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Understanding Well-Being Through Children's Eyes: Lessons for Shaping the Built Environment

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Abstract

The role of socio-spatial contexts in promoting children's well-being in urban planning and design is gaining attention. Nevertheless, the discourse on children's well-being has primarily been shaped by adults, often overlooking the unique needs and perspectives of younger populations. This interdisciinary study located in Berlin, Germany, conducted by educational scientists, planners, and architects, challenges this by directly engaging with children through game-based data collection combined with ethnographic research to explore their well-being needs. From children's centers and schools to digital worlds, neighborhoods, and interactions with crime, children clearly articulate where, how, when, and with whom they create moments of well-being. The findings highlight the importance of children's centers as well-being hubs, offering insights into how well-being can be nurtured through both physical design and programmatic offerings tailored to children's needs. A key insight is the role of religious places and family practices, alongside micro-spaces and translocal references provided by neighborhood spaces, in shaping children's sense of identity and well-being. Additionally, the importance of having access to digital spaces is emphasized by the children. The study contributes to the discourse on child-friendly cities by advocating for multi-scalar planning and design approaches. The research calls for urban planners and designers to integrate children's perspectives to design spaces that accommodate the full spectrum of children's well-being needs, including micro-scale interventions and flexible, child-responsive interior designs.

1. Introduction: How Can Children's Well-Being Be Promoted in Urban Spaces?

The concept of well-being, although not new in planning and design, gained importance following the pandemic, which significantly affected spaces for children's play and learning (Cortés-Morales et al., 2022; Million, 2021; Zougheibe et al., 2024). Since then, the planning and design professions have increasingly explored how to foster well-being (UIA International Union of Architects, n.d.). However, spatial planning and design is still predominantly adult-centric in its perspectives and actions (Castillo Ulloa et al., 2022), and often overlooks the unique needs and rights of children. There is little awareness of children's conceptualization of their well-being (Fattore et al., 2016), which gained traction in the early 2000s. The focus outlined here, especially when linked to child-friendly cities' (CFCs) initiatives, is not just about enriching children's present experiences but also about shaping cities that nurture their growth and development, taking their understanding of well-being as a starting point.

In an era where urban environments are a dominant living condition undergoing transformation (Million et al., 2021; Seasons, 2021), the objective of this article is to contribute to the scholarly understanding of how children construct their well-being in cities and to explore the implications of children's perspectives on urban planning, design, and architecture. This is undertaken through a still ongoing interdisciplinary research project called "Well-being in Socio-Spatial Contexts: Intersectional Perspectives on Children's Experiences at Non-School Learning Sites" (WIKK*I). Educational scientists, planners, and architects jointly research how children create well-being within socio-spatial contexts, how this well-being can be captured and described in a qualitative study, and how it can inform planning, design, and architectural practice. The research focuses on children in Berlin, conducted through participatory methods at a children's center. In this article, the case study setting is introduced and framed by a review of the evolution of the concept of children's well-being within the broader scope of CFCs and the focus on the built environment. After describing our qualitative research approach, we present findings from our case and then discuss their implications for planning, design, and architecture.

2. State of Research and Practice: From Well-Being to CFC and the Focus of Built Environment

2.1. Children's Perspectives on Well-Being

Child well-being is a concept that spans multiple disciplines and addresses children's living conditions and lifeworlds from a normative perspective of a good, just, or desirable childhood (Fegter & Fattore, 2024). Depending on the disciplinary background, child well-being is defined either as an objective, multifaceted construct that includes, for example, living conditions and access to education, as a subjective construct in terms of happiness and satisfaction, or as a cultural construct, depending on the norms and valued practices in a cultural community (Fattore et al., 2019). Important reference theories are the Capability Approach, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and psychological need theories (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014). As mentioned before, the well-being concept is not new, it had already begun to attract attention across various fields even before the Covid-19 pandemic. It is prominently explored from social welfare and health perspectives (Bautista et al., 2023; Brown et al., 2019), often situated at the interface between research and policy and with an international comparative perspective (see Andresen & Neumann, 2018; Bradshaw & Rees, 2018; Casas et al., 2018; Hurrelmann & Andresen, 2013; OECD, 2009; UNICEF, 2013).

Traditionally dominated by quantitative and adult-centric studies, attention has recently shifted to children's perspectives. Ben-Arieh (2006, pp. 6–7) highlighted four key shifts toward recognizing children's views on well-being:

> (1) a shift from a focus on a child's mere survival to a focus on well-being and other attributes; (2) from a focus on negative aspects in children's lives to a focus on positive aspects; (3) from a focus on well-becoming (attaining eventual well-being in adulthood) to well-being (attaining well-being during childhood); and (4) from a focus on traditional to new domains of children's well-being (Ben-Arieh, 2005; Brown and Moore, 2001).

He and other scholars argued that if the Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted in 1989 is taken seriously, then these shifts are mere consequences, and how well-being is defined and researched needs to be reconsidered. Up to today, the number of studies researching children's perspectives on well-being has grown, discussing dimensions and indicators, methods, and ways to reconstruct it.

Most statistical studies now include both objective and subjective measures. For example, the OECD (2015) has produced a multidimensional monitoring report on child well-being that uses a combination of objective and subjective indicators, including measures of income, poverty, and literacy, but also self-reported health and subjective life satisfaction. Studies focusing only on children's subjective well-being have also become increasingly important, both internationally and nationally. There is, for example, the "International Survey of Children's Well-Being" (ISCIWeB), containing data sets of about 200,000 children between eight and 12 years old in more than 40 countries, while ISCIWeB provides predominantly empirical quantitative material. Another example is the "Multinational Children´s Understandings of Well-being—Global and Local Contexts" study. Teams from 25 countries in the Global South and Global North are currently involved in the project, using qualitative, participatory methods to explore children's own concepts and constructions of well-being and how these are embedded in social and cultural contexts (Fattore et al., 2019, 2021a). A cornerstone study conducted in Australia identified the now well-accepted categories of self (self-esteem), agency (power to act), and safety and security as central to children's understanding of well-being (Fattore et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the socio-spatial focus, as well as research contributions from the disciplines of urban planning, design, and architecture, are rare.

With the rising number of people migrating (UNICEF, 2021), current studies further highlight the importance of translocal family settings for children's experiences of well-being in the context of global migration as well as the impact of digital mediatization (Castillo Ulloa et al., 2022; Fattore et al., 2021b; Fegter & Mock, 2019; Zeitlyn, 2014). It demonstrates how globalization and mediatization are influencing children's well-being, calling for a greater emphasis on multi-scalar aspects of well-being. This includes the "possibility that children's concepts and experiences of well-being may not necessarily be an expression and element of the nation-state, but potentially a function of multiple processes that occur at different levels and scales, which could be conceived through other categories than the nation-state" (Fattore et al., 2019, p. 401). In line with the discussion on children's well-being, the research presented here builds on a child-centered concept of well-being, using the dimensions of agency, security, and self (Fattore et al., 2016) as sensitizing heuristic concepts. This analytical approach looks at the child's lifeworld, the child's subjective perspectives, and the socio-spatial context in terms of how it enables or limits the realization of children's well-being (Bagattini, 2019; Fegter & Fattore, 2024).

2.2. Linking CFCs and Well-Being With a Focus on the Built Environment

Alongside the depicted development of well-being research, the concept of the CFC emerged. In 1996, UNICEF launched the Child-Friendly City Initiative at the UN Habitat II Conference (Malone, 2006). This initiative has focused on fostering children's development, ensuring adherence to their fundamental rights. The aim of enhancing children's well-being was also said to be achieved by improving the quality of urban environments. A decade later and building upon an earlier report on "Ask the Children: Overview of Children's Understanding of Wellbeing" the social scientists Woolcock and Steele (2008) conducted a literature review to link child-friendly community initiatives and well-being by focusing on the aspect of the physical environment. They conclude that:

> The physical environment has not received the same attention as other issues around child-friendly communities such as children's participation, governance, agency, social capital, and community capacity building. In a practical sense, the physical (both built and natural) environment is a difficult concept to disentangle from other social and political factors within a community setting. (Woolcock & Steele, 2008, p. 27)

The authors highlighted studies, including the second edition of "Growing Up in Cities" (GUIC II), originally started by the urban planner Kevin Lynch (Lynch, 1977), which explored aspects of physical environments that children themselves deem important. GUIC II included children from Argentina, Australia, the United Kingdom, India, Norway, Poland, South Africa, and the USA (Chawla, 2002). It concludes with several priorities to foster child-oriented spaces, including the presence of green areas, the provision of basic services, and a variety of activity settings that allow for diverse experiences. The children also valued freedom from physical dangers and freedom of movement, which facilitate safer, more autonomous exploration. Essential to their lives are peer gathering places, reductions in traffic, minimal litter or trash, and improved geographic accessibility and connectivity.

In comparison, the list provided by Bartlett (2005, based on Bartlett, 1999) offers a more extensive and detailed account of children's recommendations and priorities for improving the physical environment of their community. Bartlett emphasizes the need for designated places and spaces for children, suggesting the identification of areas with insufficient recreational space relative to the population, and highlights the importance of providing resources that cater to both boys and girls. Moreover, she emphasizes the importance of children's participation, recommending that children be consulted about the location and development of community infrastructure like pedestrian crossings and be involved in identifying and securing spaces for play. In her later works, Bartlett also emphasizes that conflicts and violence involving children, as well as responses to them, should inherently include aspects of the physical design and maintenance of spaces (Bartlett, 2017).

Looking at the spatial research and design practice onwards, the focus on children's well-being within the sustainable development of cities has predominantly been in relation to health and education. Children's spatial needs are often viewed through the duality of play and independent mobility, such as roaming around, versus attending school and obtaining an education (Barton, 2009). In a CFC-themed issue of *Cities & Health*, the editors criticize this narrow viewpoint (Brown et al., 2019, p. 1). The editors highlight, regarding child-friendly practice, the already rich portfolio of implemented examples, yet they come also to the

conclusion that "children's rights-based approaches have had little strategic influence on the built form of cities to date" (Brown et al., 2019, p. 4).

A recent literature review by spatial researchers (Cordero-Vinueza et al., 2023) also addresses the creation of CFCs, this time identifying the link to socio-spatial urban planning and making reference to children's well-being as defined by Woolcock and Steele (2008). In conclusion, they also identify an implementation gap and a research gap regarding "why child-friendly city approaches are not yet influencing urban environments" (Cordero-Vinueza et al., 2023, p. 11). Moreover, based on the current state of knowledge and practice concerning subjective well-being in general—not specifically for children—Mouratidis develops potential pathways and strategies on how well-being could be explicitly improved through urban planning. He is among the few to mention the benefits of access to ICT for subjective well-being (Mouratidis, 2021).

Well-being as an overall concept gained more attention in parallel to the Covid-19 pandemic (Cellucci & Di Sivo, 2021; Mouratidis & Yiannakou, 2022; Pérez del Pulgar et al., 2020; Song et al., 2021). Despite this, Mouratidis (2021, p. 1), in his conceptual paper, concludes that "the links between the built environment and subjective well-being are not sufficiently understood." This article shall contribute to this.

3. Research Setting as a Starting Point for Children's Perspectives on Well-Being

In our research, we examined the concepts and experiences of well-being among children who visit a children's center in Berlin. We selected this center based on a previous cooperation that had established trust on both sides, as well as the vibrant urban neighborhood. Both the neighborhood setting and the children's center will be briefly introduced. To protect privacy, and because the presentation and discussion of findings do not require it, we have opted to pseudonymize and generalize locational and institutional information.

3.1. A Berliner District With Wealth and Poverty Juxtaposed

Our study is placed in a district with culturally diverse neighborhoods, featuring late 19th-century European city architecture alongside newly constructed social housing units dating back to the 1980s. During the division of Berlin (1961–1989), the district became home to many immigrants as well as a large youth and student population. The area features tree-lined streets, two large parks, and lively main streets with multicultural stores. A main plaza, a local landmark, hosts a vibrant street market and serves as a transportation hub. Despite having the two major parks that serve more than one district and can be reached within a 10 to 30-minute walk from the children's center, the provision of public green spaces within the neighborhoods is considered inadequate (Berlin.de, 2020).

The immediate neighborhoods around the children's center have approximately 20,000 residents (as of 2017) with an average age of 38.4 years, which is the average across Berlin. Within the district's population, 46% have a migrant background, with 35% originating from countries within Europe, with 22% specifically tracing their roots to Turkey (Berlin.de, 2020). The neighborhood exhibits socio-economic diversity, with wealth and poverty juxtaposed in close proximity, reflected in a mix of nicely renovated and repair-needing 19th-century housing stock, alongside social housing infill settlements. The social housing stock is of good design quality in terms of architecture and floor plans. This socio-economic diversity presents both challenges and opportunities for community cohesion. The disparity is evident in the distinct average

income levels, with a social welfare receipt rate of 46.25% and an unemployment rate of 4.96% (as of 31.12.2018) in social housing, contrasting with the middle-class demographic prevalent in the older building district (Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung und Wohnen Berlin, 2020). A specific area of street blocks within the district stands out as a social hotspot, characterized by poverty and crime and gaining notoriety in national newspapers due to organized crime structures. According to social workers, the image of these street blocks acts as an educational barrier for children, perpetuating a culture of silence and stigmatization, which further exacerbates issues of deviance labeling.

Overall, the neighborhood is well equipped with primary school facilities as well as with day-care facilities and secondary schools. Within the district, there is a severe undersupply of youth recreational facilities, with two out of three facilities located in the study area. The children's center, though open to all, primarily serves children from socially disadvantaged families, as confirmed by the social workers. From their input, we also infer that most visiting children live within walking distance. Children's and youth centers in Germany are mostly public institutions and funded by the municipality, here the respective districts of Berlin. As institutions, they aim to provide children and youth with a safe and meaningful place to spend their free time, offering educational opportunities that are tailored to their needs alongside school (Reutlinger et al., 2021).

3.2. The Walk-In Children's Center and Their Children

The children's center itself is situated on a fenced plot surrounded by five to six-story block buildings along a four-lane tree-lined road with heavy traffic, including a bus line and a metro line in walking distance to the center. The building of the institution is gated by a fence with tall bushes surrounding the property, providing both privacy and noise reduction from the street. A prominent sign at the entrance indicates the facility's name and operating hours. The facility itself features open green spaces, a playground, a ball court, and a ping-pong table. Architecturally, the building integrates with these green spaces, surrounding a small, paved entrance plaza suitable for biking or skating. Movable benches and tables line the perimeter of this plaza. Inside, the small hallway of the building opens into various rooms. The largest room is a multi-purpose area with ample natural light, suitable for play, activities, and performances. The flexible design allows for easy adaptation to different needs, with stackable seating and mats. Another room serves as a space for games, reading, drawing, and crafting, complete with wooden climbing opportunities and niches for children to hide or retreat. However, observations suggest that these spaces are frequently used, in particular, during cold seasons for gaming, drawing, or playing an instrument or reading. During cold weather periods, we used this room for our game-based data collection.

Based on the walk-in atmosphere of the children's center, we worked together with children aged between four and 13 years old, reflecting the demographic spectrum served by the institution. We know by talking to the pedagogical staff, as well as to the children, that the children come from across the socioeconomic and cultural spectrum, many of them first- or second-generation migrant children. Most of the participants are growing up bilingual or trilingual. Only a small group of children have German as their only language.

4. Qualitative Research Design

The research project aims to explore how children construct well-being in urban settings and the role of out-of-school institutions. To this end, the project takes a child-centered approach: on the one hand, it follows

the premises of childhood studies and understands children as social actors and co-constructors of knowledge (Purdy & Spears, 2020). It also draws on strands of child well-being research that investigate what children themselves understand by well-being and that have reconstructed the three dimensions of agency, security, and self as important aspects of well-being from children's perspectives (Fattore et al., 2016). As there are few studies on well-being in urban settings from children's perspectives, the research is methodologically exploratory and characterized by the "temporary immersion of the researchers in the events to be studied" (Schulz, 2014, p. 225), with the aim of understanding the practices of meaning-making in the field.

We chose different ethnographic methods to allow the research to be open to different stories, experiences, and understandings of what well-being means for children and the role socio-spatial contexts play in promoting children's well-being in urban settings: participant observation (DeWalt & DeWalt, 1998), situated interviews (Clark, 2017), go-alongs (Kusenbach, 2003), and a game-based approach (Groat & Dodig, 2021), all focused on understanding from the children's perspectives where, when, with whom do they do well and do they feel good? What does this mean for them? How does it manifest itself for them? What does it depend on? The data collection was carried out between 2022 and 2023.

Explicit consent was obtained from the children (Fischer & März, in press). Consent was facilitated using child-friendly leaflets and ongoing conversations. Children were informed that they could withdraw from interviews, go-alongs, and the game at any time, and sometimes they did so if they were distracted by others or simply did not want to continue. We regularly checked with each child whether they were willing to continue. The research team had also been trained in child protection issues and had purchased supervision resources as part of the project funding in order to receive professional support during the project in the event of indications of "children at risk" (*Kindeswohlgefährdung*, a legal term of the German Civil Code) or other critical cases.

The participant observations, go-alongs, and situated interviews were conducted by a team of educational researchers, one of whom was already familiar with the setting from previous research. During the go-alongs, the children were asked to show places where they liked to be and to discuss what they valued there and what they experienced there. Data was collected through spontaneous and situational conversations between participants and researchers while walking around the neighborhood. Participant observations and go-alongs were documented with audio, field notes, and observation protocols, including maps. Audio segments were later transcribed. A total of 25 children aged eight and 12 years took part in these data collections.

The game-based approach was led by a team of urban planning scientists. The aim was to delve deeper into aspects of well-being by developing a game-based research tool as a participatory method of data collection to capture the interest of more children to participate in the research by creating a more relaxed environment as well as encouraging social interaction. As researchers, we can observe how choices are made, which priorities are set concerning when and where children feel comfortable or happy, and how they experience a sense of agency, security, and self. For our data collection, an existing spatial analysis game called "Agenten & Komplizen" (Benze et al., 2021) was adapted to our research and reinterpreted based on the data we had already collected through observations, interviews, and go-alongs, followed by coding and the formation of categories. The data used for the game set production mainly contained places, activities, and persons children mentioned as positive during interviews and go-alongs. They were transformed into a tile set used in the game, along with the option for participants to produce new tiles during the game

session. The game itself unfolds in two parts, engaging groups of children ranging from two to five participants (Figure 3). Initially, participants are tasked with creating a well-being map using either predefined tiles or new tiles. Placed on a game board (Figure 1) featuring distinct zones—Center, Middle, and Periphery—the tiles prompt participants to prioritize aspects of their well-being, fostering negotiation and reflection within the group. During this level, the children negotiate with each other about what is important to them for their well-being. In the second part of the game, participants are given the option to retain their perspective. Each child is prompted to express their views on key well-being domains—agency, security, and self—using DIN-A5 cards containing questions. Children are encouraged to answer the questions either in writing or with a drawing. In total, there were 13 game sessions played (Figure 1) with a total of 36 children participating.

In terms of data analysis, the game results were analyzed using grounded theory techniques, following an iterative process of data collection and analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). This involved using the insights from the analysis carried out after each game session to inform the subsequent iteration of data collection. At first, we reconstructed seven categories based on the placement of the tiles, which were further refined through clustering of findings and validated again by insights from go-alongs and situated interviews:

- PERSON: This category encompasses individuals or groups explicitly mentioned by the participants.
- OBJECTS: Refers to items, goods, or food specifically written by participants on game cards.
- PLACES: Represents significant locations in the participants' neighborhood, identified as important by the participants themselves.
- ACTIVITIES: Involves games or sports that participants expressed enjoying.
- RELIGION: Encompasses religious concepts explicitly mentioned by the participants.
- DIGITAL MEDIA: Involves digitized activities and content that participants brought into the conversation.
- NATURE: Encompasses urban landscapes, as well as flora and fauna identified by the participants.

Secondly, the categories were used in a graphical analysis via diagrams and relational maps (Copeland & Agosto, 2012) and in synthesizing findings in multi-scalar mappings (Pelger et al., 2021) of children's
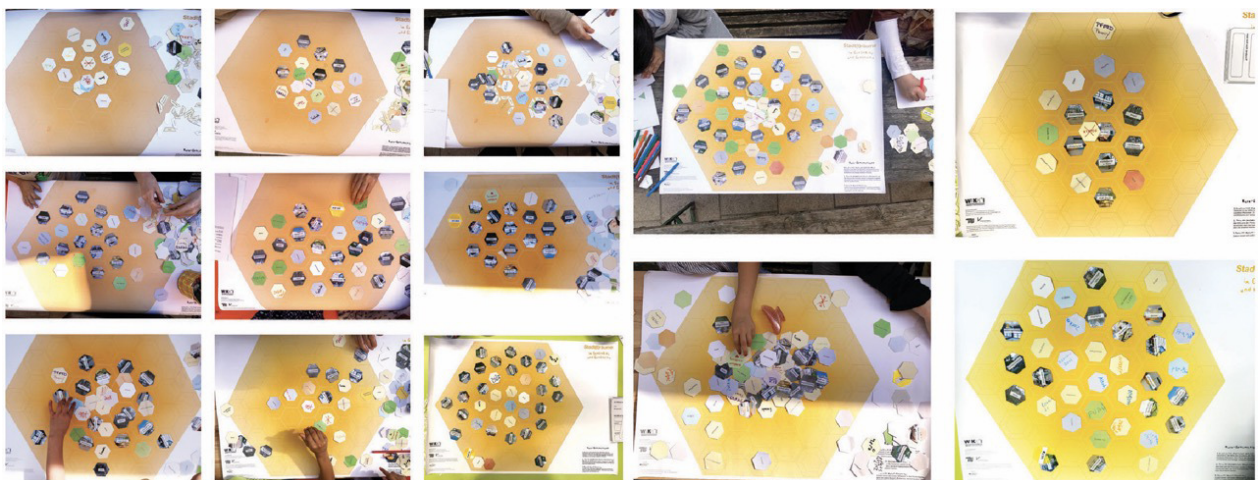

Figure 1. Photo documentation showing the end result of 13 game sessions. The game board itself was a poster indicating a playing field of well-being, where tiles could be placed. Source: Authors, WIKK*I.

well-being. Importantly, the diagrams and relational maps also illustrate the dynamics of play. It depicts a shift in content importance during the game, with certain elements moving from the center, signifying high importance, to the outer circle, indicating comparatively lower significance (Figure 2).

Thirdly, a joint data session was carried out as a form of triangulation (Krüger & Pfaff, 2008) with the educational scientists who had focused on participant observation and individual interviews. The educational scientist took the results of the graphical analyses—particularly the categories of persons, objects, places, activities, digital media, and nature—and identified and analyzed sequences in their data where children talked about the meaning of these categories in more detail: How do they construct particular persons, objects, places, activities, digital media, and nature as relevant to experiences of agency, security, and self? The findings presented below are the result of triangulation and are illustrated with material from both the game and the interviews, as well as participant observation.
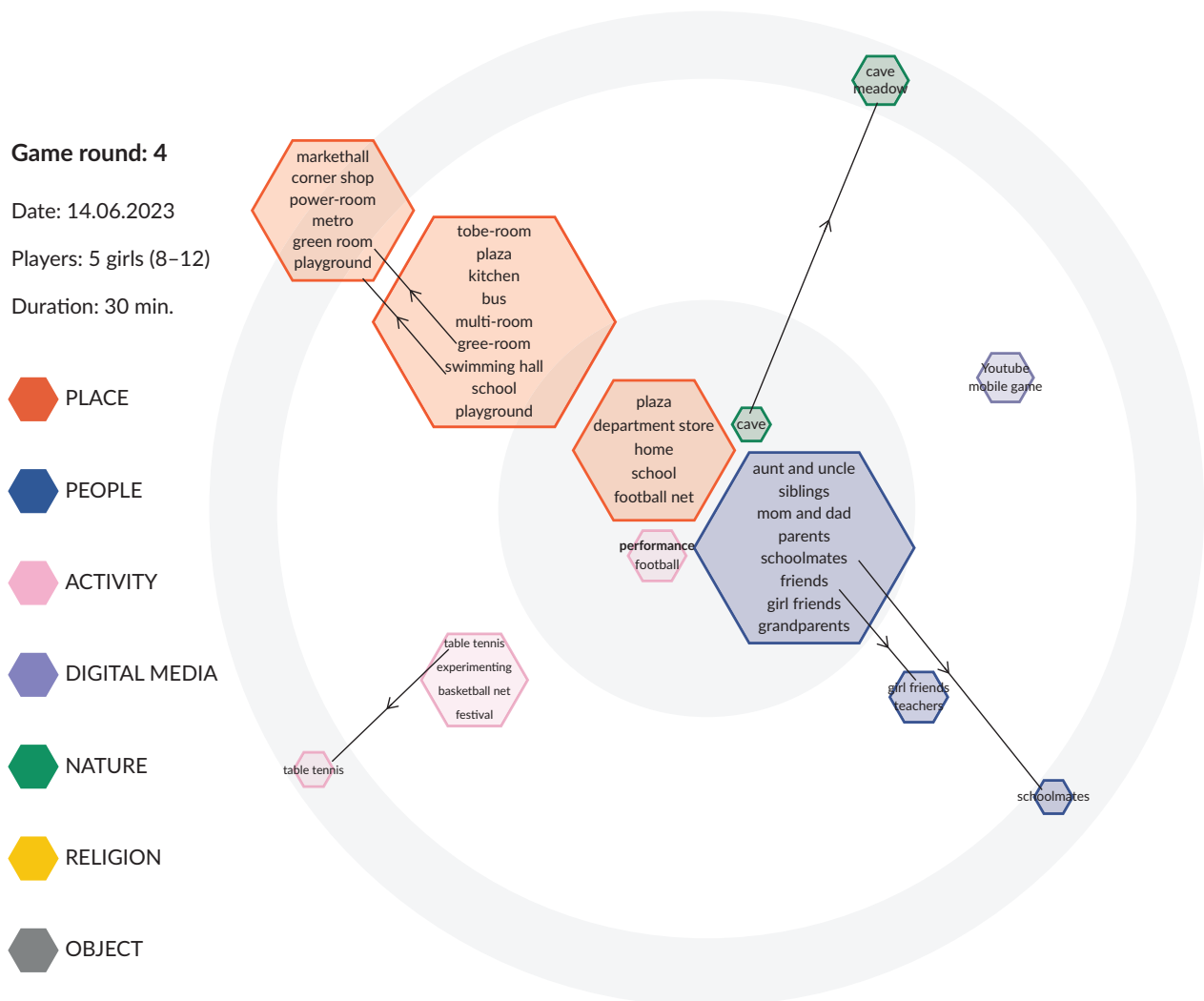

Figure 2. An analytical diagram and relational map of one game session. In this specific example, elements deemed less important were moved to the outer playing field, while overall persons and activities dominated the center stage, emphasizing their significance in the participants' well-being. Source: Authors, WIKK*I.

5. Findings: Children's Prioritization of Elements That Influence Their Well-Being

5.1. Unveiling Significance in Children's Well-Being

Figure 3 shows a collage of tiles that dominated the center of the playing field, aimed at identifying those underscored as particularly significant by participants. Notably, tiles associated with "PERSONS," "PLACES," and "RELIGION" emerged prominently in this central space, suggesting a consensus among participants regarding the importance of these elements. Throughout all game sessions, participants tended to place tiles from these categories in the center early on, signifying their immediate significance to well-being. Tiles residing in the transitional area between "particularly significant" and "not very significant" provided insights into elements that held a nuanced level of importance. "PLACES" and "NATURE" often occupied the middle ground, reflecting varying participant views on their importance to well-being. Examining the tiles along the outer edge of the playing field, labeled as "less significant," revealed patterns related to elements participants deemed less crucial or at times even unpleasant. Interestingly, "PLACES" once again dominated this outer space, suggesting that certain aspects within this category were consistently perceived as less significant or potentially undesirable by the participants.

Part of the graphical analysis also involved the analysis of dynamic Shifts and temporal patterns as they surfaced during the game sessions, particularly regarding the categories of "DIGITAL MEDIA" and "PLACES." While tiles from these categories were frequently emphasized as significant by participants at the outset of the game session, they experienced a shift in perception over time. Subsequent phases of the game sessions saw a re-evaluation, with participants categorizing these elements as "not very significant."

5.2. Family Matters: Transnational Family Ties and Religious Practices

Looking in more detail at the game results and across the various elements discussed and placed as tiles on the well-being game board, family emerged as a central theme (see also Figure 2). As the tiles indicate, the children emphasized the importance of their immediate family members, including not only parents and

Figure 3. Collage of all tiles that reached the center ring of the game board, sometimes named more than once. Source: Authors, WIKK*I.

siblings but also underscoring the significant role of a wider family in their well-being, which include grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. These findings align with participant observations and interview data from the educational researchers. During the go-alongs, the children pointed out how they often roam the neighborhood with siblings or shared insights into their lives, revealing that one or two key family members serve as their primary anchors of safety and security. There are also several individual stories indicating how family structures extend beyond geographical and national boundaries, where family members might live in different countries but still share a strong familial network. It examines how these families operate across borders, influencing their identity, belonging, and social practices. It can also influence how children render certain spaces in the neighborhood, which were also declared important for their well-being during the game. One example is a central plaza that has a city district-wide importance due to its history and a major department store and mobility hub located at and under the plaza. The plaza itself is also a marketplace. One boy in a go-along explained how it reminded him of bazaar markets in his family's foreign hometown.

Closely connected to the importance of family in children's well-being, the role of religion appeared in the game sessions on children's well-being. In our research, tiles inscribed with religious terms such as "Allah" or "Gott" (spelled by one child as "got") were notably added by the children, underscoring the significance of religious practices and at times corresponding places (Figure 3). Although these religious elements were not crucial for all participants—there were game sessions where religion was not mentioned—they held particular importance for a subset, and more so among boys. Tiles related to "religion" were often placed at the center of the game board, signaling their central role in the children's lives. This observation aligns with findings from ethnographic studies where activities such as praying, attending mosque, and participating in religious festivals like the Festival of Breaking the Fast and Ramadan, including the fasting itself, emerged as integral to the respective children's narratives and identity formation. Additionally, religious practices act as a catalyst for family and community gatherings, strengthening bonds within and across families and communities. These shared activities are vital for some children, significantly affecting their sense of identity and belonging. Through these religious engagements, children find personal significance and connect with their community, highlighting the profound influence of religion on the social worlds of some children.

5.3. Children's Center as a Hub of Well-Being

Depicting the elements centrally placed by the children during the well-being discussion, the diagrammatic analysis revealed a large number and variety of tiles within different categories related to the children's center (Figure 4). It is essential to recognize the assortment of micro-places highlighted, suggesting that the children's center provides diverse micro-places of well-being, including the "Green Salon," the "Power-room," the "Workshop," and the "Kitchen." These indoor spaces feature elements like mirror cabinets and stages. Outdoor areas featuring objects such as climbing frames and soccer goals were also highlighted. Additionally, individuals like social pedagogues and various natural elements on site were acknowledged. The range and volume of aspects relating to the Children's Center stand out as significant findings within the game results.

Our analysis of the institution's environment revealed a variety of structural moments and spatial arrangements that collectively contribute to creating positive experiences. At the center of this environment are flexible educational and play opportunities as well as a flexible schedule that allows children to decide for themselves when and in which activities they participate. During the participant observations, we could

witness how the power room was a place of noisy and indeed powerful chaotic play allowing for extensive activity. In addition, the voluntary nature of participation and the diverse age structure, welcoming pupils of different ages, and having a children's parliament, also contribute to the dynamic nature of the facility and moments of agency, empowerment, and participation. In the interviews of phase 1, it was also highlighted how educators are seen as long-term reference persons. Overall, the children's center indeed creates a dense place of well-being for the children.

In this study, several children also identified school as a crucial component of their well-being, citing the importance of schoolmates, friends, and occasionally teachers (Figure 4). However, no specific micro-spaces within the school were highlighted during the game sessions. The participant observations, interviews, and go-alongs also did not reveal significant insights into micro-places of well-being at school either, but
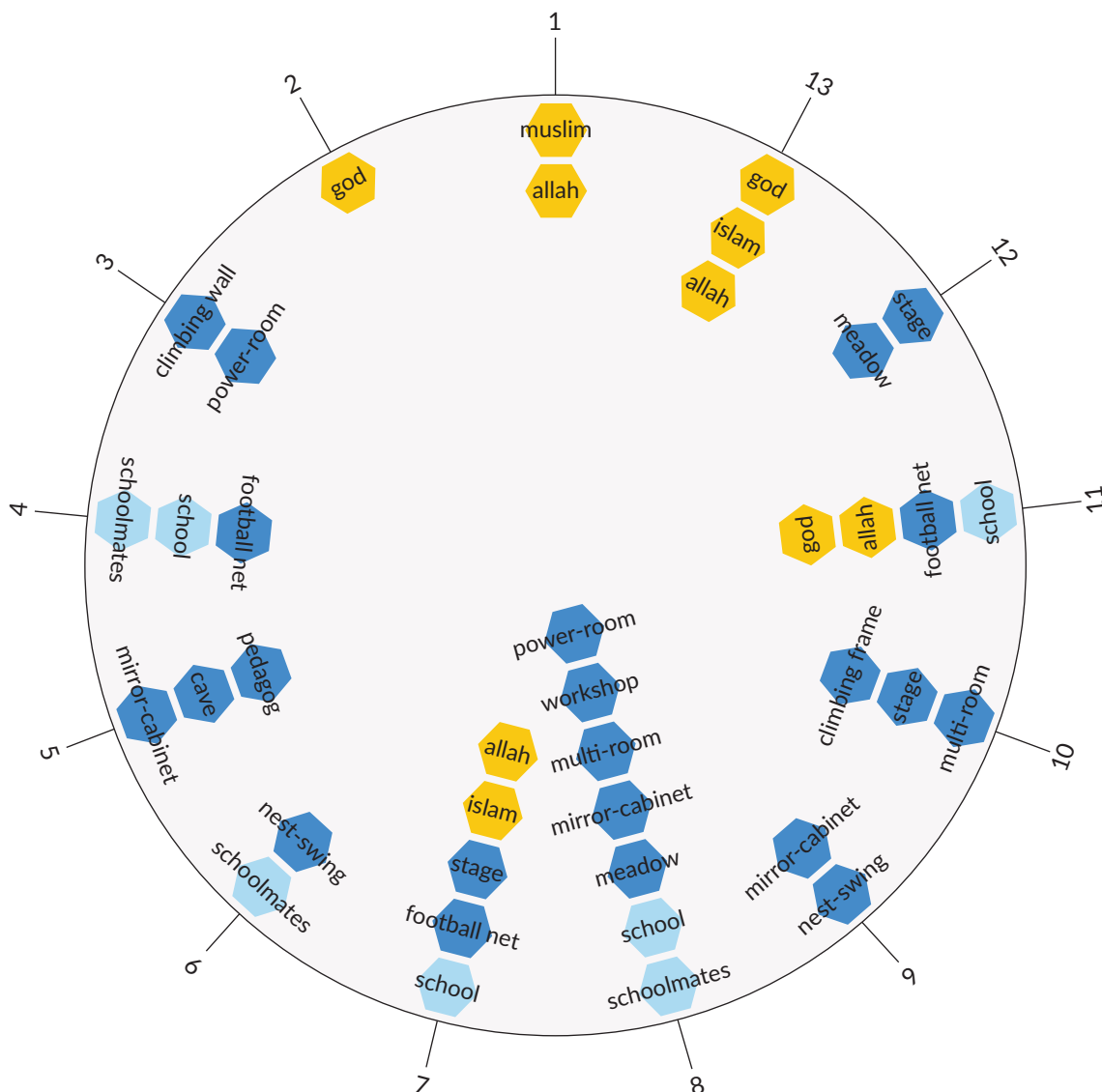

Figure 4. The analytical diagram displays all game sessions, highlighting tiles that belong to the category of religion (yellow) and elements related to the children's center (dark blue) and school (light blue). Source: Authors, WIKK*I.

some children describe the school environment as a safe place due to its enclosed gates. Additionally, one girl discussed the development of personal agency and empowerment, taking pride in personal accomplishments and the recognition by her family. Our observations include other positive remarks often tied to academic achievements or affirmations from teachers (WIKK*I field note 21). Nevertheless, one concerning incident involved a girl who reported being assaulted by a boy; she defended herself but reported that she was subsequently punished by a teacher (WIKK*I field note 18). Regarding well-being, school is multifaceted, offering both support and obstacles to the participating children. While it provides a sense of security and opportunities for some who can develop personal agency and recognition, it can also be a place where challenges such as inconsistent support and punitive responses to conflict may undermine the well-being of children.

5.4. Networking Places of Well-Being—Local and Translocal

During the game session, children identified a diverse range of places within the city quarter as important, spanning multiple neighborhoods, and, if not in walking distance, often connected by major underground lines. These places include the previously mentioned central plaza and its department store, parks, several playgrounds, a kiosk, a market hall, and spots for getting pizza or their favorite bubble tea—places they visit either independently or with siblings, family members, or friends (Figure 5).

In addition to these varied places, the children also showed considerable interest in digital content and activities, deeming them important for their well-being. In the game session, aspects such as consuming YouTube content, themes, games, and special discourses were frequently mentioned and observed in ethnographic studies of Phase 1 as a cultural code among children and peers. This is consistent with the findings from participant observations, which identified interest and knowledge of digital games and media as a cultural code among children and peers. In comparison to other categories, the tiles representing YouTube or other digital media were more frequently relocated from their initial central position on the board to a peripheral or less prominent area. We could observe how the children used their spatial knowledge of the neighborhood to offset limited access to the internet, a prerequisite for their digital activities. To illustrate this, an observation from an educational scientist can be cited here:

> A researcher is sitting at a table in the Center with three children, playing Rummikub [a game]. Two other children are also in the room. After a few minutes, these other two join me at the table. 'Can you do Internet?' Lila asks me. Instead of explaining the problem in more detail, she holds the tablet out to me so that I can take a look at the display and then she quickly and routinely navigates to the Wifi settings, where she taps on the line for the password. I notice out loud that the password is missing. Lila nods. Since I don't have it either, I refer her to Tom, the social worker. Promptly, both leave the room to look for Tom. After about 15 minutes, the two return and stop in the doorway. Lila already has her jacket on, Mary is buttoning hers as she casually says, 'We're going to the subway station for internet.' I ask with interest, while the Rummikub game is still going on, why they would need internet so badly. Excitedly, Mary tells me that they're going to download a 'really good' game that she's 'all over.' I ask if anyone else is coming along. They both grin conspiratorially at each other, then Lila denies it and announces they're both going alone. (2023_02_01_BP19_B_ Z. 18–30, LF)
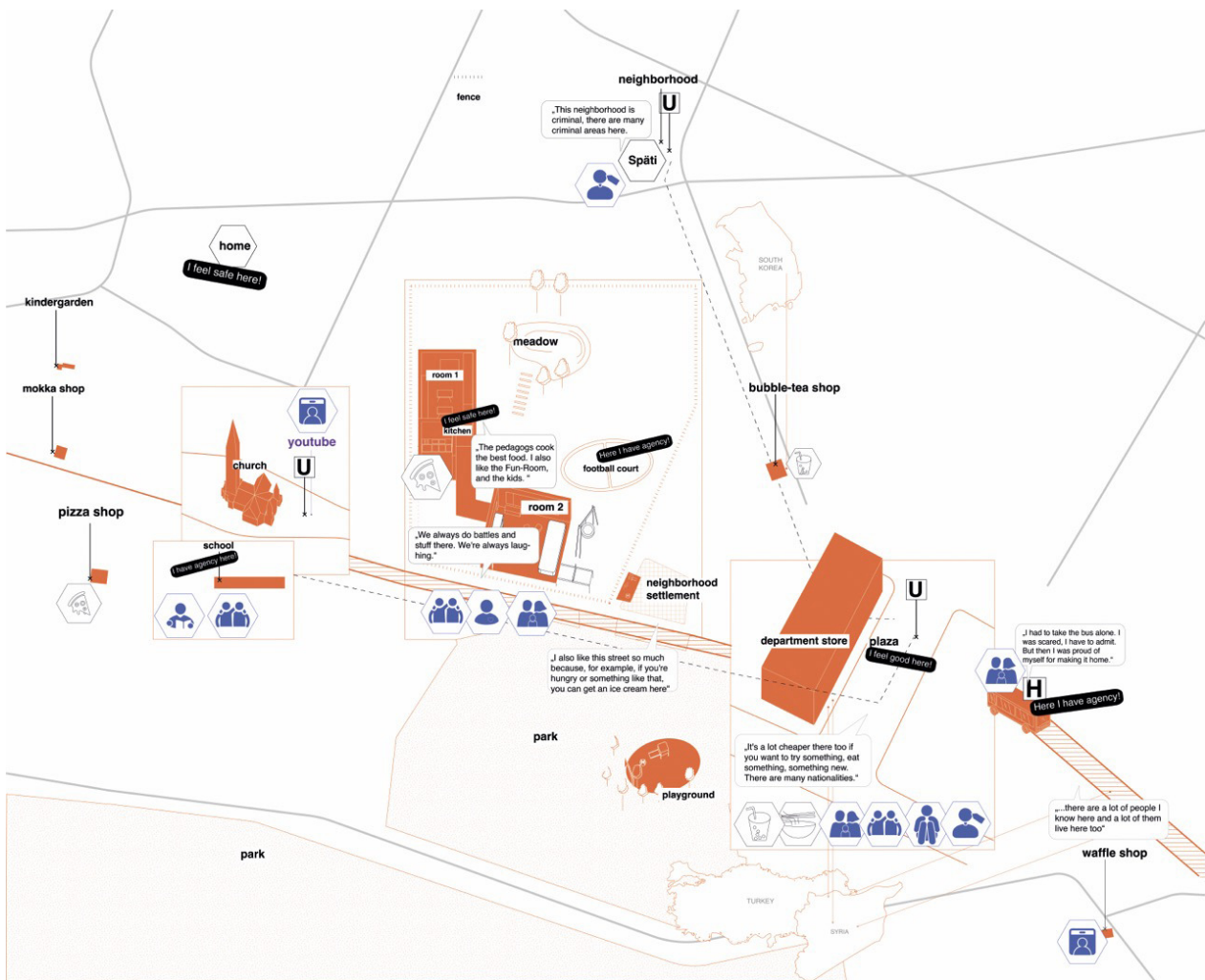
Figure 5. Multi-scalar and synthesizing map of collective well-being aspects children made central in the interviews, go-alongs, and game. Source: Authors, WIKK*I.

Transnational spatial linkages are also made in reference to local places that create well-being while recognizing global conflicts. This can be illustrated by one go-along, where three boys who have known each other for years and grown up together in the same neighborhood led us through their area. They introduced us to the market plaza, which reminded them of markets in their family's countries of origin—as mentioned before—and highlighted the diversity of languages used by the market vendors to advertise their goods. They pointed out other significant places in their neighborhood, including lively streets, restaurants, and bakeries. On a busy and important street in the neighborhood, they showed us a store window of an empty store that featured posters and stickers in Arabic writing about political conflicts in the Middle East. These insights reveal the profound ways in which the everyday environment, digital interfaces, and global issues interconnect in the everyday lives of children, shaping their well-being.

6. Discussion and Conclusion: Enhancing a Socio-Spatial Context of Well-Being

Going back to the dimensions of children's well-being and the physical environment, our findings underscore the critical role that socio-space plays. Summarizing key findings in a multi-scalar map (Figure 5), the children's

center is depicted as a pivotal location where children's well-being is particularly nurtured. Through play and the development of decision-making competence and self-awareness, children learn to choose activities they want to participate in or even decide to leave the site to engage with the broader local community. Children associate safety with familiar and secure places and individuals, such as enclosed children's centers, school gates, or family members who provide emotional and physical security. However, the ambivalent experiences some children have in these settings, particularly in schools where supportive and punitive elements coexist, highlight the complexity of these environments, much like Bagattini (2019) and Fegter and Fattore (2024) stress. The study aligns here with existing research on the dimensions of children's well-being (Fattore et al., 2016), particularly concerning self-esteem, agency, and safety and security. It provides further insights as it shows how children place significant importance on family and social interactions, but also on religious practices and places like a nearby mosque, which are integral to their identity. Especially these religious aspects of life and their spatial embeddedness in the urban environment, often related to family activities, have not been widely discussed in the existing research as an important part of children's well-being.

As spaces that offer children a sense of welcome, belonging, and support, the case study highlights the role of translocal family ties and practices that also shape environmental perceptions and bring forward places where cultural identity or religious activities can be practiced or felt. This includes religious places, but also culturally themed playgrounds or the mentioned central plaza with a market, creating an atmosphere that reflects their cultural identities. These ties provide continuity and belonging, demonstrating how global migration influences children's social worlds and sense of identity (Fattore et al., 2021b; UNICEF, 2021). Urban planning, design, and architecture should cater to these needs by securing and thoughtfully designing such places.

Compared to earlier projects like GUIC II and Bartlett (2005), our findings reaffirm the importance of safe environments while offering new insights into specific locations like children's centers and the role of digital and religious practices. Concerning this digital part of children's everyday life, the findings resonate with Barton's (2009) discussion of the duality of play and independent mobility in urban spaces while underscoring today's importance of environments that support not only physical but also digital autonomy. In the context of our study, digital autonomy refers to children's ability to independently access and use digital resources, such as the Internet, to fulfill their needs and desires. This autonomy is exemplified by their efforts to find and utilize free internet access in public spaces, like subway stations, to download games or engage in online activities. However, there are conflicting views regarding digital access for children, as psychological and developmental studies have shown that excessive internet use can have detrimental effects on their well-being. Thus, while digital autonomy provides children with valuable opportunities for learning and independence, it is important to strike a balance, ensuring that their online engagement promotes well-being without the negative effects of excessive internet use.

The findings contribute to the ongoing effort to disentangle the physical environment from social and political factors within a community setting, as highlighted by Woolcock and Steele (2008), showing that the built environment has a direct and evolving impact on children's ability to experience well-being, and efforts need to be made to shape the materiality of the built environment and the form of cities. The case study also presents learning opportunities on how to create hubs of well-being, such as the children's center, in a neighborhood facing challenges like socioeconomic disparities, lack of green spaces, and stigmatization of economically disadvantaged children. In such an environment, it is crucial to provide dedicated spaces for children that offer them the choice to visit freely, rather than confining or restricting their movement.

An under-discussed lesson in CFCs and well-being discourses is the importance of micro-places—small, intimate spaces, objects, and natural elements within broader urban settings—that foster children's well-being (Ramioul et.al., 2020). While micro-spaces are concentrated at the children's center in our case, they illustrate that, also within the broader neighborhood, the understanding and designing or securing micro-spaces is crucial for children's well-being. It could be valuable for planners and designers to adopt a socio-spatial approach in their work by integrating social work principles of openness (Reutlinger, 2022; Reutlinger et al., 2021) into urban design, as well as shifting the focus from an emphasis on learning (Pietsch & Müller, 2015) to incorporating broader aspects of well-being.

From our case study, it is evident that planning, design, and architectural strategies aimed at improving children's well-being should emphasize multi-scalar aspects. This includes scaling down beyond neighborhoods to include objects, individual natural elements, and the interior design of buildings that cater to children's needs. The participating children's center we studied highlights the importance of flexible interior spaces that accommodate personalization, varying noise levels, and shared activities like cooking. Additionally, strategies for enhancing children's well-being in built environments should expand upon the current set of initiatives (e.g., as discussed by Brown et al., 2019; Chawla, 2002; Mouratidis, 2021):

- Social infrastructure designed to serve children's needs, both indoors and outdoors, fostering movement and autonomy.
- Creating and/or securing places with translocal identity to reflect the cultural diversity of the children.
- Enhancing geographic accessibility and connectivity to places of well-being, including ICT access.

The study also illustrates the benefits of a multi-method approach with child-centric research methodologies, such as gaming, in well-being research. We also acknowledge the limitations inherent in working with a group of children who voluntarily attend the children's center, as they may not represent the views of all children. Additionally, since the children's center was the primary setting for the gaming approach, though not the only setting for data collection, it may have influenced the center's prominence in the findings. Therefore, further research exploring other institutional settings regarding the socio-spatial aspects of well-being is needed.

Given the complex interplay between the socio-spatial context and child well-being, especially in the context of increased migration and digitalization as noted also by Fattore et al. (2021b), future research should expand on how these factors could be integrated into planning, design, and architecture. For planning and design processes to enhance well-being, a shift towards securing children's perspectives in planning processes is even more necessary. The logic of children's well-being and the socio-spatial aspects that matter to them can only be fully understood with the children's involvement, asking for expanding times and opportunities to co-design and co-plan the built environment.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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