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Reimagining Urban Spaces for Children: Insights and Future Directions

Garyfallia Katsavounidou [1] **and Sílvia Sousa** [2,3]

[1] School of Spatial Planning and Development, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece
[2] Porto Energy Agency, Portugal
[3] CITTA, University of Porto, Portugal

Correspondence: Sílvia Sousa (sasousa@fe.up.pt)

Abstract

Despite decades of international efforts, children remain overlooked in urban planning, which predominantly caters to adults. This editorial introduces a thematic issue of *Urban Planning* that compiles 13 articles exploring how cities can be redesigned to better serve children's needs and rights. The collection covers a range of critical themes, including children's mobility and the constraints imposed by car-centric environments, the lack of accessible and inclusive play spaces, and the disconnection between children and nature exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. The articles highlight barriers to children's independent mobility, the importance of unstructured green and grey spaces, and the need for multigenerational public spaces. Additionally, they emphasize the role of children in environmental stewardship and urban wellbeing. We argue for a holistic, child-centred approach to urban planning, calling for greater integration of children's voices in decision-making and the creation of urban environments that promote children's well-being, mobility, and inclusion. The thematic issue provides a comprehensive framework for addressing the urgent need to reshape urban spaces for children, fostering more liveable, sustainable cities for all.

Keywords

child-friendly cities; children's well-being; environmental stewardship; inclusive public spaces; independent mobility; multigenerational spaces; urban design

1. Introduction

Colin Ward's seminal work *The Child in the City* (1978) placed the focus on children as integral users of urban environments. Yet, more than 40 years later, children remain overlooked in urban design and planning

practices. While international frameworks like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and initiatives such as Child-Friendly Cities have advanced children's rights, urban planning continues to inadequately address children's needs and their interaction with the city. As a result, this misrecognition has a detrimental effect on both children and cities. How children experience their urban environment shapes not only their well-being but also the future of the cities themselves.

2. Building Child-Friendly Cities: Lessons from Research and Practice

This thematic issue of *Urban Planning* brings together a collection of 13 articles that advance the discussion on child-centred urban environments. These studies challenge the adult-centric narratives of urban planning, introducing evidence-based insights on how children experience cities and how urban policies can promote safer, more inclusive spaces. The articles examine various aspects of children's urban experiences, exploring themes from mobility and play to safety and nature connection, shedding light on both theoretical perspectives and practical interventions.

2.1. Rethinking Mobility and Accessibility for Children

One dominant theme in this thematic issue is children's mobility and its constraints due to car-centred urbanism. In the article "Beyond Car-Centred Adultism? Exploring Parental Influences on Children's Mobility," Cadima et al. examine how parental decision-making in Portugal restricts children's independent and active mobility due to fears rooted in traffic-heavy environments. Despite the recognized benefits of active mobility, parents' reliance on cars persists, influenced by a broader cultural acceptance of motorized travel as the safest option. This culture not only limits children's engagement with their surroundings but also perpetuates sedentary lifestyles that negatively impact children's health and well-being.

Complementing this work, Michail and Ozbil Torun in their article "Walking to School: What Streets Do Children Prefer?" offer valuable insights into children's navigation choices and the environmental attributes that influence their walking routes. By focusing on children's actual walking patterns, rather than relying on geographic information system (GIS)-calculated routes, this study identifies specific street-level features, such as footpath width and street connectivity, that either promote or discourage active school travel. Such findings are crucial for designing child-friendly streets that facilitate safe and independent mobility.

Another study by Abdollahi et al., "Understanding the Factors Affecting Traffic Danger for Children: Insights From Focus Group Discussions," explores the risks posed by motorized traffic, identifying key factors such as traffic volume, speed, and road design that exacerbate danger for children on urban streets. By involving children, parents, and experts in focus group discussions, this research highlights the critical need to rethink traffic infrastructure to mitigate dangers and enhance safety for young pedestrians and cyclists.

2.2. Play and Gathering Spaces in Urban Settings

Urban environments often fail to provide adequate play spaces for children, who increasingly find themselves confined indoors, disconnected from nature and the social dynamics of public spaces. In this context, the research by Tavakoli et al., "Where Do Children Go?": Exploring Children's Daily Destinations With Children, Parents, and Experts," reveals the wide range of informal and non-school destinations that

contribute to children's well-being. The study emphasizes the importance of spaces that offer freedom from structured activities, which children associate with cognitive and social benefits. These findings suggest that urban planners should prioritize unstructured green and grey spaces in cities to promote holistic well-being for children.

Kaplan's article, "From Decline to Renewal? Understanding Children's Relationship With Nature in the Wake of Covid-19," investigates the evolving relationship between children and nature during the pandemic. Despite the general recognition of nature's positive impact on mental and physical health, the pandemic widened the gap between those with regular access to natural spaces and those without. Kaplan's research underscores the necessity for local governments to ensure accessible, high-quality green spaces, especially in urban areas, to foster children's connection with nature and promote long-term well-being.

2.3. Children's Safety, Independence, and Agency

The tension between children's independence and parental concerns about safety is another critical issue explored in several articles. Katsavounidou et al.'s research, "Active but not Independent: Children's School Travel Patterns in a Compact-City Environment in Greece," highlights how dense urban environments with mixed land uses still fail to support children's independent mobility. Despite the short distances between home and school, parents often accompany their children on foot due to concerns about road safety and poor pedestrian infrastructure. This raises questions about how cities can better support not only active, but also independent mobility for children, particularly in compact urban areas.

Cadima and Pinho's systematic review, "Walkability and Parental Safety Perceptions as Determinants of Children's School Commutes: A Systematic Review," further examines the barriers to children's active commuting, identifying a range of environmental and social factors, including parental fears about traffic safety. Their work underscores the need for comprehensive urban strategies that address both physical infrastructure and social norms to encourage walking as a viable and safe option for children.

In "New House, New Furniture, New Room: Children's Pandemic Landscapes of Care in Chile" by Cortés-Morales et al., there is a shift of focus from public space into the space of the home, a space which was transformed in unprecedented ways during the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown imposed. During that time of confinement, adults and children worked, studied, and cared for each other in close proximity. The authors, through their ethnographic research, demonstrate that children, who are often perceived as subjects of care, are capable of assuming roles of caregiving and assuming greater responsibilities than what is typically expected of them.

2.4. Multigenerational and Inclusive Urban Spaces

While designing child-friendly spaces is critical, Daniel Kaplan's other article, "Challenging Child-Friendly Urban Design: Towards Inclusive Multigenerational Spaces," introduces a thought-provoking critique of the child-friendly city concept. Drawing from data collected in Czechia, Kaplan argues that exclusive child-centric spaces may unintentionally segregate children from other age groups, undermining the goal of inclusivity. Instead, Kaplan advocates for multigenerational urban spaces where children and adults can share and shape the environment together, fostering a sense of community and cooperation.

Similarly, Natalia Bazaiou's research, "Exploring Elementary School Children's Interaction at the School Threshold: Evidence From Athens, Greece," examines how the school entrance, as a space of transition between public and private realms, can serve as a critical node for interaction between children, families, and the broader urban fabric. By focusing on the design of these "in-between" spaces, Bazaiou's work emphasizes the need to rethink the boundaries between children's spaces and the public realm to create more integrated, child-friendly cities.

2.5. Children's Role in Environmental Stewardship

In a more environmentally focused study, "Young Latinas/os' Environmental Commitments: The Case of Waste" by Miriam Solis et al. explores how young people in Pharr, Texas, perceive environmental issues, particularly waste management. This participatory study showcases the engagement of young Latinas/os in improving their neighbourhoods through environmental action, highlighting their commitment to sustainable practices. The study underscores the importance of incorporating youth voices in shaping local environmental policies, particularly in underserved communities.

2.6. Well-Being and Children's Perceptions of Place

Angela Million et al. provide a crucial perspective on children's well-being in their interdisciplinary study "Understanding Well-Being Through Children's Eyes: Lessons for Shaping the Built Environment." Using child-centred methodologies, this study emphasizes the importance of micro-spaces and translocal identities in shaping children's well-being in urban environments. The findings provide valuable insights into how urban planning and design can prioritize children's well-being, creating spaces that cater to their unique needs.

Ozbil Torun et al., in their article "Children's Perspectives of Neighbourhood Spaces: Gender-Based Insights From Participatory Mapping and GIS Analysis," examined children's perceptions of their everyday environments and correlated them with different neighbourhood types, through participatory map-based focus groups. The study identifies gender-based differences in preferences, with boys indicating a preference for more physical activities in open spaces, while girls more frequently emphasised the need for accessible playgrounds and natural settings. Children residing in urban neighbourhoods were observed using streets, parks, and local shops with greater frequency, whereas those in suburban and sprawling areas demonstrated a preference for amenities situated in closer proximity to their residences. The findings indicate that local governments should prioritise the development of context-specific policies that are sensitive to the specific needs and experiences of children when designing child-friendly neighbourhoods.

3. Future Research Agenda for Child-Friendly Cities

A future research agenda should address multiple dimensions of child-friendly cities, including mobility, play, inclusivity, nature connection, well-being, and global contexts.

Understanding barriers to children's mobility is crucial for promoting their independence. Future studies should explore how cultural norms and parental concerns constrain mobility, and investigate how interventions like traffic-calming and pedestrian-friendly design affect parental decision-making. Research

into digital navigation tools may also empower children's independence while addressing privacy and equity issues.

Urban spaces must prioritize unstructured play opportunities for children. Research should examine how public spaces can support free play beyond formal structures. Comparative studies across geographies could highlight effective design solutions. Addressing social inequalities in access to play spaces is vital, particularly in marginalized areas, underscoring the importance of participatory planning that engages diverse children.

Engaging children in urban planning is essential for fostering inclusivity. Research should focus on innovative child-centered engagement methods, such as participatory mapping and game-based approaches. Institutionalizing children's voices in decision-making will be key, exploring successful models where children have influenced urban changes.

Research on children's relationship with nature is increasingly important, particularly as opportunities for outdoor engagement decline. Longitudinal studies could examine the mental and emotional benefits of nature exposure. The pandemic's impact on access to nature also needs exploration to inform future urban design.

Creating multigenerational urban spaces is a pressing need. Research should examine successful case studies and explore social dynamics in shared spaces to foster inclusivity across age groups.

Developing metrics that prioritize children's well-being in urban planning is crucial. Future research should refine existing metrics and create new indicators measuring child-friendly infrastructure, safety, and mobility. Cross-cultural studies of children's urban experiences will deepen our understanding of global disparities, while research in rapidly urbanizing areas can reveal unique challenges in the Global South.

The role of technology in shaping children's urban experiences requires further exploration. Studies should assess digital play spaces and how smart city technologies enhance child-friendly urban design and promote safety.

The implications of climate change for children should be a research priority. Rising temperatures could render outdoor spaces unusable. Children's involvement in climate-resilient planning may illuminate their potential role in adapting public spaces, while research should examine how climate change disproportionately affects vulnerable children.

Evaluating child-friendly city initiatives is essential for identifying best practices and improving outcomes. Research should assess the long-term effectiveness of these initiatives and explore how child-friendly design principles align with broader sustainability goals.

4. Conclusion: Towards a Holistic Approach

The articles in this thematic issue collectively argue for a holistic, multi-scale approach to urban planning that considers children as central actors in the design of cities. From improving mobility options to ensuring access to nature and play, the research presented here highlights the urgent need to address the urban environment's

impact on children's well-being. Yet, the solutions are not one-size-fits-all; local contexts, cultural norms, and socio-economic factors all play crucial roles in shaping children's urban experiences.

As planners, architects, and policymakers, we must adopt child-centered methodologies that engage children directly in the planning process, ensuring that their voices are heard. Moreover, creating inclusive urban environments that cater not only to children but to all generations requires a shift in urban design paradigms. Only by addressing the needs of children can we create cities that are truly liveable for everyone.

The contributions in this thematic issue serve as a vital reminder that the quest for a "childhood city" is an ongoing challenge, but one that holds transformative potential for the future of urban living. Children's well-being is not a peripheral issue; it is fundamental to the health, vitality, and sustainability of our cities. Urban planners must recognize that the spaces we design today will shape the citizens of tomorrow.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors

Garyfallia Katsavounidou is an associate professor of urban design and planning in the School of Spatial Planning and Development at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH). Her research and teaching focus on human-centred urbanism, child-friendly cities, social and psychological approaches to architecture and space, and urban resilience. She is the author of *Child, City and Design: The Spielraum* (Kritiki, 2023), *The City at Human Scale* (Kallipos Hellenic Academic Open Textbooks, 2023), and *Invisible Parentheses: 27 Cities in Thessaloniki* (Patakis, 2004).

Sílvia Sousa is an urban planner, researcher, and project manager at the Porto Energy Agency (AdEPorto), where she leads EU-funded projects focused on youth empowerment in energy, sustainable energy districts, and climate adaptation financing. She also provides critical support to municipalities in their climate action and energy transition efforts. As a co-founder of So-ACT at CITTA Research Center, Sílvia specializes in societal adaptation to climate change. Her expertise spans urban regeneration, climate resilience, and creating child-friendly cities, where she actively contributes to shaping sustainable, resilient urban futures.