

## **Urban Playground: How Child-Friendly Planning and Design Can Save Cities**

Tim Gill (2021)

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Many urban designers and planners will have come across the idea of child-friendly cities, however few are likely to fully appreciate the enormous potential for child-friendly planning and design to improve cities for all citizens. In *Urban Playground* Tim Gill provides a cogent explanation of why child-friendly planning is not only important for children, but for the future survival of cities themselves. This book is full of insights to help urban designers, planners, politicians and policy makers create more livable, resilient and prosperous cities. Moreover, the implications of the arguments in this book go further than "saving cities." Child-friendly urban planning provides an effective strategy for responding to the global challenges currently facing humanity, including the climate emergency and biodiversity loss. Gill explains: "Looking at planning and design through children's eyes does not just offer fresh perspectives and a compelling new urban vision. It reveals the best way to set cities on a firm course away from ecological, economic and social decay." This book shows why child-friendly planning is needed and how it can be done.

Tim Gill is ideally placed to explain the link between child-friendly planning and sustainable cities that are livable for all city residents. His experience in urban design, transport, children's play and well-being advocacy, planning, and public policy provides a rich understanding of the complexities involved in understanding the changing nature of children's play and the importance of the people and places around children to their well-being. Gill's research has been widely published in academic and mainstream media. This book provides a holistic perspective that brings together the understandings from researchers, policy makers and children and families themselves.

Gill explains that not only do children value play opportunities and facilities, they also value walkability, lack of traffic, and the presence of nature. Not surprisingly, many of the child-friendly initiatives discussed in the book involve the promotion of child-friendly, active transport modes: walking, cycling and public transit.

Throughout *Urban Playground*, Gill emphasizes the importance of taming traffic, particularly on residential streets. Child-friendly street design necessitates reducing both the speed and the volume of traffic. Gill explains that there is a strong rationale for reducing motor vehicle speeds on almost all urban streets, and this is an integral component of the child-friendly planning in many of the case studies outlined in Chapters 3 and 4. Lower speeds not only support child-friendly neighborhoods in terms of enhancing children's safety and mobility; they can also provide opportunities for reclaiming space for play and thus help increase the affordances provided for children.

Many cities appreciate that slower streets are safer for children, and many city mayors also realize that prioritizing initiatives for children increases community support for road safety or sustainability initiatives. This is the case, for example, in Fortaleza, Brazil, where the city focused on the benefits for children in tackling public resistance to initiatives to tame traffic and reduce road space. Gill argues that child-friendly planning "is unsurpassed as a way to overcome unreasonable opposition."

*Urban Playground* begins by introducing the links between children and urban planning, explaining why planning for children matters. Chapter 2 then provides a working definition of child-friendly planning: "an evolving set of ideas about shaping streets, parks, squares and other public spaces so that children are active and visible in urban life. It takes children's views and experiences seriously, and aims, through planning and design, to expand their opportunities to play, explore and get around their neighborhood and the wider city." Gill employs a conceptual framework devised by the Finnish researcher Marketta Kyttä to describe two key dimensions of child-friendly urban planning. The first focuses on children's mobility—their ability to get to places, especially on their own (their independent mobility). The second is the number and type of spaces and facilities on offer in a neighborhood (the affordances).

Chapter 3 provides a detailed case study of Rotterdam. A concerted effort by city authorities transformed Rotterdam from "the worst municipality in the Netherlands to bring up a child" in 2006, to one which now has a well-deserved reputation for child-friendly urban planning with positive social and economic outcomes. While Gill notes that the story is not one of unqualified success, valuable lessons and insights come from studying Rotterdam's child-friendly planning approach. Children have been involved in new designs for their streets, in many cases creating play features in reclaimed street space. An important lesson from Rotterdam is that while some residents have been hostile to making residential streets more child-friendly (e.g., calmer), the city continues to make progress and is clear about its objectives.

Chapter 4 provides case studies of child-friendly urban planning in 13 cities from North and South America, Europe and the Middle East. These range from high-density (e.g., Barcelona and Fortaleza) to low-density cities (e.g., Boulder and Edmonton), and include a range of population sizes and average incomes. While Gill recognizes that each city is unique and requires its own strategies, the case studies provide valuable examples of child-friendly planning, as well as some of the challenges involved. Chapter 4 also outlines broader initiatives that have influenced multiple cities, including UNICEF's Child-Friendly Cities Initiative, the Bernard van Leer Foundation's Urban95 initiative, and the City of Children network, which focuses on building local political support for child-friendly policies. This network was instrumental in helping the mayor of Pontevedra, Spain, to promote lower speeds, active travel and street play initiatives, all of which contribute to Pontevedra's status as a model child-friendly, livable and environmentally and economically healthy city.

In Chapter 5 readers are provided with a detailed and well-explained framework for putting child-friendly planning into practice. The chapter is structured around four “building blocks” of child-friendly neighborhoods, nine “principles” for implementing these, and a set of 18 “tools” (introduced with the relevant principles or building blocks) from which planners and policy makers can find inspiration for their city. For example, “building block 1” is: “Livable streets: Streets that feel safe and are not dominated by cars.” Principle 2 is to “Build a shared vision and set of values,” and Tool 2 is about “formulating a vision for your city.” Part of this tool suggests a “Focus on building a long-term, collective vision that responds to the climate crisis and engages with global statements of values and vision such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and sustainable development goals.” The “principles” are important not only for child-friendly planning, but also for their economic, political and social value.

Chapter 6 reflects on issues facing child-friendly planning in the future. These include questions of city density, the challenges of low-income areas and of gentrification, and the dangers of assuming that technology (e.g., self-driving cars) will benefit children in future cities.

Gill’s writing style, combined with the format of the book, makes reading *Urban Playground* a pleasure. This is not another boring academic text. The structure of the book is logical and clearly explained in the first chapter. The arguments about child-friendly planning are clear, engaging and persuasive. They are powerfully supported with superb photos (including some historical photographs), maps (including GIS analyses), diagrams and tables. The photos of child-friendly environments from all over the world are high-quality color images, and the large-format publication size enhances their visual impact.

This book is a must-read for all those interested in children’s well-being, and equally for those concerned with the future of cities. *Urban Playground* would be an excellent text for urban planning or design courses, urban transport courses, courses on sustainability, and urban geography courses. It has the potential to transform the way we think about our cities and neighborhoods and how they are designed. It provides a well-documented and compelling rationale for child-friendly planning’s role in creating better cities for children and all city residents, as well as promoting global sustainability. More importantly, it provides the techniques and strategies to enable child-friendly planning to thrive in the world’s cities.

Review by Paul Tranter

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