

The City at Small Scale: Children's Urban Play in a Global Pandemic

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Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, commuting was a fact of adult life in much of North America, with some traveling multiple hours around their metropolitan area every day for various responsibilities (Grescoe 2012). As shutdowns rolled out in the spring of 2020, and those whose jobs were possible to do remotely began working from home – leaving the house only for local walks or grocery trips – some adults experienced life at a much smaller, more child-like scale. This unusual circumstance gives us a chance to think critically about how urban spaces serve – and constrain – young people, and how we can adapt our cities to be more child-friendly. Shaping our cities to meet the needs of younger people includes prioritizing local, liveable communities with safe streets, green space, and a wealth of accessible community amenities. In this way, the needs of our youngest populations are not so fundamentally different than the needs of us all, and prioritizing child-friendly planning can contribute to better health and well-being for everyone.

Historically, children's places and spaces in the city have been interwoven with those of adults. Children played in the same streets where adults traveled, sold goods, and conducted business (Ward 1990). In spite of this, in much of North America we now design our communities as if the only places children are welcome are the home, school, or playground. Numerous societal changes have contributed to this shift, including in particular increased urban planning for the private car and growing concerns about the presence of unsupervised children in the public realm. As they lack significant political voice or power in the form of a vote, it has been challenging for children to combat these changes themselves. Children's lack of electoral political power has also made it difficult to secure robust funding commitments for child-friendly planning. The playground now represents a rare public space where we see children's needs acknowledged and centred. However, the creation of these designated play spaces has inadvertently reduced tolerance for informal play outside these boundaries. Children are meant to congregate at the playground, and the presence of their stray tennis balls or noisy skateboards elsewhere is seen as disrupting the orderly use of adult spaces.

The COVID-19 closures that swept the world this past spring gave adults an opportunity to re-examine these assumptions. While play spaces closed to slow the spread of the virus, governments made some earnest attempts to prioritize the development of new opportunities for play and playfulness in the public realm, a right of children as laid out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 31. Slow streets initiatives, where traffic speeds were reduced and street space reclaimed as multimodal, are a good example. Dr. Peter Höfflin's (2019) research in Europe found a negative correlation between the speed limit on children's streets and the number of minutes they played outside each day. These findings suggest that the slow streets created to combat COVID-19 may also increase opportunities for children's play, an essential component to well-being that many are not getting enough of. Further, multimodal streets can support children's right to independent mobility, which has been hindered by infrastructure planning focused largely on the private automobile (Riazi et al.

2019). When children can use neighbourhood streets to visit a friend, ride a bike, or play hopscotch without fear of death by oncoming traffic, they can be more independent and active participants in urban life. Safer streets for children consequently create safer streets for numerous vulnerable populations, including older adults and those with mobility or vision difficulties.

While we have previously reduced young people to the realms of school and designated play spaces, at this time we have the chance to imagine playful urban design in more public spaces and change the future of the way children interact with the city. As we make these changes, all of society will benefit. Designing for children means designing our communities on a smaller scale, focusing on getting our needs met without daily commutes. Prioritizing small businesses and local economies, ensuring access to green space for all, and developing safe and active transportation systems are all essential components of a child-friendly city. Not only that, these elements are essential for an age, ability, and climate-friendly city as well. By prioritizing child-friendly planning, we can create a post-pandemic world where our public realm invites children, play, and playfulness everywhere.

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