner participates in the planning processes to safeguard the needs of children and families. Working directly with children and youth and strengthening planning criteria and regulations ensures that playability permeates the entire public realm of the city, not just playgrounds. The city invests in realizing children's visions for play spaces through custom-designed structures rather than relying solely on standard play equipment.

Source: Sudeshna Chatterjee & Chandrani Dutta (23 Jul 2024): Healthy public spaces for children within neighbourhoods through urban transformations, Cities & Health, DOI: 10.1080/23748834.2024.2375857

SHARJAH
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Sharjah seeks to create safe, vibrant, inclusive, and resilient open public spaces that are child-friendly and support play for children of different ages and abilities. Recognized as a child-friendly city by UNICEF in 2018, the Sharjah Child-Friendly Office (SCFO) and the Sharjah Urban Planning Council (SUPC) created the Child-Friendly Urban Planning Project with the support of UNICEF and UN-Habitat. They developed the Sharjah Planning Principles: Guidance for Child Friendly Open Public Spaces based on insights from the city's "Public Space Assessment Report," which focused on publicly owned open space. Key aspects of the guidance include creating a citywide network of playable spaces, promoting age-appropriate design of play spaces and integration of nature, ensuring play spaces are universally accessible and cater to a variety of play types, designing play spaces with graduated levels of risk, enabling formal or informal supervision and involving children in the design process.

Source: https://sharjahchildfriendlyoffice.ae/urban-planning/storage/app/media/Sharjah-Planning-Principles-Guidance-en.pdf

SHENZHEN
CHINA

The China National Program for Child Development (2021-2030) aims to create child-friendly cities, aligning with the changing aspirations of a prosperous urbanizing economy and society. The Fourteenth Five-Year Plan outlines this initiative with a target to pilot 100 child-friendly cities in urban areas housing more than 1 million people by 2025. Amongst all participating cities, Shenzhen has gone the farthest in establishing standards, such as revising the Shenzhen City Planning Standards and Guidelines to include new requirements for children's play spaces in parks and residential areas. As part of Shenzhen's Child Friendly City Action Plan, guidelines have been issued for the construction of child-friendly parks, child-friendly communities, child-friendly schools, and friendly travel systems.

Source: Chatterjee, S. (2023). How has the Child-Friendly Cities Initiative promoted public spaces for children? Children, Youth and Environments, 33(3), 1-34. https://muse.jhu.edu/journal/850



EDITORIAL BOARD



Dr. Sudeshna Chatterjee (Editor-in-Chief)

Sudeshna has extensive experience as a globally recognised urban practitioner, researcher, and published author. She focuses on enabling inclusive, resilient and child-friendly cities and communities and advocating for including child and youth perspectives in urban policies, planning and urbanisation processes. Sudeshna has led IPA's Access to Play in Crisis research in six countries and was elected to the IPA World Board in 2017. She is the Programme Director (research) for Sustainable Cities and Transport at the World Resources Institute (WRI) India Ross Centre for Cities. She led the research and framing of the UN system-wide "Global Principles and Guidance of Public Spaces for Children" and an associated compendium of 50 case studies acting on behalf of UNICEF, WHO, and UN-Habitat.



Dr. Matluba Khan
Bangladesh

Matluba is a senior lecturer in urban design at the School of Geography and Planning at Cardiff University. Her research explores the connection between the natural and built environments and human behaviour, focusing on the impact of school ground design on pedagogy and play. She has studied the outdoor learning environment of children at primary schools and urban residential areas in Bangladesh and Scotland.



Dr. Chris Martin
England

Chris is a playworker, writer/researcher, and playwork activist. He is the chair of IPA England and Tiverton Adventure Playground. He wrote the UK Play and Playwork Education and Skills Strategy 2011-2016; facilitated the All Party Parliamentary Group on Play, and was National Playwork Convenor for Unite the Union.



Dr. Helen Little
Australia

Helen is a Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Education. Before entering academia, she was an early childhood teacher. Her main area of teaching is outdoor play, which, for her is a key context for advocating for children's right to play. She aims to support her students in becoming advocates for play.





Marjorie Cole
Canada

Marjorie is President of IPA Canada and focuses on the importance of play in education as an Education Coordinator for a non-profit dedicated to early intervention. She advocates for the transformative power of play and educates post-secondary early childhood educators about play. She also pursues graduate studies in counselling and psychology.



Dr. Tolu Okoruwa
Nigeria

Tolu is a Chief Lecturer and researcher at the Federal College of Education, Abeokuta, Nigeria, where she has taught teacher trainees to adopt various play-based strategies for teaching children. She has also published articles stressing the importance of play in children's all-round development.



Dr. Maria Nordström
Sweden

Maria is an associate professor in the Department of People and Society at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. With a background in developmental psychology, she has collaborated with many urban planners on outdoor spaces for children over many years to promote children's right to play.





Dr. Anupama Nallari
India



Anupama is a member of the urban team at Save the Children where she supports knowledge and content development for the Global Alliance – Cities4Children. She received her doctorate in Environmental Psychology from the City University of New York. Her past work includes research on common space in informal settlements in India, facilitating child-focused participatory planning and design, and supporting the development of global guidance and principles for public spaces for children in both formal and informal contexts.



Tassy Ellen Thompson
Norway

Tassy currently practices as an artist-researcher and is a doctoral fellow and university lecturer at the Institute of Cultural Studies, University of South East Norway. Her work explores landscape and sustainability in relation to play, performance, and education.

Michael Dietrich
Germany

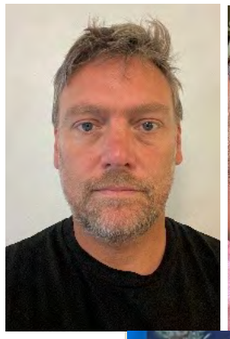


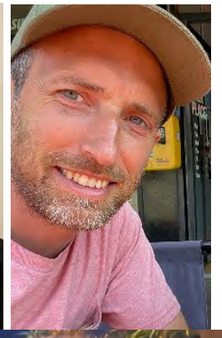
Michael is the artistic director of the improvisational theatre "Mixxit Theater" and the spinning theatre for children "Mit Zick & Zack auf Geschichtenreise". For 20 years he has initiated and organized media and theatre projects in the cultural education of children and young people, currently as managing director and board member of PA/SPIELkultur eV in Munich and for maninoy eV in the Philippines.



CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS







Mike Barclay and Ben Tawil

Mike and Ben are play consultants and researchers with over 40 years of combined experience advocating for children's play. Through their work at Ludicology, they conduct play sufficiency assessments, research, and consultancy for local governments and organizations, focusing on improving responses to children's right to play. Their efforts include developing evidence-based design recommendations and fostering partnerships to address children's play needs.



Leticia Lozano

Leticia is an architect and play researcher leading MACIA Estudio, a firm focused on designing spaces for children's play and learning. She has worked with international organizations and governments on urban development, prioritizing childhood. From 2015 to 2018, she led Mexico City's Playful City strategy at the Lab for the City and is a Salzburg Global Seminar fellow. She authored "Architecture for Urban Play" and "Playing Together," lectures globally, and serves on World Urban Parks' "Children, Play and Nature" Committee.



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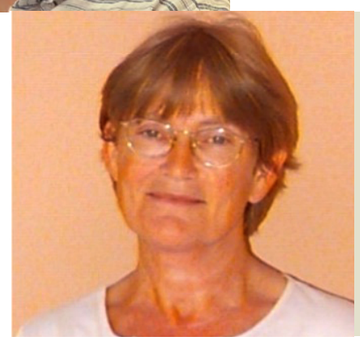
Aadish is an urban planner who fosters a harmonious balance between natural and built ecosystems. He has worked extensively on master plans, city strategies, streetscapes, placemaking projects, and public art initiatives, collaborating closely with city officials and communities to transform urban spaces. He has successfully led impactful projects, such as creating child-friendly public spaces in Bhubaneswar and developing citywide landscape strategies.



Maria Nordström

Maria is an associate professor in the Department of People and Society at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. With a background in developmental psychology, she has collaborated with many urban planners on outdoor spaces for children over many years to promote children's right to play.



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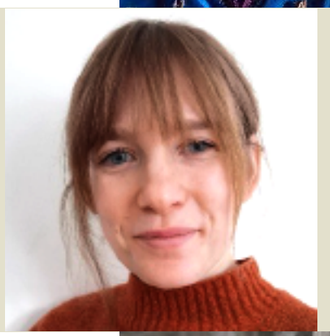
Karen Peck

Karen is a Partnership Manager within Active Leeds, working with communities to identify and remove barriers to 'moving more' for all ages. Karen has led on Play Sufficiency in Leeds for Active Leeds, working to understand play's contributions to all aspects of child wellbeing and to develop responses to improve the conditions for children's play across the city.



Jenny Rutherford

Jenny is the Play Strategy Officer at Leeds City Council, working within the Child Friendly Leeds team within the Children and Families directorate. Jenny leads the Play Sufficiency work in Leeds and collaborates with Active Leeds (Leeds City Council), managing the city's Play Street project. With five years of experience as a primary school teacher, Jenny continues to advocate for children's rights.



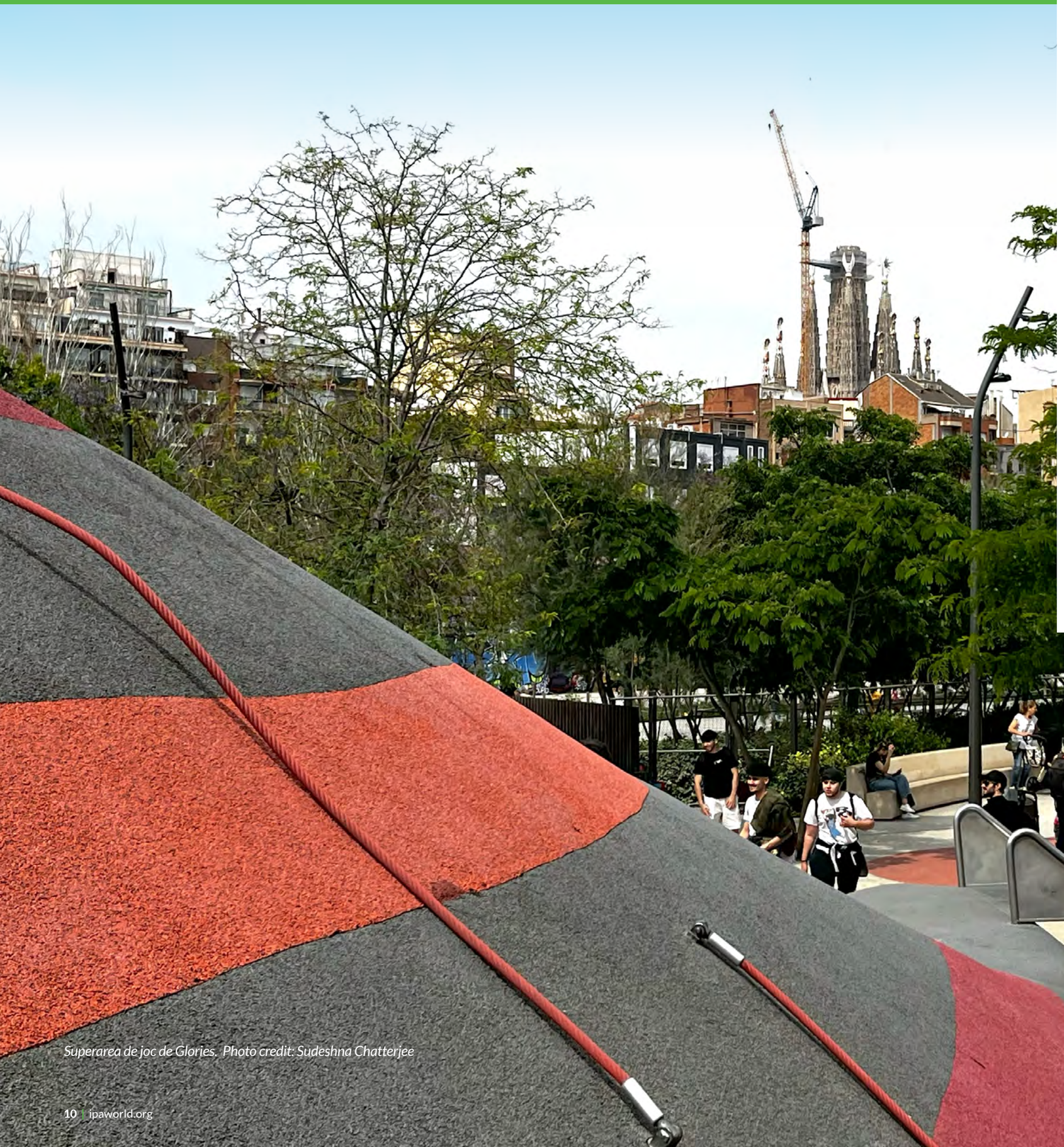
Sandra Štasselová

Sandra is an urbanist and public policy expert focused on urban renewal, public spaces, and children's mobility. She leads the City for Kids project at the Metropolitan Institute of Bratislava, promoting social inclusiveness in public spaces and participatory mobility policies. With experience in public administration, NGOs, and the private sector, Sandra specializes in participatory planning, sustainable mobility, and fostering child-friendly, resilient cities.



Maria Truñó

Maria is a political scientist and social psychologist specializing in children's rights and public policies. As the Commissioner for Education of Barcelona City Council (2019-2023), she implemented the Plan for Play to create a playable city by 2030. Previously, as Director of the Barcelona Childhood and Adolescence Institute (2015-2019), she developed the Plan for Play and a research program on child well-being. Additionally, she worked with UNICEF Spain on Child Friendly Cities in Catalonia (2010-2015).



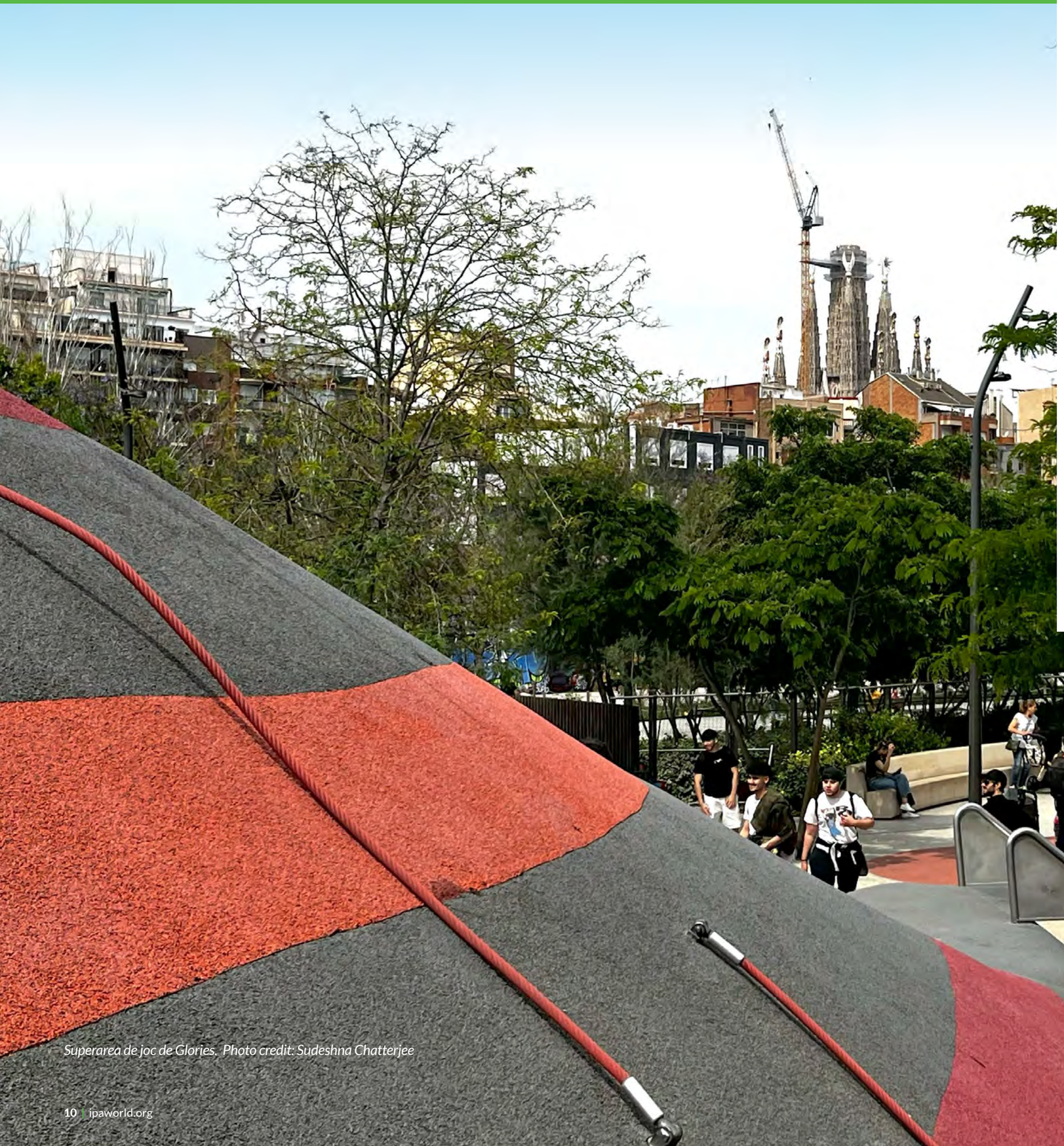
Superarea de joc de Glories. Photo credit: Sudeshna Chatterjee

Barcelona's Pioneering Plan for Play

Maria Truñó

This article discusses Barcelona's "Plan for Play in Public Spaces with a Horizon to 2030". It is a local strategy for becoming a more child friendly and liveable city with a particular focus on planning for play within these agendas. It seeks to create a playable city, a played city and a city where play gains ground.

Barcelona is a compact and densely populated Mediterranean city that serves as the capital of Catalonia. With a population of 1.7 million, approximately 15% of its residents are children and teenagers. The city has a rich history of urban innovation and emphasis on liveable public spaces. However, similar to many other cities worldwide, its built environment is not sufficiently healthy and nurturing for children to grow up in.



Superarea de joc de Glories. Photo credit: Sudeshna Chatterjee

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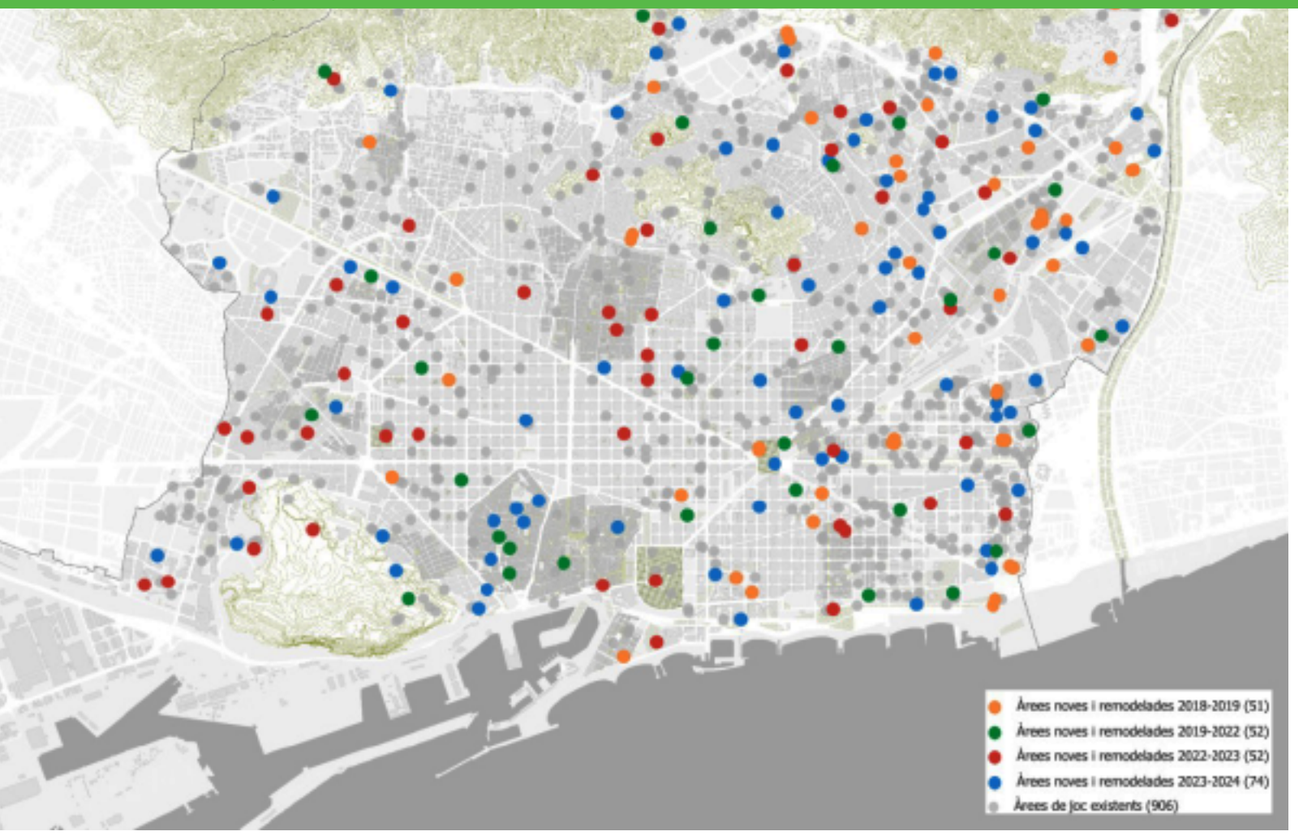

Figure 1: All the 906 playgrounds in the city were mapped and categorized according to opportunities for play. Photo credit: Barcelona city council

In 2019, Barcelona introduced a play policy to integrate play into urban transformation (Barcelona City Council 2019). This initiative seeks to highlight the social benefits of outdoor play and prioritize playability in public spaces, extending beyond traditional playgrounds. The policy not only addresses the rights and needs of children but also considers gender, caregiving responsibilities, and the significance of climate action. These elements were crucial in shaping the city's Plan for Play, which is the first of its kind in the country.

A new city government policy to make play matter

Over the last decade, Barcelona has reshaped its social and political agenda to become a more liveable and healthier city for all citizens, regardless of age or gender. The city government, led by the Comuns party from 2015 to 2023, has committed to three main concerns related to urban planning: gender justice, sustainability, and the well-being of urban children. One of the key initiatives was to incorporate a gender perspective into urban planning, which aimed to address the everyday needs related to care, as outlined in the 2017 measures linked to the Plan for Gender Justice (2016-2020). Additionally, to tackle the significant challenges posed by climate change, pollution, and the lack of green spaces, the government increased the amount of greenery throughout the city and promoted nature-based solutions. These efforts were detailed in the Climate Plan (Barcelona City Council 2018) and emphasized in the Climate Emergency Declaration (Barcelona City Council 2020).

The government initiated a Childhood Plan aimed at enhancing and implementing child-focused policies, known as the Children and Citizenship Focus for 2017-2020. As part of this effort, they created child participation programs, such as "Children Have Their Say: The Subjective Well-Being of Children in Barcelona," which included a comprehensive survey involving 4,000 children and promoted their active involvement.

One of the children's key demands was for more time, improved spaces, and greater freedom to meet and play outdoors in a greener city (Cortes & Truñó, 2018). In this context, Barcelona was recognized as a UNICEF Child Friendly City for the second time in 2018. A significant measure of this initiative was the "Plan for Play in Public Spaces with a Horizon to 2030," developed by the Barcelona City Council with support from the Barcelona Institute for Children and Adolescents (IIAB-Metropolis Institute). Successful efforts in other cities, including Berlin, Copenhagen, Dublin, and London, influenced this plan.



Figure 2: Improving quality and playability of playgrounds. Superarea de joc Colonia Castells. Photo credit: Sudeshna Chatterjee

Strategic shifts in thinking about play provisions

Before the Plan for Play, Barcelona primarily constructed standardized playgrounds based on local demands for children's recreation. The Plan for Play introduced two strategic shifts in the city's approach to children's play.

SHIFT 1: Instead of merely increasing the number of playgrounds, the focus shifted toward improving their quality and playability while incorporating a wider range of play opportunities and affordances.

The entire stock of publicly maintained playgrounds (about 900) was mapped using geospatial tools, and an assessment was conducted on the accessibility, density, quality, and size of each playground. Quality standards for upgrading municipal playgrounds were established through a desk review of global benchmarks and consultations with key city stakeholders. The standards were shaped by key documents, including the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comment No. 17 (2013) and the Seven Criteria for a Playable City developed by the Barcelona Institute for Children and Adolescents, which draws on extensive research (Herrington et al., 2007; Studio Ludo, 2007; Play England, 2009; Greater London Authority, 2012; Shackell et al., 2015; Gill, 2021).

7 CRITERIA FOR A PLAYABLE CITY

These seven criteria provide a framework for auditing existing play spaces and act as guiding principles for designing new play areas or refurbishing existing ones.
They are as follows:

1. Offer multiple options for challenging and creative play activities that promote healthy development forchildren and teens.
2. Provide diverse, stimulating, interconnected, and accessible physical spaces.
3. Ensure that play areas are inclusive for individuals of all ages, genders, backgrounds, and abilities.
4. Incorporate elements of nature, greenery, and opportunities for play with sand and water.
5. Facilitate shared, intergenerational, and collaborative play experiences.
6. Create spaces for community gatherings where people can come together.
7. Foster playful ecosystems and maintain safe, friendly, and enjoyable environments.





Figure 3: The three layers of a playable city model of Barcelona City Council



Figure 4: Improving public spaces in the heart of disadvantaged neighbourhoods for children's play. Photo credit: Sudeshna Chatterjee

SHIFT 2: The municipal government's efforts extended beyond just enhancing playgrounds; it developed a playful ecosystem that incorporated both designed and spontaneous public spaces where children often play on their own.

This includes spaces such as schoolyards (after classes), streets, and other public areas, thereby expanding opportunities for play. Specifically, any location lacking play features was analyzed alongside other play spaces within a 300-meter radius to assess the available play opportunities nearby.

This approach allowed the planning for play to enhance play value not in isolation but as part of a broader network, creating diverse and complementary opportunities for play within proximity. For example, if within the 300-meter radius, there were no elements of height (3 meters or more) in any play structure suitable for children over the age of 10, the plan would incorporate such an item into one of the local play spaces.

The Barcelona model of a playable city starts with conventional play areas but extends beyond them. It consists of three layers (see Figure 3):

- The first layer includes designated spaces for children to play, such as playgrounds and schoolyards.
- The second layer encompasses playful spaces and the surroundings of schools.
- The third layer involves the entire city and its urban infrastructure, including wide sidewalks, pedestrian streets, public squares, natural areas like beaches, forests, and riversides, and additional facilities such as skateparks and open sports courts.

Barcelona as a playable city, a played city, and a city where play gains ground

The Plan for Play outlines three strategic axes, ten measurable milestones, and sixty-three specific actions to enhance and diversify play opportunities in public spaces, particularly for children. Below are the three foundational axes of the Plan, along with examples of interventions for each:

1. A PLAYABLE CITY: This axis focuses on creating more and better spaces for play within the urban environment by developing new playgrounds and improving existing recreational infrastructures.

- This involves creating innovative playgrounds, referred to as super playgrounds, in prominent parks. Some of these playgrounds will be developed in collaboration with input from school children, ensuring they are actively involved in the design process. The design will adhere to guidelines that encourage children's engagement in transforming play spaces, as well as the seven established quality criteria.
- The renovation of playgrounds should include new criteria aimed at progressively enhancing the quality of play across all existing spaces within a playful ecosystem. This ecosystem should offer at least three distinct types of play activities, as outlined in the Plan for Play. This approach is a key principle for upgrading and renovating current play areas and designing new ones.
- All small playgrounds measuring less than 50 square meters and those lacking sufficient quality play features must be removed by 2030.



Figure 5: Children playing in a traffic closed superblock intersection in Sant Antoni neighbourhood. Photo credit: Sudeshna Chatterjee

- The playability of schoolyards is enhanced by promoting nature-based and gender-equal play in all public primary schools through the "Let's Transform Schoolyards" (Transformem els patis) program, with collaborative input from children, teachers, and families.
- Playability in the streets outside schools is improved by reclaiming space from cars and creating plazas that enhance the area for meeting friends and neighbours. This initiative is part of the program 'Let's Protect Schools' (Protegim les escoles) (Public Health Agency of Barcelona 2023). Additionally, a social movement called School Rebellion, primarily made up of families, advocates for more rapid transformations of school streets.

2. A PLAYED CITY: Enhancing behavioural change by promoting play and physical activity in outdoor public urban spaces throughout the city.

- The Barcelona Superblock (Superilles) program creates zones with reduced car traffic by restricting it to major peripheral roads around nine square blocks of neighbourhoods. This initiative allows for the development of new pedestrian plazas at intersections and encourages children's play outside of traditional playgrounds, fostering independent mobility (Barcelona City Council 2023).
- Car-free days and play streets are made possible through the "Let's Open Streets" (Obrim Carrers) program. Organized by the City Council, this initiative closes the city's main streets in different districts to cars on weekends. It encourages activities such as cycling, playing, socializing, and walking, allowing residents to enjoy the streets beyond the sidewalks.
- The "Let's Play in Squares" (Juguem les Places) municipal program facilitates pop-up play activities in public spaces by temporarily setting up various play kiosks primarily designed for early childhood. Additionally, proposals are in place for a permanent Play Space catering to individuals aged 0 to 99.
- The program also promotes water play opportunities in public squares and aims to increase the availability of drinking water sources in these areas. This initiative helps to cool and hydrate children playing outdoors during hot summer months, but it will only be implemented in accordance with water usage regulations, especially considering the severe drought conditions.
- Furthermore, a new play support service is being piloted to assist children with special needs. This service promotes inclusive play that addresses accessibility challenges (cognitive, physical, and sensory). It is modelled after the existing bathing assistance program for individuals with disabilities.

3. A CITY WHERE PLAY GAINS GROUND: Creating an enabling social environment through advocacy, leisure time policies, and monitoring and evaluation.

- Lifting bans on ball games to create a more welcoming environment for children playing in public spaces, and promote agreements and alternatives to hard balls without penalties.
- Enhancing communication and signage throughout the city to better inform residents about various play opportunities and to highlight universal accessibility.
- Encouraging the "social prescription" of at least one hour of outdoor play per day for children, as recommended by doctors, paediatric nurses, and teachers (this initiative is still in its early stages of development).



Figure 6: Improvements in school surroundings Photo credit: Sudeshna Chatterjee



Figure 7: Sidewalks widened on school streets. Photo credit: Sudeshna Chatterjee

Concluding thoughts

The pioneering initiative to enhance outdoor play opportunities in Barcelona through the Plan for Play has effectively raised awareness about the importance of integrating playability into urban planning and city transformation. This plan has established detailed guidelines and quality standards to improve the play value of playgrounds, schoolyards, and other play areas during renovation or transformation.

Thanks to the Plan for Play, we can measure and confirm improvements in playability across neighbourhoods and the city as a whole. The Barcelona City Council now prepares an annual list of playgrounds for upgrades based on the seven quality criteria. While there is no explicit approach for broader urban planning focused on children, the efforts to enhance the playability of urban spaces have resulted in the networking of small play areas. These spaces are located within a 300-meter radius, promoting proximity to play and linking a variety of diverse and complementary play opportunities.

Barcelona's Plan for Play is a strategic action plan designed to achieve the objectives of various city agendas over twelve years. It harnesses the co-benefits of play and playable outdoor spaces to promote health and well-being, mitigate climate change, and enhance the city's livability. These improvements also support the goal of creating a caring, child-friendly, and playable city that is inclusive of people of different abilities, ages, cultural backgrounds, and genders. Additionally, advocating for unstructured outdoor play fosters attitudinal changes regarding children's play in public spaces, highlighting its social significance beyond childhood.

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Photo credit: Lizzie Coombes/Playful Anywhere

Play sufficiency in Leeds:



What has it meant for the ways local government can plan for play.

Leeds City Council is the first local authority in England to adopt the principle of play sufficiency, a powerful organising principle around which local authorities can align their work to improve responses to children's play rights, securing and improving opportunities for children's play. This article reviews their pioneering and transformational work.

Ben Tawil, Mike Barclay, Karen Peck & Jenny Rutherford

Over the past 50 years, spatial and societal changes have constrained children's freedom of movement and play (Karsten, 2005; Loeback et al. 2021; Woolley & Griffin, 2015). Children's right to play is often overlooked, undervalued, and undermined (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013) in the public realm (Russell et al., 2023) and institutions of childhood (Ardelean et al., 2021), as well as



Figure 1: Kidz Club Leeds.

within the range of professional domains whose work (directly or indirectly) impacts children's play. Changing this situation requires adults to radically rethink our values about children, their childhoods, and their play (Russell et al., 2023).

What is Play Sufficiency

In General Comment 17, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recommends support for children's play based on the principle of sufficiency (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013). In the UK, both Wales and Scotland have enacted legal play sufficiency duties for local authorities. Play sufficiency legislation differs somewhat in Scotland and Wales, yet at its core, it is about assessing the sufficiency of opportunities for children's play across a local authority and making efforts to secure sufficient opportunities for children's play. In Wales, the process of assessing and securing play sufficiency is carried out by local authorities on a tri-annual basis, and in Scotland, it is part of preparing a local authority's local development plans. The principle of play sufficiency is about much more than designated play provision alone. Play is not simply confined to specific times and spaces. Playing is a fluid and polymorphous process that emerges wherever and whenever conditions allow. Adopting the principle of play sufficiency requires a broad commitment to creating societal and environmental conditions that support children's right to play across all the places where children might find themselves.

Children's capability to play and their associated play patterns are relationally produced and co-dependent on a multitude of interrelated personal, social, environmental, and structural factors (Russell et al., 2023). Play sufficiency is a framework for assessing and enhancing children's opportunities for play by considering the range of factors that shape children's play experiences. These factors include but are not

Adopting the principle of play sufficiency requires a broad commitment to creating societal and environmental conditions that support children's right to play across all the places where children might find themselves.



Figure 2: Kidz Club Leeds.

limited to: parental permission, influenced by their fears and values; other obligations on children's time; the amount and proximity of public open space; the layout of residential roads; the amount and speed of traffic; the availability and quality of play provision; the attitudes of other residents; the visibility of other children; practices within adult run services and institutions; local and national media coverage; planning; transport; housing and education policies; and public liability concerns (Russell et al., 2023). While children have the capacity for playing and being well, converting that capacity to a capability is largely relationally dependent on the conditions available to them. As such, it is the job of those involved in play sufficiency to work with that meshwork of relationships, leveraging their capability to work towards producing the social, environmental, and personal conditions through both policies and practices for children to play and in so doing, creating the capability for children to support their own wellbeing.

In England and Northern Ireland, there are no legal duties related to this issue. The UNCRC's General Comment on Article 31 rights highlights the importance of adopting the principle of play sufficiency. In places like Leeds, which

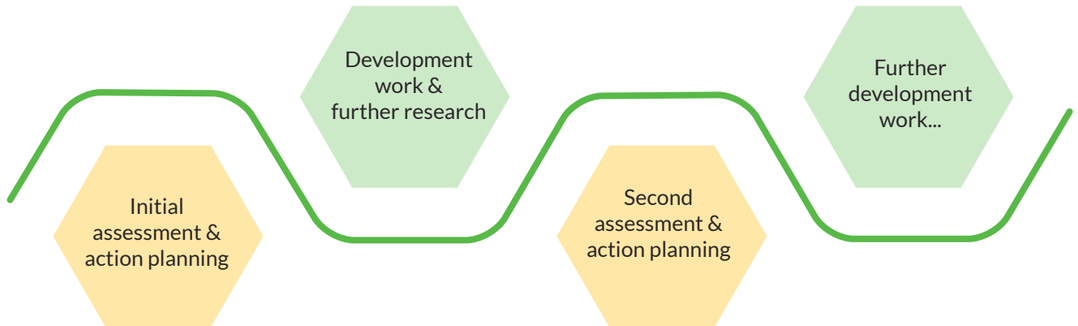


Figure 3: Play sufficiency, an ongoing cycle of research and action © Ludicology.



Figure 4: Playful Anywhere. Photo credit: Lizzie Coombes/Playful Anywhere

is part of UNICEF's Child Friendly Cities Initiative, there is a strong emphasis on supporting children's right to play through this initiative. These are critical levers driving local governments to adopt the principle of play sufficiency. While local authorities in Wales and Scotland are required by law to conduct play sufficiency assessments, cities like Leeds in England are choosing to embrace this concept voluntarily at the local level.

How Did Leeds Approach Play Sufficiency

The approach, exemplified by the Welsh Play Sufficiency Duty, and the one we replicated in Leeds: (Figure 3), involves an ongoing cyclical process of research (Account-ability) and action (Response-ability) that considers how these factors combine to make spaces, places, practices, and policies more-or-less open to the possibility of play. This process combines quantitative and qualitative research to capture broad trends and localised experiences. Quantitative surveys establish baselines, key performance indicators, and general trends in children's play, and enable the identification of case study communities where qualitative research, such as face-to-face engagement with children, parents, and practitioners, and detailed spatial audits, helps to uncover why play opportunities vary and how they might be improved.

Importantly, play sufficiency recognises that there is no universal childhood but rather a diversity of childhood experiences shaped by factors such as age, gender, ability, location, and socio-economic background. It challenges narrow definitions of play provision and advocates for a more comprehensive response that accounts for the many influences on children's freedoms to play. Play sufficiency is a cross-cutting agenda and, therefore, requires a collaborative, multi-agency, and cross-directorate response to maintaining, securing, and enhancing levels of play sufficiency (Russell et al., 2020).

While local authorities in Wales and Scotland are required by law to conduct play sufficiency assessments, cities like Leeds in England are choosing to embrace this concept voluntarily at the local level.

Actors Involved in Leeds Play Sufficiency Process

Leeds is the first Local Authority in England to implement a full play sufficiency assessment and has done so with mentoring support from play consultants, Ludicology, through their play sufficiency knowledge transfer package. This work was led by Active Leeds and Child Friendly Leeds, with support from the LS14 Trust (a local non-profit community organisation). It was initially funded by Get Set Leeds Local (an Active Leeds project funded by Sport England). This core group formed the Play Sufficiency implementation team, responsible for delivering the play sufficiency assessment.

From the beginning of the assessment process, work also began on engaging and developing a strategic play sufficiency partnership. This group would, in time, oversee the strategic direction of play sufficiency in Leeds. This embryonic and multi-disciplinary partnership is made up of individuals from Leeds City Council and its partners from the third sector including but not limited to, executive members and officers from the children and families department, child friendly cities, planning, adult services, health and active lifestyles, officers from public health, parks and localities, communities, housing and environment, planning, BARCA Leeds (community support services), Playful Anywhere (play provider and community advocate), OPAL (Outdoor Play and Learning), was provided with training through a bespoke 'Understanding Play Sufficiency' course developed and facilitated by Ludicology.

Play Sufficiency Process in Leeds

Leeds City Council's first play sufficiency assessment, as a result of disruptions to implementation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, was carried out over a two-year period. Desk-top and neighbourhood primary data collection was carried out in year one, with initial findings being presented to partners and key stakeholders early in year two and final research aspects with local authority officers carried out later the same year and submission of final report and key priorities going to the executive board at the end of year two. Due to external funding parameters directing the work of Active Leeds focussed on the most economically deprived communities within their six priority neighbourhoods. The aim of the initial play sufficiency assessment was to establish what was working for whom, where, and why (or why not) at a neighbourhood level and how this was influenced by the workings of local government systems. In doing so, this initial assessment provided a thorough account of the ways in which spaces, services, practices, and policies currently work

Play Sufficiency Methodology

A fundamental part of assesment is conducting in-depth research with children, their carers and front line workers. Within this assesment over 50 hours has been spent listening to children's localised lived experiences of play across 6 priority neighbourhoods of Leeds, along with focus groups with carers and those that understand the communities.



The detailed evidence that has surfaced can be used to compare and contrast with current policy and practice across a broad range of professional domains; establishing how the work of the local authority and its partners inflences the sufficiency of children's opportunities for play.

Figure 5: Overview of assessment methodology based on Ludicology's package of support © Leeds City Council





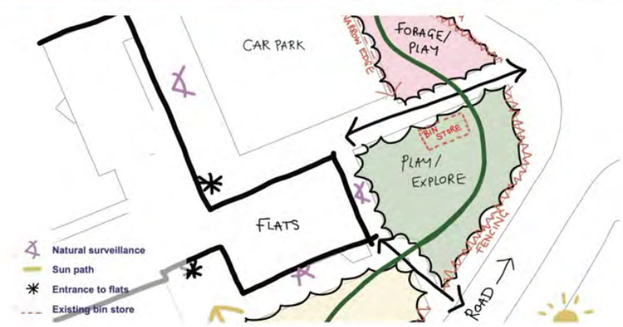




Figure 6: Burmantofts play trail: Granville Corner

across Leeds to support or constrain children's opportunities for play. It also provided an opportunity to identify ways in which adult-run organisations could improve their response-abilities towards children and their play. This research then informed the development of a strategic action plan aimed at cultivating more favourable conditions for children's play both at a neighbourhood and organisational level.

The assessment methodology, illustrated in figure 5, included policy analysis and mapping, quantitative surveys on play satisfaction, and further in-depth qualitative research with children, caregivers, and practitioners in case study communities.

The detailed evidence and insights generated about children's play lives were then presented to 50 colleagues from across Leeds City Council and other partner organisations, including elected members. These events shared key insights and identified a wide spectrum of stakeholders interested in this work.

These events were followed by further research, which included themed focus groups/semi-structured interviews involving policy leads from a broad range of professional domains, including:

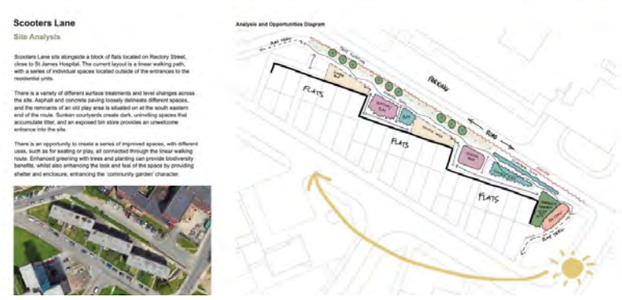
- The built and natural environment
- Policy and strategic context
- Education, health, social care, and community safety
- Play, leisure, recreation, and community development



Figure 7: Playful Anywhere. Photo credit: Lizzie Coombes/Playful Anywhere







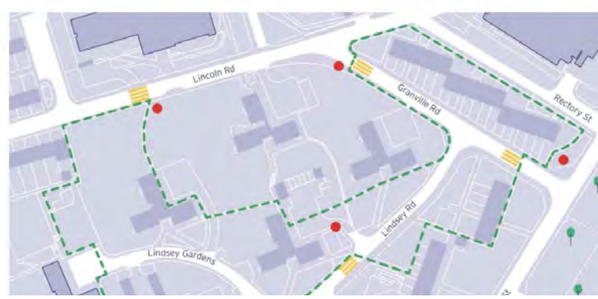


Figure 8: Burmantofts Play Trail: Scooters Lane

- Cross-cutting areas (such as workforce development, publicity, among others)

Findings from this aspect of the research highlighted key opportunities to improve response-abilities towards play, as well as existing barriers to creating change. Conversations allowed officers from a range of services and directorates to note the ways in which their work impacted children's opportunities to play and how this work connects and overlaps with the work of multiple teams, projects and city strategies.

From Assessment to Strategic Priorities and Action

The assessment identified assets that enable and encourage play, factors that constrain it, and opportunities to create change. This included identifying nine strategic priorities for improving the sufficiency of children's opportunities for play across Leeds:

1. Facilitate the cross-service endorsement of Play Sufficiency and embed key principles within Leeds City Council departments.
2. Celebrate and enable parents and carers' permissions, confidences, and skills for play.
3. Grow a play workforce of adults whose work directly and indirectly impacts children and their play.
4. Facilitate sufficient time, space, and attitudes towards play in educational settings.
5. Enable sufficient time, space, design, and attitudes to play for children with protected characteristics.
6. Create streets that are safe, welcoming, and encourage children's play.
7. Improve the variety of spaces available for play for all age groups within proximity of children's homes (including informal and designated spaces).
8. Improve access to nature-based play environments.
9. Improve the perception of teenagers and improve their opportunities to play and hang out.

Findings from the initial assessment also informed the creation of specific, targeted responses at both neighbourhood and organisational levels. These responses form a three-year action plan and aim to make real changes on the ground and improve organisational systems for supporting play sufficiency. A report on the play sufficiency assessment and associated action plans was subsequently submitted to Leeds City Council's Executive Board. The report achieved almost unanimous support from members of the board, with a high-level commitment to endorse the principle of play sufficiency within the Council's work over the next three years and into a second play sufficiency assessment.

CHANGING ATTITUDES AND MINDSETS

Officers from various other services and directorates now recognise their work impacts on children's play and desire to focus on play as part of their workstreams. An example of this is a housing officer who recently emailed one of the authors to say they were horrified to find cars parked on local green spaces where children should be able to play. The car owners had been advised to park there to avoid a parking violation, and it was apparent local car permits were being traded with those from outside the area, bringing more cars in and further constraining children's opportunities to play. The housing officer freely admits they just didn't think about these impacts or see things in this way prior to learning about play sufficiency and the data the assessment had generated. Schools are also beginning to work together to identify how they can improve conditions for play across the school day and the local authority.

From Play Sufficiency to Planning for Play

Leeds City Council's Executive Board endorsement makes play sufficiency a cross-cutting city-wide priority, enabling consideration of and planning for play as part of existing local government systems and structures. In response to the hyper-local nature of the play sufficiency data gathered, targeted responses have been coordinated in a pilot of the UK Department for Transport's Active Travel Social Prescribing Pilot. This has enabled Leeds City Council to work with Arup to develop plans for a Play Trail to improve opportunities for those most disadvantaged by localised conditions. The circular route connects and enables access to public green spaces, services, and amenities, and incorporates opportunities for playing along the way, as well as at destination points. Figures 6 and 8 show proposed plans for develop-ment in the Burmantofts, Harehills, and Richmond Hill area, focusing on Granville Corner and Scooters Lane, respectively. This exciting project demonstrates the value of the evidence base and the strong partnership working.

A partnership was formed between Active Leeds, Housing, Parks, and the Communities Team in response to findings from the play sufficiency assessment in a tower block complex. The assessment revealed that children and families living there had significantly fewer opportunities for play compared to those in nearby areas. Many of these residents felt isolated and disconnected from local formal play areas, and the tower block itself lacked designated spaces for play. To address this issue, the partners collaborated to repurpose an area on-site that was previously used for waste services. They relocated the waste services and introduced low-level play equipment, seating, and greenery in the newly developed space. Additionally, they organized activation days to encourage community use and foster a sense of ownership among residents for this enhanced area.

Whilst there have been many positive developments since the Executive Board's endorsement of the play sufficiency assessment, outcomes also emerged along the way as people were involved in the process of producing the assessment.

Even before the play sufficiency report was submitted for approval, early engagement of policy officers resulted in several gains.

- Play sufficiency is identified as a priority in the new Children and Young People's Plan.
- Play sufficiency is identified as a priority in Leeds Parks and Green Spaces Strategy and the Child Poverty Strategy.
- Public health recommendation for adopting a play sufficiency approach in the 2022 Leeds City Council Director of Public Health Annual Report.
- Child Friendly Leeds incorporated responsibilities for play sufficiency into the role of a play strategy lead, a new role for this team that was recruited during the assessment process.
- The planning department is identifying links to play sufficiency as a part of the Leeds Local Plan Update: Leeds Local Plan 2040 strongly focuses on play sufficiency through specific policies on play, recreation and child friendly cities, possibly including specific guidance for planners and housing developers.



Figure 9: Kidz Club Leeds.

Conclusion

Endorsement by the Executive Board legitimised play as an outcome and has permitted time spent supporting it. Previously, the lack of strategic direction in overarching policies made focusing on children's play difficult, but this is no longer the case with the high-level adoption of play sufficiency. Play sufficiency is now recognised by the Executive Board (the highest level of local authority governance) as contributing to the city's three strategic pillars (Inclusive Growth, Health and Wellbeing, and Zero Carbon), and aligns with other key policies such as the Mental Health Strategy, Transport Strategy, and Local Plan. Furthermore, Executive Board endorsement of the principle of play sufficiency and the appointment of a lead member to champion it, who now chairs the play sufficiency partnership, has strengthened the membership of that group, ensuring each directorate participates, to ensure this group has a real strategic focus on play in Leeds.

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How the UNCRC is supporting planning for play in Sweden

Developmental psychologist Maria Nordström spotlights how Swedish municipalities are implementing practical measures to uphold children's rights in local planning decisions. These initiatives aim to support children's right to play.

MARIA NORDSTRÖM

There was general support for the principles of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in Swedish society when it was first passed in 1989. A year later, Sweden ratified the convention. However, it took another 30 years for the convention to become law. The significant gap between the ratification and the law shows that it is not easy to integrate a new legal framework into a country's established principles. It also takes time to transform everyday practices by changing business-as-usual models of municipalities. This was also the case when efforts were made to apply the rights-based framework of the UNCRC to transform Swedish urban planning to fulfil the rights of children.

Child rights have been widely accepted and utilized within social sectors in Swedish society, such as children's care, health, and education. Studies reveal the adverse effects of traffic, pollution, and inadequate access to physical spaces on children's health and well-being. Such evidence builds a strong case for addressing children's environmental needs in urban planning as a matter of children's rights as enshrined in the UNCRC (Mårtensson & Nordström, 2017).

Even though urban planning in small Swedish municipalities does not explicitly reference the principles of the UNCRC, the practice of planning demonstrates a child-friendly turn with a desire to involve children in matters that are important and meaningful to them. In my study of the efforts to create child friendly urban environments following the rights-based approach based on the UNCRC, I found that practical as opposed to normative planning frequently aligns with the principles outlined in the convention (Nordström, 2020). And that is what I will discuss in this reflective article.

Swedish municipalities have a "planning monopoly"

Municipalities in Sweden have the crucial responsibility of implementing the UNCRC in urban planning as they have a "planning monopoly," which means they are exclusively



Source: https://visitsweden.com/where-to-go/middle-sweden/narke/orebro/





Left: Den making in the woods. Right Children riding the "motorbike." Source: Lisa Klingwall, Taby Municipality

authorized to make decisions regarding physical planning within their own jurisdictions. In 1993, Sweden established a new governmental body to promote the Convention on the Rights of the Child after it had been ratified. This institution, known as the Children's Ombudsman (CO), was tasked with raising awareness of the UNCRC across the country through various initiatives and monitoring its implementation and interpretation. The CO proposed using Child Impact Assessments (CIA) to further advocate for the UNCRC. The purpose of a CIA is to assess the potential impact of municipal actions on children before those actions are carried out (Nordström, 2017). The results of the CIA inform the planning process. It then becomes the responsibility of the municipality to ensure that any proposed planning action will not harm children and is, in fact, beneficial to them.

Emerging practices in child-friendly urban planning

Child Impact Assessments play an important role in child friendly urban planning as they help practitioners understand how children use urban spaces and how planning can make those spaces better or worse for them. Key assessments include the level of access to schools and parks through footpaths and bike lanes, and children's proximity to play areas and nature. CIAs use different types of data, such as geographical and social data, official statistics, and observations of how children interact with their surroundings to learn how children use outdoor spaces. They could also integrate children's views by asking children how much these spaces mean to them. Children's Geographic Information System (GIS) has been used in some cases to make this information easy for planners to understand through maps created by children using GIS. This way, planners can consider children's needs in their work. While this approach has been successful to some extent, using Children's GIS in urban planning is not yet standard practice in Sweden.

CHILDREN'S GIS AND HOW IT INFORMS PLANNING

Children's GIS maps are digital, interactive maps created by children to communicate their experiences, preferences, and ideas about their local environment. These maps are developed using Geographic Information System (GIS) technology, allowing children to mark places, routes, and activities and comment on their surroundings. The method is designed to be child-friendly, enabling children to participate in urban planning processes by sharing their perspectives in a way that is accessible and meaningful to planners (Berglund, 2008).



Children playing in a public space in Orebro. Source: https://www.talesfromthecampsite.com/ best-things-to-do-in-orebro-sweden/

According to researchers who have developed and worked with children's GIS, the core issue in child friendly planning does not seem to be the search for the 'right' formal planning method. They emphasize the need for a shift in attitudes, greater acceptance of children's environmental needs, and involvement of children in urban planning. It appears that not only Children's GIS but also CIAs may be perceived by physical planners as too complex and challenging to incorporate into standard urban planning processes.

"Playful maintenance and reshape"

However, more direct ways of involving children in urban planning are taking shape, and new planning practices are evolving. An invisible but often impenetrable wall exists between technical and social departments within most municipal organizations. It seems to be about to be torn down in some places. An interesting example of this can be found in the small town of Täby in a recent project called "Playful maintenance and reshape". Here, the park department engaged children in their work by asking children to show where and how they played in park areas so that park workers can avoid those spaces when doing maintenance work. By focusing on the importance of parks for children's play, municipal park workers developed new maintenance methods and learned to observe how children play. They also learned how to interact with children while they work. This example also demonstrates respecting and fulfilling children's rights in spaces that matter to them.

Diverse play spaces and flexible planning processes

New practices, like those in Täby, encourage new ways of thinking about how children use and relate to outdoor spaces. This has also happened in Örebro, a small town in Sweden. Here, planners are rethinking how they design spaces for children's play. Instead of just playgrounds, they are creating flexible outdoor play areas. This approach focuses on understanding children's experiences in their everyday environments and improving the quality of their play. The municipality has invited children to play in various green areas across the town, allowing planners to observe children's play. Such observations have led to physical improvements, adapting ordinary places based on how children engage with them, and planning interventions to enrich the overall play experience. Currently, such child friendly urban planning has created 20 new play spaces in Örebro inspired by the principles of the UNCRC. Planners involved different groups, including children, in discussions about what makes play fun and meaningful. Then, they turned those ideas into reality through flexible planning processes.

Concluding thoughts

This approach to child-friendly planning emphasizes the enhancement of children's outdoor play experiences. It recognizes the significance of the entire local environment as a vital resource for play, extending beyond merely equipped playgrounds. An ecological perspective underpins this notion, illustrating how the qualities of the environment directly influence the quality of children's play (Mårtensson et al., 2025). Furthermore, this approach aligns with the principles set forth by the UNCRC, which establishes adult duty-bearers as accountable for upholding children's rights. Municipal governments, as the kind of government closest to children, are thus tasked with promoting these rights, particularly the right to play, through thoughtful planning and the allocation of appropriate resources.

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Looking back to play forward: Mexico City's play policies at a crossroads

Leticia Lozano

This article examines Mexico City's dynamic relationship with play and childhood. By tracking the development of child-focused urban planning from post-revolutionary policies to contemporary urban initiatives, the article spotlights the successes and shortcomings of various programs, including the recently concluded citywide initiative of Ciudad Lúdica (Playful City).

Loreto Plaza with an Urban Toy installation. Picture Credit: Onnis Luque

In Mexico City, the streets and public spaces are home to more than 2 million children, out of a total of 38.3 million under the age of 18 nationwide (Red por los Derechos de la Infancia en México, 2020). Urban public realm prioritises cars (Pérez, 2014), commerce, and adult-centred activities, effectively excluding children from the urban environment (Gülgönen & Laboratorio para la Ciudad, 2016). In a city as diverse and complex as this one, children's play experiences are far from uniform (Blanco et al., 2018) and are influenced by the location of their home, school, or their parents' workplace. These factors also impact exposure to violence, interactions with nature, access to play spaces, and engagement in playful activities.

The rise and fall of Mexican childhood in urban planning

The 20th century witnessed both the rise and decline of societal acceptance of children and provisions shaping childhoods in the public landscape of Mexican cities. The institutions created by the Post-Revolutionary Governments (1930–1940), particularly the Ministry of Education, placed children at the heart of plans to cultivate new revolutionary citizens (Solano, 2018). Artists, intellectuals, and writers contributed to a curriculum that promoted modern socialist ideals and cultural nationalism (Jackson, 2014). New types of schools were established in rural areas across the country to unify the Mexican childhood experience, divided by stark urban-rural disparities. Art classes, radio programs, puppet theatres, and student organisations were introduced as tools for child participation. Simultaneously, a new physical education curriculum led to the rise of sports facilities and the introduction of playground equipment, which aimed to improve the physical and moral standing of the lower classes (Solano, 2017).

Although the official political discourse of the post-revolutionary era emphasized the professionalization of child-focused fields, state reforms and policies were framed with children at their heart, as reflected in the transformation of public spaces and the widespread use of child-related imagery in public art (Jackson, 2014). However, as most public space concessions increasingly favoured private interests, which celebrated modernist ideals, children's right to play was often sidelined in favour of adult-centric recreational facilities, such as aviaries and artificial ponds (Solano, 2017). It was not until the 1950s, when social housing models rose throughout the country, that playgrounds became mainstream. The playground equipment design became a vehicle for the sculptural experiments of architects, artists, urban planners, and even the first Mexican industrial designers in housing developments, plazas, parks, and renovation projects



Figure 1: A typical mid-20th-century playground with distinct identity—the Ramón López Velarde Garden, Mexico City Photo credit: MACIA Estudio



Figure 2: Standard play provision with no sense of place, Mexico City, 2018, Photo credit: MACIA Estudio

(see figure1). Between 1940 and 1970, the production of playground equipment was primarily led by government institutions as part of the cultural nationalism of modern Mexico (Solano, 2017).

Between 1950 and 1980, playgrounds and public spaces designed for children started to change significantly. The modernist-influenced designs that once encouraged community interaction were replaced by bland standardized play facilities that became staple outputs of neo-liberal recreational planning worldwide. These new facilities arrived in the country along with other products from globalization, like fast-food restaurants. Later, these generic pieces of equipment showed up in parks and gardens (see figure 2). The earlier playgrounds helped shape a shared community identity and became important landmarks. In contrast, the new spaces did not resonate with the specific cultural and social needs of the communities. Instead, they focused on adult preferences, prioritizing "safe" but disconnected designs that became the default choice for decision makers (Gülgönen & Laboratorio para la Ciudad, 2016).

Transforming Spaces: How Play Brings Communities Together

Mexico City and the rest of Mexico lack formal play policies. In 2014, the General Act on the Rights of Children and Adolescents (Ley General de los Derechos de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes, LGDNNA) came into effect. This law recognized that play is different from recreation and sports. It was an important step in ensuring that public policies protect the rights of children and teenagers through the National System of Comprehensive Protection of the Rights of Children and Adolescents (SIPINNA). While experts welcomed these legal and policy changes, they raised concerns about the city's ability to coordinate efforts and prioritize children's rights (Cámara de Diputados del H. Congreso de la Unión, 2024).

Aligned with the LGDNNA, the Laboratorio para la Ciudad (Lab for the City) was a creative and experimental area of Mexico City's government from 2013 to 2018. The lab explored the potential of children and youth as agents of change. One of its initiatives developed a curriculum for public schools to inspire creativity and critical thinking. The lab believed that exposing children to design and innovation early on could help them identify and solve problems in their surroundings. However, putting this curriculum into practice faced many challenges and obstacles. This made the lab team rethink their strategy. As a pivot, they recognized the untapped potential of public spaces for citywide playful learning and civic engagement of young people. This insight gave birth to Ciudad Lúdica (Playful City), a four-year action-research initiative under the Lab for the City. It explored how urban planning could nurture play and playfulness in public spaces and foster a civic culture where children actively

Playful City represented a pivotal moment in bringing play and childhood back to the forefront of urban discussions within the Mexican context.



Figure 3: 'Wednesdays for Play' project, Mexico City, 2019, Photo credit: MACIA Estudio

engaged with decision-makers in the development of public projects. Playful City represented a pivotal moment in bringing play and childhood back to the forefront of urban discussions within the Mexican context (see figure 3).

Playful City acknowledged that urban environments must offer children easy and consistent access to play opportunities within public spaces to support children's holistic development. As a first step, the project developed an urban-spatial analysis tool to scope out opportunities for play across the city. This tool mapped areas of the city with the highest child population density per block against the location of open and green spaces. While initially aimed at understanding children's opportunities for play, the mapping exercise uncovered the lack of equity in providing public spaces across Mexico City. Ultimately, it highlighted the absence of an urban strategy that considers children's perspectives, children's right to play and children's right to the city. These findings inspired two major projects: Juguetes Urbanos (Urban Toys) and Peatoniños (Pedestrianized play streets).

Urban Toys

This project focused on areas with high child population densities where nearby public spaces were underutilized or unwelcoming for children. Urban Toys was operationalized through a public space design competition that invited urbanists, architects, designers, and the general public to propose temporary interventions to transform three spaces within the Historic City Centre through temporary play interventions. The project aimed to prioritise children's voices to ensure their ideas shaped the competition guidelines and the resulting designs. The guidelines were co-designed with children who lived or spent significant time near the selected sites. Children participated in workshops where they assessed the playfulness of the spaces, identified areas for improvement, and envisioned their ideal playscapes. Competition participants were encouraged to attend several of these workshops to ensure their proposals were more meaningful and relevant to the needs of local children. The competition encouraged proposals that embraced children's ideas, addressed site-specific challenges, and envisioned urban toys as exploratory, unconventional, and playful interventions that defy the norms of traditional plastic jungle gyms (Lozano & Vertiz, 2018).

There were three winning projects that stayed on site for three months. The three tactical intervention sites for showcasing design innovations by three different design/architectural practices included two urban plazas—Santa Catarina Plaza (see figure 4), Loreto Plaza (see figure 5) and a vacant space called Parque De La Equidad (see figure 6). During this time, the Lab for the City collected information to see how the projects impacted the community. They looked at how many visitors came, how long they played, and how they interacted with others. The goal was to show how play can help children get involved in their communities and unite people. For example, at one location, the number of children doubled in two weeks, play activity increased by 312%, female visitors grew by 20%, and the daily activity time increased. The study showed that families were using the space past midnight compared to it being empty by 6:00 PM during the initial visit.

One of the urban play structures was vandalized in the initial weeks, and the swing ropes were cut. Bureaucratic delays prevented immediate repairs, sparking concerns about additional vandalism. However, the community quickly stepped in and responded. A father of one of the children who had participated in the initial workshops organised a small fundraiser among local families, and within days, the swings were repaired. Another site, initially an inaccessible green space owned by the government, was transformed into a shared "schoolyard" for the nearby high school and kindergarten. When the time came to dismantle the interventions, the residents of these two sites opposed the removal and appealed to local authorities to keep them. As a result, some of these urban toys remain in place.

"The first time I came, I saw that you were building something, and then I came and the monsters were already built... and I like them so much, and I play with them a lot, I even tell my friends to come with me to the park, I have made many new friends, I can play with them or alone, whatever but I play"

-Brenda, 9 years old (participant comments from Juguetes Urbanos Project, 2018)



Figure 4: Urbay Toy "Polerama" by Oomo Studio + Beatriz Rico in Santa Catarina Plaza, 2018, Photo credit: Lab for the City

One of the local children consulted in the evaluation commented: "We call them 'the swings.' They [swings] call me: 'Lalo, let's go to the swings,' and now we're always here."
—Lalo, 11 years old
(participant comments from Juguetes Urbanos project, 2018)



Figure 5: Urbay Toy "AROS" by Palma in Loreto Plaza, 2018, Photo credit: Lab for the City

Peatoniños

The second major project, Peatoniños, targeted areas with high child population densities where parks or green areas were scarce or non-existent. Peatoniños piloted the concept of playstreets in marginalised urban areas (see figure 7). Its name is a wordplay in Spanish combining "peatón" (pedestrian) and "niños" (children), symbolizing "children who walk" (Lozano & Vertiz, 2018). In Mexico City, streets have historically been vital playscapes for children and families, but have gradually become hostile spaces. The project sought to present alternative uses for streets as play areas, empowering children to actively transform the physical spaces they inhabit.

After several iterations, the play street project established a framework that involved engaging neighbours and volunteers, using GIS tools to identify suitable streets, and fostering collaboration to ensure clear communication about Peatoniños' benefits. Proactive community members acted as connectors, building consensus and addressing challenges, while sceptics were shown data and statistics to legitimize the intervention. Expert involvement brought diverse perspectives, enhancing the initiative's appeal to attract broader interest and stakeholders. While documentation and impact measurement were areas for improvement, steps were taken to refine these processes for future interventions. The Peatoniños ended in mid-2018, but inspired another play streets project called "ludicalles", which is still running.

Efforts of creating an enabling environment for citywide playful public spaces

In addition to the street-level projects, Playful City conducted various research initiatives, including Jugar la Ciudad (Play the City), Primeras Provocaciones: Ciudad Lúdica (First Provocations: Playful City) and Arquitectura para el Juego Urbano (Architecture for Urban Play).

- **Jugar la Ciudad (Play the City):** This is a publication (Gülgönen & Laboratorio para la Ciudad, 2016) that, through interviews with public officials, civil servants, and politicians, aimed to clarify the regulatory framework governing public play spaces, addressing questions such as who oversees their design and how they fit into urban development planning.

- **Primeras Provocaciones:** Ciudad Lúdica (First Provocations: Playful City): This features commissioned essays from experts in various disciplines, exploring how play fosters collaboration, problem-solving, and creativity in public spaces as an approach to promoting social cohesion and urban regeneration. This series aimed to counteract adult-centric perspectives, levelling the dialogue on the importance of play in urban design with decision-makers, policymakers, and the general public.

- **Arquitectura para el Juego Urbano (Blanco et al., 2018):** This serves as a guide for planning, designing, building, and maintaining public play spaces while integrating children's perspectives into urban planning. It compiles insights from the four-year action-research initiative highlighting the challenges and opportunities of creating play spaces in a Latin American metropolis.



Figure 6: Urbay Toy- Monsters by Bandada Studio + Factor Eficiencia, in Parque De La Equidad 2018, Photo credit: Lab for the City

It is essential to emphasize that every project had counterparts in various ministries, departments, and boroughs whose collaboration was indispensable for Playful City to showcase the transformative power of play. These efforts revitalized neglected spaces, fostered everyday playful experiences, and encouraged decision-makers, policymakers, and the general public to expand their understanding of urban inhabitants and their interactions with the city. The research, both street-level and desk-based, highlighted the complex challenges posed by increased perceptions of insecurity, adults' risk aversion, and the dominance of a car-centric city development model (Blanco et al., 2018). It underscored the need for parallel approaches that integrate top-down and bottom-up strategies for urban experiments to succeed, and the urgency for inter-institutional collaboration to address the historical neglect of childhood in Mexico City's landscape.

The demise of Playful City

In December of 2018, with the arrival of the new Mayor, Claudia Sheinbaum (now the president of Mexico), the Lab for the City initiative came to an end, and consequently so did Playful City. Nevertheless, a series of recommendations was developed to lay the groundwork for a comprehensive plan for play in Mexico City. Since then, significant changes have occurred that directly affect children's lives. Unfortunately, SIPINNA was shifted from a decentralized body within the Ministry of the Interior (SEGOB) to an administrative unit within the National System for the Integral Development of the Family (DIF), under the pretence of inefficiency and unnecessary expenses. This change has diminished its autonomy, limited its scope, and weakened the emphasis on children's rights. This restructuring has drawn concern from the UN's Committee on the Rights of the Child, as reflected in their 2024 Concluding Observations.

All is not lost

At the local level, prospects are more optimistic. Since 2017 the city's Constitution has recognised the Right to the City as a fundamental right for all, including the Right to Public Space, ensuring that all inhabitants, especially children, have the collective right to transform and reinvent their environment according to their dreams and desires (Consejería Jurídica y de Servicios Legales,

Every project had counterparts in various ministries, departments, and boroughs whose collaboration was indispensable for Playful City to showcase the transformative power of play.



Figure 7: Peatoniños playstreet, 2018, Photo credit: Lab for the City



Figure 8: Urban Toys workshop in Plaza Santa Catarina, 2017, Photo credit: Lab for the City

2016). The recently elected Mayor of Mexico City, Clara Brugada, has committed to a City of Care for all, emphasizing equality through programs like Utopias — "units for transformation and organisation for inclusion and social harmony"— which originated in Iztapalapa. This initiative has significantly bridged the gap in cultural services for the city's periphery, creating parks, libraries, senior centres, swimming pools, sports courts, playgrounds, and more. Mayor Brugada has pledged to expand the program citywide, building 100 Utopias to ensure every neighbourhood benefits (Taylor, 2024). On a smaller scale, she has also implemented Ludicalles, a continuation of Playful City's playstreet program, promising to "fill the streets with sports and culture."

Foreseeing a future for play?

Mexico City stands at a crossroads. To create a comprehensive plan for play that acknowledges the unique needs and rights of its 2 million children, it is important to learn from the past. We can take lessons from post-revolutionary governments in unifying bureaucratic language to position children at the centre of policies. The social housing movement also offers valuable insights for creative and artistic exploration to design innovative playground equipment. They encourage us to think beyond traditional plastic jungle gyms. *Playful City* teaches us the significance of incorporating children's voices as vital stakeholders in shaping the city and the importance of rigorous impact assessment to reinforce that play is not merely a recreational activity but a fundamental right and a critical component of children's lives.

Despite the challenges posed by adult-centric policies, the city's evolving legislative framework and local government initiatives indicate a promising shift. The analysis presented in this article provides valuable insights for informing future local planning strategies to create a more inclusive and playful city, fostering environments where children can thrive. The success of a plan for play will depend on its ability to integrate these historical insights into a cohesive and forward-thinking strategy. This strategy must create a citywide framework that prioritises children's needs in urban planning, fosters institutional collaboration, and ensures the sustainability of play initiatives. By building on the successes and addressing the challenges identified by Ciudad Lúdica, México City can pave the way for every child to grow, learn, and thrive in a supportive and playful urban environment.

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Crafting Playable Futures:
How Bhubaneswar is reimagining urban spaces for children

Preeti Prada Panigrahi and Aadish Nargunde

This article explores how the Indian city of Bhubaneswar attempted to integrate play into city planning and urban development programs and policies, mainly through the Smart Cities Mission in 2016 and later through Odisha's award-winning Jaga Mission program. The goal was to include children's needs and voices in shaping an inclusive and resilient urban environment.

Bhubaneswar: A thriving city confronting tomorrow's challenges

Bhubaneswar, the capital city of Odisha, grapples with the dual challenge of managing rapid urban growth while addressing the escalating impacts of climate change. According to the IPCC reports and the Odisha State Action Plan on Climate Change (2018–23), the city is highly vulnerable to extreme weather events, floods, droughts, and heatwaves (Government of Odisha, 2018). These challenges have spurred innovative disaster resilience measures, including early warning systems and disaster-resistant infrastructure. As Bhubaneswar navigates the complexities of climate adaptation, it faces the added responsibility of integrating these strategies into urban planning, particularly in creating safe and accessible public spaces for children. With approximately 30–35% of its population comprising children, the city's development agenda prioritizes child-friendly urban spaces while building resilience to future climate impacts.

Bhubaneswar's urban population has grown by 27% annually over the last decade (World Population Review, 2025). Close to half a million reside in slums, where children face daily challenges related to poor infrastructure, unsafe public transport, and inadequate sanitation. These conditions underscore the need for a more inclusive, child-centred approach to urban planning that prioritises safety, accessibility, and resilience.

Modernist planning principles influenced the city's original design by Otto Königsberger in the 1950s. The layout, pioneering for its time, focused on creating functional neighbourhoods with accessible schools, civic centres, and roads. The city's growth in the last few decades has been largely unplanned. Still, the recently developed Comprehensive



Children playing in the rain in a Bhubaneswar slum. Photo credit: Freepik


Photo credit: Authors

Development Plan (CDP) emphasises efficient land use, ecological balance, and the creation of open spaces such as parks and recreational areas. By addressing the physical and social needs of the city's growing population, the CDP aims to ensure balanced growth and climate resilience, as well as improve quality of life for Bhubaneswar's residents (Bhubaneswar Development Authority, 2016).

Key political figures, advocacy campaigns, and child-responsive urban plans and policies provide for play across the city

Leveraging national and state policies, political will, advocacy campaigns, and strategic urban development initiatives has contributed to Bhubaneswar's growing emphasis on children's play in urban planning.

Political champions: Former Union Minister of Urban Development Venkaiah Naidu was a strong advocate for child-friendly urban spaces. During his tenure, he supported several national missions aimed at inclusive urban planning that prioritises the needs of vulnerable groups, especially children. These initiatives include the Smart Cities Mission (SCM), the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT), and the National Urban Policy Framework (NUPF). At the city-level, Naveen Patnaik, former Chief Minister of Odisha and a champion of child-friendly urban development, aligned inclusive urban development with disaster resilience strategies and equitable growth, ensuring that play spaces are safe and adaptable during extreme weather events like cyclones and floods.

Advocacy Campaigns: The Humara Bachpan campaign in Bhubaneswar is a grassroots movement that empowers

To set a new benchmark for child friendly urban planning in Bhubaneswar, BDA produced the Draft Child-Friendly Public Space Design Regulations 2024, mandating that public spaces in neighbourhoods are legible, safe, accessible, and responsive to the needs of children, including play and learning.


Figure 1: Child participation workshop by HBT. Photo credit: https://www.humarabachpan.org/gallery/

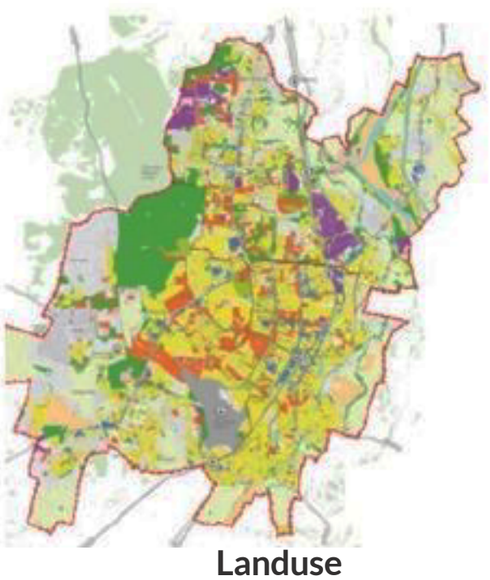
marginalized communities, especially children and women, to actively participate in shaping urban spaces and policies (see figure 1), ensuring that cities grow in a way that is safe, inclusive, and supportive of their holistic development (Humara Bachpan Trust, n.d.). Anchored by an NGO, Humara Bachpan Trust (HBT), the campaign has played a significant role in making Bhubaneswar one of India's first child-friendly cities, contributing to city administration proposals and the implementation of socially smart city projects. The campaign has partnered with local authorities, such as the Bhubaneswar Smart City Limited (BSCL), to integrate child-friendly and gender-sensitive approaches into city planning and services. The campaign began in Bhubaneswar and has since expanded to 23 cities across 17 states in India, directly reaching over 35,500 children (NITI Aayog, n.d.).

Urban laws, policies, and plans: They have played a critical role in prioritising children in urban planning and development in Bhubaneswar. With its dedicated funding model and independent administrative structure that created a special purpose vehicle for project implementation, the Smart Cities Mission has played a key role in creating child-friendly spaces such as parks, playgrounds, and pedestrian-friendly streets in Indian cities, including Bhubaneshwar. In 2015, in the first edition of the mission, the India Smart Cities Challenge, Bhubaneswar, made history by securing the top spot out of 98 cities. The city's Smart City proposal highlighted "Child-Friendly City" as a key planning principle.

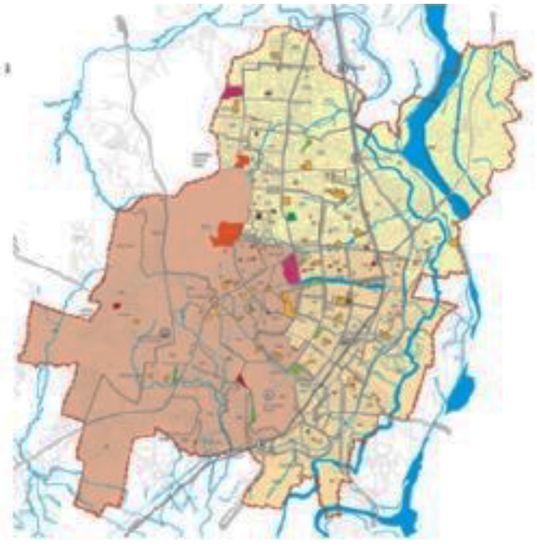
City level planning efforts: At the state and city levels, concerted efforts have ensured that plans and policies are responsive to the needs of all residents, particularly the most vulnerable. The city's Master Plan 2040 and Bhubaneswar Development Authority (BDA) guidelines emphasise the need for inclusive public spaces that cater to the needs of children, integrating play zones into both new developments and older neighbourhoods. To set a new benchmark for child friendly urban planning in Bhubaneswar, BDA produced the Draft Child-Friendly Public Space Design Regulations 2024, mandating that public spaces in neighbourhoods are legible, safe, accessible, and responsive to the needs of children, including play and learning.

To bring the vision of a child friendly smart city to life, the Bhubaneswar Development Authority, supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation, established the Bhubaneswar Urban Knowledge Centre (BUKC) as a nerve centre for urban innovation and planning in Bhubaneswar. The Child Friendly Smart City Centre is one of its core domains. BUKC provides technical support and coordination

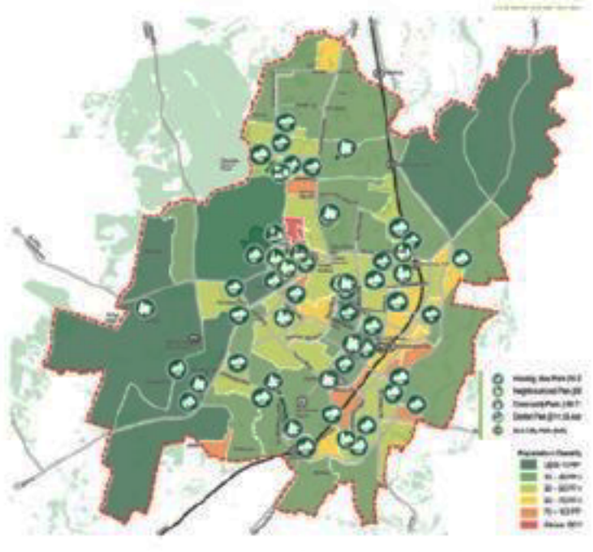
Mapping of the green and blue spaces by Bhubaneswar Urban Knowledge Centre (BUKC).



Landuse



Total no. of Playgrounds



Total no. of Parks



Walkability

Figure 2: Mapping of the green and blue spaces by Bhubaneswar Urban Knowledge Centre (BUKC). Photo credit: BDA

for the Child-Friendly Smart City Centre, which focuses on integrating children's needs into urban planning and infrastructure. The Humara Bachpan campaign ensured the voices of children informed the planning proposals. One of the first exercises initiated by the BUKC was developing a baseline map of available open spaces, parks, and playgrounds (see figure 2). The mapping revealed gaps in access to play in the city and showed that children with special needs lack access to inclusive play areas. To address these gaps, a Parks and Open Space Master Plan was developed to plan, design, and implement a network of citywide macro- and micro-level open spaces, parks, and playgrounds.

State-level policies that impact equity-focused planning and urban development in the city:
The State-level Odisha Land Rights to Slum Dweller Act (OLRSDA), the Odisha Municipal Corporation (Amendment) Act (OMC) enacted in 2018, and the JAGA mission (2019) supported the creation of open



Photo credit: Authors

While creating safer streets and accessible public areas is fundamental, these changes must be complemented by cultural shifts in our perceptions of childhood, community, and independence.



Overview of Bhubaneswar's 2024 Child Friendly Public Space Design Regulations

The Bhubaneswar Development Authority (BDA) introduced the Draft Child Friendly Public Space Design Regulations in 2024 to make urban spaces in the city safer, more inclusive, and accessible for children. These regulations apply to all government and private agencies involved in planning, designing, constructing, approving, and maintaining existing and new public spaces within BDA's jurisdiction (Bhubaneswar Development Authority, 2024).

What does it cover?

The regulations cover parks, streets, playgrounds, building premises, and other public infrastructure. A special focus is on making streets and parks child-friendly.

Child friendly streets:

- Safe pedestrian pathways with clear crossings and traffic-calming measures.
- Inclusive design that accommodates children of all abilities.
- Engaging environments with interactive elements, play spaces, and educational features.
- Legible navigation through clear signage and visual cues.
- Healthy surroundings with greenery, shaded areas, and pollution control.

Child friendly parks:

- Safe play areas with age-appropriate equipment and soft surfaces to minimize injuries.
- Inclusive design that accommodates children with disabilities, ensuring wheelchair-accessible pathways and sensory-friendly spaces.
- Engaging environments with interactive elements, nature-based play, and educational features.
- Legible navigation through clear signage, wayfinding markers, and child-friendly maps.
- Healthy surroundings with greenery, shaded areas, pollution control, and water facilities.

What is the proposed rating system?

The rating system for child-friendly public spaces is based on how well they meet mandatory design criteria outlined in the Bhubaneswar Child Friendly Public Space Design Guidelines. Public spaces are evaluated using five key principles: Accessibility, Safety, Legibility, Environment, and Learning.

Here's how the ratings are assigned:

- Platinum Public Spaces: Achieve 90%-100% of mandatory design details.
- Gold Public Spaces: Achieve 80%-90% of mandatory design details.
- Silver Public Spaces: Achieve 60%-80% of mandatory design details.

New public spaces should aim to meet as many provisions as possible to achieve a higher rating. Existing spaces undergoing redevelopment must adhere to the guidelines to improve their quality and qualify for an upgrade to Gold or Platinum status.



Figure 3: A transformed intergenerationally active open space in the Satasingha area in Keonjhar under Jaga Mission. Photo credit: https://horizons.tatatrusts.org/2021/december/tata-trusts-liveable-habitat-jaga-mission.html

spaces and children's play areas in slums and informal settlements across all 115 cities in Odisha (Mohapatra, n.d.). The Jaga Mission grants heritable, but non-transferable, land rights to informal slum dwellers in cities and towns. It provides essential services to these settlements and supports the development of inclusive, intergenerational, multi-purpose public spaces on vacant or unused land. The program employs a participatory approach that strongly emphasizes addressing children's developmental needs.

Child-friendly zones created through Jaga Mission must meet specific safety and quality criteria, such as ensuring non-toxic colours in play equipment, building play structures with local materials, and providing regular maintenance. Additionally, these areas were required to be well-lit, with seating for caregivers, ensuring safety and usability at all times (see figure 3). While local authorities continued to provide technical and funding support, community bodies were the decision-makers. Slum Dwellers Associations, a cohort of community representatives, conducted participatory needs assessment surveys to understand infrastructure needs in their neighbourhoods and collaborated with the city government to address these needs. Due to the city's proximity to the sea and high exposure to climate change risks, play and open spaces must be built with locally available climate-resilient materials to ensure they weather cyclones and, when damaged, could be easily repaired or replaced. The JAGA Mission has closed the gap in access to play spaces, especially for children and their caregivers in low-income communities, with earmarked funds towards creating community and play spaces in slums.

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Examples of Placemaking and Planning for Play

Under the child friendly smart cities program, six new parks were developed across the city, and community spaces in four informal settlements were equipped with play structures. Under the Jaga Mission, 135 slums were upgraded in Bhubaneswar and 1681 in other cities across Odisha. All slum upgrading efforts focused on common spaces to cater to children's needs. A few notable examples from the two programs mentioned above illustrate how planning for play has created spatial provisions for children's play in Bhubaneswar.

Sensory Park for All Abilities through the Smart Cities Mission

Two new inclusive sensory parks have been developed in Bhubaneswar under the Smart Cities Mission, aligning with the vision outlined in the Parks and Open Space Master Plan to prioritize the creation of play parks accessible to all abilities. The site selection criteria for inclusive parks included the following:

- The property should be at least 1,000 square feet and ideally consist of underutilized land that is free of legal issues.
- It should be located within walking distance of a school or informal settlement.
- The area must be free of harmful elements.
- It should also be easily accessible and well-lit.

The first Sensory Park was established in Sahid Nagar (see figure 4) with an initial funding of 10 million INR from Bhubaneswar Smart City Limited (BSCL). The park's layout emphasizes safety and accessibility, adhering to universal design principles. It allows children to connect with their peers in a manner that fosters empathy, social skills, and self-confidence. The design of the park centres around the philosophy of "play together," creating an environment where children of all abilities can share experiences and confront their fears. Spanning 1,368 square meters, the park features specialized elements that enhance sensory experiences (India Today Web Desk, 2022). Inclusive play features, such as a music wall, Braille wall, and wobble bridge, cater to children of various ages and those with different physical and sensory disabilities. These structures offer opportunities for fun while improving motor skills, balance, and cognitive awareness, making play engaging and therapeutic. The design is thoughtfully guided by the park's natural elements, such as existing trees and green spaces, which are complemented by vibrantly coloured dynamic flooring patterns. These features provide visual and tactile stimulation while ensuring climatic comfort, fostering an environment that integrates play with nature. Bhubaneswar's Sensory Park demonstrates how thoughtful planning and inclusive design can transform urban landscapes into vibrant, welcoming spaces where play becomes a medium for growth, learning, and connection.

Several barriers prevent city-wide scaling up of successful play interventions. The include:

- Design workshops and training programs, integral to placemaking interventions, can be time-consuming and challenging to implement.
- Space limitations present a significant challenge in low-income areas, particularly in following universal accessibility principles for ramps that require more space.
- Barriers include the availability of suitable vendors, such as equipment and material suppliers, and the acceptance and openness of local elected representatives. For instance, at Sahid Nagar Smart Park, the ward corporator recently converted a splash pool into a fenced-off mini skating rink style structure. This modification has restricted free access to the splash pool, taking away the joy of running into the refreshing water.
- Government procedures hinder the implementation of innovative design involving new and non-scheduled items that could enhance risk-taking among children and make the overall play experience more fun and challenging.
- Successful interventions like the Sensory Parks require substantial financial investment to operationalise, especially to meet accessibility and construction standards.
- A shortage of dedicated human resources at the municipal level slows down the scaling of city wide initiatives.
- These interventions often lack monitoring and evaluation, making it difficult to determine how well they meet neighborhood needs. This also hinders the establishment of effective feedback loops that could improve projects and adapt to the evolving requirements of the communities.



Figure 4: Sensory Park in Sahid Nagar, Photo credit: Bhubaneswar Development Authority





Figure 5: Shaded and well-lit public spaces in Maa Mangala slum. Photo credit: Jaga Mission

Maa Mangala slum upgrading with children in mind

Maa Mangala is a pilot slum under the JAGA Mission in Bhubaneswar, home to 288 families who live in densely packed, poorly ventilated houses. The residents have limited access to clean water, sanitation, and healthcare. The area faces frequent waterlogging, which has led to a rise in malaria and other waterborne diseases. Demographic assessments revealed that 82 of the 768 inhabitants are children under the age of five, and 34 are of school-going age. Residents, especially children and caregivers, have identified several needs, including the lack of play areas and open community spaces for socializing.

The community invested significant time in formal meetings with city officials to determine the allocation of space for play areas. During these meetings, they emphasized that play equipment must be resilient to heat waves and frequent cyclonic storms. Tribeni Pradhan, a community leader, stated, "When community infrastructure is created, often after a cyclone, it gets damaged and remains that way. However, if they can build it from locally available materials, the community has control over it."

In response to the needs and priorities identified by the community, a new play space has been developed.

A key aspect of Maa Mangala's transformation is the thoughtful design of spaces for young children. The new play area features seating for caregivers under a canopy of trees, allowing them to supervise their children as they play. The play area is situated near homes, enabling parents, especially grandparents, to easily keep an eye on the children. To help keep the play space cool during hot summer days, it is shaded by trees and located near a water source. Additionally, the brightly painted exterior walls of the neighbouring houses and adequate lighting make it an inviting and lively area, encouraging social interactions and a sense of community (see figure 5).

Concluding thoughts

Political will, pro-poor, and child-responsive plans and policies have allowed Bhubaneswar to become a leading example of how Indian cities can prioritize children in inclusive urban development and placemaking that leaves no child behind. The city has significantly improved urban living and fostered community well-being by promoting inclusive play and community spaces—especially in or near low-income neighbourhoods. These initiatives provided a more liveable environment and encouraged social engagement by involving local communities in the planning and maintaining spaces created through them.

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Building a City for Kids: How Bratislava is reimagining public spaces for childhood freedom and play



Water games in a monumental fountain at Freedom Square, Bratislava, Photo credit: Metropolitan Institute of Bratislava

Sandra Štasselová

This article explores how Bratislava is reimagining its urban spaces to better serve the needs of its youngest residents by planning high-quality, open, and safe public spaces that encourage play, exploration, and social connections.

Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia with a population of nearly half a million, has evolved from a city shaped by 40 years of Communist rule to a vibrant democratic capital. The free market has influenced the post-1990s transformation of Bratislava, but it has neglected investment in public infrastructure. Bratislava's current mayor, Matúš Vallo, an architect by background, elected in 2018, made improving the quality of public spaces a priority of his government. His team has firmly adopted the 8-80 principle of city development, championed by Gil Penalosa: what benefits an 8-year-old also benefits an 80-year-old, which means it's advantageous for everyone in the city. The

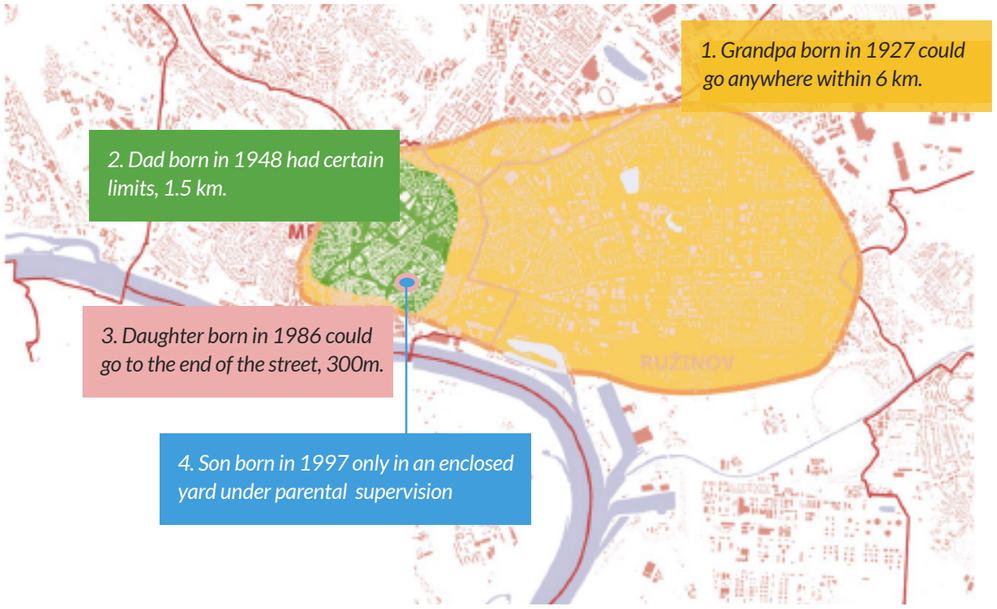

Figure 1:The independent mobility range of three generations. Source: Metropolitan Institute of Bratislava, 2023.

current administration is committed to making this vision a reality by creating high-quality, enjoyable, open, and safe public spaces for all, including vulnerable groups, children, and seniors.

The Evolution of Bratislava's Approach

Ever since Slovakia became an independent state, the quality of public spaces at the heart of its capital, Bratislava, has been much discussed. However, the young state saw mostly ad hoc private investments and tactical initiatives without a clear vision from the local municipality. The Mayor, Vallo, was instrumental in bringing together 70 experts to compile a book called Plan Bratislava or Plan B. It outlined all the city's challenges and the plans to address them. Plan B also recommended the creation of a new institution—the Metropolitan Institute of Bratislava (MIB)—as a key vehicle for implementing urban planning and public space development strategies and attracting funding for built environment projects.

Since its establishment, MIB has focused on setting the standards and core values for the public space revitalization program and codified them in a manifesto for transforming the streets and squares of Bratislava into high-quality public spaces. The Manifesto for Public Spaces and the extensive collection of technical documents titled Principles and Standards, which outline the rules for managing elements in public spaces (such as the design and placement of benches, guidelines for tall greenery to ensure both its prosperity and the well-being of space users, the design of public transport stops, outdoor advertising, etc.), do not explicitly mention children as a target group. Instead, they take a comprehensive approach, considering all users of public spaces in their full complexity.

The MIB has been instrumental in translating this vision into reality through the Vivid Places program for public space renewal. Since 2021, MIB has designed, developed, or completed more than 60 public space revitalisation projects, including squares, streets, parks, playgrounds, and city forests.

The need to enhance many overlooked public spaces is evident, yet challenges such as limited funding and administrative capacity persist. To address this issue, city officials must establish clear priorities. In developing an algorithm to determine which spaces would benefit most from reconstruction, the MIB has begun to focus on the needs of vulnerable resident groups. In Bratislava, one notably large and vulnerable demographic is children, highlighting the importance of prioritizing their safety and accessibility in urban development efforts.

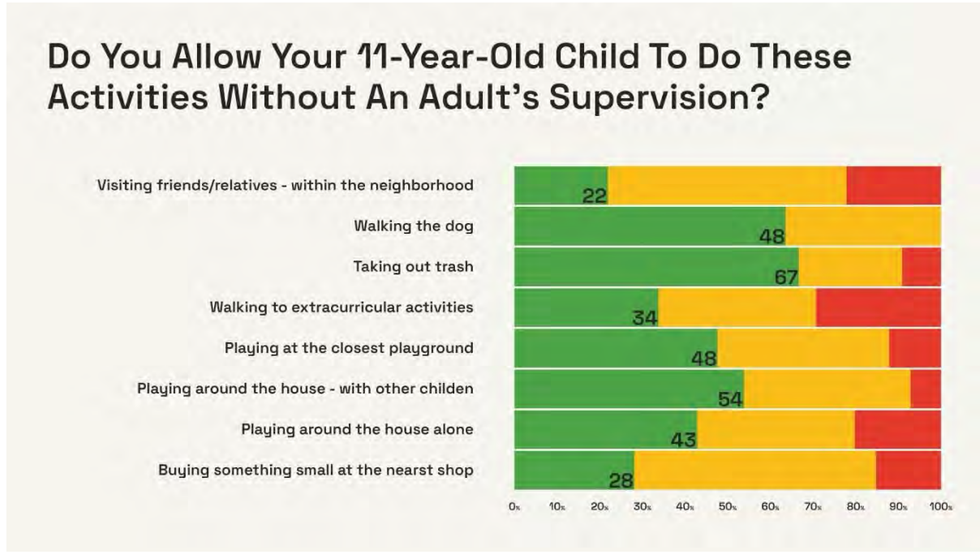

Figure 2: Data gathered from the parent community of participating schools in 2023, Source: Metropolitan Institute of Bratislava

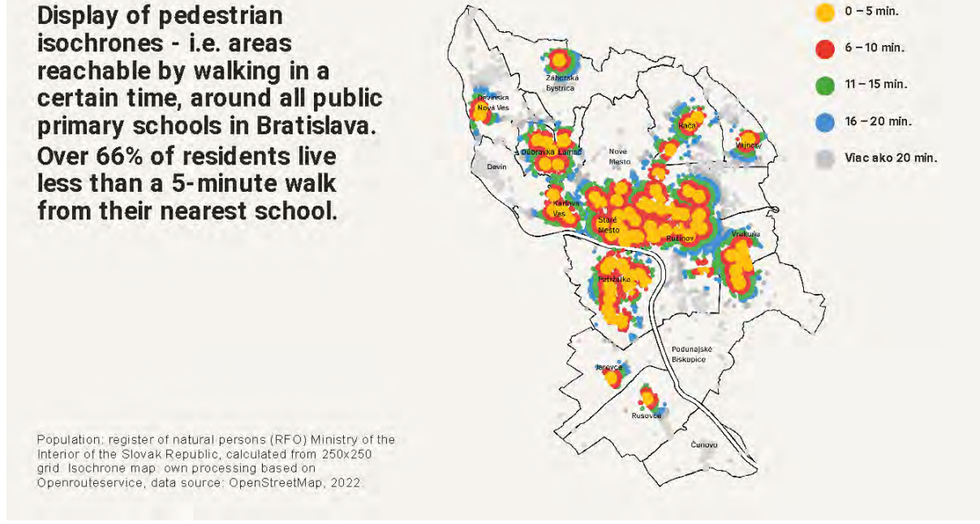

Figure 3: Walking distance to schools from different neighbourhoods. Source: Metropolitan Institute of Bratislava

Through engaging discussions with experts in children's health, psychology, pedagogy, and urban design, MIB's transdisciplinary team—composed of urbanists, anthropologists sociologists, and urban designers—has identified two key themes for the City for Children project: independent mobility and free play. The City for Children team at MIB explored the project's goals and indicators while focusing on understanding how people behave in public spaces. This exploration led to important questions: At what age do children feel empowered to walk to school independently? How many children live within a 10-minute walk from school and choose transportation methods other than a car? How many children have access to safe and inviting outdoor play areas? Since 2021, this progressive project has been at



Figure 4: Top and below: Play street in summer 2023 in Bratislava, Photo credit: Veronika Gezik



the forefront of the administration's efforts in Bratislava, aiming to create a more child-friendly urban environment.

Children's spatial freedoms in Bratislava and consequences

MIB undertook a focused study, drawing inspiration from Tim Gill's research, to examine how children's freedom has evolved over generations (Gill, 2021). They interviewed families representing multiple generations who were raised in Bratislava. Participants reflected on their experiences of freedom at age eight, discussing the places they could explore independently without adult supervision. This insight provides valuable perspectives on the changing nature of children's autonomy and the factors influencing these shifts (see figure 1).

This small study revealed significant differences between generations. While grandfathers had the freedom to explore their surroundings at eight, their grandsons at the same age are now limited to playing in a closed courtyard, often under parental supervision from a window. International comparisons of children's independent mobility (Shaw et al., 2015) have shown that children with more freedom to explore their neighborhoods without adult supervision engage in higher levels of physical activity, social interaction, and self-confidence. In contrast, restricted mobility is associated with lower fitness levels, diminished self-esteem, and fewer social opportunities. This limitation also negatively affects mental well-being by restricting experiences that foster resilience, problem-solving skills, and deeper connections to their communities and the natural environment.



Figure 5: One of the public spaces around a school transformed with asphalt art, Photo credit: Metropolitan Institute of Bratislava

Further, in 2023, a survey conducted in Bratislava involving over 2,000 parents of school-aged children revealed a significant decline in unsupervised activities and independent mobility (see figure 2). Notably, one-third of 11-year-olds do not take out the trash, and fewer than half are allowed to visit the nearest playground without adult supervision. According to a Health Behavior in School-Aged Children report (2024), over 60% of girls and 40% of boys in Slovakia aged 13-15 are experiencing psychological difficulties.

In Bratislava, encouraging children to embark on their first independent journey to school is vital for their development. The city's data indicates that two-thirds of children live less than a five-minute walk from their nearest school, and 95% are within a fifteen-minute walk (see figure 3). This favorable distribution offers an excellent opportunity for families to promote walking to school, whether children go alone or with friends.

Unfortunately, the reality presents a different picture. Thirty-seven percent of children are driven to school by car, and 44% of parents perceive the areas around schools as unsafe. Parents who do not allow their children to go to playgrounds or schools unaccompanied frequently cite this lack of safety. Thirty years ago, public transportation and walking were the primary modes of travel for parents and children. However, cars have doubled in the past decade, and vehicles have long dominated city planning, representing multiple generations who were raised in Bratislava. Participants reflected on their experiences of freedom at age eight, discussing the places they could explore independently without adult supervision. This insight provides valuable perspectives on the changing nature of children's autonomy and the factors influencing these shifts.

The City for Kids initiative combines data-driven insights with community-driven engagement. It is a movement that empowers communities to shape a safer, more independent future for their children.



Figure 6: Participative activities that engage children in identifying dangers or inconveniences in their local area. Photo credit: Veronika Gezik



Figure 7: An empathy walk around a school, where children experience urban mobility from the perspective of individuals with specific needs, fostering awareness of inclusive public space design. Photo credit: Veronika Gezik



Figure 8: Pedestrian Bus going to School, Photo credit: Veronika Gezik

City for Kids: creating a safer environment for independent mobility and play

To address the decline in children's independent mobility, the first step is to transform public spaces into safer environments. Since perceptions of safety can differ, the city gathers data to understand the views of parents, children, and local residents before consulting with traffic engineers. These insights guide the development of solutions that prioritize pedestrian safety while meeting the needs of families who drive their children to school. By fostering this approach, the city aims to help children and parents build confidence and resilience while enjoying the benefits of active transportation.

The City for Kids initiative combines data-driven insights with community-driven engagement. It is a movement that empowers communities to shape a safer, more independent future for their children. This approach ensures that relevant communities are actively involved throughout the entire process. By embracing this method, the city aims to turn this transformative initiative into a collaborative effort, fostering a strong sense of ownership and connection among participants. The ultimate goal is to create safer and more independent mobility options for children (see figure 4).

Schools are ideal focal points for City for Kids for several reasons. First, most children who attend a school live nearby, which makes it easy for them to get around and helps the school become a social hub for families within the local area (see figure 5). Second, this project brings parents and kids together to work towards a common goal: keeping children safe. This shared goal strengthens the community and allows the city to collect important data while involving everyone actively.

Engaging individuals in planning long-term urban changes in Bratislava can be challenging due to competing priorities on personal time. The team at the Department of Participation at MIB has frequently faced this issue. However, City for Kids is an exception where children actively envision a better environment through modeling, comic strip storytelling, and facilitated discussions (see figure 6). The difference is evident—not only in the high survey response rates but also in the energy and emotional investment parents show in the initiative, reporting deeply personal and sometimes even traumatic experiences concerning safety. However, just as autonomy is desired for children, so is a strong desire to retain the right to drop their children directly at the school gate. These contrasting feelings significantly shape the discourse and engagement surrounding the initiative.

To truly understand and address mobility issues, MIB surveys parent's transportation habits, perceptions of safety and independence, and ideas for potential solutions. MIB also explores children's daily journeys to school, using age-appropriate, interactive methods, discussing children's positive and negative experiences, and encouraging children to imagine the changes they want. One of the most popular exercises is the "empathy walk," where children experience navigating public spaces as if they were wheelchair users, visually impaired, or carrying a large shopping cart (see figure 7). These activities spark creativity and foster a deeper understanding of accessibility and inclusion.

In 2024, MIB revamped the City for Kids program to adopt an application-based model. Previously, we selected neighborhoods and schools solely based on safety data. However, after working in 12 neighborhoods, we discovered that the key to meaningful change lies in engaging with proactive and motivated communities eager to make a difference. The new application-based approach still allows us to prioritize schools based on traffic conditions, but now we choose from a pool of schools that actively apply to participate. These schools not only focus on safety but are also prepared to collaborate with us in advocating for policies that prioritize the well-being of children in public spaces. By partnering with communities committed to change, we can achieve a deeper and more sustainable impact.

Initiatives such as Play Streets, the Play Pavilion, and Playboxes may not offer permanent solutions, but play a crucial role in promoting free play as an essential aspect of urban childhoods.

What we learned

In recent years, investments in public transportation, pedestrian areas, and cycling infrastructure have aimed to encourage Bratislava's residents to adopt active mobility. However, changing mindsets is equally important. We implement various behavioral "nudge" strategies to promote a cultural shift. Some of them are described below.

1. Specific initiatives that can help transform mindsets about walking to school

One initiative that stands out is the Pedestrian Bus—a simple yet effective concept designed to enhance community life and encourage walking to school (see figure 8). Each morning, a parent leads a group of children along a designated route, picking them up at specific "stops." Walking together is enjoyable and exciting for the children, some even leave their cars mid-journey to join the group during Pedestrian Bus events. These experiences make walking to school fun and memorable for children who have never had the opportunity to do so.

2. Bringing people togetherto celebrate play on the streets

One impactful initiative is the Play Street Festival, inspired by the internationally recognized concept of Play Streets. These one-day events temporarily close streets to cars, transforming them into safe and vibrant spaces where children can play and explore freely. The streets become hubs for games, creative activities, and leisure, reminding



Figure 9: Play Pavilion on Street, Photo credit: Metropolitan Institute of Bratislava



Figure 10: Playboxes project in the heart of neghbourhoods, Photo credit: Metropolitan Institute of Bratislava

adults of a time when playing outside was both natural and enjoyable. Many families travel from different neighborhoods to participate, drawn by the sense of freedom and community these events create.

The community plays an active role in organizing the Play Streets. Children are involved in the planning process: schools receive a small budget on the condition that students use democratic decision-making to allocate funds for the festival. Whether they choose a magician or free popcorn, this process teaches children valuable skills such as creativity, responsibility, independence, and democratic participation. Each event is unique, shaped by the decisions of school parliaments and the community's collaborative spirit. While Play Streets were initially conceived to engage the local community on the issue of independent mobility, they have revealed an even broader insight: the profound importance of free play as an end in itself. Observing children rediscover the joy of unstructured, creative play has underscored how critical such experiences are for their development, well-being, and utonomy.

3. Making citywide free play a cornerstone of our City for Children project

Through Play Streets, we have observed that free play not only encourages physical activity and creativity but also builds essential skills for navigating the world, such as confidence and independence. This realization has shifted our perspective; we now see that promoting free play is not just complementary to encouraging independent mobility, but an equally vital goal in itself. Therefore, we recognize the need to embed free play more deeply into the discourse and policy surrounding children's mobility. By creating spaces and opportunities for unstructured play, we can nurture a generation of children who feel empowered, engaged, and at home in their communities. This shift opens new avenues for advocacy and action, where the freedom to play becomes as fundamental as the freedom to move independently.

In addition to Play Streets, we established the Play Pavilion, a pop-up space inviting people of all ages to engage with their community over several weeks. Open daily, the pavilion provided free access to sports (see figure 9) and creative equipment, such as scooters and drawing supplies, while also hosting regular cultural and sports programs. Although items occasionally went missing, the community often replaced them with new contributions, creating a dynamic cycle of sharing and trust. However, relocating the pavilion every few weeks proved to be a challenge. Just as a neighborhood embraced it, we would move it away. Despite this, feedback was overwhelmingly positive, highlighting its role in building connections among neighbors and fostering a shared sense of ownership.

The Playboxes project is another initiative designed to encourage free play. These urban storage units are filled with games and sports equipment, serving as small interventions

While creating safer streets and accessible public areas is fundamental, these changes must be complemented by cultural shifts in our perceptions of childhood, community, and independence.



Figure 11: Children's and parent's perceptions of Playboxes? Data from discussions with communities, Source: Metropolitan Institute of Bratislava

to revitalize public spaces. The goal is to encourage children to go outside, meet their peers, and engage in spontaneous play. Whether they use the provided items or create their own games, children are attracted to the play boxes as centers of activity and social interaction (see figure 10).

Initiatives such as Play Streets, the Play Pavilion, and Playboxes may not offer permanent solutions, but play a crucial role in promoting free play as an essential aspect of urban childhoods. By normalizing unstructured play and showcasing its significant benefits, these projects encourage communities and families to incorporate free play into their daily lives. This, in turn, enriches individual development and strengthens the overall fabric of neighborhoods.

Concluding thoughts

Bratislava's journey toward reclaiming independent mobility and free play for children highlights an essential lesson: transforming physical spaces is only part of the solution. While creating safer streets and accessible public areas is fundamental, these changes must be complemented by cultural shifts in our perceptions of childhood, community, and independence. Initiatives like Play Streets, Pedestrian Buses, Play Pavilions, and Playboxes have demonstrated the potential of urban spaces to foster creativity, autonomy, and stronger community bonds. Although these tactical initiatives are a promising start, long-term progress requires collaboration across various fields. Urban planners, educators, psychologists, and policy makers must work together to address the societal and environmental challenges affecting children and their caregivers. Most importantly, parents play a crucial role in this effort. To raise happy, resilient children, we must create supportive networks of families that collectively value independence, free play, and exploration. Working together can ensure a healthier, more vibrant future for Bratislava's youngest residents.

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OPINION | JENNIE BJÖRSTAD

Jennie is a sociologist focused on bringing social equity, children's rights, and public health into urban planning. She works at AFRY in Sweden.

Designing for presence: rethinking planning for play in a screen-filled world

For the first time in history, children in many countries now spend more time on screens than on outdoor play. Simultaneously, they move less than ever before, with screen use often cited as a major cause of sedentary behaviour. From an urban planning perspective, this calls for serious reflection. How do we design cities and public spaces that support children's developmental needs to encourage physical movement, face-to-face interaction, imagination, and unstructured play? And perhaps most crucially, how do we allow children to be immersed in the moment, and be bored without seeking constant technological stimulation? Creativity, perseverance, and playfulness are born as much out of moments of boredom as constant action.

Smartphones and digital tools offer undeniable convenience for accessing public transport, wayfinding, enabling micromobility, and community feedback in planning processes. However, when bus tickets require apps, park signs are reduced to QR codes, and playgrounds are designed as Instagram-friendly backdrops, we send a signal: a smartphone is an integral part of urban living. And that excludes by design.

We risk overlooking children's basic need for playful, messy, risky, and stimulating environments. The organisation Smartphone-Free Childhood calls smartphones "experience blockers" — a term worth considering as screens become embedded in our physical world. We know unstructured, risky play — climbing high, running fast, getting lost — supports children's physical and mental health. Yet, modern playgrounds are often over-designed, pre-programmed, and focused on safety, which limits children's freedom, creativity, and time outdoors. Car-free environments remain essential for children's independence. Yet, in many safe and sustainable mobility environments, parents often give their child a smartphone out of fear — fear of not being able to reach them, or the need to support their first solo journeys on public transport. These concerns, along with social pressure, are common reasons children get their first smartphone.



Girls using smartphones. Photo credit: Tati Odintsova/Unsplash.



Kid's trail photo (scan QR to learn more about what the NGO Friluftsfrämjandet offers to kids and adults). Photo credit: Jennie Björstad

But this shift also challenges established urban ideals. Take "eyes on the street" — a concept championed by the legendary Jane Jacobs, rooted in the idea that adults help keep spaces safe simply by being present. But presence means attention. When eyes are on screens rather than on children or each other, aren't interactions and developmental moments lost? A counter-movement is emerging. Parents are delaying their child's first smartphone. Schools are introducing phone-free zones, even for adults. At parties, conferences, and concerts, phones are locked away to support presence. Digital exclusion — once framed as a problem for the elderly — is becoming a health strategy among families consciously opting out.

Urban planning must respond. We now have the opportunity to design public spaces that don't assume a screen in every hand — but instead invite connection, curiosity, and play. Some strategies include:

- **Identifying when and where screens tend to appear in public life and what policies can be used to limit their usage in public spaces used by children.**
- **Creating phone-free zones with rich, multisensory alternatives that encourage interaction.**
- **Allowing more natural, risky play environments that are inclusive, cooperative, and developmentally engaging.**
- **Designing spaces that children can help shape — incomplete by design, and richer for it.**

This is a moment to rethink how we design for presence, interaction, and meaningful play and to gently challenge the growing norm of building the need for screen use into our shared physical world.

News From Our Branches

IPA World currently has branches in 19 Countries. Here we share updates from 9 of them!

IPA Aotearoa/ New Zealand (Play Aotearoa)

Aotearoa is well underway with planning for Christchurch 2026 and looking forward to welcoming you! The conference website is soon to go live, and you will be able to register for notifications for calls for abstracts, conference tickets, and general information. For the first time, Christchurch 2026 will host a play film night, which will be open to the public. If you are making a film that celebrates play, the right to play, children's rights, or a film made by children, you are invited to share it at the play film night as part of the conference. You'll be able to submit your film as part of the abstract process for consideration for inclusion in the play film night. The call for abstracts will open on October 31, 2025.



IPA Australia (Play Australia)

Australia is hosting the Asia Pacific conference June 24-27, 2025, and welcoming members from Taiwan, New Zealand, India, Hong Kong, China, and Singapore. To develop a cross-disciplinary Australian Playwork sector, Play Australia has partnered with Play Wales, and 100 Playworkers have been trained in an Industry Certified Foundation course since September 2024. A report into the State of Play will be launched for IDOP on June 11 to generate discussion on the issues impacting play in Australia and lay the groundwork for the development of a National Agenda for Play.



IPA Canada

IPA-Canada has made significant strides recently, starting with a successful inaugural webinar featuring Rachel Franz from Fair Play USA, which focused on strategies to reduce children's screen time. IPA-Canada's social media presence has been refreshed to be more visible and current, reflecting our commitment to engaging with contemporary issues in children's play. Three new board members have joined IPA Canada, bringing fresh and diverse perspectives on play that further enrich the collective vision and capacity. This includes initiating conversations with a Canadian city interested in submitting a proposal to host the IPA Triennial Conference in 2029 and connecting with various play-based organizations to strengthen support for Article 31 of the UNCRC. These developments mark an exciting and purposeful phase of growth for IPA-Canada as it continues to expand its network and make a nationwide impact.

IPA Hong Kong China (Playright Hong Kong)



The HK Branch partnered with local government to create an inclusive playground at Cha Kwo Ling Promenade, winning a Professional Award in the Greater Bay Area Urban Design Awards 2024. They also launched the "Playroom Enhancement Pilot Project" to offer free indoor play environments for young children. The Branch enhanced the professional capabilities of industry practitioners by offering professional qualifications in playwork: the PARS Playwork (UK) and Playground Safety Inspection: The Certified Playground Safety Inspector Certification Program (USA) and the Operational Playground Inspection Course (EN). The Branch has been instrumental in the creation of the Well-Being Design Guide for Public Housing, a policy backed by the Secretary of Housing, which aims to ensure that future public housing developments in Hong Kong include both child and community-friendly formal and informal play spaces. A flagship project – the Dream Together Playground will be set to open in October 2025 in HK and is designed to showcase child-led adventure outdoor play. This project can demonstrate a new type of playground in Hong Kong, encouraging innovative and creative play spaces. The HK Branch is making Hong Kong a playful city, one step at a time.





IPA Nigeria

In 2025, IPA opened the year with excitement, hosting an association-organized capacity-building opportunity attended by Mr. Gabriel, a member of IPA Nigeria. For IDOP 2024, IPA Nigeria was delighted to see the day promoted with speeches and media awareness done through their networks including two schools in Lagos, Nigeria (Holden Park School and Springlake School) who celebrated the United Nations Day for Play by extending playtime for children and sharing acknowledgments on Instagram.

IPA USA



IPA USA's focus for the International Day of Play is to encourage early childhood programs, primary-grade schools, family childcare providers, state-funded PreK programmes, Head Start programs, and part-day preschools to dedicate the day to child-initiated play. They have created a Google Form for individuals to share their plans for the play day. Those who submitted their plans before May 20th could request the IPA USA "We Played Today" sticker to be mailed to them. As of May 20th, they have sent out 5,022 stickers to Kenya, Hungary, and 12 addresses across the U.S. IPA USA will continue to invite individuals to share their experiences from the International Day of Play through the end of June.

To promote IDOP, IPA USA has utilized Facebook, Instagram, and invitations to both lapsed and active members. Currently, there are 287 free Porch Play Chats available on the IPA USA YouTube Channel. These chats feature short discussions on how to incorporate more play into children's daily routines. Every Monday, a new Porch Play Chat link is provided, and on Fridays, Lindsay Dzieilski designs and creates Play Fact Fridays to engage the community.

IPA Portugal

The IPA Portugal branch will be officially established as the Portuguese Association for the Right to Play on June 6, 2025. On April 24, in collaboration with the local organization Manga a Pé, which promotes children's play, IPA Portugal hosted the first national online play forum. Eleven entities from across the country participated, sharing their experiences in play advocacy. This event marked an important step toward building a national network for ground level play provision and children's right to play. For IDOP 2025, IPA Portugal will launch a social media campaign inviting local play provision groups, associations, projects, and initiatives, as well as the general public. The campaign aims to celebrate play encounters, moments, movements, and efforts across diverse school and public spaces. This includes promoting play in less visible and predictable areas where children often engage in self-organized play, such as outside schools, on pavements, at kerbs, in corridors, and in alleyways. IPA Portugal is supporting the "Time to Play" initiative led by the Portuguese network of educational cities. This initiative encourages both Portuguese and international cities in the International Network of Educational Cities to celebrate IDOP (International Day of Play). Cities are invited to organize activities in public spaces and school grounds from 10 AM to 12 PM, allowing children to participate in meaningful play activities.

IPA Ireland

The first IPA Ireland branch was formally approved this year at the March World IPA council meeting, thanks to the support from IPA Northern Ireland and IPA World. The establishment of this new branch was made possible following an active recruitment and promotion strategy, which brought together 16 active IPA members, surpassing the minimum criteria required to establish a new branch. This was an exciting process that brought together play workers, researchers, and advocates from NGOs, government departments, academic institutions, and self-employed individuals across the Republic of Ireland. The branch plans to make its presence known by celebrating International Play Day on June 11th and sharing news about our play work and advocacy on social media. By the end of the year, they hope to have an IPA Ireland social media plan and have established an IPA Ireland website to maximize their potential for disseminating their work and hopefully add impact. Their first face-to-face meeting will be held in early July to explore goals for this branch and to develop a clear mission, vision, and goals.

IPA Cymru Wales

IPA Cymru Wales has launched a series of online sessions titled "Spotlight On," showcasing the work or publications of its members and member organizations. The first session featured Ben Tawil from Ludicology, who led an informative discussion on "Playing and Being Well," a literature review they co-authored with Wendy Russell. This review focuses on recent research regarding children's play, social policy, and practice, particularly in Wales.

Swansea Council held its inaugural Play Sufficiency Awards, celebrating individuals and organizations that contribute to making Swansea a place that values play. Sue Bradshaw from the Bishopston Play Association and Mike Greenaway, also from Bishopston Play Association and Play Wales, were honored with the Lifetime Achievement Award.

Additionally, Clybiau Plant Cymru Kids' Clubs, which supports out-of-school childcare clubs in Wales, received the Professional Development Award at the 2025 Annual Playwork Awards. These awards celebrate the playwork sector in the UK and recognize the hard work of playworkers and organizations across the four nations.



IPA Membership Benefits

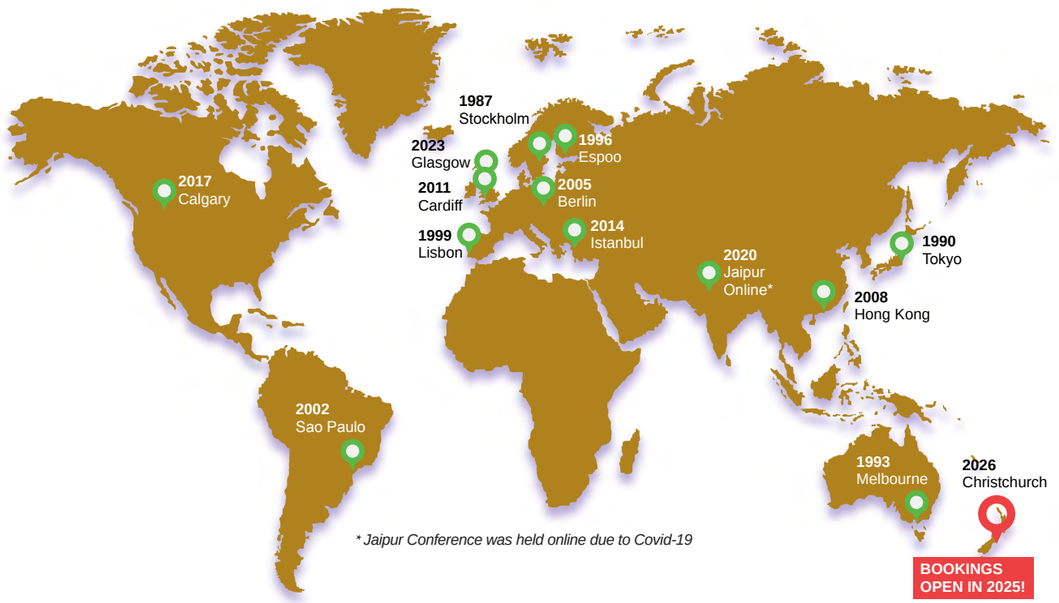
When you become a member of IPA, you will connect with a global network of passionate individuals advocating for the child's right to play. Additionally, you will have the opportunity to participate in global conferences and projects, and you can write for us and have your work featured in the IPA magazine.



IPA Triennial Conferences

Conferences are a primary means by which IPA seeks to fulfil its purpose of maintaining an international cross-sectoral forum to protect and promote a child's right to play, facilitate the exchange of experiences, disseminate information, and influence society. Every three years, the IPA holds a world conference. It is always a powerful and motivating experience with people engaged in creating a world where all children have the right to play and come together to learn from each other. **Members enjoy a discounted rate to participate.**

Previous IPA Triennial World Conferences have been held in the following countries.



** Jaipur Conference was held online due to Covid-19*



IPlay Rights Magazine

The Play Rights is a multi-disciplinary, online, print-on-demand magazine published by the International Play Association (IPA). It highlights the importance of play in child development and disseminates knowledge on the child's right to play by connecting the worlds of research, policy, and practice. The current board is committed to publishing two high-quality issues per year showcasing distinct viewpoints on children's right to play and varied approaches embedded in diverse cultures, disciplines, and regions worldwide. **The magazine is circulated for free among all financially viable members of IPA.**



Webinars

Did you know that IPA World has its own YouTube Channel? You can catch our latest recorded webinars at https://www.youtube.com/@internationalplayassociati5755

In 2025, starting February 12, we will host free member webinars on the second Wednesday of each month. These **"Webinar Wednesdays"** are wonderful opportunities for members to share their projects, research, and the latest initiatives.

Sessions are one hour long and start at 12 p.m. London time.
Do you have a presentation or idea for a webinar? Email us your bio and a brief 200 summary of the topic you want to share secretary@ipaworld.global

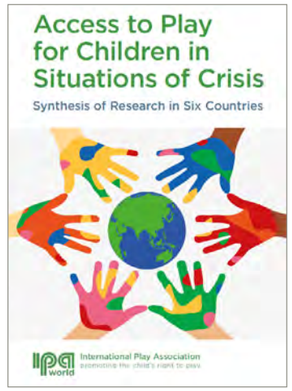


Special projects

IPA undertakes special projects to deepen our understanding of Article 31 and play as a child right. IPA branches, members, and trustees participated alongside invited experts in many significant projects.

• **General Comment No. 17 on Article 31 of the UNCRC:** In 2013, the IPA reached a significant milestone when the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child adopted the General Comment (GC) on Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). **IPA spearheaded the GC-17 effort and positioned this neglected article 31 and the forgotten right of children, the right to play, more centrally within the fuller context of the UNCRC for the benefit of States Parties worldwide and increased opportunities for its compliance.** IPA Executive and Council are currently reviewing how countries have used the document and preparing a report on recommendations for further action to support the use of the General Comment to inform and educate the community and policymakers on implementing Article 31. A formal report will be released in early 2025.

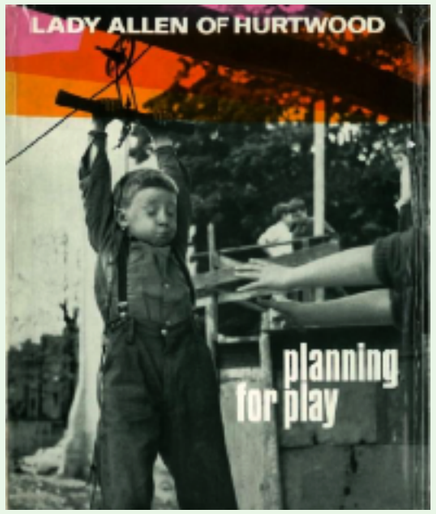
• **Access to Play in Crisis:** IPA shared the Committee on the Rights of the Child's concern that in situations of conflict or disaster, the child's right to play is often given lower priority than the provision of food, shelter, and medicines despite play being crucial to children's well-being, development, health, and survival. In 2016, the **IPA engaged in an international research project called Access to Play in Situations of Crisis in India, Japan, Lebanon, Nepal, Thailand, and Turkey** to address the gaps in knowledge and programming for promoting children's right to play in situations. **IPA also developed the Access to Play in Crisis (APC) tool kit to provide a practical document for those who work with children in challenging circumstances or situations of crisis** (humanitarian, natural, and man-made disasters) to support children's opportunities for play. Our national IPA branches and members participated in both APC projects.



SPOTLIGHT ON PUBLICATIONS

In this section, we share the editor's pick of classic and emerging publications on the topic of planning for play.

PIONEERING BOOK: **Planning for Play (1968) by Lady Allen of Hurtwood**



"Planning for Play" is a foundational book written by a remarkable person, Lady Allen of Hurtwood, a landscape architect and a children's advocate, who redefined society's views on children's play spaces, championing creativity, risk-taking, inclusivity, and children's own experiences. In "Planning for Play", she addresses architects, planners, and community leaders, advocating for the creation of play environments that genuinely meet children's needs. She urges planners to conduct play space surveys and ensure that every child has opportunities for meaningful, self-directed play close to their home. Lady Allen advocates for "sympathetic environments" tailored to children's needs rather than imposing adult notions of order and safety. This advice is still relevant today, as shown by the papers in this issue of the Play Rights magazine. Lady Allen's advocacy led to the spread of adventure playgrounds and inclusive play spaces worldwide, leaving a lasting legacy in the fields of child welfare, landscape architecture, and urban planning.

NEW PUBLICATIONS ON PLANNING FOR PLAY

Planning for Play: *How are Barcelona and Regensburg using the approach and what have they achieved? (2025) by Sudeshna Chatterjee, Maria Truñó, and Anna Schledorn*

The paper studies the role of planning for play as a tool for achieving citywide playability as a key urban quality of child-friendly cities. Using a comparative case study approach, the authors examine the planning for play approaches in two UNICEF-recognized child-friendly cities: Barcelona (Spain) and Regensburg (Germany). The paper highlights the similarities and differences in their methods, and finds that both cities, despite their different approaches, share an overarching consensus on 'what to do' to plan for play, as established through policies, plans, processes, regulations, and guidelines. Both cities secured clear political mandates from city councils, which enabled wide-ranging stakeholder buy-in and integration with broader urban policy goals, such as improving air quality, road safety, urban greening, climate resilience, and inclusivity. The paper also discusses the outcomes for children, including enhancing their capabilities through deep diagnosis of urban conditions, active participation in the design of custom play spaces, and securing greater spatial freedoms through planning to access diverse public spaces for play, recreation, socialisation, and leisure activities.

Citation: Chatterjee, S., Truno, M. & Schledorn, A. (2025). Planning for Play: How are Barcelona and Regensburg using the approach, and what have they achieved? *International Journal of Play,* https://doi.org/10.1080/21594937.2025.2508645

Planning for Risky Play: *From Child-Safe Playgrounds Towards Adventurous Urban Areas (2024) by Marlies Meijer, Kirsten Visser & Irina van Aalst*

The paper examines the transition from risk-averse playgrounds to promoting risky play in urban areas, with a focus on two Dutch cities: Rotterdam and Utrecht. Risky play is increasingly recognized for its developmental benefits, but planning for risky play encounters several challenges. These include established safety norms that often discourage risky play due to concerns about liability and societal expectations regarding child safety. The study examines how past path dependencies on prevalent approaches, interdependencies among different stakeholders that reinforce narratives, and goal dependencies on old and new agendas influence the planning process, including for risky play. The research found that stakeholders have found ways to navigate the complex governance systems, opening new policy windows for more diverse, adventurous, and risky outdoor play. The strategic coupling of other policy objectives and domains, such as greening the city or innovative initiatives like temporary pop-up play areas, opens new windows of opportunity for risky play.

Meijer, M., Visser, K., & van Aalst, I. (2024). Planning for Risky Play: From Child-Safe Playgrounds Towards Adventurous Urban Areas. *Planning Theory & Practice,* 25(4), 463–481. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2024.2399663



2-5 November 2026

IPA 2026 WORLD CONFERENCE

At Christchurch, New Zealand

www.ipachristchurch2026.com

A message from **Shyrel Burt**
Chairperson of Play Aotearoa

"We're looking forward to you joining us for five days to hear about play, learn about play, play, and participate in a programme of social and cultural events. We have a unique play environment here in Aotearoa, New Zealand. We enjoy playing in bare feet in the bush and at the beach, and we love the outdoors, and all things play. Our play sector is on a journey of change and discovery, and we're ready to share it with you. We can't wait to see you and hear what you've been doing since Glasgow last year. We will release submission and booking dates in early 2025.
Save the date in your diary now, and we look forward to seeing you in November 2026!"

Play Aotearoa is excited to invite you to Christchurch, New Zealand, for the IPA World Triennial Conference from **Monday, November 2, to Friday, November 5 2026.**

Days one to four will be held at **Te Pae Christchurch Convention Centre** in central Christchurch, and day five will be field trips in the Christchurch area.



international play association

promoting the child's right to play

ipaworld.org

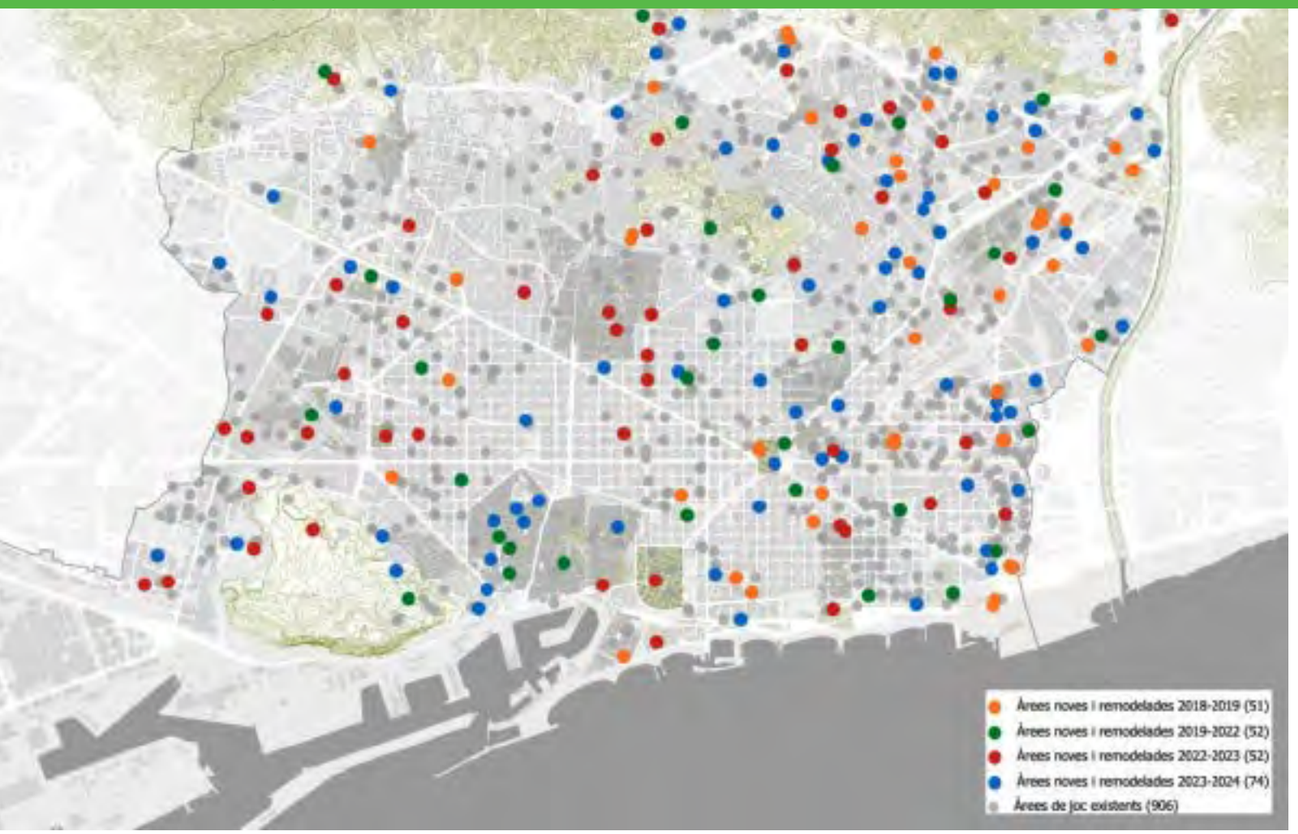


Figure 1: All the 906 playgrounds in the city were mapped and categorized according to opportunities for play. Photo credit: Barcelona city council

In 2019, Barcelona introduced a play policy to integrate play into urban transformation (Barcelona City Council 2019). This initiative seeks to highlight the social benefits of outdoor play and prioritize playability in public spaces, extending beyond traditional playgrounds. The policy not only addresses the rights and needs of children but also considers gender, caregiving responsibilities, and the significance of climate action. These elements were crucial in shaping the city's Plan for Play, which is the first of its kind in the country.

A new city government policy to make play matter

Over the last decade, Barcelona has reshaped its social and political agenda to become a more liveable and healthier city for all citizens, regardless of age or gender. The city government, led by the Comuns party from 2015 to 2023, has committed to three main concerns related to urban planning: gender justice, sustainability, and the well-being of urban children. One of the key initiatives was to incorporate a gender perspective into urban planning, which aimed to address the everyday needs related to care, as outlined in the 2017 measures linked to the Plan for Gender Justice (2016-2020). Additionally, to tackle the significant challenges posed by climate change, pollution, and the lack of green spaces, the government increased the amount of greenery throughout the city and promoted nature-based solutions. These efforts were detailed in the Climate Plan (Barcelona City Council 2018) and emphasized in the Climate Emergency Declaration (Barcelona City Council 2020).

The government initiated a Childhood Plan aimed at enhancing and implementing child-focused policies, known as the Children and Citizenship Focus for 2017-2020. As part of this effort, they created child participation programs, such as "Children Have Their Say: The Subjective Well-Being of Children in Barcelona," which included a comprehensive survey involving 4,000 children and promoted their active involvement.

One of the children's key demands was for more time, improved spaces, and greater freedom to meet and play outdoors in a greener city (Cortes & Truñó, 2018). In this context, Barcelona was recognized as a UNICEF Child Friendly City for the second time in 2018. A significant measure of this initiative was the "Plan for Play in Public Spaces with a Horizon to 2030," developed by the Barcelona City Council with support from the Barcelona Institute for Children and Adolescents (IIAB-Metropolis Institute). Successful efforts in other cities, including Berlin, Copenhagen, Dublin, and London, influenced this plan.



Figure 2: Improving quality and playability of playgrounds. Superarea de joc Colonia Castells. Photo credit: Sudeshna Chatterjee

Strategic shifts in thinking about play provisions

Before the Plan for Play, Barcelona primarily constructed standardized playgrounds based on local demands for children's recreation. The Plan for Play introduced two strategic shifts in the city's approach to children's play.

SHIFT 1: Instead of merely increasing the number of playgrounds, the focus shifted toward improving their quality and playability while incorporating a wider range of play opportunities and affordances.

The entire stock of publicly maintained playgrounds (about 900) was mapped using geospatial tools, and an assessment was conducted on the accessibility, density, quality, and size of each playground. Quality standards for upgrading municipal playgrounds were established through a desk review of global benchmarks and consultations with key city stakeholders. The standards were shaped by key documents, including the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comment No. 17 (2013) and the Seven Criteria for a Playable City developed by the Barcelona Institute for Children and Adolescents, which draws on extensive research (Herrington et al., 2007; Studio Ludo, 2007; Play England, 2009; Greater London Authority, 2012; Shackell et al., 2015; Gill, 2021).

7 CRITERIA FOR A PLAYABLE CITY

These seven criteria provide a framework for auditing existing play spaces and act as guiding principles for designing new play areas or refurbishing existing ones.
They are as follows:

1. Offer multiple options for challenging and creative play activities that promote healthy development forchildren and teens.
2. Provide diverse, stimulating, interconnected, and accessible physical spaces.
3. Ensure that play areas are inclusive for individuals of all ages, genders, backgrounds, and abilities.
4. Incorporate elements of nature, greenery, and opportunities for play with sand and water.
5. Facilitate shared, intergenerational, and collaborative play experiences.
6. Create spaces for community gatherings where people can come together.
7. Foster playful ecosystems and maintain safe, friendly, and enjoyable environments.





Figure 3: The three layers of a playable city model of Barcelona City Council



Figure 4: Improving public spaces in the heart of disadvantaged neighbourhoods for children's play. Photo credit: Sudeshna Chatterjee

SHIFT 2: The municipal government's efforts extended beyond just enhancing playgrounds; it developed a playful ecosystem that incorporated both designed and spontaneous public spaces where children often play on their own.

This includes spaces such as schoolyards (after classes), streets, and other public areas, thereby expanding opportunities for play. Specifically, any location lacking play features was analyzed alongside other play spaces within a 300-meter radius to assess the available play opportunities nearby.

This approach allowed the planning for play to enhance play value not in isolation but as part of a broader network, creating diverse and complementary opportunities for play within proximity. For example, if within the 300-meter radius, there were no elements of height (3 meters or more) in any play structure suitable for children over the age of 10, the plan would incorporate such an item into one of the local play spaces.

The Barcelona model of a playable city starts with conventional play areas but extends beyond them. It consists of three layers (see Figure 3):

- The first layer includes designated spaces for children to play, such as playgrounds and schoolyards.
- The second layer encompasses playful spaces and the surroundings of schools.
- The third layer involves the entire city and its urban infrastructure, including wide sidewalks, pedestrian streets, public squares, natural areas like beaches, forests, and riversides, and additional facilities such as skateparks and open sports courts.

Barcelona as a playable city, a played city, and a city where play gains ground

The Plan for Play outlines three strategic axes, ten measurable milestones, and sixty-three specific actions to enhance and diversify play opportunities in public spaces, particularly for children. Below are the three foundational axes of the Plan, along with examples of interventions for each:

1. A PLAYABLE CITY: This axis focuses on creating more and better spaces for play within the urban environment by developing new playgrounds and improving existing recreational infrastructures.

- This involves creating innovative playgrounds, referred to as super playgrounds, in prominent parks. Some of these playgrounds will be developed in collaboration with input from school children, ensuring they are actively involved in the design process. The design will adhere to guidelines that encourage children's engagement in transforming play spaces, as well as the seven established quality criteria.
- The renovation of playgrounds should include new criteria aimed at progressively enhancing the quality of play across all existing spaces within a playful ecosystem. This ecosystem should offer at least three distinct types of play activities, as outlined in the Plan for Play. This approach is a key principle for upgrading and renovating current play areas and designing new ones.
- All small playgrounds measuring less than 50 square meters and those lacking sufficient quality play features must be removed by 2030.



Photo credit: Lizzie Coombes/Playful Anywhere

Play sufficiency in Leeds:



What has it meant for the ways local government can plan for play.

Leeds City Council is the first local authority in England to adopt the principle of play sufficiency, a powerful organising principle around which local authorities can align their work to improve responses to children's play rights, securing and improving opportunities for children's play. This article reviews their pioneering and transformational work.

Ben Tawil, Mike Barclay, Karen Peck & Jenny Rutherford

Over the past 50 years, spatial and societal changes have constrained children's freedom of movement and play (Karsten, 2005; Loeback et al. 2021; Woolley & Griffin, 2015). Children's right to play is often overlooked, undervalued, and undermined (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013) in the public realm (Russell et al., 2023) and institutions of childhood (Ardelean et al., 2021), as well as



Figure 4: Playful Anywhere. Photo credit: Lizzie Coombes/Playful Anywhere

is part of UNICEF's Child Friendly Cities Initiative, there is a strong emphasis on supporting children's right to play through this initiative. These are critical levers driving local governments to adopt the principle of play sufficiency. While local authorities in Wales and Scotland are required by law to conduct play sufficiency assessments, cities like Leeds in England are choosing to embrace this concept voluntarily at the local level.

How Did Leeds Approach Play Sufficiency

The approach, exemplified by the Welsh Play Sufficiency Duty, and the one we replicated in Leeds: (Figure 3), involves an ongoing cyclical process of research (Account-ability) and action (Response-ability) that considers how these factors combine to make spaces, places, practices, and policies more-or-less open to the possibility of play. This process combines quantitative and qualitative research to capture broad trends and localised experiences. Quantitative surveys establish baselines, key performance indicators, and general trends in children's play, and enable the identification of case study communities where qualitative research, such as face-to-face engagement with children, parents, and practitioners, and detailed spatial audits, helps to uncover why play opportunities vary and how they might be improved.

Importantly, play sufficiency recognises that there is no universal childhood but rather a diversity of childhood experiences shaped by factors such as age, gender, ability, location, and socio-economic background. It challenges narrow definitions of play provision and advocates for a more comprehensive response that accounts for the many influences on children's freedoms to play. Play sufficiency is a cross-cutting agenda and, therefore, requires a collaborative, multi-agency, and cross-directorate response to maintaining, securing, and enhancing levels of play sufficiency (Russell et al., 2020).

While local authorities in Wales and Scotland are required by law to conduct play sufficiency assessments, cities like Leeds in England are choosing to embrace this concept voluntarily at the local level.

Actors Involved in Leeds Play Sufficiency Process

Leeds is the first Local Authority in England to implement a full play sufficiency assessment and has done so with mentoring support from play consultants, Ludicology, through their play sufficiency knowledge transfer package. This work was led by Active Leeds and Child Friendly Leeds, with support from the LS14 Trust (a local non-profit community organisation). It was initially funded by Get Set Leeds Local (an Active Leeds project funded by Sport England). This core group formed the Play Sufficiency implementation team, responsible for delivering the play sufficiency assessment.

From the beginning of the assessment process, work also began on engaging and developing a strategic play sufficiency partnership. This group would, in time, oversee the strategic direction of play sufficiency in Leeds. This embryonic and multi-disciplinary partnership is made up of individuals from Leeds City Council and its partners from the third sector including but not limited to, executive members and officers from the children and families department, child friendly cities, planning, adult services, health and active lifestyles, officers from public health, parks and localities, communities, housing and environment, planning, BARCA Leeds (community support services), Playful Anywhere (play provider and community advocate), OPAL (Outdoor Play and Learning), was provided with training through a bespoke 'Understanding Play Sufficiency' course developed and facilitated by Ludicology.

Play Sufficiency Process in Leeds

Leeds City Council's first play sufficiency assessment, as a result of disruptions to implementation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, was carried out over a two-year period. Desk-top and neighbourhood primary data collection was carried out in year one, with initial findings being presented to partners and key stakeholders early in year two and final research aspects with local authority officers carried out later the same year and submission of final report and key priorities going to the executive board at the end of year two. Due to external funding parameters directing the work of Active Leeds focussed on the most economically deprived communities within their six priority neighbourhoods. The aim of the initial play sufficiency assessment was to establish what was working for whom, where, and why (or why not) at a neighbourhood level and how this was influenced by the workings of local government systems. In doing so, this initial assessment provided a thorough account of the ways in which spaces, services, practices, and policies currently work

Play Sufficiency Methodology

A fundamental part of assesment is conducting in-depth research with children, their carers and front line workers. Within this assesment over 50 hours has been spent listening to children's localised lived experiences of play across 6 priority neighbourhoods of Leeds, along with focus groups with carers and those that understand the communities.



The detailed evidence that has surfaced can be used to compare and contrast with current policy and practice across a broad range of professional domains; establishing how the work of the local authority and its partners inflences the sufficiency of children's opportunities for play.

Figure 5: Overview of assessment methodology based on Ludicology's package of support © Leeds City Council

Looking back to play forward: Mexico City's play policies at a crossroads

Leticia Lozano

This article examines Mexico City's dynamic relationship with play and childhood. By tracking the development of child-focused urban planning from post-revolutionary policies to contemporary urban initiatives, the article spotlights the successes and shortcomings of various programs, including the recently concluded citywide initiative of Ciudad Lúdica (Playful City).

Loreto Plaza with an Urban Toy installation. Picture Credit: Onnis Luque



Figure 7: Peatoniños playstreet, 2018, Photo credit: Lab for the City



Figure 8: Urban Toys workshop in Plaza Santa Catarina, 2017, Photo credit: Lab for the City

2016). The recently elected Mayor of Mexico City, Clara Brugada, has committed to a City of Care for all, emphasizing equality through programs like Utopias — "units for transformation and organisation for inclusion and social harmony"— which originated in Iztapalapa. This initiative has significantly bridged the gap in cultural services for the city's periphery, creating parks, libraries, senior centres, swimming pools, sports courts, playgrounds, and more. Mayor Brugada has pledged to expand the program citywide, building 100 Utopias to ensure every neighbourhood benefits (Taylor, 2024). On a smaller scale, she has also implemented Ludicalles, a continuation of Playful City's playstreet program, promising to "fill the streets with sports and culture."

Foreseeing a future for play?

Mexico City stands at a crossroads. To create a comprehensive plan for play that acknowledges the unique needs and rights of its 2 million children, it is important to learn from the past. We can take lessons from post-revolutionary governments in unifying bureaucratic language to position children at the centre of policies. The social housing movement also offers valuable insights for creative and artistic exploration to design innovative playground equipment. They encourage us to think beyond traditional plastic jungle gyms. *Playful City* teaches us the significance of incorporating children's voices as vital stakeholders in shaping the city and the importance of rigorous impact assessment to reinforce that play is not merely a recreational activity but a fundamental right and a critical component of children's lives.

Despite the challenges posed by adult-centric policies, the city's evolving legislative framework and local government initiatives indicate a promising shift. The analysis presented in this article provides valuable insights for informing future local planning strategies to create a more inclusive and playful city, fostering environments where children can thrive. The success of a plan for play will depend on its ability to integrate these historical insights into a cohesive and forward-thinking strategy. This strategy must create a citywide framework that prioritises children's needs in urban planning, fosters institutional collaboration, and ensures the sustainability of play initiatives. By building on the successes and addressing the challenges identified by Ciudad Lúdica, México City can pave the way for every child to grow, learn, and thrive in a supportive and playful urban environment.

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Crafting Playable Futures:
How Bhubaneswar is reimagining urban spaces for children

Preeti Prada Panigrahi and Aadish Nargunde

This article explores how the Indian city of Bhubaneswar attempted to integrate play into city planning and urban development programs and policies, mainly through the Smart Cities Mission in 2016 and later through Odisha's award-winning Jaga Mission program. The goal was to include children's needs and voices in shaping an inclusive and resilient urban environment.

Bhubaneswar: A thriving city confronting tomorrow's challenges

Bhubaneswar, the capital city of Odisha, grapples with the dual challenge of managing rapid urban growth while addressing the escalating impacts of climate change. According to the IPCC reports and the Odisha State Action Plan on Climate Change (2018–23), the city is highly vulnerable to extreme weather events, floods, droughts, and heatwaves (Government of Odisha, 2018). These challenges have spurred innovative disaster resilience measures, including early warning systems and disaster-resistant infrastructure. As Bhubaneswar navigates the complexities of climate adaptation, it faces the added responsibility of integrating these strategies into urban planning, particularly in creating safe and accessible public spaces for children. With approximately 30–35% of its population comprising children, the city's development agenda prioritizes child-friendly urban spaces while building resilience to future climate impacts.

Bhubaneswar's urban population has grown by 27% annually over the last decade (World Population Review, 2025). Close to half a million reside in slums, where children face daily challenges related to poor infrastructure, unsafe public transport, and inadequate sanitation. These conditions underscore the need for a more inclusive, child-centred approach to urban planning that prioritises safety, accessibility, and resilience.

Modernist planning principles influenced the city's original design by Otto Königsberger in the 1950s. The layout, pioneering for its time, focused on creating functional neighbourhoods with accessible schools, civic centres, and roads. The city's growth in the last few decades has been largely unplanned. Still, the recently developed Comprehensive



Children playing in the rain in a Bhubaneswar slum. Photo credit: Freepik



Water games in a monumental fountain at Freedom Square, Bratislava, Photo credit: Metropolitan Institute of Bratislava

Building a City for Kids: How Bratislava is reimagining public spaces for childhood freedom and play

Sandra Štasselová

This article explores how Bratislava is reimagining its urban spaces to better serve the needs of its youngest residents by planning high-quality, open, and safe public spaces that encourage play, exploration, and social connections.

Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia with a population of nearly half a million, has evolved from a city shaped by 40 years of Communist rule to a vibrant democratic capital. The free market has influenced the post-1990s transformation of Bratislava, but it has neglected investment in public infrastructure. Bratislava's current mayor, Matúš Vallo, an architect by background, elected in 2018, made improving the quality of public spaces a priority of his government. His team has firmly adopted the 8-80 principle of city development, championed by Gil Penalosa: what benefits an 8-year-old also benefits an 80-year-old, which means it's advantageous for everyone in the city. The

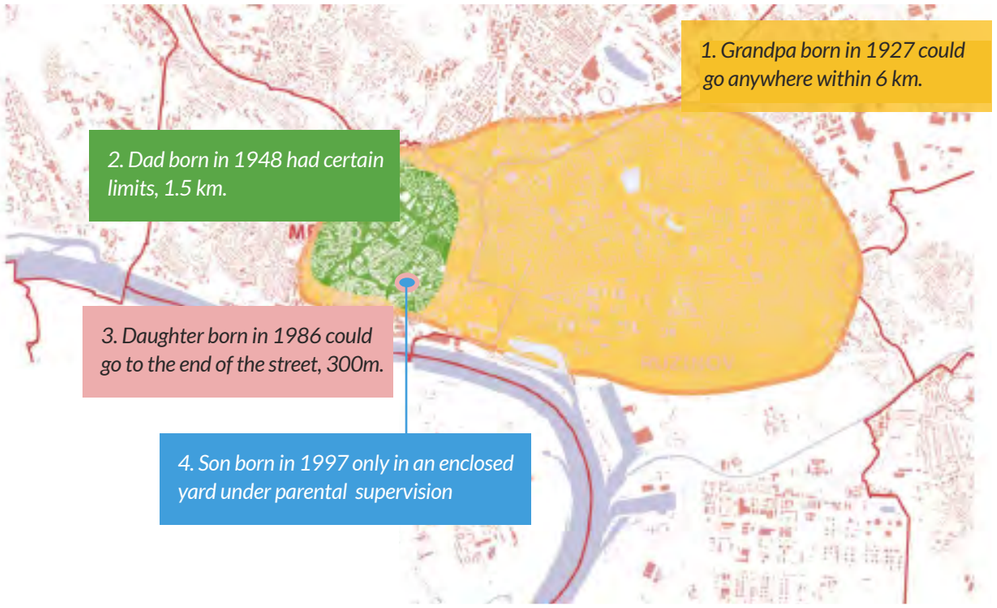


Figure 1:The independent mobility range of three generations. Source: Metropolitan Institute of Bratislava, 2023.

current administration is committed to making this vision a reality by creating high-quality, enjoyable, open, and safe public spaces for all, including vulnerable groups, children, and seniors.

The Evolution of Bratislava's Approach

Ever since Slovakia became an independent state, the quality of public spaces at the heart of its capital, Bratislava, has been much discussed. However, the young state saw mostly ad hoc private investments and tactical initiatives without a clear vision from the local municipality. The Mayor, Vallo, was instrumental in bringing together 70 experts to compile a book called Plan Bratislava or Plan B. It outlined all the city's challenges and the plans to address them. Plan B also recommended the creation of a new institution—the Metropolitan Institute of Bratislava (MIB)—as a key vehicle for implementing urban planning and public space development strategies and attracting funding for built environment projects.

Since its establishment, MIB has focused on setting the standards and core values for the public space revitalization program and codified them in a manifesto for transforming the streets and squares of Bratislava into high-quality public spaces. The Manifesto for Public Spaces and the extensive collection of technical documents titled Principles and Standards, which outline the rules for managing elements in public spaces (such as the design and placement of benches, guidelines for tall greenery to ensure both its prosperity and the well-being of space users, the design of public transport stops, outdoor advertising, etc.), do not explicitly mention children as a target group. Instead, they take a comprehensive approach, considering all users of public spaces in their full complexity.

The MIB has been instrumental in translating this vision into reality through the Vivid Places program for public space renewal. Since 2021, MIB has designed, developed, or completed more than 60 public space revitalisation projects, including squares, streets, parks, playgrounds, and city forests.

The need to enhance many overlooked public spaces is evident, yet challenges such as limited funding and administrative capacity persist. To address this issue, city officials must establish clear priorities. In developing an algorithm to determine which spaces would benefit most from reconstruction, the MIB has begun to focus on the needs of vulnerable resident groups. In Bratislava, one notably large and vulnerable demographic is children, highlighting the importance of prioritizing their safety and accessibility in urban development efforts.

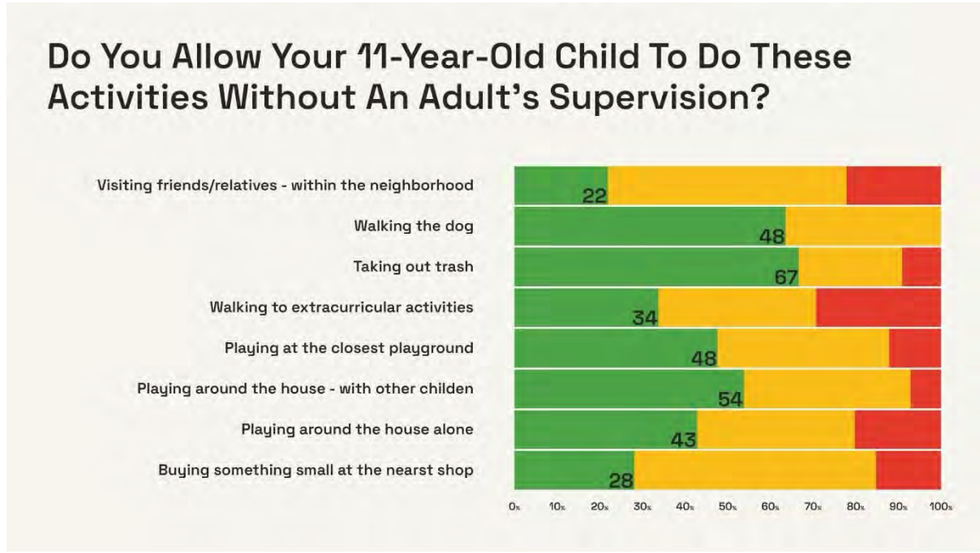


Figure 2: Data gathered from the parent community of participating schools in 2023, Source: Metropolitan Institute of Bratislava

Figure 3: Walking distance to schools from different neighbourhoods. Source: Metropolitan Institute of Bratislava

Through engaging discussions with experts in children's health, psychology, pedagogy, and urban design, MIB's transdisciplinary team—composed of urbanists, anthropologists sociologists, and urban designers—has identified two key themes for the City for Children project: independent mobility and free play. The City for Children team at MIB explored the project's goals and indicators while focusing on understanding how people behave in public spaces. This exploration led to important questions: At what age do children feel empowered to walk to school independently? How many children live within a 10-minute walk from school and choose transportation methods other than a car? How many children have access to safe and inviting outdoor play areas? Since 2021, this progressive project has been at



OPINION | JENNIE BJÖRSTAD

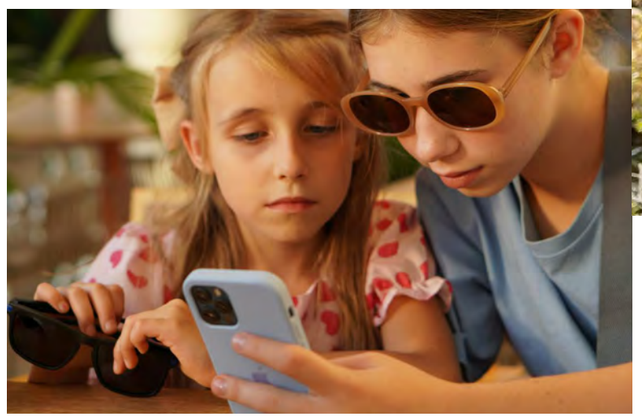
Jennie is a sociologist focused on bringing social equity, children's rights, and public health into urban planning. She works at AFRY in Sweden.

Designing for presence: rethinking planning for play in a screen-filled world

For the first time in history, children in many countries now spend more time on screens than on outdoor play. Simultaneously, they move less than ever before, with screen use often cited as a major cause of sedentary behaviour. From an urban planning perspective, this calls for serious reflection. How do we design cities and public spaces that support children's developmental needs to encourage physical movement, face-to-face interaction, imagination, and unstructured play? And perhaps most crucially, how do we allow children to be immersed in the moment, and be bored without seeking constant technological stimulation? Creativity, perseverance, and playfulness are born as much out of moments of boredom as constant action.

Smartphones and digital tools offer undeniable convenience for accessing public transport, wayfinding, enabling micromobility, and community feedback in planning processes. However, when bus tickets require apps, park signs are reduced to QR codes, and playgrounds are designed as Instagram-friendly backdrops, we send a signal: a smartphone is an integral part of urban living. And that excludes by design.

We risk overlooking children's basic need for playful, messy, risky, and stimulating environments. The organisation Smartphone-Free Childhood calls smartphones "experience blockers" — a term worth considering as screens become embedded in our physical world. We know unstructured, risky play — climbing high, running fast, getting lost — supports children's physical and mental health. Yet, modern playgrounds are often over-designed, pre-programmed, and focused on safety, which limits children's freedom, creativity, and time outdoors. Car-free environments remain essential for children's independence. Yet, in many safe and sustainable mobility environments, parents often give their child a smartphone out of fear — fear of not being able to reach them, or the need to support their first solo journeys on public transport. These concerns, along with social pressure, are common reasons children get their first smartphone.



Girls using smartphones. Photo credit: Tati Odintsova/Unsplash.



Kid's trail photo (scan QR to learn more about what the NGO Friluftsfrämjandet offers to kids and adults). Photo credit: Jennie Björstad

But this shift also challenges established urban ideals. Take "eyes on the street" — a concept championed by the legendary Jane Jacobs, rooted in the idea that adults help keep spaces safe simply by being present. But presence means attention. When eyes are on screens rather than on children or each other, aren't interactions and developmental moments lost? A counter-movement is emerging. Parents are delaying their child's first smartphone. Schools are introducing phone-free zones, even for adults. At parties, conferences, and concerts, phones are locked away to support presence. Digital exclusion — once framed as a problem for the elderly — is becoming a health strategy among families consciously opting out.

Urban planning must respond. We now have the opportunity to design public spaces that don't assume a screen in every hand — but instead invite connection, curiosity, and play. Some strategies include:

- **Identifying when and where screens tend to appear in public life and what policies can be used to limit their usage in public spaces used by children.**
- **Creating phone-free zones with rich, multisensory alternatives that encourage interaction.**
- **Allowing more natural, risky play environments that are inclusive, cooperative, and developmentally engaging.**
- **Designing spaces that children can help shape — incomplete by design, and richer for it.**

This is a moment to rethink how we design for presence, interaction, and meaningful play and to gently challenge the growing norm of building the need for screen use into our shared physical world.





IPA Nigeria

In 2025, IPA opened the year with excitement, hosting an association-organized capacity-building opportunity attended by Mr. Gabriel, a member of IPA Nigeria. For IDOP 2024, IPA Nigeria was delighted to see the day promoted with speeches and media awareness done through their networks including two schools in Lagos, Nigeria (Holden Park School and Springlake School) who celebrated the United Nations Day for Play by extending playtime for children and sharing acknowledgments on Instagram.

IPA USA



IPA USA's focus for the International Day of Play is to encourage early childhood programs, primary-grade schools, family childcare providers, state-funded PreK programmes, Head Start programs, and part-day preschools to dedicate the day to child-initiated play. They have created a Google Form for individuals to share their plans for the play day. Those who submitted their plans before May 20th could request the IPA USA "We Played Today" sticker to be mailed to them. As of May 20th, they have sent out 5,022 stickers to Kenya, Hungary, and 12 addresses across the U.S. IPA USA will continue to invite individuals to share their experiences from the International Day of Play through the end of June.

To promote IDOP, IPA USA has utilized Facebook, Instagram, and invitations to both lapsed and active members. Currently, there are 287 free Porch Play Chats available on the IPA USA YouTube Channel. These chats feature short discussions on how to incorporate more play into children's daily routines. Every Monday, a new Porch Play Chat link is provided, and on Fridays, Lindsay Dzieilski designs and creates Play Fact Fridays to engage the community.

IPA Portugal

The IPA Portugal branch will be officially established as the Portuguese Association for the Right to Play on June 6, 2025. On April 24, in collaboration with the local organization Manga a Pé, which promotes children's play, IPA Portugal hosted the first national online play forum. Eleven entities from across the country participated, sharing their experiences in play advocacy. This event marked an important step toward building a national network for ground level play provision and children's right to play. For IDOP 2025, IPA Portugal will launch a social media campaign inviting local play provision groups, associations, projects, and initiatives, as well as the general public. The campaign aims to celebrate play encounters, moments, movements, and efforts across diverse school and public spaces. This includes promoting play in less visible and predictable areas where children often engage in self-organized play, such as outside schools, on pavements, at kerbs, in corridors, and in alleyways. IPA Portugal is supporting the "Time to Play" initiative led by the Portuguese network of educational cities. This initiative encourages both Portuguese and international cities in the International Network of Educational Cities to celebrate IDOP (International Day of Play). Cities are invited to organize activities in public spaces and school grounds from 10 AM to 12 PM, allowing children to participate in meaningful play activities.

IPA Ireland

The first IPA Ireland branch was formally approved this year at the March World IPA council meeting, thanks to the support from IPA Northern Ireland and IPA World. The establishment of this new branch was made possible following an active recruitment and promotion strategy, which brought together 16 active IPA members, surpassing the minimum criteria required to establish a new branch. This was an exciting process that brought together play workers, researchers, and advocates from NGOs, government departments, academic institutions, and self-employed individuals across the Republic of Ireland. The branch plans to make its presence known by celebrating International Play Day on June 11th and sharing news about our play work and advocacy on social media. By the end of the year, they hope to have an IPA Ireland social media plan and have established an IPA Ireland website to maximize their potential for disseminating their work and hopefully add impact. Their first face-to-face meeting will be held in early July to explore goals for this branch and to develop a clear mission, vision, and goals.

IPA Cymru Wales

IPA Cymru Wales has launched a series of online sessions titled "Spotlight On," showcasing the work or publications of its members and member organizations. The first session featured Ben Tawil from Ludicology, who led an informative discussion on "Playing and Being Well," a literature review they co-authored with Wendy Russell. This review focuses on recent research regarding children's play, social policy, and practice, particularly in Wales.

Swansea Council held its inaugural Play Sufficiency Awards, celebrating individuals and organizations that contribute to making Swansea a place that values play. Sue Bradshaw from the Bishopston Play Association and Mike Greenaway, also from Bishopston Play Association and Play Wales, were honored with the Lifetime Achievement Award.

Additionally, Clybiau Plant Cymru Kids' Clubs, which supports out-of-school childcare clubs in Wales, received the Professional Development Award at the 2025 Annual Playwork Awards. These awards celebrate the playwork sector in the UK and recognize the hard work of playworkers and organizations across the four nations.



IPA Membership Benefits

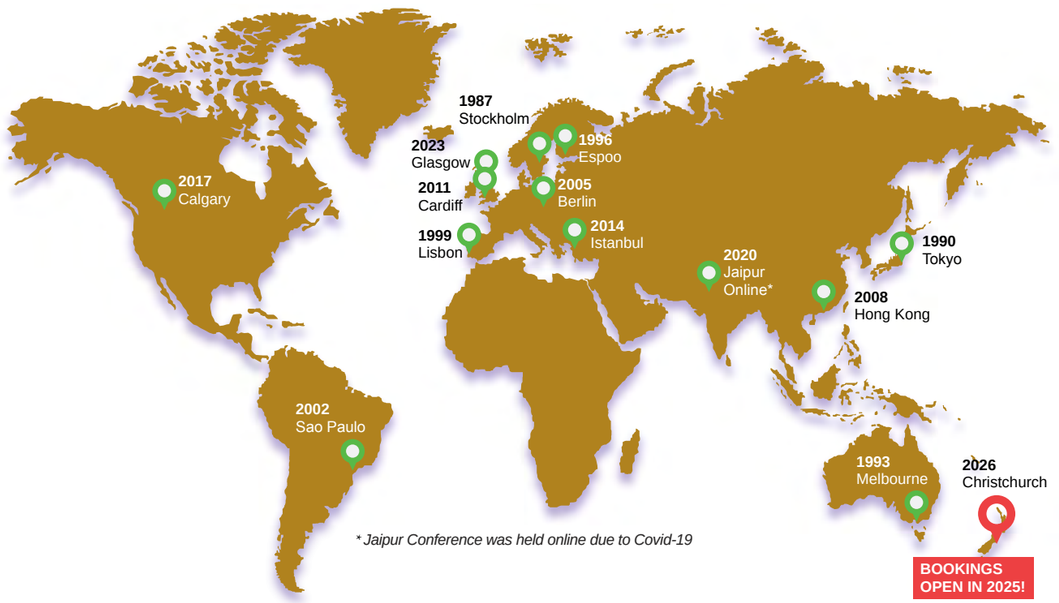
When you become a member of IPA, you will connect with a global network of passionate individuals advocating for the child's right to play. Additionally, you will have the opportunity to participate in global conferences and projects, and you can write for us and have your work featured in the IPA magazine.



IPA Triennial Conferences

Conferences are a primary means by which IPA seeks to fulfil its purpose of maintaining an international cross-sectoral forum to protect and promote a child's right to play, facilitate the exchange of experiences, disseminate information, and influence society. Every three years, the IPA holds a world conference. It is always a powerful and motivating experience with people engaged in creating a world where all children have the right to play and come together to learn from each other. **Members enjoy a discounted rate to participate.**

Previous IPA Triennial World Conferences have been held in the following countries.



** Jaipur Conference was held online due to Covid-19*



IPlay Rights Magazine

The Play Rights is a multi-disciplinary, online, print-on-demand magazine published by the International Play Association (IPA). It highlights the importance of play in child development and disseminates knowledge on the child's right to play by connecting the worlds of research, policy, and practice. The current board is committed to publishing two high-quality issues per year showcasing distinct viewpoints on children's right to play and varied approaches embedded in diverse cultures, disciplines, and regions worldwide. **The magazine is circulated for free among all financially viable members of IPA.**



Webinars

Did you know that IPA World has its own YouTube Channel? You can catch our latest recorded webinars at https://www.youtube.com/@internationalplayassociati5755

In 2025, starting February 12, we will host free member webinars on the second Wednesday of each month. These **"Webinar Wednesdays"** are wonderful opportunities for members to share their projects, research, and the latest initiatives.

Sessions are one hour long and start at 12 p.m. London time.
Do you have a presentation or idea for a webinar? Email us your bio and a brief 200 summary of the topic you want to share secretary@ipaworld.global

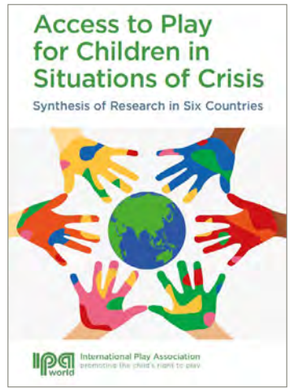


Special projects

IPA undertakes special projects to deepen our understanding of Article 31 and play as a child right. IPA branches, members, and trustees participated alongside invited experts in many significant projects.

• **General Comment No. 17 on Article 31 of the UNCRC:** In 2013, the IPA reached a significant milestone when the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child adopted the General Comment (GC) on Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). **IPA spearheaded the GC-17 effort and positioned this neglected article 31 and the forgotten right of children, the right to play, more centrally within the fuller context of the UNCRC for the benefit of States Parties worldwide and increased opportunities for its compliance.** IPA Executive and Council are currently reviewing how countries have used the document and preparing a report on recommendations for further action to support the use of the General Comment to inform and educate the community and policymakers on implementing Article 31. A formal report will be released in early 2025.

• **Access to Play in Crisis:** IPA shared the Committee on the Rights of the Child's concern that in situations of conflict or disaster, the child's right to play is often given lower priority than the provision of food, shelter, and medicines despite play being crucial to children's well-being, development, health, and survival. In 2016, the **IPA engaged in an international research project called Access to Play in Situations of Crisis in India, Japan, Lebanon, Nepal, Thailand, and Turkey** to address the gaps in knowledge and programming for promoting children's right to play in situations. **IPA also developed the Access to Play in Crisis (APC) tool kit to provide a practical document for those who work with children in challenging circumstances or situations of crisis** (humanitarian, natural, and man-made disasters) to support children's opportunities for play. Our national IPA branches and members participated in both APC projects.



SPOTLIGHT ON PUBLICATIONS

In this section, we share the editor's pick of classic and emerging publications on the topic of planning for play.

PIONEERING BOOK: **Planning for Play (1968) by Lady Allen of Hurtwood**



"Planning for Play" is a foundational book written by a remarkable person, Lady Allen of Hurtwood, a landscape architect and a children's advocate, who redefined society's views on children's play spaces, championing creativity, risk-taking, inclusivity, and children's own experiences. In "Planning for Play", she addresses architects, planners, and community leaders, advocating for the creation of play environments that genuinely meet children's needs. She urges planners to conduct play space surveys and ensure that every child has opportunities for meaningful, self-directed play close to their home. Lady Allen advocates for "sympathetic environments" tailored to children's needs rather than imposing adult notions of order and safety. This advice is still relevant today, as shown by the papers in this issue of the Play Rights magazine. Lady Allen's advocacy led to the spread of adventure playgrounds and inclusive play spaces worldwide, leaving a lasting legacy in the fields of child welfare, landscape architecture, and urban planning.

NEW PUBLICATIONS ON PLANNING FOR PLAY

Planning for Play: *How are Barcelona and Regensburg using the approach and what have they achieved? (2025) by Sudeshna Chatterjee, Maria Truñó, and Anna Schledorn*

The paper studies the role of planning for play as a tool for achieving citywide playability as a key urban quality of child-friendly cities. Using a comparative case study approach, the authors examine the planning for play approaches in two UNICEF-recognized child-friendly cities: Barcelona (Spain) and Regensburg (Germany). The paper highlights the similarities and differences in their methods, and finds that both cities, despite their different approaches, share an overarching consensus on 'what to do' to plan for play, as established through policies, plans, processes, regulations, and guidelines. Both cities secured clear political mandates from city councils, which enabled wide-ranging stakeholder buy-in and integration with broader urban policy goals, such as improving air quality, road safety, urban greening, climate resilience, and inclusivity. The paper also discusses the outcomes for children, including enhancing their capabilities through deep diagnosis of urban conditions, active participation in the design of custom play spaces, and securing greater spatial freedoms through planning to access diverse public spaces for play, recreation, socialisation, and leisure activities.

Citation: Chatterjee, S., Truno, M. & Schledorn, A. (2025). Planning for Play: How are Barcelona and Regensburg using the approach, and what have they achieved? *International Journal of Play,* https://doi.org/10.1080/21594937.2025.2508645

Planning for Risky Play: *From Child-Safe Playgrounds Towards Adventurous Urban Areas (2024) by Marlies Meijer, Kirsten Visser & Irina van Aalst*

The paper examines the transition from risk-averse playgrounds to promoting risky play in urban areas, with a focus on two Dutch cities: Rotterdam and Utrecht. Risky play is increasingly recognized for its developmental benefits, but planning for risky play encounters several challenges. These include established safety norms that often discourage risky play due to concerns about liability and societal expectations regarding child safety. The study examines how past path dependencies on prevalent approaches, interdependencies among different stakeholders that reinforce narratives, and goal dependencies on old and new agendas influence the planning process, including for risky play. The research found that stakeholders have found ways to navigate the complex governance systems, opening new policy windows for more diverse, adventurous, and risky outdoor play. The strategic coupling of other policy objectives and domains, such as greening the city or innovative initiatives like temporary pop-up play areas, opens new windows of opportunity for risky play.

Meijer, M., Visser, K., & van Aalst, I. (2024). Planning for Risky Play: From Child-Safe Playgrounds Towards Adventurous Urban Areas. *Planning Theory & Practice,* 25(4), 463–481. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2024.2399663



2-5 November 2026

IPA 2026 WORLD CONFERENCE

At Christchurch, New Zealand

www.ipachristchurch2026.com

A message from **Shyrel Burt**
Chairperson of Play Aotearoa

"We're looking forward to you joining us for five days to hear about play, learn about play, play, and participate in a programme of social and cultural events. We have a unique play environment here in Aotearoa, New Zealand. We enjoy playing in bare feet in the bush and at the beach, and we love the outdoors, and all things play. Our play sector is on a journey of change and discovery, and we're ready to share it with you. We can't wait to see you and hear what you've been doing since Glasgow last year. We will release submission and booking dates in early 2025.
Save the date in your diary now, and we look forward to seeing you in November 2026!"

Play Aotearoa is excited to invite you to Christchurch, New Zealand, for the IPA World Triennial Conference from **Monday, November 2, to Friday, November 5 2026.**

Days one to four will be held at **Te Pae Christchurch Convention Centre** in central Christchurch, and day five will be field trips in the Christchurch area.



international play association

promoting the child's right to play

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