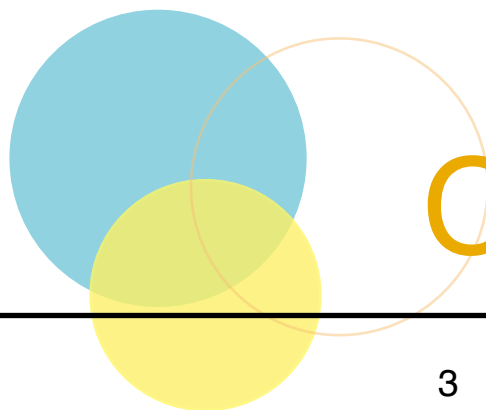


THOUGHT
LEADERSHIP



CONTENTS

- 3 SECTION 01 AFRICAN PLAY NETWORK
- 13 SECTION 02 AFRICAN CONTRIBUTORS
- 33 SECTION 03 GLOBAL CONTRIBUTORS





SECTION 01
AFRICAN PLAY
NETWORK

AFRICAN PLAY NETWORK

The African Play Network is a group of organisations across the continent that share common goals around creating playful spaces for children. The following pieces are from members of the Network.





A PLACE TO PLAY: FIVE LESSONS ABOUT CHILD-FRIENDLY DESIGN IN ACCRA

Amowi Phillips & Rachel Phillips, Play & Public Space Advocate and Consultant, Strategic Planning Consultant-Mmofra Foundation

Accra, Ghana is a bustling city of over 2.6 million, evolving rapidly to accommodate a growing population. Although children 18 and under make up over 50% of that population, their needs are rarely reflected in the design of the city's public spaces.

As an advocate of playful, enriching environments for children, Mmofra Foundation champions child-friendly placemaking in African cities. We target opportunities to redesign existing spaces with children in mind: most recently, our focus has turned to Accra's public marketplaces. Markets in Accra are busy commercial spaces traditionally dominated by women, many of whom bring their young children to work. In 2018, we prototyped playful interventions in two markets to enhance informal learning. Here are five lessons we learned from the process:

1. Children are natural placemakers. Children learn by exploring their environments, and in doing so, they can teach the observant designer a lot about what works in

public spaces.

In the Accra markets, many young children spend the day around mothers and carers - with no accessible, child-friendly space available, parents would rather keep them within arm's reach. Once we began constructing our playspaces, we noticed a shift, as children started engaging with the new structures even while they were being built! The positive feedback was clear: children in the city value having interactive, purpose-built spaces of their own.

2. Child-friendly design and positive economic impact go hand in hand. In urban commercial spaces, we can demonstrate both the social and the economic value of child-friendly design.

Converting a commercial space into a play area could be perceived as a risk for business. Recognizing that concern, we sourced building materials from market vendors, and worked with leaders to keep resources circulating locally. The finished spaces have a net positive financial impact, and even attract new customers!

3. Existing spaces can be transformed for play with a flexible and frugal approach. By adding interactive features to existing structures, we create new layers of functionality for children while maintaining the original purpose of the space.

We considered market stalls and their use patterns as the most obvious scaffolding for creative additions. We painted walls and floors, suspended artworks from ceilings, and installed interactive structures to encourage motor coordination skills. Market users saw these interventions as enhancements, rather than interruptions to the normal flow of daily commerce.

4. Culturally informed placemaking is critical for children's socio-emotional development. The sounds, textures, colours, and movements that define the daily lives of children are essential sources of inspiration for playful intervention.

Cultural framing during the design process benefited greatly from the intensely sensory and vibrant environments of markets in Ghana. By repurposing ordinary domestic wares like wooden ladles, calabashes and seeds into play structures and visually stimulating installations, we introduced elements of magic into a familiar world.





5. Community buy-in sustains the placemaking process. With a holistic exchange of information among constituents, the intervention leaves an imprint for the community to define, take ownership of, and inhabit.

We encouraged conversations among market leaders, caregivers, children, artisans, and educators, validating the importance of child-friendly spaces for each group. Once persuaded of the beneficial impact of this placemaking, adult community members became advocates in their own right and built alliances to ensure the continuity of the space beyond the lifetime of our project.

The market playspace prototypes now serve as demonstration sites for hundreds of market users who pass through every day, under the continued stewardship of our vendor partners. We are seeking out new ways of applying a child-friendly, multifunctional design lens to public spaces in Accra and elsewhere: when places work better for children, they work better for everyone.

Resources like the Play Africa Design Toolkit add new depth to our work by amplifying the voices of children in a participatory design process. With a supportive framework for leadership and creative expression, Accra's children will have an even greater influence on the future shape of their city.



IMAGINING AFRICAN CITIES : INVOLVING YOUNG CHILDREN IN THINK- ING ABOUT PUBLIC SPACES IN SENEGAL

Karima Grant, Founder, ImagiNation Afrika

Since 2011, ImagiNation Afrika, based in Senegal's capital Dakar, makes child centered approaches central to its mission of changing the paradigms of learning for West Africa's most important citizens. As a small, innovative organization dedicated to changing the learning paradigms around children, ImagiNation Afrika's strength lies in its creative responses to the challenges that inhibit young children's learning and development. Including children's voices and children's experiences have informed the production and creation of all our exhibitions as well as the learning environments our learning and innovation hub, Ker Imagination provides.

With particular respect to the Senegalese context, and the particular strengths and experiences of ImagiNation Afrika's child centered approach, we placed emphasis on involving and co-creating with children so that their own voices and experiences can be seen and heard from their perspective.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Children are competent, capable and can fully participate in sharing their experiences. This is one of ImagiNation Afrika's core beliefs. All our work is based on the lived realities of young children in Senegal. Advocacy on behalf of children must pull its credibility from on the ground, tangible experiences of children. Children's own voices, experiences should lead the narrative where possible and their imaginings, thoughts and products should inform the solution.

Walking with Amadou, digital advocacy: Meet Soukeyna, Antou and Amadou

The Walking With Amadou project began as a creative spark from the ImagiNation Afrika communications team. Inspired by the Bernard Van Leer Foundation's Urban95 project, the ImagiNation Afrika communications team wondered what it would be like to see the Dakar from the point of view of a three year old?

We partnered with three year olds Soukeyna, Antou and Amadou to film a series of videos to showcase the city from their point of view as three year olds, and that of their caretakers. The video series captured the experience of young children in the marketplace, at the mayor's office, in the health center, in a public play-space,



at the beach, interacting with local commerce, trying to navigate the streets, on a bus and in a private childcare center.

The first walk was a revelation. Armed with a GoPro, our communication team, set out alongside 3 year old Amadou, a Yoff native and Ker ImagiNation attendee to follow him as he crisscrossed the streets neighboring our learning and innovation center. Every day, Amadou navigated streets with no sidewalks filled with animals, almost the same height as him, environmental hazards such as trash and debris from half built homes, and people's attempts at meager livelihoods in the 15 minute perimeter to get from his home to our learning center.

As adults watching the video, the impact of this navigation gave us pause. How well did we know this environment we lived in every day? How could we assume that this environment was livable for children? Where else was our knowledge limited by our assumptions of the experience of children and their environment? How often were we walking through these spaces without an understanding of their impact on children? Most importantly, how could we find out?

From these musings an idea for a second project (and continued advocacy) was born:

“IMAGINER DAKAR: LA VILLE PAR SES ENFANTS CI-TOYENS”

As part of ImagiNation Afrika's participation in Dakar's 7th annual art crawl - Partcours, ImagiNation Afrika collaborated with children from Yoff, where Ker Imagination, our children's museum/learning and innovation hub was based. For two months, 30 children from Yoff participated in 15 interactive workshops on the topics of multimedia, city planning and architecture, leading critical conversations about their city, neighbourhood and the efficiency of public services. Among the issues children raised and explored through the exhibition were: the absence of public (play) spaces, trash and waste problems and safety in their neighbourhood. These issues were then more thoroughly explored by the children through photography, video, and interviews with family members and neighbours.

The resulting multimedia exhibition offered visitors the opportunity to experience Dakar from the perspective of its youngest citizens - children. In order to start a broader conversation about children's limited access to cultural and art spaces, the exhibition was designed with its children visitors in mind. The exhibition included two interactive spaces; the first - a mini city where children and adults were invited to immerse themselves in an exciting experience of reconstructing their city and



the second - photos and videos taken by the children as a critical reflection about their city.

Unlike in traditional art galleries and exhibitions, IMAGINER DAKAR : LA VILLE PAR SES ENFANTS CITOYENS provided a play area for children where they were invited to touch, move, explore and play. In addition, photos and videos exhibited in the space were hung or placed at an average height of a 10 year old child, making sure the children visitors could enjoy the exhibition unassisted. Guided questions engaged children in the theme of the exhibition, provoking and encouraging them to reflect and provide their own answers while developing emergent literacy skills. In order to truly allow the visitors to view the city from a child's perspective, the children built three periscopes that adults could use to view the exhibition from the average height of a child ages three, seven and 11.



CELEBRATING DIVERSITY THROUGH PLAY INITIATIVES

Ingabire Julian Kayibanda, Founder, The Play Hub

The PlayHub is redefining play and learning in Rwanda and East Africa through (1) Leveraging available space and local materials to increase access to playgrounds/spaces and child friendly inclusive quality environments (2) Providing advisory on designing child friendly spaces (city planning, estate development, public spaces etc) (3) Training parents, and city planners on importance of child friendly environments and (4) Researching and exploring the scale of the current play deficit, and the impact of missed play moments on children's lives.

There is a need for additional platforms to discuss placemaking and activities around the continent to ensure that play opportunities are available for children. The availability and accessibility of toolkits is equally important as they also function as a knowledge-sharing medium that guides communities in implementing these initiatives in their own contexts. Facilitating the design process through the use of Design Thinking and human-centred design also helps us create more inclusive, playful, and resilient cities and evolved children.

Urban professionals need to be encouraged to take a serious consideration of engaging stakeholders and communities; once you engage the community then they own the understanding, and once they own the understanding they will explore, they will research, and they will develop. They will apply what is available within their communities - the skills, the materials, the available spaces etc to ensure that children have access to play.

I also look forward to seeing an Africa that speaks as one. While we live in different cultural contexts, and while the African continent is vast and rich with cultural experiences, sharing knowledge and sharing best experiences only stands to benefit us. Our different cities, designed in different ways, at different developmental stages, provide us with much we can learn from each other to implement and adapt in different contexts. The African Play Network is a great example of what Africa can show the world about the power of collaboration in bringing child friendly cities to life.

The richness of African diversity is very exciting and creates opportunities for some of the practices of our in-

indigenous communities to be further diversified and culturally adapted to multicultural communities. There are opportunities for us to creatively unleash the potential of everyone wanting to explore this work. We are also yet to reach the understanding that play cannot leave out anyone. It involves the policy makers, the government, the private sector, communities, parents and children. We cannot leave anyone behind in terms of ensuring that we are creating these spaces and these child-centred design places- inclusive, quality and resilient cities. Everybody must be involved because these are environments that affect everyone.

In the pursuit of our work, many challenges still exist as designing playful African Cities is still a struggle. We need to close gaps in terms of communities and city planners understanding the importance of designing with a child's lens, lack of investments in the child friendly spaces, leveraging local skills, and materials as well as extending the child friendly spaces beyond schools. What is positive is that there is research coming out to support play and its benefits, serving as a perfect tool for advocacy. I am currently spearheading a series of talks, in Rwanda, on why play and child friendly spaces matter; aiming to inform the public and policy makers on why we collectively need to invest in these spaces. We hope to catalyse transformation of our cities, communities and neighbourhoods in this direction.



AFRICAN CONTRIBUTORS

CO-CREATING PLAYFUL CITIES IN URBAN AFRICA

Mark Ojal, Urban Designer and Placemaking Expert, UN Habitat

It is estimated that by 2030, six out of every 10 people living in cities will be children. Unfortunately, children bear the greatest brunt for poor urban planning and design, specifically facing denied childhood. In 2010, 42 million children under the age of five were overweight, of which 35 million were in developing countries. The Covid-19 associated stresses faced by children and their families are a reminder to reclaim and play opportunities in everyday life beyond the playground. It is therefore imperative that we design and build interactive, playful places, cities and communities.

Placemaking and gamification provide an opportunity to meaningfully engage children in visioning their public spaces across scales, enabling them to express their creativity and imagination, and re-imagining the notion and experience of play. City leaders and developers need to consider children as partners and important stakeholders in city making. A child-friendly lens to city-making can help city leaders deliver streets as places, create citywide networks of playful places, integrate flexible social programs to create playful destinations

for children and families, and make walking and cycling attractive and experiential options in urban Africa.

The UN 2030 Agenda makes a specific call for the provision of universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible green, and public spaces by 2030, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities. This toolkit is a step forward in sharing approaches and inspiring practices on how to co-create playful cities in urban Africa.

CITIES THAT HELP RE-DEFINE THE IDENTITY OF THE AFRICAN CHILD

Rehana Moosajee, Founder and Owner, The Barefoot Facilitator

Throughout history, and long before the advent of formal school systems – communities have had systems for children to learn. In some instances through oral tradition and inter-generational living, in some instances through apprenticeships and mostly through doing. The power of communal methods of transmission of knowledge, skills, stories and information has been lost through the “outsourcing” of learning and teaching to professionals, in a building for a limited period of time in a day. Yet humans are designed to be constantly learning from the natural environment, from observing, and from sharing.

African identity is often compromised by an internalized inferiority to supposedly superior Western systems. Yet the West is facing a pandemic of loneliness, individualism and emptiness as it becomes increasingly evident that humans thrive in communal contexts with all their complexity.

We have the possibility in Africa to re-imagine our city spaces as massive learning spaces – where natural ac-

tivities like breastfeeding are encouraged and catered for in place-making. Instead of expecting children to be silent, fingers on their lips, we can create the spaces for them to explore, learn and grow through the multi-sensory experiences afforded through public art, and the way in which we design outdoor space and creating conversation starters between children and their adult care-givers.

Spaces that reflect food, customs and traditions that we can feel proud about showcasing to each other. Where public depictions of life embrace the cultural activities and practices that various children can identify with. Where indigenous knowledge and the keepers of knowledge systems (who knew that we were entrusted with the responsibility to co-exist with other species not dominate them) are celebrated.

It's time for Africa and its children to proudly claim and actively show in public space the wealth of Africa's wisdom – the Mali Timbuktu manuscripts, the stories of Mansa Musa, of Fatima bint Muhammad Al-Fihriya

Al-Qurashiya, of Credo Mutwa and Wangari Mathai and countless others who have contributed to life, collective knowledge and resistance amidst colonialism, imperialism and arrogance.

Our cities could become the bedrocks of the re-education and unlearning of the African child – to emerge with a sense of identity premised on wisdom, community and co-existence with other species, to take their rightful spaces in confronting the multiplicity of challenges facing the human family and make a decisive contribution in their families, neighbourhoods, communities and the world.



ADDRESSING SPATIAL INJUSTICES

Marcela Guerrero Casas, Public space advocate,
Co-founder, Open Streets Cape Town

The gap between the haves and the have-nots is enormous in Cape Town. While some parks are equipped with state of the art tools and equipment, others are not more than a barren piece of land. This will inevitably deepen spatial injustices and perpetuate an uneven level of access for children to public space.

In this context, working with what we have in different neighbourhoods is key. Since the beginning of the pandemic, I have been inspired to see the emergence of bicycle centres in Khayelitsha and Langa.

It is not just about bicycles however, and in places like Langa, the Bicycle Langa Hub serves as a place for kids who lack parental support with an option for healthy activity and connection. In addition, they are provided with the opportunity to learn to cycle lessons and informal bicycle mechanic skills. Finding ways to support such initiatives in the short term can go a long way in bringing educational activities within a playful environment for the youth.

In the long term, we must continue to work with partners

in the public and private sector to provide safe, inviting and greener public spaces across the city. I believe this is essential in building more resilient communities and cities.

“ With rapid urbanization being experienced in many African countries, it is more important than ever to put effort in thinking about how we take into account our youngest and most vulnerable citizens and design child friendly-cities and spaces. As Africans it is also important to draw on our history of community centered care-giving, and our history of placemaking that was centered on our local environments and materials. Just imagine the possibilities if we invested in ensuring that all children had the best start possible to their lives.

”

Ory Okolloh, Activist, Strategist, Policy expert



LET THE CHILDREN PLAY!

Peninah Ndegwa, Founder and Managing Director, Wow Mom Ltd.

Children learn through play. It is their universal language! Unfortunately, access to safe outdoor play areas is becoming scarcer with time. Just like in South Africa, the majority of children in Nairobi do not have access to play areas. While most neighborhoods had planned public spaces in the master plans, these vital spaces are often grabbed and replaced with massive developments or converted into dumping sites. The few existing parks within the city such as Uhuru Parks and Gevanjee gardens, are poorly managed and maintained and hence unsafe for children. Notably, most parks lack designated children's corners and lack basic play facilities for children, yet, they all provide smoking zones! These few parks that are mainly found in Nairobi CBD, are far from homes and caregivers can only plan visits during weekends.

Due to inadequate play spaces, most caregivers opt to take their children to shopping malls that have space limitation and mostly no connection with nature. Playing in malls has a cost implication which locks out low income families. As a result, most children are now locked in houses for the better part of the week, and this will have a negative implication on their growth and devel-

opment. In the words of Gil Penalosa, "A great city is where people sleep at home and live outside." Are our cities giving children the opportunity to be outside?

Play is vital for children's growth and development. They learn motor, coordination, social skills as well as enhance their muscle and mental strength. Play needs to be free and accessible for all children regardless of gender, age and ability. Cities need to provide, protect, and maintain safe play spaces that are usable by all people. Failure to provide safe play spaces means that we are robbing childhood from our children. Grabbed public spaces need to be reclaimed and redesigned to offer diverse play activities for all children. Sensitization and advocacy on the need of safe play facilities needs to continue to encourage more stakeholders' participation in designing play facilities. Streets, being the greatest public spaces, need to be redesigned to reduce vehicle speeds to enhance safety of children. City planners need to take advantage of wide intersections and provide small pockets of play facilities that can be used by children and caregivers while engaging in other activities in the city. Finally, for the existing parks, it's important to designate a children's corner and ensure that basic facilities such as swings, sand, slides, benches are provided to enhance play.

DESIGNING SAFE AND ENGAGING SPACES FOR CHILDREN TO LEARN, EXPLORE, PLAY AND GROW IN AFRICAN CITIES

Rashiq Fataar, Director, Our Future Cities

According to UNICEF, only 29% of South Africa's children have access to safe play areas. It is common to see children playing between freeways in sparse green spaces, often in spaces that are not very safe or secure with limited to no surveillance. In some of these spaces, children are also at a higher risk to environmental hazards and crime. In Tafelsig, Cape Town, children often play near dangerous roads and it is clear that these children have been side-lined by conventional urban planning that promotes car-centric cities and fails to take into account the lived experiences of all citizens including children.

Children deserve spaces in which they can freely express themselves: to learn, to play, to explore and to engage with their environment. They also deserve spaces which are safe both in terms of physical safety and environmental safety. South Africa has extremely high levels of crime that also affects children, especially in public spaces. We feel that there needs to be more conscious design of public spaces with radical approaches to placemaking including roads, pedestrian crossings and sidewalks to ensure the safety of all pedestrians.

If we don't transform city engineering, traffic, road and planning departments we are condemning more kids to dangerous spaces and possibly death. This is very important in a context, where the majority of children use streets to get to school, to walk to public transport and who use pedestrian crossings within inner cities across South African cities.

Play Africa's toolkit is a wonderful initiative that will bring tangible benefits towards achieving the inclusion of children's needs in their urban environments. This initiative should be used to support more child-friendly design, urban engagement and more innovative and meaningful placemaking. This output should not only be viewed as a creative exercise but as a practical one that could potentially impact millions of lives. Urban planning and design interventions can be enhanced by incorporating the lens of the child to existing projects. Child-friendly public spaces are ones that are safe, secure, engaging, diverse, and creative whilst also being fun to use. The time is now to unlock the multiple benefits of playful cities. We are excited to see both bold and creative action in this field.

REIMAGING AND RE-CREATING PLAY SPACES

Maliga Naidoo, Director, Academy of Leisure Sciences
South Africa

Play for children is a sense of perpetual freedom. It is an opportunity of intrinsic necessity for growth and development which fosters socialising, a sense of community belonging, and most of all fun. Maria Montessori (1870-1952), expressed the importance of play by referring to it as the work of the child. Children learn and grow through play and every opportunity within their environment should be creatively designed to encourage this freedom and right to play. Since January 2020, children all over the world were severely affected by Covid-19. The year of school shutdown, no access to playgrounds, cancelled social activities like birthday parties (which are so important for children) and sport activities, is distressing at the best of times. Not being able to see their friends and step outside of closed spaces can contribute to long term social, emotional, and physical dissonance. As a human right, children should have easy access to play spaces to exercise this freedom for fun engagement.

It is imperative for city officials to take note of the devastation and are urged to revisit the policies and frame-

works to design place making spaces where people live, work, and play by re-purposing these for leisure time use. Residential streets should be reclaimed so children can go back to playing in spaces close to home and under the watchful eye of the community. Nature based playgrounds in parks within a 10-to-15-minute walk from home will enhance play, build stronger communities and lead to an appreciation of nature. The re-designing of city centre streets to reduce the number of cars and parking spaces will provide more areas to practice social distance, allow restaurants to use pavements and expand their service areas outdoors while contributing to economic growth. Taking back the public spaces for play and providing leisure programs and services, can transform human lives, build livable and sustainable communities. Designing place making spaces may allow communities to adapt easily during future pandemics.

CITIES FOR CHILDREN

Mark Schaerer, Principal Architect, SRS Architects

We are faced with many challenges in our cities in South Africa. The way we respond to them is often to isolate ourselves behind walls. This exacerbates systemic problems and in doing so unknowingly make cities more inhospitable to children.

The way we build is often against the idea of meeting strangers: something we tell our children to beware of. We set up rules and restrictions that exclude and push the 'other' away. This not only enhances inequality, where the 'other' is often poor, but prevents interaction and the forming of meaningful inclusive communities. We should rather be designing cities where our children feel safe to be outside their homes.

In my own Architectural practice, we have started to interrogate how the buildings we design can start to integrate with the world beyond. How can someone washing dishes look out over the street? Can they watch the children too? Can a new entrance to the alley behind our office offer new places to play? Where do our buildings allow people to sit and wait and who can you meet there? The importance lies in the interaction with, and connections made in public spaces.

In Brixton, where I live, there is much contestation over public space: the park, alleys and even streets. These contestations are over who uses them and how; can people sleep in them; can we braai and drink there and can the children smoke there? The community is fragmented. It is very diverse with people of all backgrounds and incomes. But it is often through children that the community comes to meet each other and to some extent gets to know each other. Our children play in the same park and we all walk the same streets.

The Brixton Community Forum often focused on involving children in their community events. The events were low-key and focused on the local community. They were always free and, where possible, food was provided. Children helped set up and clean up afterwards. The venues have varied from the park to the alleys or street, but always in public spaces. Some events have simply been clean-ups while others were a collective and fleeting transformation of space: a fashion show or a lights parade. By holding such events in public spaces not only allows more freedom (anyone can join) but opens them to interrogation by everyone around. Children can

be part of a redesign of their space, have the freedom to explore and become part of a community network that they can trust and be able to ask for help.

The design of our cities is not just to create places to play but rather enhance the safety of where children can play and meet others. This is everywhere from the gate they leave to the playground and in between. We should use and protect our public spaces and ensure they are accessible to everyone. That way children can be more integrated into a community that supports each other including the stranger who sleeps in the park.



GAMIFYING CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN URBAN DESIGN

Richard Gevers & Ella Alcock, CEO & Founder Open Cities Lab, Executive Assistant, Open Cities Lab

We get excited about placemaking's ability to capitalize on the local community's innovative ideas and potential to create safe and inclusive spaces. As a form of active citizenship it creates space for a diverse and participatory democracy. In South Africa we battle to capture citizen participation in city design.

It is critical to listen to everyone's voices in a democratic society, especially those that have less agency and power such as children. The quality of public space is crucial for a sustainable city and without intervention those with the loudest voices will continue to have the biggest influence on how a city is designed. Children can really benefit from active and social play and often children don't engage in healthy play as regularly as they should due to the issue of proximity to a safe space. But how do we get children involved in decision making and engaging with the concept of placemaking in urban design?

Encouraging children to engage with the key ideals of placemaking, such as safe spaces and inclusivity can

be done through the invention of a simple game. This involvement can be gamified in different ways depending on the age of the children that are being targeted. For example, a game where children are asked to build a mini 3D printed model of their neighbourhood could be devised, and then these models could be used to achieve certain aims or recreate spaces based on certain goals. This idea could also be offered in the form of a virtual reality computer game. It would be telling to see what children choose to modify in their area to make it more child friendly. Would they tear down walls to create more open space, cut down trees to increase light, close roads to establish safer places to play? These games would be a way to teach children about the importance of placemaking, and their involvement in it, as well as being able to collect data on what a child-friendly city would look like, with the end goal of including this collaborative effort of a local community into the formal planning processes.

There have been similar opportunities and activities around the world to ensure that children are represent-

ed in the transformative process of placemaking. Often these initiatives take place when a new park is being planned and can be a once off event. However, it is also important to be continuously capturing the ideas and evolving nature of what child-friendly placemaking looks like, in order to collaboratively design urban environments that serve all members of a democracy equitably.



CO-CREATING PUBLIC SPACES WITH CHILDREN FOR SAFE, INCLUSIVE AND PLAYFUL CITIES

Ayanda Roji, General Manager: Research and Knowledge Management, Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo

As countries across the globe look to build back better in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is imperative to consider a far more holistic and integrated approach to city making. In post-apartheid cities such as Johannesburg in South Africa, this approach should include addressing inequalities in public space supply, quality and distribution. One of the social realities the pandemic has brought into stark relief is that the urban poor and other vulnerable groups depend on public spaces for their everyday life. Besides the urban poor public spaces are essential platforms for children to interact and play – a core part of a healthy childhood and development. This is particularly the case for children in Black townships and informal settlements, who have inadequate access to public spaces putting them at a significant disadvantage relative to those in well-resourced areas.

Although COVID-19 has brought newfound scrutiny to public spaces, it has hammered home why local governments, particularly in African cities, need to support informal workers and people living in informal settle-

ments, especially children. Women informal workers face additional challenges as they sometimes have no choice but to take their children along to public spaces such as markets, squares and transport hubs while they work, which can expose them to unsafe and unhealthy environments. This calls for the need for local governments to work collaboratively with other city stakeholders, to design and manage these environments and public spaces in a way that engages the everyday reality of African cities. One way of tackling this is by putting “place” at the centre of how they operate, and consider how children navigate cities, where they live, learn, play, discover the natural world, and access basic services.

This way of seeing the city through the eyes of children enables tackling urban challenges in a more context specific, holistic and integrated manner, generating a substantial range of benefits for all urban citizens.

In light of the above, cities can reimagine their future, using the pandemic as an opportunity to deploy bold

and creative solutions to achieve safe and more inclusive and playful cities. In Johannesburg, for example, green and public spaces such as parks, nature reserves, and botanical gardens are considered green lungs for the city. However, these public spaces are also places of refuge for people experiencing homelessness and others who are desperate and criminalised. Consequently, the public spaces may be considered unwelcoming and unsafe places for children. Tackling these competing interests requires a deep understanding of how different segments of society use the space so as to facilitate co-existence. In the End Street North Park upgrade project, the Johannesburg City Council collaborated with users and other stakeholders including UNHabitat Global Public Space Programme, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit's Inclusive Violence and Crime Prevention (VCP) and Sticky Situations, and utilized a wide range of child-friendly participatory approaches including art workshops, safety mapping, indigenous games to solicit views of children in designing and redesigning inner city parks. One such approach was the implementation of Block by Block idea of integrating Minecraft computer game into the park upgrade design process to engage people who don't typically have a voice in city-making, such as children, youth, people experiencing homelessness, women and informal workers. The City partnered with one of the inner city primary schools and trained

children on how to use Minecraft to re-imagine their park by modelling their surroundings, visualising possibilities, expressing their ideas to improve its safety.

Through creative methods of engaging with and empowering the most vulnerable in African cities, children, informal-worker mothers, those experiencing homelessness and others living in informal settlements, more context-responsive, inclusive, safe and playful cities are possible.

OPEN STREETS / PLACE MAKING

Lerato Mabaso, Specialist on Promotions and Safety,
City Of Johannesburg Local Government

The City of Johannesburg is passionate about spaces and place making. The concept assists in preserving and improving spaces and historical places. These open places are created for social cohesion and for the communities to enjoy the bond and relations which perceived unity. One of the most important aspects for these spaces is children and the youth. The children of today are growing up in an environment where they are bullied and they can use these spaces to form or create bonds instead of being home worried about the bully. We are saying “NO” to child hunger and neglect as well when creating these spaces because we are building knowledge on topics like re-use and recycle which the kids can learn and use it to combat poverty, and in doing so the children do not feel neglected and instead feel like part of the community. The crime is diminished in communities where there is creation of spaces because the neighbours take good care of their neighbourhood and they make it safe for all. Different City Departments work together in creating these social spaces and working towards the Growth and Development Strategy 2040.

Going forward, the City will be a safe space if communities take charge, unite and help the City in identifying the spaces they want to make safe, and take good care of the already existing historical spaces.



WHAT IS INCLUSION FOR CHILDREN IN NEW POST-APARTHEID AFRICAN CITIES

Stefanie Chetty, Director Urban Policy Development and Management, National Department of Cooperative Governance

In my experience as a professional planner, in research, policy development and implementation there is limited use of design thinking, human-centred design and user-centred design to help create more inclusive, playful and resilient cities for children as the main users. Cities are generally designed with spatial planning elements that centre on integrated land uses, high density buildings, efficient public transport and limited open spaces to cater for recreational spaces. The new concept of post-apartheid African cities needs to be more inclusive to create an enabling environment for children. In particular, cities need designated open spaces and recreational areas that cater to all children in society, that is safe, user friendly, brightly designed, and up to date. The spaces could have play gyms, putt putt, soccer fields on astro turf, tennis and basketball courts and skateboarding that are well designed with safety infrastructure such as CCTV cameras and lighting, visible onsite parking, sufficient spaces for picnics.

My seven year old, and nine year old daughters were

fascinated by this topic as I interviewed them around making cities more inclusive and safe. They said that we should design parks and open spaces with special play gyms that prevent injury when in use. The space must be clean and well maintained, and must have a very efficient security on site for visibility and must be easily accessible.

For me as a professional I would recommend that we create these toolkits that showcase children's meaningful perspective through children designing posters on what is a safer city, what would be their ideal playground that includes all within a neighborhood, have interviews with children through their schools, and create videos that have encouraging messaging. As part of implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) leading up to 2030 goals we should as government relook at revising our legislations such as Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act (SPLUMA), Integrated Development Plan (IDP), Spatial Development Frameworks (SDFs), and Municipal By-laws

to incorporate inclusive, safer planning principles and encourage municipalities to adopt the UN Systemwide Guidelines for Safer Cities and Human Settlements in their design and planning annually developing, these principles should be also applied to the development and revitalisation of New Post-Apartheid African Cities. I also support the development of indicators of safety for children in cities that can be adopted and measured, monitored and reviewed by municipalities through their IDPs and SDFs. The recent Integrated Urban Development Framework (IUDF) Implementation Plan 2020-2025 advocates for inclusivity in an “All of Society” approach emphasises the importance of enabling partnerships, and transformation can only start when we have authentic partnerships in our societies amongst communities and government.



CHILDREN AS ACTIVE URBAN AGENTS

Catherine de Souza & Guy Trangos, Principals, Meshworks Architecture & Urbanism

The economic inequality that so pervades South African society has a profound effect on the lived experience of children. In an urban context these disparities are heightened by the lingering spatial geography of colonialism and apartheid. A fortunate minority have access to excellent schooling, quality outdoor spaces, and various levels of emotional, psychological, and educational support. The marginalised majority, however, are reliant on government institutions for their education and support requirements, and the provision of government services is variegated and unreliable. The result of this is a lived urban experience felt differently by children as a result of long entrenched inequities. The challenge of the urban in South Africa is thus acutely felt by its children who are directly impacted by these legacies, with little to no agency to enact change themselves.

Enabling children's participation as active agents in urban space is contingent upon multiple factors, but perhaps the most significant is their ability to engage in them with relative degrees of independence. If children cannot safely operate within the urban, they cannot be considered independent actors in it, and so a variety

of pragmatic measures – walkability, road navigation, safety barriers, transport options, scaled urban furniture and amenities, etc – as well as an attitude of co-operative and caring surveillance and oversight by the adult actors in the urban space are required. Parents are unlikely to permit their children to begin the process of partaking in the urban realm as developing citizens without the reassurance that these kinds of measures – both pragmatic, and psycho-social – exist.

In the South African context, the notion of an overarching consideration of the wellbeing of other members of a community is innate to many of its cultures. This structuring spirit of communal guardianship, particularly of its minor members, offers lessons for other contexts, but can also be translated into the physical organisation of the urban. An urban ubuntu or considered social participation in the public realm would enliven our streets and parks with activity, recasting these zones of fear and securitization as community spaces. Numerous benefits would follow such as passive surveillance, pride in public spaces, cross-cultural interaction, and an enhanced community spirit. The Colombian Ciclovía program is an

excellent example of community-street activation. In addition, if a baseline set of child-oriented provisions within all public spaces can be provided, this could form an infrastructural basis for bridging some of our acute economic and social divides, empowering all children everywhere to act meaningfully in their urban environments. The outcome of this child-centred focus would be a heightened sense of safety and freedom for everyone: if the Right to the City is bestowed upon the most vulnerable, we will all be the beneficiaries.



RECLAIMING URBAN PLAY TODAY

Kerry Kassen, Director, The LEGO Foundation South Africa

Outdoor play, once the most accessible type of play, is struggling to find a place in the lives of many children today. In cities, barriers to play are complex and numerous. Here in South Africa the overwhelming concern is child safety. The impact of poverty in overpopulated townships and informal settlements for the families and children who live in these vulnerable urban contexts is immense – their health, safety, education, and future lives are all affected.

Promoting children's drive to learn, their ability to imagine alternatives, and to connect with their surroundings in positive ways, is essential. Recently, the LEGO Foundation worked with Arup (built environment specialists) and the Real Play Coalition to develop the Urban Play Framework, with the aim to better understand the complexity of urban play, and support city stakeholders and decision-makers in developing city spaces designed for children.

With the support of the local organisation Ikhayalami and the LEGO Foundation, Arup trialled this framework in the township of Khayelitsha in Cape Town. Today Khayelitsha has a 'play network' linking three reclaimed outdoor courtyard hubs. Each hub is designed to develop a

different skill set through play – problem solving and perseverance, managing motivation and impulses, as well as collaborating and negotiating. These play spaces are connected by a network of safe routes through the settlement, signposted by child-height wayfinding markers, while community members trained as Play Champions provide adult supervision.

One of the most important recommendations is that with the child as the main stakeholder in designing play-friendly cities, it's imperative we seek their input and collaboration during the design process. Focus groups, workshops and co-creation are just some ways to see the city through the eyes of a child and understand the kinds of playful experiences they seek. It's equally important that the voices of parents, caregivers, community leaders and local government are heard.

By opening our minds to how urban spaces can enable children to learn through play, and working together, we can build and reimagine play-friendly urban African environments for optimal childhood development. We have a responsibility to reclaim play in cities, due to the critical role it has for children's development and learning, but also for society in general – to create more lively, liveable and stimulating urban environments for current and future generations.



GLOBAL CONTRIBUTORS

INVESTING IN COMMUNITIES THROUGH PLACEMAKING AND PLAY: PLAYFUL LEARNING LANDSCAPES

Helen Hadani & Jennifer Vey, Brookings Institution Fellow, Brookings Institution Senior Fellow and Director of the Bass Center for Transformative Placemaking

In order to thrive in today's rapidly-changing world, children need rich learning opportunities in and out of school that allow them to adapt and engage in independent and lifelong learning. An overwhelming body of evidence points to play as the best way to equip children with a broad set of flexible competencies and personal capacities to tackle new and different challenges creatively. And yet today children have less time for play in and out of school as parents and educators worry increasingly about academic readiness.

Playful Learning Landscapes (PLL)—an initiative that marries the science of child development with placemaking—offers an innovative approach to making cities more playful by transforming everyday spaces into enriching, social spaces for children, families, and communities. The Brookings Institution in collaboration with Temple University, through the leadership of Professor Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, and Playful Learning Landscapes Action Network (PLLAN) is working to reimagine cities

as supportive ecosystems for children and families in ways that produce measurable outcomes for children and communities.

What makes PLL unique is a critical layer of playful learning—a spectrum of child-directed play methods that include free play (no direct adult involvement), guided play (supported by adults toward a learning goal), and games (rule-based activities with learning goals) informed by the latest findings in developmental science. Guided play—the focus of interactions in PLL—allows children to maintain control over their learning with the guidance of an adult to provide structure and focus the activity around a learning goal (e.g., a well-curated exhibit at a children's museum).

PLL installations in Philadelphia, Chicago, Santa Ana, and elsewhere have shown that PLL promotes the kinds of caregiver-child behaviors and interactions directly related to later progress in STEM, literacy, and execu-

tive function. For example, PLL's Urban Thinkscape in Philadelphia infused a bus stop with learning science by adding puzzles to a bench and transforming the childhood favorite hopscotch game into an executive function activity. In addition, Parkopolis enriched a public space with math and science learning by engaging children and their caregivers in a life-size board game where they roll "fraction dice" and move one and a half spaces around the board.

Public, private, and civic sector leaders need to embrace and prioritize play in their communities so new ideas can be implemented, measured and evaluated, and scaled. By thinking differently about the role of play in cities, we can optimize learning for children while at the same time enhancing urban environments for all citizens.



A PRIVILEGE THAT SHOULD BE A RIGHT: THE ROLE OF PLAY IN CHILDREN'S LEARNING

Caroline Gaudreau, Research Analyst, University of Chicago, University of Delaware

We know from the scientific literature that play is instrumental in children's learning and development. Carefully designed research studies have shown us, time and time again, that in many cases, playful learning can support children's content learning just as well (if not better) than more didactic methods. When children lead play, but are guided towards a learning goal by an adult, they learn material better (1) and even enjoy the activity more (2). This is called guided play – and it is effective for a wide variety of content areas, including mathematics, literacy, and even spatial skills.

If we know that play, especially guided play, supports children's learning, why isn't it always accessible to children throughout the world? Unfortunately, as academic standards and benchmarks are emphasized in many schools, more direct instruction and less playtime are worked into the curriculum. Further, in some schools or neighborhoods, there are no safe spaces for children to play freely in their environments. This is a problem, when we consider how children learn best—through

meaningful, active, engaging, iterative, socially interactive, and joyful learning experiences—rather than dull textbooks or rote memorization (3).

The good news is that some initiatives have already found ways to bring playful learning opportunities to children who otherwise may lack these activities (4). There are ways to transform urban spaces into environments full of opportunities for play and learning. In “Urban Thinkscape,” for example, a typical bus stop now contains playful learning activities, such as a puzzle wall and a metal structure with hidden figures, both supporting spatial skills development. Though not all communities may have access to this kind of design, spaces can still be transformed through low cost initiatives. Perhaps a teacher might use colorful tape to create shape designs on a floor, challenging children to run to specific shapes as she calls out the shape names, for example.

Ultimately, we know from the science of learning that play is foundational to children's learning. It is imperative, then, for stakeholders to advocate and push for playful opportunities for all children, around the world.

References

1. Fisher, K. R., Hirsh-Pasek, K., Newcombe, N., & Golinkoff, R. M. (2013). Taking shape: supporting preschoolers' acquisition of geometric knowledge through guided play. *Child Development, 84*, 1872–1878. [10.1111/cdev.12091](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12091)
2. Eason, S. H. & Ramani, G. B. (2020). Parent-child math talk about fractions during formal learning and guided play activities. *Child Development, 91*, 546-562. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13199>
3. Hirsh-Pasek, K., Zosh, J. M., Golinkoff, R. M., Gray, J. H., Robb, M. B., & Kaufman, J. (2015). Putting education in “educational” apps: Lessons from the science of learning. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 16*, 3–34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100615569721>
4. Hassinger-Das, B., Bustamante, A., Hirsh-Pasek, K., & Golinkoff, R. M. (2018). Learning landscapes: Playing the way to learning in public spaces. *Education Sciences: (Special Issue) Early Childhood Education, 8*, 74. <https://dx.doi.org/10.3390/educsci8020074>

CHILD-CENTRIC CITIES

Jason Twill, CEO, Urban Apostles

Child-centric urban planning is essential to the future of our cities and how we design great places for all. Having young children and youth participate in the planning or redesign of our communities and places offers tremendous insight to designers and policymakers by considering a child's eye view and mindset on what makes a great place. This allows for unconventional understandings of human-scale elements, playful spaces, safety and street-life from a child's perspective that can profoundly influence the design team and direction of place outcomes that can benefit all ages and abilities. This also enables decision makers to move beyond the traditional notion of formal, fenced-in playgrounds and opens the idea that the entire urban landscape offers an opportunity to nurture a child's curiosity.

Indeed, how we design our cities clearly indicates to our children what we value most in society. Too often our cities symbolize our value of money, power, privacy and status as they are unilaterally conceived by adults with adult interests in mind. When children are integrated into the planning and design process, their innocence and understanding of what makes a great place or community can shift these symbols toward respect, sustain-

ability, accessibility, delight and happiness.

Children offer great diversity of thought to a design process and force us to consider factors of our places; they typically get forgotten or left out simply because of old design habits, outdated planning guidelines or regulations. This may happen with street and laneway design features, open spaces, formal and informal play spaces, urban forests and activity zones that cater to a child's imagination and curiosity that all too often we value engineer out of a project without fully appreciating the long term value these spaces provide a community. Be it retrofitting rural communities or reimagining our urban environments to define a new future for our cities, if we design places to accommodate the needs and desires of our children, we have designed them to accommodate the needs of all.

PLAY AND PUBLIC SPACE/CITY DESIGN

Sudeshna Chatterjee, Member of the Executive Board,
International Play Association

General Comment 17 (GC-17) of the Article 31 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child provides the universal legal basis for right to play and identifies the barriers to children's play across the world. GC 17, that emerged out of an extensive international consultative process led by the International Play Association on the invitation of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, and unanimously adopted by the Committee in 2013, very clearly states that play belongs to children but adults play a crucial role in promoting, protecting and preserving this right for children. However, play should not be confused with play-based methods in the learning or research space. It is important to bear in mind the clear definition of play as outlined in the GC-17 for guidance.

Definition of play in GC-17: "Children's play is any behaviour, activity or process initiated, controlled and structured by children themselves. Play is non-compulsory, driven by intrinsic motivation and undertaken for its own sake, rather than as a means to an end. It may take infinite forms but the key characteristics of play are fun, uncertainty, challenge, flexibility and non-product-

tivity. While play is often considered non-essential, the Committee reaffirms that it is a fundamental and vital dimension of the pleasure of childhood and is an essential component of children's development."

Play is typically not considered a priority in local area development in most countries. But play can be a driver for child friendly public space. Design of appropriate metrics for play and place assessments and employing lenses like play sufficiency and resiliency can lead to public space policy and guidance that can have an impact on cities. Even though there is a challenge of promoting inclusive play in urban settings, involving children in co-design, planning as well as management of local public spaces is key. GC-17 needs to be made more accessible to local governments and communities to have tangible outcomes for children. Strong advocacy and awareness of GC-17 with appropriate stakeholders is required to make right to play a household demand.

COLLECTIVE EXPERTISE FOR A BRIGHTER TOMORROW

Andres Bustamante, Assistant Professor, School of Education, University of California Irvine

Promoting play in public spaces where families already go has tremendous power to equip young children around the world with fundamental skills that they can use to flourish in school and life. It can also empower caregivers with a mindset that they are active agents in their child's education and development, and they can support learning through play everywhere they go. As developmental scientists, we can contribute knowledge of how children learn to the design of public spaces. Specifically, research says that children learn best in situations that are social (done collaboratively with peers or adults), iterative (children can ask a new question or solve a new problem each time they return), engaged (active and hands-on or minds-on), joyful (fun, playful, and child centered) and meaningful (connected to their everyday lives and experiences).

Including families in the design of their own communities brings local knowledge and expertise that a researcher (no matter how clever or experienced) does not have. Families bring their culture and experiences which are unique to their community and surface nuanc-

es and challenges specific to their community that must be addressed for a project to succeed. This community knowledge makes the designs meaningful to the children and families that will use them. It also creates buy-in and local ownership of the spaces so that families become champions and advocate for them in their community, improving engagement and longevity.

In Santa Ana, California, we are designing public spaces (parks, bus-stops, sidewalks, etc.) with families to reflect the local culture, values, and community goals. One meaningful activity for generating design ideas is storytelling. When someone tells a story about a space or experience in their community their values and culture are baked directly into the story whether they know it or not. So instead of asking someone how we can integrate their culture into a bus-stop, we ask them to think about a time they went to the bus-stop and share a story of what happened. Parents tell stories about their childhood or experiences with their children at the bus-stop, children share their fondest memories or favorite activities. These stories are full of cultural games, val-

ues, and traditions, and can be used to inspire designs that reflect the people that will use them.

For me, the ultimate vision of urban design emerges from partnerships between urban planners, architects, local politicians, developmental scientists, and local families coming together and contributing their unique expertise to design spaces that are strategic, safe, sustainable, aligned with research in child development, and reflective of the community they sit in. These are the kinds of public spaces that can contribute to a brighter tomorrow for our children and society.



PLAYFUL LEARNING LANDSCAPES: THE SCIENCE

Sarah Lytle, Executive Director, Playful Learning Landscapes Action Network

Playful Learning Landscapes offer accessible, adaptable and equitable educational opportunities by baking the science of learning into everyday spaces like bus stops, libraries and sidewalks. The science tells us that children learn best when they are engaged in activities that are active, engaging, meaningful, socially interactive, iterative and fun. Playful learning, directed by children, often includes all of these principles and capitalizes on the science of how children learn.

What can children learn when they engage in mental gymnastics within a public setting? Professors Kathy Hirsh-Pasek and Roberta Golinkoff suggest that they can master a breadth of skills that will prepare them for school and beyond: Collaboration, Communication, Content, Critical Thinking, Creative Innovation, and Confidence. Indeed, these are precisely the skills that businesses stress when hiring employees and the skills that children will need to outsmart the robots.

The scientific results from studies of playful learning landscapes have been nothing short of stunning. Re-

searchers find 30-60% changes in behaviors at these installations including more parent-child language conversations (bedrocks for later literacy), more math and spatial play, and even more learning to learn skills like attention, memory and impulse control. And the learning can be targeted for particular outcomes.

Perhaps most impressively, each of the installations is co-designed with the community so that the look, feel and even content of the activities are influenced and owned by members of the neighborhood. The first Urban Thinkscape – playful learning landscapes at the bus stop—reflected the communities desire to commemorate a small plot of land on which Martin Luther King Jr. gave a prominent speech. And our life-sized board game changes some of the squares to reflect both the language and interest of the people who will be using it.

Playful Learning Landscapes can be anywhere. Add hashmarks to a climbing pole and children start to talk

about how high they reached – math. Place a large ruler on the ground and children jump – and even compare jumps by using fractions.

Children's early experiences are the foundation for later learning, for school readiness, for third grade reading, and for high school graduation. Playful Learning Landscapes incorporates the latest science of learning directly into the designs of public spaces to create the new public square for children and families. Playful Learning Landscapes offers a recipe for rejuvenating neighborhoods, re-invigorating learning, and playing all at the same time.



CHILDREN AS A LENS - AND CHILD-FRIENDLY URBAN PLANNING AS A BEACON – FOR CITIES

Tim Gill, Founder, Rethinking Childhood

Cities are growing and changing at an unprecedented rate. The decisions we make now will shape the lives of generations to come. Yet in the global debate about cities, one group is too often invisible: children. Even though children – particularly poor children - are more harmed by bad urban planning than any other group.

What does a child-friendly city look like? As children tell us all the time, it looks a lot like a sustainable city: accessible, green, full of places to play and socialize, free from environmental hazards, and safe and easy to get around on foot, by bike or by public transport.

Only the most heartless would say we should ignore children in city building. But why should we seek to involve them directly? They bring to projects an enthusiasm, energy, creativity, and openness to new ideas that can stimulate fresh, radical thinking. Their voices compel us to confront questions about who and what cities are for. Even very young children are surprisingly well-informed about the places where they live: their likes and dislikes, and their hopes, fears and dreams.

And let's not forget children's right to participate in decisions that affect them, as enshrined in international conventions.

However, involving children is not enough. As adults, we also need to listen, to build on what we already know, and to draw on the expertise and insights of planning and design advocates. Creating vibrant, lively, playful places is complex. We cannot expect children to do it all by themselves.

Creating child-friendly cities may be hard, but it is easy to tell when we get it right. Children come. They stay. They play. They are active and visible in the public life of the neighbourhoods where they live, and of the city as a whole. As they grow up, they gradually explore and discover more about the people and places around them – and in doing so, discover more about themselves.

Children have a claim on adult attention both as urban citizens now and the custodians of the cities of the future. As Nelson Mandela said (and as quoted at the start of my book *Urban Playground*): “there can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way it treats its children.”



BUILDING HEALTHY CONNECTIONS IN PUBLIC SPACES THROUGH PLAY

Cecilia Vaca Jones, Executive Director, Bernard van Leer Foundation

Cities can be wonderful places to grow up, but they can also pose serious challenges for the health and wellbeing of babies, toddlers and the people who care for them – from a lack of nature and safe spaces to play, to air pollution and traffic congestion, and social isolation.

When young children play in cities, they are learning and building connections. The connections a child forms between - neurons, other children, their caregivers and the physical urban space around them - plays an essential role in their development. Cities that are designed to encourage play and exploration as well as support positive caregiver interactions are simultaneously investing in babies' and toddlers' brain building and the future.

Play also happens everywhere not just in designated playgrounds. Reimagining urban public spaces, like streets, as play areas helps to transform them into safe and healthy places for young children and families to meet, connect and play.

But we need to ensure that healthy public spaces are

accessible for everyone. In all cities, there are huge gaps between developed areas and vulnerable neighbourhoods. Cost-effective interventions that consider the needs of young children and their caregivers, such as creating play streets, comfortable walking routes or micro-parks with shade and nature, helps cities to discover solutions that make cities better for everyone.

Look at your city at an elevation of 95cm (the height of a healthy three-year-old child). What would you change? By using this perspective and collaborating across sectors, cities will realise a healthy, peaceful and creative societies where young children and their families can thrive.