

Children Need Pocket Parks as Much as Pocket Parks Need Children

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Abstract

This article presents the story of the Boa Praça Movement, a Brazilian group that decided to act and occupy, care for and create better public spaces for children and their families in São Paulo, Brazil, the largest megalopolis in Latin America.

Keywords: pocket parks, Brazil, community organizing, outdoor play

What can a green area offer to children? It offers textures, colors, insects and shapes to sharpen their sensibilities. Sun for their bodies to produce essential vitamins. And often a long horizon to exercise their eyes. Children need space to run, play and freely experience their bodies and their limits. And after they use up the energy they have accumulated, they can rest better at night (see reviews by Dankiw et al., 2020 and Sugar, 2021).

In pocket parks¹, children find leaves, seeds, sticks and other elements that arouse their innate curiosity, explorative spirit, and creativity. They turn these items into objects of for investigation and play. A green area also brings the possibility of socializing with other children, sometimes of different ages and lifestyles. And so, they have fun, learn to resolve conflicts, and to accept and appreciate differences.

A green area often has challenges that can be tested and conquered over time: climbing a tree, lifting a big rock, digging the earth, or mastering the mechanics of a piece of play equipment. This builds confidence and self-awareness. Pocket parks can also offer children the possibility of stillness and contemplation. There they can concentrate on an ant path for as long as their curiosity desires and thus, quiet their body and mind. These are essential benefits. But is it possible to facilitate this contact with nature in a frenzied megalopolis like São Paulo, Brazil, with 12.3 million inhabitants?

Today, 87% of the population of Brazil lives in cities (World Bank, 2020). In most cities, the dispute for territory, disorderly growth and real estate speculation have caused public spaces such as streets, sidewalks, pocket parks and larger parks to decrease year after year (Schteingart, 2007). This problem is compounded by enormous social inequalities, considerable rates of violence, and planning those privileges intense and fast vehicular traffic. Consequently, urban children in Brazil face a cloistered life. Children and teenagers spend more and more time indoors, in front of electronic devices or in guided activities (Meio & Mensagem, 2019). In other words, many children were living in confinement even before the COVID-19 pandemic arrived. This scenario has produced alarming rates of obesity, with one in three children in Brazil overweight or obese (Desiderata, 2018); high medicalization, with Brazil as the second largest consumer of Ritalin, a drug used to treat ADHD (Pereira da Silva et al., 2012); and, numerous cases of early myopia, among other problems. Around the city, access to green areas is rare, and offered inequitably.

A survey by the Municipal Secretariat for Green Spaces and Environment of São Paulo (Prefeitura de São Paulo, 2017) found that only 9 of the 32 districts in the capital had vegetation cover rates equal or above 18 m² per inhabitant (including parks, preservation areas and private gardens). In some regions, this number

¹ Pocket parks offer important opportunities for access to nature in densely populated cities, where children's lives are often confined to their immediate neighborhood and large city parks are often beyond reach. Usually no bigger than a few house lots in size, pocket parks can provide green "breathing spaces" for their surrounding community ([National Recreation and Park Association, n.d.](#)).

reached only 5.22 m²/inhabitant. The situation was more dire for public green areas (specifically, pocket parks and parks accessible to all citizens), of which the city of São Paulo had only 2.6 m² per inhabitant. The consequences of this lack of green are immense, including very high levels of air pollution, deteriorating human health, recognizable heat islands, difficulty in controlling floods, and very few opportunities for exercising and practicing outdoor activities.

How can parents promote a healthy childhood in such an environment? How can they raise children in a place where the closest nature is a poorly maintained pocket park, often full of garbage and broken play equipment?

In an attempt to respond to some of these concerns, the Boa Praça Movement was established by a group of people who wanted to live in a more humane city. In 2008 when we co-founded the movement, we did not know about the various scientific studies identifying the benefits of contact with nature for children. We did not know anything about laws and rules for the regulation and maintenance of public spaces, but recalling the children we had once been, we sensed that we needed to give our children at least one (or several!) well maintained, "good" pocket parks near home where they could play outside.

A Child's Wish Starts a Movement to Bring City Pocket Parks to Life

The Portuguese expression "Boa Praça" means that someone is a good fellow, a nice companion, a trustworthy and pleasant person. Literally, it also means that a pocket park (praça) is good. This double meaning similarly characterizes good spaces and friendly people, which defines the essence of our movement. Boa Praça was an initiative of a group of people who wanted to know their neighbors and act together for their well-being and for their community. We wanted a city where children could play freely, in green public spaces close to their homes, and connect with nature.

The Boa Praça Movement emerged from the wish of a child. When a young girl was about to turn 4 years old, she asked her mother to throw a birthday party in the pocket park they always passed on their way to school. "This place is all broken up and dirty, you can't have a party here!" said her mother. But the girl replied: "Mom, we can fix it!"

That phrase lit a spark and the mother made the child a proposal: "If you agree to have no gifts this year, we'll ask for the gifts to be given to the pocket park, and then we'll manage to fix it." The girl agreed. The mother then began to speak with those responsible at City Hall, with friends and neighbors, and with local shops and enterprises, asking everyone if they could help.

Before the party, people from City Hall repaired some of the play equipment. For the birthday, they loaned awnings and musician friends came to play. A supermarket nearby donated trash bins and a fitness center offered a trampoline for the children to play on. Some neighbors gave money, while others came to tell stories, photograph the party, make mosaics and plant a garden.

After the birthday party, the neighborhood had a revitalized pocket playground. But beyond a renewed public space, the neighbors' relationships had acquired a new sense of meaning. Once they had met and talked, each one realized that by giving a little, it was possible to make great changes.

Figure 1. Tables being painted by neighbors²



Are Places Abandoned Because Nobody Goes, or Does Nobody Go Because They Are Abandoned?

Our group of neighbors also realized that a single action would not be enough. If things continued as they were, in a few years, the playground would have to be revitalized again. We thought that it was useless to have a beautiful pocket park if almost nobody used it and nobody took care of it. By often occupying the pocket parks around our houses, we decided to break the vicious cycle of: "Is the place in bad shape because nobody goes, or does nobody go because it is in bad shape?"

We opted for a strategy that was both simple and quite effective: every last Sunday of the month, an open-to-all community picnic would take place in one of the neighborhood pocket parks. During these picnic gatherings, people could get to know each other and promote recreational and educational activities. We

² All photos by Carolina Tarrío / Movimento Boa Praça

established a motto: "to leave the pocket park always better than before." Thus, it was through combining forces that the Boa Praça Movement emerged.

From that moment on, a series of more than 70 picnics were promoted. At first, the talents of friends, such as a musician or a children's story teller, were used to organize activities. As the neighbors came to know each other, many talents appeared, and new activities were scheduled. To date there have been picnics with cinema, theater, dance, music, workshops to build kites and roller carts, painting, bread making, composting, games, fairs for exchanging toys and objects... And, the pocket parks have been improved with plantings, constructed outdoor furniture, renewed playgrounds and signage, rain gardens etc.

The children are always the liveliest at these picnics and engage in collective efforts. They enthusiastically paint, plant, invite neighbors, and give their opinions and ideas about how to improve the parks. Often they offer surprising and very simple but effective ideas. For example, one of the pocket parks we revitalized was located in front of a school and also a public institution where children visited for recreational activities. When consulted, the children indicated that they would like to have tables in the pocket park, so that they could do their homework and study there, because their houses were crowded, noisy and had little space. So, a Boa Praça work group installed the tables.

As a founding member of Boa Praça, I went several times to ring doorbells in my neighborhood, accompanied by my children, who loved to distribute the picnic flyers. Seeing me with my children also helped to ease people's resistance and make them feel more comfortable about our invitations to participate. And, at the same time, when children and young people feel listened to and cared for, they help to conserve places. For example, André Almeida, 8 years old, said,

In the pocket park, during the picnics, I play with my friends differently than I do at home. We play at finding metals or treasures on the ground, for example. And in the meantime, we help to improve the place: making a path, a table, so that the pocket park becomes nicer.

The picnics and the improvements that Boa Praça promoted helped to create a community sense around the pocket parks. When I arrived in my neighborhood 16 years ago, I did not know anyone. Today, I don't leave the house without saying at least three "good mornings." And I feel good that way. I know the people around me and I know they will look after my children and me. Recently, neighbors carried out a renovation of the pocket park in front of my house. This was during the pandemic so it was undertaken with masks, social distancing and great care. Later, we received the following testimony from Maria Angélica, whom I did not yet know:

I would like to talk about my recent experience at Praça Paulo Schiesari. I live very close, but I would go there very rarely. Since the space was revitalized by the Boa Praça Movement, it has become a haven for games and for a breath of fresh air. We are very happy to have helped today to touch up the paint on the pavement! My son enjoyed the climbing adventures

installed in the pocket park so much that he even drew a picture of them when he got home.

Figure 2. At Paulo Schiesari Pocket Park, we identified that children needed more “adventure” and “challenges,” so this play equipment was built



Another testimony came from the architect Nina Furukawa, who helped to develop a painting for the amphitheater in the pocket park Amadeu Decome. Nina said:

As an architect, there is nothing more rewarding than experiencing actions that strengthen recognition among neighbors in a megalopolis. I helped to restore the amphitheater together with the Boa Praça Movement and saw how this gave rise to solidarity, valuing the citizen and allowing the creation of an affective memory of urban life.

Figure 3. Planting a palmetto tree at Amadeu Decome Park, in São Paulo



Figure 4. Building play equipment at Amadeu Decome Park, in São Paulo



The Movement Begins to Spread...

When the movement became better known and a few newspaper articles were published, requests from other neighborhoods began to arrive: "Can you come here and fix our pocket park?" At the same time, as lead organizers for Boa Praça, we realized that the improvements and actions that neighbors could carry out by themselves were limited. Larger works, like infrastructure or lighting, required investment and expertise that only the government or companies could afford. And we knew, by law, it was the government's duty to perform certain tasks.

Figure 5. Day of consultation, when Boa Praça organizers exhibit images of different types of play equipment, park uses, and pocket parks around the world, print a map of the pocket park, and ask people to write or draw what they would like to do in different spaces.



From that point on, we decided we needed to grow in some new directions. Firstly, we offered people from other neighborhoods (and other cities) inspiration and the knowledge we had accumulated so far. We then created our website (www.movimentoboapraça.com.br), opened an account on Facebook, and developed some manuals to share our story and methods and help other people start their own story of love and care for public spaces.

On another front, we realized we needed a better public policy that would welcome the participation of citizens and invite city hall, institutions, companies, and neighbors to work together. So, in 2013, the Boa Praça Movement joined other

organizations to draft the “Law on Participative Pocket Parks Management.” This law proposes that people who live around a pocket park can form a user committees and act together with the city government to recommend measures, supervise public acts, and revitalize those spaces. The law also provided that the city of São Paulo would map its pocket parks and offer more information about them to citizens. Until that moment, it had been very hard to know how many pocket parks there were in the city and their characteristics and needs. We expected different spaces had different functions, topographies, equipment and dimensions. Some pocket parks were simple flowerbeds between avenues, others were more than 10,000 m² in size, but all received the same management by City Hall. (We would suggest they received the same neglect!) Many were poorly maintained, with broken equipment and overgrown bushes, and failed to meet the population’s needs or promote safe and secure play areas.

The law we proposed was approved by the Chamber of Councilors in 2015, but we have not yet managed for it to be included in regulations, which requires an executive power. It seems the City government is not interested in increasing public participation. Yet, even without official regulation, the Boa Praça Movement has been working with several groups of neighbors who take care of spaces throughout the city to register their users’ committees and exchange experiences about how to improve the pocket parks.

Our group continues to function, on a voluntary basis, in our local community. When there are requests from other groups, even without having a legal entity or being organized as an NGO, we manage to assemble an autonomous professional team to offer training, educational projects, consulting and community revitalization processes. These initiatives are funded by charitable foundations, neighbors’ donations, corporate volunteer programs or public notices. We have carried out many revitalization actions including space diagnostics, mapping, mobilization of local actors, planning, and managing contributions by volunteers and local enterprises, as well as lectures, workshops, educational programs, and events like TEDx talks (Instituto Saúde e Sustentabilidade, 2012; Movimento Boa Praça, 2012).

What we always try to do, when we are not in our own neighborhood, is to form a group and engage people who live or work near a pocket park, so the care, occupation and maintenance work will continue after we leave. Some places have strong groups or an institution like a school that continues the work. However, in some places, the group is difficult to maintain, due to people moving away or because they cannot continue to contribute. Recently, we registered our work and gathered data that documented greater park use and an increase in people’s sense of belonging and security after improvements were made.

Notably, the last pocket park we revitalized, Praça Paulo Schiesari, showed a significant increase in use and fulfilled its function of promoting health, well-being, and care for families and children. We were able to carry out this work from November 2020 to February 2021 without any occurrence of COVID-19. The place gained new equipment, furniture, plants with large roots to retain the hills, and fruit trees which already welcome birds! We carried out surveys, using online and offline

participation, and 87% of the 70 people who responded declared that their frequency of visits to the pocket park had increased. Ninety-three percent said the place looked nicer and had better equipment, and 44% said they felt safer after the revitalization. When we compared people's length of stay in the park before and after the revitalization, the time people spent in the park increased by 23% and new ways to use the revitalized park appeared such as reading.

Figure 6. Little "house of books" installed at Paulo Schiesari Pocket Park in São Paulo, our most recent revitalization project. People can read at the square or take away a book and bring another. The nearby school and children's center also benefit from the "library."



This last revitalization was funded with money from a parliamentary amendment, organized and executed by the Boa Praça Movement together with neighbors and a partner NGO, and inspected by the sub-city government. We see much potential in this model. But we are still far short of the work necessary to encourage the rise of new groups all over our country, to revitalize the existing areas and create more equitably distributed new green areas, which is an urgent need.

International Presentations and Learning

Our methodology and work gained strength when Boa Praça was presented at international meetings, like FIU (Festival Internacional de Intervenciones Urbanas) in Peru, as well as at different events in Brazil, like Virada Sustentável and TEDx Cidade e Saúde. In our 13 years of experience, we have learned so much! We learned that by mobilizing people, it is possible to make big changes with low costs and high impacts. We learned that when you listen to people and build a place that meets their needs, they start to take care of it, thus interrupting a cycle of abandonment and decay. And, above all, we learned that public spaces are essential and unique. They are unique because, for so many, they are the only available alternatives for meeting, enjoying nature and leisure. And they are unique because they welcome everyone, regardless of social class, interests, gender, age or condition. We are in such need of encounters and dialogues among different people! And, particularly in this pandemic period, we have found that nearby public green spaces are essential for maintaining physical and mental health.

Pocket parks are a great symbol of democracy, a place for citizen engagement like the Greek Agora. We need them to become better citizens. We need them to offer better childhoods to our children, and to teach them how to become better citizens too: citizens who care for nature, their neighborhoods and cities. And the parks need us. When people connect and do things together, a support network emerges, making neighborhoods better places for everyone: more diverse, more humane and more secure. Especially for children!

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