

Strengthening Urban Resilience through Play



June 2022





Acknowledgments

This report is a product of collaboration between the Resilient Cities Network, Arup, the LEGO Foundation and the Real Play Coalition Play Ambassador Cities, including Houston, Milan, Belfast, Barcelona, Colima, Ramallah, and Tbilisi. In particular, we are grateful for the inputs and expertise from Lina Liakou, Nilofer Tajuddin, Federico Aili and Nikki Rudnick (Resilient Cities Network), Dr Sara Candiracci and Spencer Robinson (Arup), Christina Witcomb and Euan Wilmshurst (The LEGO Foundation) in the organization of the events, and in the development of the survey and this document. We also would like to thank the valued contributions of the speakers of the events named in the document. We would like to acknowledge the organizers of the Cities on the Frontline Webinar Series and of the Resilience Hub at COP26 for enabling the space and platform for this key discussion that informed this publication.

The **Real Play Coalition** is a global non-profit coalition created in 2018 and includes UNICEF, National Geographic, Arup, IKEA and LEGO Foundations. It has the ambition to change perceptions around the value of play, mobilize decision makers, influence behavior change, and eliminate the play deficit for children, for their development and optimal wellbeing. The coalition seeks to support the adoption of learning through play concepts in norms and practices in all cities of the world, focusing on the most vulnerable and marginalized contexts in both developed and developing countries, influencing change in individuals and institutions responsible for decision making and planning at the city level.

www.realplaycoalition.com

Resilient Cities Network (R-Cities) is a global city-led nonprofit organization that brings together knowledge, practice, partnerships, and funding to empower cities to help them build a safe, equitable and sustainable future for all. R-Cities integrates the combined effort of urban practitioners, city governments, and communities in a collective, comprehensive, and well-coordinated call-to-action to deliver urban impact-driven resilience solutions. R-Cities builds on the legacy of the “100 Resilient Cities pioneered by the Rockefeller Foundation” and its 97 member cities and Chief Resilience Officers.

www.resilientcitiesnetwork.org

In 2021 the Real Play Coalition and the Resilient Cities Network launched the *Strengthening Urban Resilience through Play Initiative*, in collaboration with **7 Play Ambassador Cities**:

Ambassador Cities:

- > Houston,
- > Milan,
- > Belfast,
- > Barcelona,
- > Colima,
- > Ramallah, and
- > Tbilisi.



The LEGO Foundation



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TBILISI CITY HALL



Contents

Foreword	6
Introduction	8
Understanding Play in Cities: The Survey	10
Our priority themes	12
Theme 1: Co-creation and inclusion in play	14
Key messages	17
City Actions	18
Theme 2: Urban planning and quality of play	20
Key messages	23
City Actions	24
Theme 3: Finance and funding of play	26
Key messages	29
City Actions	30
Conclusions	33
Annex 1: Cities on the Frontline Webinars on Play	35
Playful Cities - Why cities need play and placemaking	36
Reclaiming the Value of Play in Cities	38
COP26: Fostering connections between nature & play	40
How to Finance for Play and Placemaking in Cities	42
Creating Resilient Cities - The Role of Play in Planning	44
Annex 2: Resources	46

Foreword



Sophie Camburn

Arup

On behalf of the the Real Play Coalition

Play is rocketfuel for a child's happiness and development. Yet 100 million children worldwide are not getting the time or space to play that they need.

UNICEF, National Geographic, Arup, IKEA and the LEGO Foundation formed the Real Play Coalition to close the gap between the play children need and their access to play.

Children build personal resilience through play. Falling and getting back up. Failing and trying again. Connecting, understanding relationships and dynamics, and supporting each other. A play-focused approach to designing places better prepares our societies and communities to respond, recover and reduce the impact of major shocks. Play makes our children and cities more resilient to the challenges they face. Also, places that are designed for children are inclusive and accessible for all.

Most children now are now growing up in cities. That is why the Real Play Coalition is focusing on helping the people and organisations shaping our towns and cities to unlock the value of play to children and communities. A play-focused approach to city planning and design can make our cities more resilient.

As an urban practitioner, I know that we need evidence and inspirational examples to convince clients and funders embrace this approach to urban play. The examples and practical guidance in this report show how we can improve city resilience through play, not only for children but to the benefit of all society. Playful spaces aimed at children

create accessible and enjoyable space for everyone. A green play area reduces air and noise pollution, promotes activity and brings people together, while helping with urban cooling.

In Ramallah, Belfast, Paris and Manchester, play is being used to connect children with nature. Barcelona has a team dedicated to creating a playful city, not just a city with places for play. Shopping centres are creating play in Australia and pop-up play is happening on car-free streets in San Francisco. Many of the projects highlighted have received a funding boost following the Covid-19 pandemic, which demonstrated our critical need for space to play and its role in nurturing the physical and mental health of children. Tirana built 50+ playgrounds in as many months.

This report reinforces the Real Play Coalition's aim to inspire and connect a network of the people and organisations that have the power to create playful and more resilient cities.

By building a pro-play movement that shares knowledge, inspires and supports each other, we can nurture a generation of happy, creative and resilient children and create more open, inclusive and resilient cities. [Come play with us!](#)



Lauren Sorkin

*Executive Director
Resilient Cities Network*

Urban resilience is at its core about communities thriving well into the future, for future generations, for our children. I'm very pleased to present this report to you on *Strengthening Urban Resilience through Play*, featuring work we have advanced at the Resilient Cities Network over the past 10 months in partnership with the Real Play Coalition and seven Ambassador Cities – Barcelona, Belfast, Colima, Houston, Milan, Ramallah, and Tbilisi.

The global Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted all aspects of our lives, as well as the lives of children around the world. Due to distance learning and social isolation, children spent time away from their traditional play spaces, normal activities and routines. The UN has stated that even though children were not featured as the main victims of this pandemic, they bear the brunt of its effects, due to poverty, and the lack of education, health and social protection.¹

As we have learned from experts over many months while engaging in this work, a paradigm shift in the way we think about urban health and resilience building is urgently required. We need an approach to planning and urban design that embraces human and planet health resilience as underlying contributors to economic growth. We know – and have heard from the cities in our network throughout this crisis – that they are seeing in real ways that how we design cities for future generations matters.

The majority of children today grow up in urban environments. This is projected to increase to 70% by

2050. A child's early years (0–5) create the foundation for life-long physical and mental well-being. The growing body of research in this field continues to affirm the connection between play and building resilience. For instance, according to an article in the *Child Study Journal*, play can enhance a child's empathy and promote emotional regulation and competence.² An article from the *Journal of Pediatrics* cites that play can also help children develop the ability to overcome challenges and adversity. As they experience mastery of the world they create, children develop new competencies that lead to enhanced confidence and resilience they need to address future challenges.³ Children also build resilience through meaningful trial-and-error, in a safe environment to work through frustrations and “bounce back” if they don't get it right on first attempt.

It is with great pleasure that I present this report, offering different perspectives on the value of play as well as practical case studies of implementation from cities around the world that are committed to creating safer, healthier and happier environments for children to become resilient.

We are pleased to be on this journey with our partners at the Real Play Coalition, as well as with the growing list of ambassador cities to better understand how cities are prioritizing play, and what we can do to help advance further action on this critical agenda.

¹ United Nations, 2020. *Policy Brief: the Impact of COVID-19 on children*. UN. (https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/160420_Covid_Children_Policy_Brief.pdf)

² Eric W. Lindsey and Malinda J. Colwell, “Preschoolers’ Emotional Competence: Links to Pretend and Physical Play,” *Child Study Journal*. (Vol. 33 No. 1: 2003).

³ Regina M. Milteer, Kenneth R. Ginsburg, and Deborah Ann Mulligan, “The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bond: Focus on Children in Poverty,” *Pediatrics* (Vol. 129 No. 204: 2012)

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on children, disrupting their schooling, affecting their wellbeing, social contact, and even nutrition. This is especially damaging for children living in deprived urban areas, increasing the risk of poverty given the accumulated disadvantages.

While cities around the world cautiously reopen to a post-pandemic world, national and local leaders, urban practitioners, international organizations and communities are emphasizing the need to ‘build back better’.

Building the city of the future requires first and foremost that children of today are empowered and prepared, not only to survive but to thrive in the face of adversity. One of the key aspects of a child’s development is the availability and accessibility of play. It is essential for children’s health, physical, and emotional growth, and intellectual and educational development. It also helps children to acquire social and behavioral skills and build resilience.

The *Strengthening Urban Resilience through Play* initiative was launched by the Real Play Coalition and the Resilient Cities Network, in collaboration with the cities of Houston, Milan, Belfast, Barcelona, Colima, Ramallah and Tbilisi (Play Ambassador Cities). The initiative aims to promote the value of play in cities globally, and support impactful play-focused ideas that contribute to children’s wellbeing, optimal development, and resilience. The initiative also seeks to:

- › **Generate evidence** on children’s play experience in cities, and the value of play on their wellbeing, skills development and resilience.
- › **Identify the types of play-focused investments and**

solutions that cities are prioritizing (or could adopt), particularly in light of the Covid-19 pandemic.

- › **Accelerate play-focused actions and ideas** on the ground through collaboration with local authorities, urban practitioners, the private sector and community organizations.
- › **Facilitate knowledge-sharing and peer-to-peer learning** among cities and experts.

This report compiles the learnings from the Strengthening Urban Resilience through Play initiative. It presents the insights from a series of peer-to-peer learning activities between the partners and member cities, public events (online webinars and dedicated events during COP26 in Glasgow) and an extensive public survey that was carried out between June–September 2021. It includes case studies and recommendations on how to further scale up and build urban resilience through actions that promote play.



Photo by Ichsan Wicaksono

The objective of the report is to inform, inspire and mobilize other city leaders, urban practitioners, play workers and the broader resilience community on the importance of play for urban resilience. Through practical examples from across the globe, we want to highlight how investing in play can create multiple benefits not only for children and their caregivers, but for the city as a whole. The report is structured around three priority themes identified through the survey and various interactions with cities, practitioners and experts. They are the key entry points to build resilience through play:

1. **Co-creation and inclusion:** The need for direct participation and inclusion of children's and youth's voices in shaping playful environments.
2. **Urban planning and quality of play:** The role of urban planning in translating insights from various groups – and children in particular, along with expert knowledge on spatial design to create play spaces of high value and quality in the city.
3. **Finance and funding for play:** The need for creative and innovative ways to identify sustainable methods and establish effective partnerships to help source funds for cities to implement and scale up play.

Understanding Play in Cities: The Survey

Between June and September 2021, the Resilient Cities Network and the Real Play Coalition launched a public survey focusing on play. The key audiences of the survey were city authorities including decision makers at municipal level; and urban practitioners like architects, designers and planners; and play workers. The survey also drew responses from parents, users and residents. The aim of the survey was to understand conditions for play in various cities around the world, barriers for play in these cities and identify opportunities and recommendations for more 'playful' urban environments around the world. The survey gathered a total of 115 responses from cities all around the world (see figure above), with the following composition:

- > Urban practitioners: **41%**
- > City authorities: **29.5%**
- > Other stakeholders (parents, environmental consultants, non-governmental organizations, pediatricians, foundations and funding bodies): **26%**
- > Play workers: **3.5%**

Respondents unanimously affirmed the importance of play to support children's development of social, behavioral and motor skills, their mental and physical health and wellbeing, and for strengthening their resilience, and ability to cope with challenges and trauma. Play, therefore, is key for equipping children with critical skills throughout childhood and adulthood.



Figure 1: A selection of cities globally from which the survey gained responses.

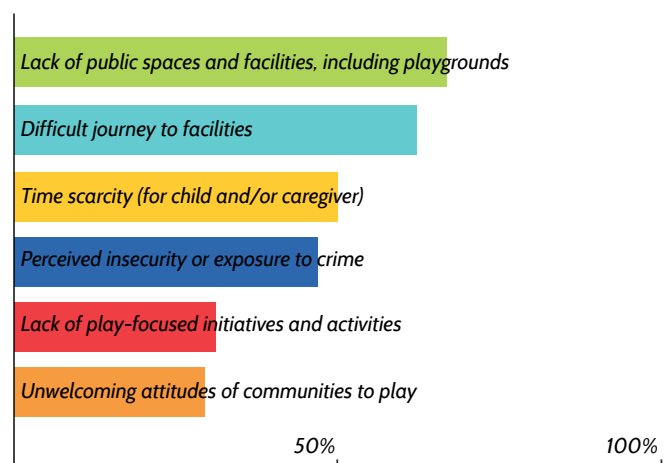


Figure 2: Responses on the key challenges or barriers that reduce children's opportunities for play

66%

of City Authorities want to work with children and youth as part of project design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

Creating accessible play by
Focusing investments in vulnerable areas

60%

of respondents stated difficulty in journey due to high traffic or lack of public transport as a key challenge

Support play in cities through
Public Private Partnerships

Preferred types of play activities identified through the survey:

**Nature
Free
Active
Outdoor**

65%

of City authorities and Play workers identify access to long term funding as a key barrier to implementing and scaling up play

Long-term benefits of play identified by different respondents:

- 1. Better health**
- 2. Sense of belonging**
- 3. Social inclusion**
- 4. Learning skills**

"Kids, teens and the community can be employed by the city throughout the process and trained to become stewards of the space. Assets can be identified and used to lift up members of the community."

Play worker

"[Play should be in]..open and flexible spaces with no boundaries, that are welcoming to all. Nature is the unifying factor for people of different race or gender to feel welcomed."

Urban practitioner

Source: R-Cities/ RPC survey, 2021

"Investing in a culture of play at all levels, from the doorstep to the design of homes, is a preventive medicine."

City representative

Source: R-Cities/ RPC survey, 2021

Our priority themes

The three identified themes provide a holistic approach to building resilience through play, and give insight into how play can be leveraged as a means to recover from the various shocks and stresses that cities face today, including climate hazards, the Covid-19 pandemic, among others. The themes also align with the key drivers in building city resilience as they are described within the [City Resilience Framework¹](#) that allows us to diagnose where the city has gaps to improve upon its capacity or opportunities to build upon.

¹ The City Resilience Framework (CRF), created by Arup in partnership with the Rockefeller Foundation, is a tool to help us understand the many drivers that can contribute to building resilience in a city. The key drivers of the CRF are: Health & Wellbeing, Economy & Society, Infrastructure & Environment, Leadership & Strategy.

1. Co-creation and inclusion in play

To build urban resilience through play, it is essential that we listen to children and wider communities earnestly and create a shared vision together. This theme focuses on the need to include, involve, engage and co-develop solutions with local communities, particularly children and youth, at every stage of the project cycle. Additionally, these processes must be inclusive of all groups regardless of economic status, gender, disabilities or ethnic background to ensure we capture as broad a range of needs as possible.

2. Urban planning and quality of play

The design and planning of the built environment directly impacts children's access to high-quality play opportunities. Good design can unlock the value of play for children as well as their communities. This thematic area delves into the governance arrangements, spatial

Resilience qualities of case studies

In each case study, we have also indicated the specific resilience qualities that allow them to support the resilience of the system within which they function.



Reflective

Learning and creating feedback loops throughout the process



Resourceful

Creating innovative ways of using resources in multiple ways



Robust

Ability of systems to withstand pressure, shocks and stresses

characteristics and innovative strategies to implement and scale up play.

3. Finance and funding for play

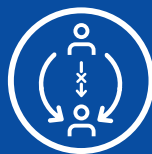
Leveraging play as an opportunity to unlock broader societal and environmental benefits calls for innovative partnerships to finance the agenda for play. This theme explores funding gaps and funding models that can scale up play interventions.

These themes are discussed in this report and supported by various **case studies** to give **recommendations** on how cities and key stakeholders can implement, further **scale up and accelerate their investments and actions for play**. The case studies demonstrate how a play-based approach can address multiple shocks and stresses while achieving various benefits for children, their communities, and entire cities.



Redundant

Creating redundancies and spare capacities in the system



Flexible

Ability to adapt its form/ uses based on the needs



Inclusive

Including voices from diverse groups and actors



Integrated

Finding creative ways of including different activities

Theme 1: Co-creation and inclusion in play



A participatory approach – whereby communities are consulted and engaged throughout the project cycle – are essential to ensuring longevity in urban interventions, and the same extends to the integration of play in the city. The same can be said for play-based interventions: involving children and their caregivers from project inception to completion increases the likelihood that projects are relevant and useful in the short- and long-term. Through co-creation processes, we can directly influence the feeling of ownership, safety and relationship with the play space. It essentially changes people's perception from that of a consumer to that of a user and guardian of the space.

By definition, co-creation transforms the dynamic from designing for the people to designing with the people. It welcomes citizens to participate, express problems, share ideas, collaborate and co-design solutions together. Children and youth constitute a vulnerable section of the society and this vulnerability is further exacerbated by economic, racial, gender and disability disparities. Hence, it is also equally important that these processes remain inclusive and just to all groups in society. It is fundamental to approach co-creation and inclusion as inseparable to ensure that play is available, accessible and owned by all.

The inclusion of children's perspective in the planning and design process of spaces for play inevitably requires the creation of opportunities where they can participate and input in the process. While children's participation is important, it is often sidelined in urban interventions. Children's needs may be 'lumped in' with those of teenagers or youth. In turn, the challenges they face are under-appreciated or worse, go entirely unrecognized. Understanding

and integrating children's preferences is important to understand how they can use a space and what they want, preventing the risk of designing spaces that they do not like and therefore they do not want to use.

There are several tools and methodologies which can be used to engage children in co-creation processes. For instance, using [Playground Ideas](#), members of the communities can come together with children to build a play space together. With [Map my Day](#), children, youth and adults can map their local assets, thereby raising awareness as well as identifying potential play spaces together. Additionally, methods like interactive workshops, games, tactical urbanism, community days, arts and culture can also be leveraged to engage children. Some of these can be tailored specifically for children in order to collect their unique insights on the environments they live in and move through. Playful and engaging participation through games is definitively one of the most interactive approaches.

How are cities engaging their citizens?

Co-creation has become a well-regarded process in urban planning and development. Cities around the world today are actively engaging with citizens to set up a knowledge exchange where citizens benefit from being engaged in discussions about new possibilities and the city benefits from extracting local knowledge that ensures that their interventions are sustainable. This desire to engage continuously was directly reflected in our survey; when respondents were asked what 'pledge to play' they would like to make for transforming their city into a play-friendly one, **74%** indicated advocating for active involvement of children and youth in play initiatives.

66%

of City Authorities want to work with children and youth as part of project design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

Source: R-Cities/ RPC survey, 2021

While there is consensus on the need to specifically engage children in co-creation processes, the methods used by cities are limited. About **60%** of respondents to the survey engage citizens via the Internet and social media, digital engagement platforms, site visits and meetings, family surveys and street-based engagement. Most methods are designed to engage citizens on a general level and there is no specific approach to engage children and youth. Only few cities like Barcelona, Tel Aviv, Belfast, Thessaloniki and Miami specifically engage children and youth through community events and school networks, street-based engagement, youth climate working groups.

"Kids, teens and the community can be employed by the city throughout the process and trained to become stewards of the space. Assets can be identified and used to lift up members of the community."

Play worker

Source: R-Cities/ RPC survey, 2021

Engaging with marginalized communities

A number of respondents from city authorities noted the need for targeted outreach to marginalized communities to understand their needs and priorities and to invest and build accordingly, moving beyond basic deliberation forums. Creating strong connections between schools and out of school partners was suggested as a pathway to reach children within vulnerable communities in a systematic way.

"Play can be an equalizer for many children - we need to make sure that we invest in play where children will have access and the ability to engage in play opportunities independently no matter their background and ability."

City representative

Source: R-Cities/ RPC survey, 2021

The co-benefits of co-creation

The majority of the respondents highlighted that by engaging with children, a city can identify barriers within its planning system that are also relevant to the broader communities of the city. For example, a lack of play spaces and intergenerational interactions also affects other groups such as the elderly. So, by working together and by using spaces for play as a catalyst, they could better address some of the key challenges of the city. The need to treat children as urban citizens was also emphasized, along with the need to enable their right to the city through active participation and involvement.

Long-term benefits of play identified by different respondents:

1. Better health
2. Sense of belonging
3. Social inclusion
4. Learning skills

Source: R-Cities/ RPC survey, 2021

Key messages

1. Children as urban citizens

Engagement of children and youth is key and so is a genuine willingness to listen to children's suggestions. Create a culture of participation where children and youth trust that their voices are heard and responded to.

2. Play as a catalyst

By engaging with children, a city can identify barriers within its planning system that are also relevant to the broader needs of the city, and untap opportunities that can benefit the entire community in different ways.

3. Integrate play into existing investments

Combine investments in play with efforts to address social inequalities and create multiple benefits for the communities.

4. Create a shared community vision

Engage with vulnerable communities by encouraging them to co-create and identify common assets and liabilities in their neighborhoods by integrating play with art, interactive games, history and culture.

City Actions

Milan, Italy: Play Streets

The city of Milan aims to create more spaces in the city dedicated to play and to children. Play Streets is part of the city's adaptation strategy and it is one of the priorities for the recovery after the pandemic. Since schools were closed for a long time in Italy, the project focused on providing spaces where children can play and interact with their peers. In collaboration with Arup, the city of Milan decided to work on a specific district, to analyze how play is considered within the neighborhood scale and how this approach can be mainstreamed across districts. The city gave back the streets to children and their families and worked with them through co-design activities to better understand and imagine the city of the future. The city collaborated with local associations and community groups through a joint commitment they all had to sign to organize workshops and activities in the streets that allow children to use streets as spaces for play. The results of this work are available [here](#).

The Play Streets project *Via Montepiana* was co-designed together with the children and teachers of Sottocorno school, local community groups, the Municipality of Milan and with support from Arup's expertise; the final

Key city facts

Population: 1.39 million (2021, Milano Citta Stato)
Population of children & youth: -15.2 % (2022, City Population)

Resilience Values of this project



Integrated



Flexible



Resourceful

agreement was signed by six local organizations and institutions within the neighborhood. This two-day event reached 700 students and their families, and about 300 people from the neighborhood. The activities included: a *Build your own city of the future* LEGO lab, a biodiversity lab, dance workshops, painting labs (murals), chess and traditional games, music and animated readings and sport activities.

"By co-designing an area of their neighborhood and learning how to take care of it, children do not simply enjoy the opportunity of playing. They make an experience of cooperation and responsibility to each other and the community. They begin to understand what 'citizenship' is and why it matters in daily life."

**Eugenio Petz, Head of Active Participation Office,
Municipality of Milan**



Play street: At the primary school F. Filzi in Monte Piana street, Milan, June 2021 (credits: Municipality of Milan)

Ramallah, Palestine: Play in Nature

The city of Ramallah wants to promote unstructured play for children in outdoor spaces, acknowledging the benefits from play on children (such as learning respect for nature, becoming more creative and confident). However, due to building expansion, lack of public spaces and facilities (in particular playgrounds), traffic and limited public transport, children in the city do not have the opportunity for outdoor play. Therefore, Ramallah has started to host outdoor events to facilitate children's play in nature such as the *Nowar Nissan Festival* which provides opportunities for the co-production of play activities and promotes experiential play. This yearly festival has been organized nine times thus far and has engaged 5000 children each year. Another activity that the city is organizing is *Yalla A' HAdeqa* ("Let's go to the garden") which aims to promote the right to play and access to the public realm and green spaces. This initiative has been organized eight times on a yearly basis and has engaged 4000 children each year. Moreover, Ramallah organizes a Scout camping trip to facilitate children's play in nature, and a yearly youth marathon, in partnership with 18 Ramallah schools and the Ministry of Education. In the eight versions that were previously organized, the marathon engaged 3000-3500 children each year.

Key city facts

Population: 355,000 (2021, Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics)
Population of children & youth (Palestine): 50% (2017, UNFPA)

Resilience Values of this project



Inclusive



Flexible



Resourceful

The initiatives were designed through a needs assessment and discussions with the local community, and have been embedded in the city's structure and strategies (Participation Strategy and the Ramallah Resilience Strategy 2050). The city is expanding its interventions strategically in many other social and cultural projects that target children and youth and is expanding its partnerships, utilizing public and semi-public spaces all around the city, and uniting human and financial resources.

"Taking the needs of children, kids, toddlers and caregivers into consideration has been an important principle of how we plan within the city of Ramallah. Partnering with R-Cities and the Real Play Coalition and participating at the Urban95 Academy has deepened our understanding on how to advance our sustainable development by working with and for the children of our city"



Ahmed K. AbuLaban, Ramallah City Director

Greater Manchester, UK: City of Trees

One of the priorities in Manchester is to ensure that children have access to spaces for play in nature. The initiative *Community Forest - City of Trees* is working to increase nature in school grounds by planting. Children and students are directly engaged by planting trees and they connect to nature through the Royal Horticulture Gardens, where groups work together to design a green space for their school and local community.

Paris, France: OASIS schoolyards

As part of Paris' resilience strategy, the municipality launched the initiative to transform 10 schoolyards into 'cool islands', by using nature-based solutions and an integrated approach to reduce the exposure to high temperatures and heat waves. The OASIS project aims to co-design the schoolyards together with children and transform them into public spaces accessible to everyone in the neighborhood after school hours. The innovation of OASIS lies in the process developed to co-design and mobilize collective intelligence of neighbors, of all ages, to define and better manage local facilities. Hence, OASIS proposes the emergence of new models of micro-local governance, with methods for local actors' empowerment.



OASIS Schoolyards (credits: Paris resilience strategy)

Hyderabad, India: Organo Et Schools

Organo Et School is an initiative created by the [Organo Company](#), aimed at creating opportunities for sustainable community living. Organo Et School focuses on educating and empowering schools, colleges, but also organizations and communities on sustainability. It engages individuals and children through workshops, live sessions and site visits.

Theme 2: Urban planning and quality of play



Play is a child's basic right and the provision of adequate spaces and facilities for playing is a priority which is directly affected by the design of outdoor public spaces. Cities are often planned and designed without taking sufficiently into account children's needs and perspective. More children than ever are growing up in urban areas. Cities bring a host of challenges for children's wellbeing, namely air and noise pollution, congestion, and overzealous regulations. Yet, the built environment can unlock multiple benefits for children and help them address these challenges.

Adequate spaces for play are essential for children to develop skills, build resilience, and form connections with their environment. And well-designed spaces can benefit other groups too. For instance, an increase in green play spaces has a direct impacts on air and noise pollution in the city, generating longer-term health benefits for all residents.

Governance structures, and their focus on play, vary from city to city. By creating a well-resourced and long-term agenda for play, cities are more likely to steer urban development in a manner that prioritizes child-friendly environments. As explained in the previous theme, inclusion of children and youth in the planning process is essential because it gives cities direct feedback on how play spaces can be designed to their maximum potential.

On an urban level, equal access to play spaces across all neighborhoods must be seen as a priority. There is growing demand for play that is accessible by foot or bicycle, or at least by public transport. Access to open spaces is continually linked with better quality of life. In fact, during the Covid-19 pandemic, reasonable access to such spaces became crucial in the daily life of children and adults.

The spatial design and quality of the play space will determine how much it is used, what value it brings to a child's development and how resilient it is to the various shocks and stresses facing cities today. Especially in marginalized communities, play spaces offer respite and much needed breathing space for children and youth. These spaces bring people of different backgrounds around a common purpose. They can nurture more cohesive communities. By comparison, inadequate spatial design considerations can have a negative impact on communities and attract undesirable activities, including crime and other anti-social behaviors.

City governance and play

80% of city authorities in the survey indicated they have a department whose work is directly or indirectly related to play. However very few of these are dedicated solely to play. In the majority of cases, these departments work in connection with schools, parks and recreation, public spaces and health. In some cases, the department of culture and social affairs was responsible for organizing regular activities and events that are focused on child-and-family or children-only activities throughout the year. A few cities have dedicated teams that spearhead the play agenda in their city. For example, Barcelona is looking to make itself more playable through the *Plan for Play in Barcelona's Public Spaces* initiative. In Milan, there is a team which manages play interventions, and a strategic lead for children and young people, although the scope is limited at present.

City systems and the role of play

The survey highlighted ways in which play can bring together other urban systems. More than 60% of all respondents highlighted the complete lack of spaces for play within a reasonable distance from the household as a key barrier to scaling play initiatives. Parents and caregivers also indicated the length of commute as a key challenge to visit such spaces. It is clear from the survey that successful play interventions also need to take supportive infrastructure into account.

60%

of respondents stated difficulty in journey due to high traffic or lack of public transport as a key challenge

Source: R-Cities/ RPC survey, 2021

A number of respondents suggested a playable transport network. This offers a holistic approach which meets both transport and play needs. Similarly, play can also be connected with green infrastructure to support the mutual

benefits between nature and play. This way, nature can be used to provide enriching play opportunities, while playful interventions can include natural features that support climate resilience and the preservation of biodiversity. By leveraging these interconnections between sectors, there is a need to move from 'a city with playful areas' to 'a playful city overall'.

Typology of play interventions

The type and nature of recommended play interventions varies between age groups. Nearly all respondents from the survey agreed that free play, physical activity and play in nature benefit all age groups (including adults). Yet, several respondents stressed the importance of building flexibility into play spaces to meet the needs of different age groups and play styles. The look, feel and sensory characteristics of spaces affect people differently; this should be considered.

Preferred types of play activities identified through the survey:

Nature
Free
Active
Outdoor

Source: R-Cities/ RPC survey, 2021

Safety and play

The spatial quality of play areas can also increase anti-social behaviors and create feelings of insecurity. Ensuring that play areas are welcoming and set the right scene in their design, material, placement and interaction with the urban environment was highlighted as a crucial factor in the survey.

"[Play should be in]..open and flexible spaces with no boundaries, that are welcoming to all. Nature is the unifying factor for people of different race or gender to feel welcomed."

Urban practitioner

Source: R-Cities/ RPC survey, 2021

A designed approach to avoiding unwelcoming attitudes from community members who perceive play as a nuisance was also considered. These can be influenced both through the design of play spaces and processes of co-creation to resolve these perceptions during the design and implementation process.

From the survey as well as discussions with cities, it is evident that there is no 'one size fits all' approach. It is therefore essential that urban planning processes respond to the needs of, and accommodate various factors to root play interventions in, the local context.

"We need spaces that are more open for children to explore and make use as they desire, and we need to shift our perceptions on what behaviors are 'acceptable' in public spaces. "

Urban practitioner

Source: R-Cities/ RPC survey, 2021

Key messages

1. Intergenerational interactions

Design spaces appropriate for all ages so that families can actively engage in play together. Facilitate intergenerational play that also creates natural oversight.

2. Open and accessible play

Move beyond conventionally gated play areas. Explore open access spaces to change current perceptions of play as a prescriptive activity.

3. Flexible school yards

Create safer and healthier school surroundings and use school yards as spaces for after school play.

4. Designing for routines

Understand daily patterns of movement and align with places of play to better identify barriers and needs in term of access.

5. Reclaiming and re-purposing spaces in the city

Spaces of play can become activators of urban regeneration. Identify underutilized spaces and reprogram them with play.

6. Making a playful city

Move from thinking about a city with playful areas, to a playful city overall.

City Actions

Barcelona, Spain: Playful City

The city of Barcelona has the mission to become a more safe, just, and equitable city. The vision is to move from being a city with playful areas to a playful city overall. To achieve this, Barcelona identified 10 key milestones and 63 actions in consultation with children both in terms of the type of activities and the design of public space.

Using the school network as an entry point, in 2020 Barcelona launched the program *Protegim les escoles* (“Let’s protect the schools”), for 200 schools throughout the city. The aim is to make school environments healthier and safer, with better air quality, and more play spaces. The measures include traffic calming (fewer cars and slower speeds), the addition of more green spaces, better street furniture, signage and street lighting. These measures create open spaces that promote and facilitate play. This initiative is part of Barcelona’s *Superblock* program, a street transformation model that aims to reclaim public spaces previously used for cars in order to create greener and healthier areas for citizens, including children.

Key city facts

Population: 5.6 million (2021, Statista)

Population of children & youth: 15.1% (2019, City of Barcelona)

Resilience Values of this project



Inclusive



Integrated



Flexible



Resourceful

“A city where children play in public space and green areas is a safe city that promotes community life and the wellbeing of its citizens. Putting children at the centre of city planning is about making a city for everyone.”



Ariadna Miquel, Urban Strategy Director, Office of the Chief Architect, Barcelona City Council



Let's protect the school: Lavínia School in Barcelona (credits: Àlex Losada)

Belfast, UK: Child Friendly City Center

The city of Belfast has historically been a place of conflict, where people have been cut off from the center. The city has been working on trying to make Belfast a human-centered city, with a livable center. In particular, the city council acknowledged the need to plan the city taking into account the youngest in the population (35% of Belfast's population is 25 or under). With this perspective, play has become the opportunity not only to provide outdoor facilities for children but also to bring back nature to cities through new green spaces. Arup, supported by Resilient Cities Network, worked closely with Belfast City Council to develop a multifaceted framework for spatial analysis and placemaking, built on engagement with local people, children and families. The goal is to address the resilience challenges that traditionally affect the city, such as intense car use, air pollution, climate change, lack of housing in the core of the center, and to support economic recovery as well as sustainable development. The interventions include measures to promote connectivity, place-making, active travel schemes and retrofit of the existing landscape such as the Cathedral Gardens, a temporary pop-up play park in the center of the city created in 2020.

Key city facts

Population: 342,000 (2018, NISRA)

Population of children & youth: 20% (2018, NISRA)

Resilience Values of this project



Inclusive



Integrated



Resourceful

"It is an exciting time for Belfast, and we are building on the positive changes from the last couple of years that put the focus on people and place. Our Bolder Vision for Belfast is the blueprint for how our streets and public spaces are designed and used to meet the changing needs of a diverse range of users and will support a livable city center for all ages. Our work to date has brought together expertise across regeneration, resilience, culture and sustainability and we look forward to bringing forth new approaches and ideas to make Belfast a more playful city."



Dr. Callie Persic, Development Manager, Belfast City Council

Brisbane, Australia: Playscape at Westfield Chermside

Westfield Chermside is a regional shopping center located in the north of Brisbane, opened in 2017. The design includes daycare facilities, indoor playgrounds and various child-friendly features in the midst of retail. This makes the journey easier and enjoyable for both parents and children. In fact, by just taking a break, children can play in one of the kid's activity areas and live a different experience from traditional commercial centers. Mixing shops, dining areas and playscape is a setting which can also be replicated within city centers.

Istanbul, Turkey: Pop-up playgrounds

In 2019 a new playground designed specifically for children aged under three and their caregivers was opened in Attila İlhan park in Istanbul. It is considered the first playground in Turkey to use the design principles defined by the guide *Playground Ideas for 0-3 Years*, published as part of the Bernard van Leer Foundation's *Istanbul95* program. The playground covers 433 square meters and it is designed to encourage activities that help with young children's development, while shade and seating areas contribute to make the park an attractive place for caregivers to spend time there and interact with their neighborhoods.



Istanbul Pop-up playgrounds (credits: Arkitera)

Tbilisi, Georgia: Child-Friendly City Initiative

Building up from their resilience strategy, Tbilisi has pledged to join the *Child Friendly Cities Initiative*, supported by UNICEF. The city is reviewing its child-friendly laws and policies, and their impact on children, and is in the process of developing a city-wide strategic action plan with committed funds to make Tbilisi a more playful and child friendly city. The city is also implementing activities of co-creation with children and youth and is developing cross-sectoral partnerships to maximize the impact of its child-friendly policies and programs.

Theme 3: Finance and funding of play



Cities face barriers in financing dedicated spaces for play and leveraging investments for play initiatives. These barriers call for an innovative approach to financing projects and initiatives that build resilience through encouraging play in the city. Investing in play has broad societal benefits.

While local governments reassess their priorities and consider stimulus packages as part of the Covid-19 recovery, the imperatives for more resilient, inclusive, healthy, and green cities are more significant than ever. Within this process it is critical for city leaders to ensure that these investments also prepare and strengthen the resilience of the children and families whose lives have changed in profound ways during this pandemic. As cities are trying to 'build back better', local authorities in partnership with their local communities, and with the support of national governments, the private sector and the global community, need to act quickly to prevent a lost generation of children.

According to Simon Henzell-Thomas, Global Head of Public Affairs & Advocacy for Ingka Group (IKEA), their research showed that play spaces decreased local antisocial behaviors by 90%. The cross-cutting nature of play allows for its integration with other aspects of the built environment, such as transport, public buildings, parks, and more. By considering the value of play holistically and measuring the multiple benefits of play, cities are looking to make a stronger case to scale up investments into making a play-friendly city. This need for investing in children's development calls for the creation of new partnerships between the public, private and community led sectors.

Key funding barriers for play

The financial barriers manifest on different levels within cities. More than **60%** of city authorities and play workers identified access to long term funding as the biggest barrier for the maintenance and operations of spaces and activities for play.

65%

of City authorities and Play workers identify access to long term funding as a key barrier to implementing and scaling up play

Source: R-Cities/ RPC survey, 2021

For many cities though, seed funding for research and testing is also a critical factor to develop new research about play and test innovative solutions. Thirty percent of the respondents identified access to seed funding and pilot grants for testing as a key challenge for the implementation of play initiatives within their city. At the same time, entry costs to access play spaces are that are often levied by cities to cover maintenance were also identified by the users (parents/caregivers) as a challenge that reduces children's opportunities for play in the city.

Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) for play

About **60%** of city authorities indicated that play initiatives have been initiated or led through public-private partnerships, thereby unlocking creative methods of financing play. This naturally requires further buy-in both politically and from the private sector. By reflecting on the long-term benefits that play delivers, a clear business and value case can be made for further investments. Among the widely acknowledged benefits of play from the survey are those to health and wellbeing, stronger sense of community, better social inclusion, enhanced safety and more learning opportunities.

"We need to make policies (local ordinances) that promote investments towards better efforts in addressing social inequalities and exclusion"

Urban practitioner

Source: R-Cities/ RPC survey, 2021

The survey findings further stress that financing play should take into account a long-term strategy with a better identification and measurement of the multiple co-benefits that it delivers to broader society.

"Investing in a culture of play at all levels, from the doorstep to the design of homes, is a preventive medicine."

City representative

Source: R-Cities/ RPC survey, 2021

At the same time, cities need to identify ways to leverage funding both for innovation and further scaling up of existing solutions.

Creating accessible play by
Focusing
investments in
vulnerable areas

Source: R-Cities/ RPC survey, 2021

Support play in cities through
Public Private
Partnerships

Source: R-Cities/ RPC survey, 2021

Key messages

1. Placing value on the benefits of play

Understand the additional benefits that spaces of play create to the wider community (health and wellbeing, stronger sense of community, better social inclusion, enhanced safety and more learning opportunities) to leverage private funding.

2. Integrating play in existing budgets

Leverage existing city investments for scaling up initiatives for play by combining solutions (e.g. recovery funds, climate funding).

3. Ensuring priority needs are funded

Ensure that city investments are responsive to the needs of the local communities and work with community and knowledge institutions to experiment with new solutions and ways to better understand the needs of children and their families (citizen science).

4. Equitable investment in the city

Focus resources and create a framework to prioritize investments in under-served neighborhoods.

City Actions

Houston: 50/50 Park Partners

To be a more resilient city and drive improvements to quality of life, Houston must have thriving parks to support thriving neighborhoods. Public and private investment in the development and improvement of Houston parks, greenways, and public spaces has solidified Houston's national reputation as a green space leader. These spaces offer opportunities for both structured and unstructured play for the children of these neighborhoods.

The city of Houston invites citizens and the private sector to become involved in the stewardship and care of public parks. By becoming volunteers or adopters, they can directly take care of urban green spaces, contributing to their maintenance. The adoption program offers the possibility to choose among five different typologies: a park, an esplanade, a sport field, a trail or a library greenspace. The *50/50 Park Partners* initiative brings together 50 businesses to support the improvement of 50 neighborhood parks through monetary contributions, in-kind support, ideas, and volunteers. The core of the initiative is the creation of long-term relationships for sustained impact between businesses, communities, and parks, while improving citizens' quality of life for the years to come. The three principles of this initiative are: park equity, community engagement, and long-term sustainability impact.

Key city facts

Population: 7.1 million (2021, Greater Houston Partnership)
Percentage of children & youth: 25% (2021, Houston State of Health)

Resilience Values of this project



Inclusive



Integrated



Resourceful

"Houston is proud to be a leader building healthy children and communities through access to parks. The 50/50 initiative runs alongside and aligns with the city's two-year process toward recognition as the first UNICEF Child Friendly City in the USA, a historic move that holds the potential to transform the lives of youth, from all backgrounds and abilities. Houston's CFCI Action Plan focuses among other areas on addressing mental health needs of young people. Access to parks and play has positive mental health benefits and is needed for young people to thrive and learn."



Olivera Jankovska, Director of Education, Office of Mayor Sylvester Turner, City of Houston



50/50 Park Partners: Playground at Hartman Park (credits: Houston Park Board)

San Francisco: Sunday Streets

Launched in 2008, San Francisco's *Sunday Streets* has become one of North America's premiere open street programs serving 100,000 residents in diverse neighborhoods across San Francisco with an annual season of events that reclaim car-congested streets for community health. The program transforms streets into car-free spaces for play for both children and adults. Sunday Streets' mission is to create temporary open space and play opportunities in neighborhoods most lacking, encourage physical activity, foster community-building and inspire people to think about their streets as public spaces. Sunday Streets is a program of the nonprofit Livable City presented in partnership with the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency, San Francisco Department of Public Health, and the City and County of San Francisco.

Key city facts

Population: 873,965 (2020, US census)
Percentage of children & youth: 13% (2021, SF Chronicle)

Resilience Values of this project



Inclusive



Integrated



Resourceful



Flexible

This success is made possible through the participation of 400+ volunteers, hundreds of local nonprofits and small businesses, dozens of sponsors and city agencies, and the residents of the host neighborhoods. *Sunday Streets* provides public health benefits through open space and free recreation. But it also builds resilience through connecting residents, small businesses and other stakeholders to organize for and plan the event, as well as creating the space for people to come together and meet.

Sydney, Australia: Public Legacy Program

In 2020 as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic, Sydney announced the launch of an AU\$ 250 million *Public Spaces Legacy Program*. The program is part of the ongoing work carried on by the city council to protect the health of communities, providing economic and job stimulus through the improvements of safe, open public spaces. Interventions include new and improved walking and cycle paths, parks, trails, riverfronts, play spaces, civic plazas, outdoor event and performance spaces.

North Somerset, UK: Improving Play Spaces Fund

The £250,000 *Improving Play Spaces Fund* was set up by North Somerset in 2022 to offer capital match funding of up to 50%. The fund was created to enable local groups and organizations within North Somerset to improve their local children's and young people's play facilities. The funding will provide up to 50% of the cost of the project, with the remaining funding being provided from other sources. Projects that enhance the accessibility and inclusivity of play facilities to children of all ages and abilities will be prioritized.



Improving public spaces fund (credits: North Somerset Council)



Conclusions

This report compiles the learnings taken from the *Strengthening Urban Resilience through Play* initiative. The objective is to inform, inspire and mobilize other city leaders, urban practitioners, play workers and the broader resilience community on the importance of play for urban resilience. Through practical examples from across the globe, we want to highlight how investing in play can create multiple benefits not only for the children and their caregivers but for the entire city.

Play benefits children, youth and society as a whole. The first step towards building urban resilience through play is to ensure that the voices of children and youth from all backgrounds and abilities are integrated. Co-creation of play ensures that the spaces we design are optimized to the needs of the communities and best suited for the local context. This way, the communities take ownership, value play and see play as integral to their own development. It is important to treat children as urban citizens and enable their right to the city. We need to create a culture of participation wherein children and youth trust that their voices are heard and acted upon.

Participatory processes also help build stronger and more resilient communities and play is a unique entry point to engage people from all walks of life. Play spaces can be important catalysts in facilitating dialogue between different age groups and can even lead to new collaborations like intergenerational play. Integration with art, culture and history can also help root play in its local context. There are no one-size-fits-all solutions and hence each intervention must be tuned to the needs of the local communities.

The valuable feedback from co-creation can be integrated into urban planning processes and translated into designs that communities enjoy and access on a daily basis. The spatial design quality of play spaces has a direct influence on the perceptions and use of the space. Hence, special attention must be given to the material, form, function, flexibility, adaptability and nature of the play. Governance setups are key to ensuring that the play agenda is featured in the long-term city vision. There is a need for dedicated initiatives and teams within cities to prioritize scaling up of play in the city. We need to move from a 'city with playful areas' to a 'playful city'.

Play can be integrated with various sectors and interventions. Nature and play can work together such that play brings back nature into the city and vice versa. It is evident that play benefits society as a whole and in multiple ways, like social cohesion, better quality of life, enhanced safety and so on. Measuring these benefits and placing value on them can be key to making a stronger case for investing in play. There is a financial gap as more cities look to scale up play in their cities. Innovative public-private partnerships can help bridge this gap and unlock new finance models for play in the city.

Through this initiative the Real Play Coalition partners, the Resilient Cities Network and the Play Ambassador Cities, Houston, Milan, Belfast, Barcelona, Colima, Ramallah and Tbilisi, aimed to showcase impactful play-focused ideas that contribute to children's wellbeing, optimal development, and resilience strengthening. This is just the first step of an ongoing commitment that these organizations have taken to continue advocating, designing and implementing impactful policies that will create a better more playful future for all.



Annex 1: Cities on the Frontline Webinars on Play

Playful Cities – Why cities need play and placemaking

CITIES on the FRONTLINE

Speaker Series #01

PLAYFUL CITIES:
Why cities need play and placemaking

January 21, 2021, 08.00 AM EST /
2:00 pm CET / 09.00 PM SIN/KUL

RESILIENT CITIES NETWORK WORLD BANK GROUP



Access previous material:
bit.ly/PlayfulCities



Louise Thivant Johannsen
Child Friendly Cities
Initiative Advisor
UNICEF



Anuela Ristani
Deputy Mayor for
Foreign Affairs
Tirana, Albania



Hans Karsenberg
PlacemakingX

21 January 2021

Watch the webinar [here](#).

As part of the R-Cities and the World Bank Cities on the Frontline Webinar Series, the Real Play Coalition organized a session on why cities need play and placemaking.

Play and leisure are central to ensuring that children grow up happy and healthy. More time playing outside links to higher levels of happiness, however, our cities often lack opportunities or a city-wide approach to play. Covid-19 associated stresses faced by children and their families are a reminder to reclaim and integrate places to play in everyday life and public spaces, beyond the playground.

Louise Thivant Johannsen, from UNICEF Child Friendly Cities Initiative, explained how important play is in a child's development, and how access to play can have immediate and long-lasting impacts on a child's physical and mental health. She illustrated a diverse set of impacts, from preventing smoking and use of drugs, improving confidence and self-esteem, reducing depression to promoting community cohesion. She emphasized how we need to prioritize play, invest in innovative projects and build partnerships with various stakeholders, especially in light of the consequences of the pandemic.

"We cannot afford not to invest in children."

"Building on what we have learned from the crisis, we have to invest in PLAY and play solutions that are innovative and high impact, through multi-stakeholder collaboration."

Louise Thivant Johannsen, Unicef

Anuela Ristani, from the City of Tirana, emphasized how important it is to use play as a method to educate all age groups. Tirana has undergone significant political and urban transformation and is now focusing on creating a child friendly city. The city is implementing several

initiatives of upgrading amphitheaters, creating dedicated playgrounds in the city by identifying available, idle spaces such as sporadic public lots. The city has set up 56 playgrounds in 56 months. By promoting child safe streets, the city also hopes to raise awareness on the importance of shared means of transport. For instance, leveraging children's bike streets to raise awareness of child friendly spaces and in turn urge other road users to be mindful of the need for safe streets.

"Zero playgrounds. In a city with half a million people. Then, in 56 months we built 56 playgrounds."

Anuela Ristani, City of Tirana

Hans Karssenbergh, from Placemaking X, explained how impressive the transformation of Tirana has been and how the city is an exemplary case of an integrated approach to scale up play in the city. According to him, placemaking is a lightweight way of bringing the community together. Especially in post Covid recovery, placemaking can be powerful to build back better. It is essential for a top-down strategy and bottom-up initiatives to work together towards a common goal. Children can be a powerful resource for co-creation of play spaces and tapping into their potential can unlock innovative solutions. He also highlighted the case of San Francisco, which has successfully implemented this collaboration between top-down and bottom-up levels. For instance, local artists are turning the parking spaces into 2x5m play spaces, now come to be known as "parklets". This initiative of turning

parking spots into green areas has now spread all around the world. A key lesson learned from San Francisco is how to lower barriers to promote participation, facilitate greater equity and projects in all neighborhoods and enable more public spaces that are free to use.

"We do placemaking for children with children and their caregivers." "Through this approach, Tirana has transformed into a totally different city than it was before and it is totally replicable for other cities!"

Hans Karssenbergh, PlacemakingX

The session then culminated in a discussion on how to scale up play in the city, the kinds of frameworks that are required for this transformation and the impacts of improving play in the city, especially in post pandemic recovery.



Photograph of Tirana from the presentation by Anuela Ristani

Reclaiming the Value of Play in Cities

CITIES on the FRONTLINE

Speaker Series #12

RECLAIMING THE VALUE OF PLAY IN CITIES

July 08, 2021, 09.00 AM EST –
1.00 PM GMT – 09.00 PM SIN/KUL



CITIES NETWORK



City Resilience Program
GDRR



Access Previous Material:
bit.ly/citiesfrontline



RECLAIMING THE VALUE OF PLAY IN CITIES



Sylvester Turner
Mayor City of Houston
Chairman
R-Cities Board
(via recorded message)



Jerome Frost
Global Cities Leader
Arup



Thiago Hérick de Sá
Healthy Urban Environment,
Technical Officer,
World Health Organization



Leticia Lozano
Co-Founder & Director
MACIA Estudio



Callie Persic
City Regeneration &
Development
Belfast City Council



Richard McLernon
Project Coordinator,
Climate Unit
Belfast City Council

8 July 2021

Watch the webinar [here](#).

As part of the Cities on the Frontline Webinar Series, R-Cities launched the partnership with the Real Play Coalition, [Strengthening Urban Resilience Through Play](#).

Sylvester Turner, Mayor of Houston and Chair of R-Cities' Board, kicked off the session by launching the R-Cities and the Real Play Coalition' survey on how cities are building resilience through play. He continued to outline the City of Houston's commitment to children in their efforts to build back better.

"We must ensure that every child is respected, valued, treated fairly and loved."

Sylvester Turner, Mayor of Houston and Chair of R-Cities' Board.

Jerome Frost, Director at Arup and Co-Chair of the Real Play Coalition, provided the perspective of an urban practitioner. Arup's role in the coalition is particularly focused on the built environment, providing strategic and technical guidance for creating a safe, inclusive and playful

public realm. With London, Milan and Cape Town, Arup has driven the [Reclaiming Play in Cities initiative](#), including the development of the Urban Play Framework, to guide design and placemaking.

"Play is a bit of a Trojan horse, whilst the benefits seem to be for children – we are also at the same time investing in places that their parents, the elderly, and the wider community likes to enjoy."

Jerome Frost, Director at Arup and Co-Chair of the Real Play Coalition

To underscore the importance of play in the health and wellbeing of people at all ages, the session was joined by **Thiago Hérick de Sá, Healthy Urban Environment Technical Officer from the World Health Organization (WHO)**. He stressed that children are not only the beneficiaries of our work but must be active participants in the process of planning, implementing and monitoring it. Enhancing the agency of children is critical for enhancing their health and wellbeing throughout their lives.

"Health is not only an outcome but an input – we have a role to play as a larger health community, whether you are an engineer, urban planner an architect, you are all health professionals because what you do impacts public health."

Thiago Hérick de Sá, Healthy Urban Environment, Technical Officer, World Health Organization

Bringing in a design perspective, **Leticia Lozano, Co-Founder and Director of MACIA Estudio**, provided examples of initiatives and interventions in Mexico. Participatory processes and community engagement is central in their process through the design and evaluation process. At MACIA Estudio, they create frameworks and strategies to embed play into urban agendas, design and disseminate tools on the importance of play, guides on how to continue to play during Covid-19, among many other projects. Leticia stressed the importance of involving children, women and the elderly throughout the community engagement process.

"Think of what you enjoyed most as a child, and now as an adult, try to create those moments throughout the urban fabric."

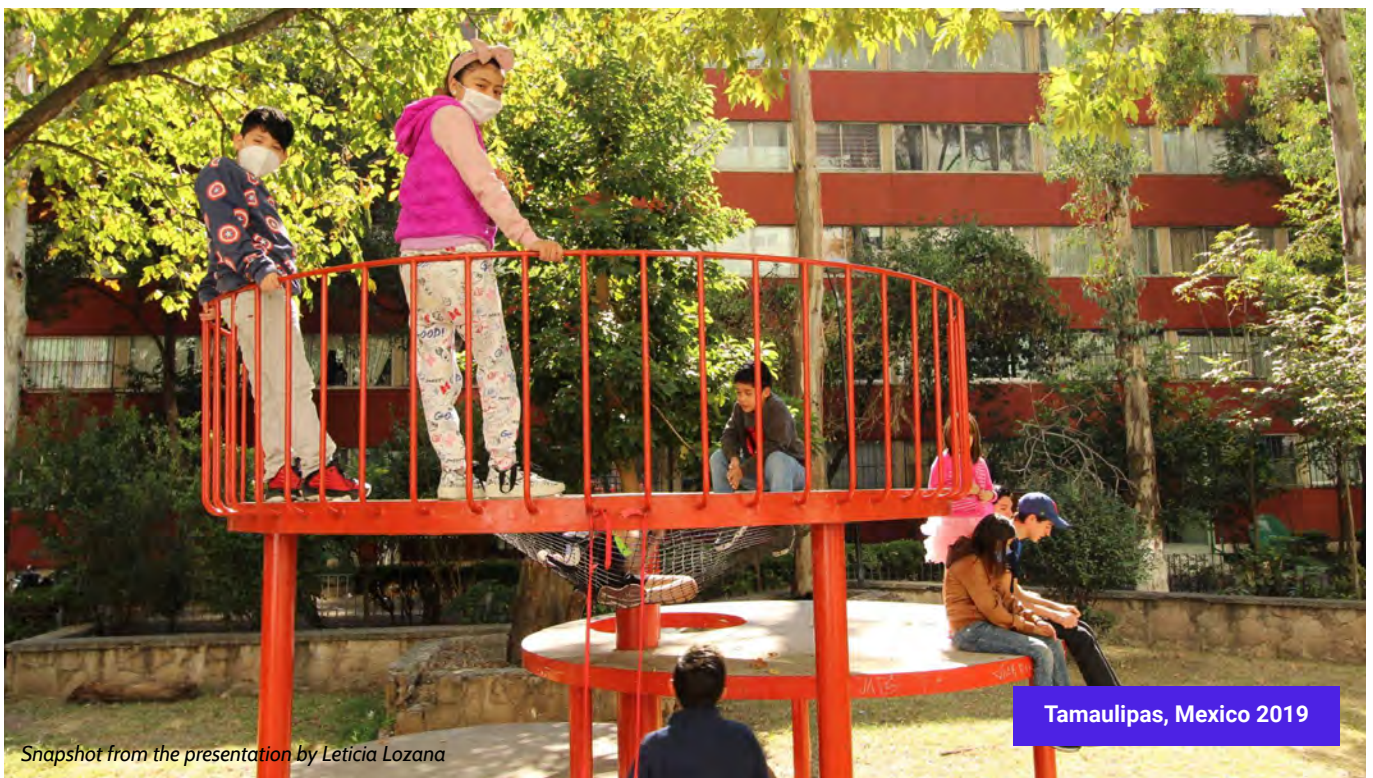
Leticia Lozano, Co-Founder and Director of MACIA Estudio, Mexico.

Finally, the webinar was joined by two people from **Belfast City Council – Richard McLernon, Project Coordinator for the Climate Unit, and Callie Persic, Regeneration Project Officer**. Together, they outlined the many placemaking and community projects the city has undertaken. Richard provided insight into the challenges youth face, the history of conflict and shocks faced by the city, and the [resilience strategy](#) that has come out of this. Callie described the interventions conducted to enhance the public realm and bring people back into the city centre. One of these examples was a pop-up park for children which was very well received and resulted in the growth of similar play and placemaking initiatives.

"Think of play broadly in the city center fabric. Integrated and not just as a space you go to. By doing that, it benefits play of all ages"

Callie Persic, Project Coordinator for the Climate Unit, Belfast City Council

The session then culminated in a discussion on how we can better recognize the many benefits of play, how it can be used to address inequalities and how cities can commit to children while building back better.



Snapshot from the presentation by Leticia Lozano

Tamaulipas, Mexico 2019

COP26: Fostering connections between nature & play



RESILIENCE HUB

CITIES, REGIONS & BUILT ENVIRONMENT



Fostering connections between nature and play, for children's well-being and resilience

10th November
11:15am – 12.45pm [GMT]
Resilience Hub Pavilion, Blue Zone

If you are tuning into this event virtually, please register [here](#) and log into the event platform [here](#)



Dame Jo da Silva
Global Director Sustainable Development, Arup



Dr Sara Candiracci
Associate Director, Arup



Marguerite H. Blair
Chief Executive, Play Scotland



Dr Anne Martin
Research Fellow, University of Glasgow



Richard McLernon
Belfast Resilience Project Coordinator



Ilaria Giuliani
Milan Deputy Chief Resilience Officer



Jennifer Lenhart
Global Lead, WWF Cities



Ahmed K. AbuLaban
Ramallah City Director, Chief Resilience Office







10 November 2021

Watch the event [here](#).

In November 2021, Arup, the Resilient Cities Network and the Real Play Coalition organised an event at COP26 in Glasgow to explore connections between children, nature and play, and the benefits that this powerful combination has not only for children's physical, mental and emotional health, but also for society and the planet.

A connection with the natural world is associated with a range of physical and mental health benefits, including lower rates of obesity, depression, stress and attention disorders. Urban green spaces have been shown to particularly benefit the elderly and young, tackling age-related inequality while improving health. Parks and nature can give everyone the sense of being part of a community, and children especially need places they can explore, feel safe and form attachments with both other people and the environment. However, the effects of urbanisation, such as deforestation, land take and diminished biodiversity, as well as a tendency for parks to be kept overly tidy, can make it difficult for children to develop and maintain meaningful contact with nature. Creating more green and

wild space at local, neighbourhood and city scales allows us to integrate the benefits of natural ecosystems into our everyday lives, whilst respecting planetary boundaries, and addressing the climate crisis. Since these spaces are flexible and adaptable, they have the potential to be enjoyed by everyone: wilder and more natural spaces close to schools, for example, could be used for outdoor learning, as well as intergenerational activities such as gardening and community events. This event, along with the below case studies from Belfast, Milan, Ramallah, Greater Manchester, and Barcelona, demonstrated how by fostering the linkages between nature and play, government authorities, communities and key stakeholders, can create and safeguard valuable ecosystem services for urban populations, whilst reclaiming play for children and meeting the climate goals, with benefits for the planet and society.

Belfast

The City of Belfast has historically been a place of conflict, as an economic target, where people have been cut off from the city center. The city is now trying to make it a place for people again.

Play has evolved in the city with traditional play spaces and greenspaces, now trying to bring back nature. Play is the opportunity for children to come out and get involved in their community. The City Resilience Strategy is very important on a number of fronts to capture the participation of children and young people. Sets out goals for the quality of urban childhoods, playful city, and making public squares more accessible. Young people consulted said Belfast was not a friendly city.

1M trees planted effort is for Belfast a platform to explore opportunities to integrate young people into the city. Engagement of National Tree Week at end of Nov through a tree give away event, and engagement with young people and build play.

Milan

The City of Milan has been studying the Play Street concept in other cities around Europe to create new areas in the city dedicated to play and to children. Play Streets is part of the City's Adaptation Strategy and the first thing to do after the pandemic - to have new spaces for the children to play and interact with their peers, because schools were closed so it was a need and necessity to create new places for children to play. The City of Milan decided to use this project to go in deep on the topic of play for one specific neighborhood, which helped to analyze how play is considered within the neighborhood. How were children considering their neighborhood, working specific neighborhood in the city a specific street we closed which is close to a school, and removed cars. The city gave back the streets to children and their families to let children understand and imagine the city of the future. Signed a collaboration with other local associations to organize workshops and pilots to close streets and give back to children to let them play.

Ramallah

In Ramallah the goal is for unstructured play in an outdoor space without controls from anyone - that is most important. Children gain so many benefits from play - respect for nature, more creative, more confident. Main challenges - urbanization (losing the nature due to building expansion) and technology (attracting children to games, social media, and laptop/phone creating addictions). The City is hosting outdoor events - Nowar Nissan Festival, Yalla 3 E17adiqa and Scouts camping to facilitate children's nature play. Also enhancing public parks - Park of Nations.

Greater Manchester

In Greater Manchester the importance children's access to nature and play is more clear than ever - it stimulates

the development motor skills. The City calculated \$1B GBP benefit to our people from nature. Top priority is bringing nature into schools - Community Forest - City of Trees working to green school grounds with free trees and run plant a tree day with children to leave a legacy of nature rich investment in schools. Nature based solutions to schools with biodiverse rain gardens, living education resource to kids.

Harness power of nature to help with children and young people mental health in the local wildlife trust to reconnect children with nature through activities like nature walks and food growing. 90% reported being more active and 80% reported making new friends. Health services prescribing time in nature rather than just taking medicine or drugs. Supporting children and young people to better connect with nature. We have the knowledge and tools - we must go further and fast and scale this up. Investing in greenspace is an investment in our children's future.

Barcelona

In the City of Barcelona the mission is to change the older model to have a safe, just, more equitable city with more nature, and focus of all efforts on groups of citizens with specific needs like children. Move from a city with playable areas, to a playable city overall. Advancing this work through Horizon 2030 program with 10 key milestones and 63 actions including an open streets program with safe and healthier school surroundings.

Asked children what activities they like the most - and designed the areas to appeal to kids desires. Closing streets for people in the city and facilitating free play. Program is Let's Protect the Schools - 600 schools in the city we are improving the surroundings in the next years in 3 years, removing traffic and making the surroundings more safe and healthier and more kind to have free playing - put elements for children to play for free and safer.



Snapshot from the event at COP

How to Finance for Play and Placemaking in Cities

CITIES on the FRONTLINE

Speaker Series #2

HOW TO FINANCE FOR PLAY & PLACEMAKING IN CITIES

February 3, 2022, 08.00 AM EST – 01.00 PM GMT – 9.00 PM SIN/KUL



CITIES NETWORK



City Resilience Program
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Register here
bit.ly/FundPlay



HOW TO FINANCE FOR PLAY & PLACEMAKING IN CITIES



Simon Henzell-Thomas
Global Head of Public Affairs & Advocacy, Ingka Group (IKEA)



Olivera Jankovska
Director of the Mayor's Office of Education, City of Houston's



Ilaria Giuliani
Deputy Chief Resilience Officer, City of Milan



Paul O'Hara
Founder CEO, ChangeX

3 February 2022

Watch the webinar [here](#).

As part of the Cities on the Frontline Webinar Series, R-Cities and the Real Play Coalition organized an event focusing on the importance of financing for play and placemaking in cities, particularly on how to create innovative approaches to finance projects and initiatives that build resilience through encouraging play. Building the city of the future requires first and foremost that children of today are empowered and prepared, not only to survive but to thrive in the face of adversity. Play is essential for children's health, physical, and emotional growth, and intellectual and educational development, it also helps children to acquire social and behavioral skills and build resilience. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on children, disrupting their schooling, affecting their well-being, social contact, and even nutrition.

Simon Henzell-Thomas, Global Head of Public Affairs & Advocacy for Ingka Group (IKEA) and keynote speaker for the session, opened the session by stressing the overwhelming positive effects of play on children. For

instance, he pointed out, research shows that play outside has decreased by 50% in the newer generations, but that creation of play spaces decreased local antisocial behaviors by 90%. The Real Play Coalition has the objective of embedding play-based principles into urban design and planning as this, in Simon's experience has been most systemic and effective way to finance play. As a gateway to the first presentation of the session, Simon posed the question:

How can these innovative partnerships and stakeholder collaborations, rather than exist in silos, become sustainable and scalable to complement more systemic urban planning?

"On the question of financing, for me, the most systemic way that we can achieve that is by making sure we embed play at the begging of urban planning and design."

Simon Henzell-Thomas, Global Head of Public Affairs & Advocacy for Ingka Group (IKEA)

Paul O'Hara, founder and CEO at ChangeX, took on Simon's question and shared the work that ChangeX is

leading. One of the things that Paul noticed in his past work experiences, was that initiatives often remain in the regions that they were created in and very rarely are scaled to other parts of the world. Therefore, the objective of ChangeX became to get finance and proven, innovative, packaged and adaptable ideas directly to anyone ready to lead impactful projects in their communities. Some of the examples of active work that Paul shared included Community Play Challenges in London and Brazil and the First LEGO league in partnership with the LEGO Foundation. As a final note, Paul enforced the importance of true collaboration between innovators, local communities, to make this type of projects possible.

"I always thought it was so wasteful that proven solutions which are relevant to other parts of the world were not getting out there. The idea behind Change X was: can we package all of the global proven social and environmental innovations and make them easily accessible in communities elsewhere?"

Paul O'Hara, Founder and CEO at ChangeX

The session also showcased the perspective of two Play Ambassador Cities, with **Ilaria Giuliani, deputy City Resilience Officer (CRO) for the City of Milan, and Olivera Jankovska, City of Houston's Director of the Mayor's Office of Education.**

Ilaria shared Milan's experience working on play by reflecting on their funding strategies and case studies of innovation in play financing. She emphasized the steps that were necessary to develop a framework for play in the city, these include the 2030 City Masterplan, and the Milan 2020 Adaptation Strategy that was created in response to the pandemic. Based on the priorities defined in these documents, the areas of environmental challenges, adaptive public space and play dedicated spaces were pulled out as key in reference to the need to implement play and placemaking in the city. This initial framework allowed them to start working on implementing the pilot "Playstreet" in collaboration with Arup and the Real Play Coalition, and with an internal local budget from the city. "Playstreets" consisted of temporarily closed streets near schools to increase the supply of play spaces for children and residents. However, while the initiative had a great response from the community and marked the city's first play related initiative, Ilaria indicated that a big task remains, after such success, how will the city act to make this an ordinary activity with a permanent budget?

"Our main challenge for the city of Milan is to shift from a scenario where we have been able to develop just two pilot projects to a more structured scenario where we can organize Playstreets as ordinary activities with our own budget."

Ilaria Giuliani, Deputy CRO for the City of Milan

Olivera wrapped up the session discussing the difficulty of accessing play in the city of Houston as this large city is resource rich, but access poor with a lot of opportunities that are scattered and hard to find. Based on this reality, Olivera shared two concrete actions that the city is acting on to make play more accessible. The first one is the creation of the "Out to Learn" program in collaboration with nonprofits which consists of a database to collect all activities in one single website where people can easily find the right ones for them. The second one is the launch of a program with corporate partners, tentatively named "Adopt a Park" that challenges corporate partners to work in a public private partnership to deliver play in communities, these range from small actions like hosting a community event, to bigger more permanent ones such as supporting the renovation of an entire park responding to local community needs.

"Every city of course has a limited budget, and we always struggle to figure out what the priorities are there. One of the creative ways we figured out we could help play was to launch a program that asked corporate partners to sponsor a renovation of, or an event at, a small neighborhood park to reinvigorate play in local neighborhoods."

**Olivera Jankovska
City of Houston's Director of the Mayor's Office of
Education**



Snapshot from the presentation by Paul O'Hara

Creating Resilient Cities – The Role of Play in Planning

CITIES on the FRONTLINE

Speaker Series #7

CREATING RESILIENT CITIES: THE ROLE OF PLAY IN PLANNING

May 5, 2022, 09.00 AM EST – 01.00 PM GMT – 9.00 PM SIN/KUL



CITIES NETWORK



City Resilience Program
GFDNR



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CREATING RESILIENT CITIES: THE ROLE OF PLAY IN PLANNING



Ariadna Miquel
Urban Strategy Director,
Office of the Chief
Architect, Barcelona
City Council



Dr. Sara Candiracci
Associate Director,
ARUP



Joana Dabaj
Co-founder at
CatalyticAction,
architect and
researcher

5 May 2022

Watch the webinar [here](#).

As part of the Cities on the Frontline Webinar Series, R-Cities and the Real Play Coalition organized an event focusing on how we can integrate play within city planning while co-designing the future with children and their caregivers to make them more playful.

Ariadna Miquel, Urban Strategy Director at the Office of the Chief Architect for the Barcelona City Council, started off the session by sharing Barcelona's experience and initiatives around play. To tackle climate change the city has called for an "Urban Reprogramming", involving several initiatives related to play, such as transforming roads into pedestrian streets and reclaiming space for people. The second initiative, "Plan for Play" focused on changing the mindset from a city with play areas to a payable city. The last initiative "Let's protect schools" focuses on the understanding that schools are social centers with the potential to be surrounded by multipurpose interaction and play spaces. To conclude Ariadna emphasized that it is possible to redefine public space to create ownership among the inhabitants in the city. She also took this

opportunity to mention that Barcelona has been named the UNESCO capital of architecture and to invite everyone to join them for the [UIA World Congress](#) that will take place in Barcelona in the year 2026.

"In our urban model we have some environmental quality indicators that show we have some problems including air pollution acoustic pollution, climate change and lack of green areas [...] We have to reprogram Barcelona and we have to work in three axis, nature, proximity and collaboration"

Ariadna Miquel, Barcelona City Council

Dr. Sara Candiracci, Associate Director at ARUP, and Joana Dabaj, Co-founder of CatalyticAction both complemented Ariadna's presentation by sharing some useful tools developed to help urban practitioners and city authorities integrate play in an efficient and effective way in their cities.

Sara presented the [Playful Cities Toolkit](#) which was developed in collaboration with the LEGO Foundation and provides a range of resources to support government authorities, urban practitioners and professionals working

on child development to better design and plan for play in cities. Sara continued her presentation by sharing some of the things that the toolkit is doing to help cities take advantage of the benefit of play and overcome challenges. To illustrate how the tool has been used, she shared the examples of the Reclaiming Play in Cities work implemented in London, Cape town and Milan. One of the core elements of the toolkit is the Urban Play Framework which helps understand the play in cities at different urban scales, and using a holistic view.

“We cannot design for play without engaging with children and their caregivers”

Dr. Sara Candiracci, Associate Director at ARUP

Joana talked about the work that Catalytic Action has been leading since 2014 to deliver playgrounds for refugee children in Lebanon, highlighting the importance of play in emergency contexts. More recent work has involved community collaborative interventions in severely affected areas of Beirut. Their experiences helped shaping the [DECID Handbook](#), a tool about co-designing built interventions with children affected by displacement. The handbook provides practical guidelines, tools, examples, and templates to give an understanding of the different ways that practitioners can work with children to get the most out of implemented spaces.

“How do we realize how such design processes have an impact that goes beyond the physical project

and that is much more linked to the process?”

Joana Dabaj, Co-founder at Catalytic Action

All panelists agreed on during the session that in order to reclaim play in cities, some important challenges must be overcome, including:

- > Reduced access to open space in urban settings and under supply of play spaces with changes in urban lifestyles that de-prioritize play,
- > Limited evidence and knowledge on the state and the value of play in cities which leads to low fundings for play initiatives,
- > Limited guidance for authorities who want to integrate play initiatives in their cities,
- > Lack of collaboration from different entities and levels of government necessary to implement projects and facing multiple operational challenges including safeguarding.
- > The panelists also agreed that there are multiple important benefits that can be harvested when implementing play initiatives, including:
 - > Strengthening child development by providing diversified learning opportunities;
 - > Contributing to children’s wellbeing with the development of social, physical and emotional skills;
 - > Creating a stronger sense of belonging and cohesion for communities as whole
 - > Generating co-benefits that address other important city agendas including climate change, security and create a positive impact on local economies.



Snapshot from the presentation by Joana Dabaj

Resources

1. Global Repository of Interventions for creating healthier environments: <https://www.who.int/tools/compendium-on-health-and-environment>
2. Healthy urban planning guidance: <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/331678>
3. Playful Learning Landscapes playbook: <https://playfullearninglandscapes.com/playbook/>
4. Proximity of Care Design guide: <https://www.proximityofcare.com/>
5. Reclaiming Play in Cities Approach: <https://www.arup.com/perspectives/publications/research/section/reclaiming-play-in-cities>
6. Playful Cities Toolkit: <https://www.arup.com/perspectives/publications/research/section/playful-cities-toolkit-resources-for-reclaiming-play-in-cities>
7. Activating Play in Milan: <https://www.arup.com/perspectives/publications/promotional-materials/section/activating-play-in-milan>
8. Activating Play in London: <https://www.arup.com/perspectives/publications/promotional-materials/section/activating-play-in-london>
9. Specific guidance for children's environmental health: * WHO Training Package on Children's Environmental Health for the health sector and paediatric environmental history <https://www.who.int/teams/environment-climate-change-and-health/settings-populations/children/capacity-building>
10. Children's Environmental Health atlas <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241511773>
11. Children and digital dumpsites, e-waste exposure and child health <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240023901>
12. Air pollution and child health: prescribing clean air <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/air-pollution-and-child-health>
13. New report with recommendations on structuring family-involved playful learning in communities: <https://williampennfoundation.org/what-we-are-learning/family-learning-and-literacy-urban-settings>
14. WHO's Global action plan on physical activity 2018–2030: more active people for a healthier world: <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/272722/9789241514187-eng.pdf>
15. Lessons from Brookings for scaling play across a city: <https://williampennfoundation.org/what-we-are-learning/philadelphia-playful-learning-landscapes-scaling-strategies-playful-learning>
16. Another place families spend a lot of time is on public transportation. A major interactive and playful campaign designed with input from children and families is about to launch on the sixth largest transit agency in the US. See <https://www.readingpromise.org/adventure>



The LEGO Foundation

ARUP

