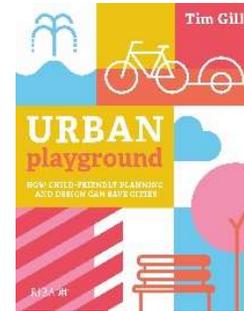


Urban Playground online launch talk

Tim Gill, 24 Feb 2021

Hosted by Urban Design London



Thanks to UDL and the panel and all of you for joining.

Urban Playground aims to elevate the status of children in city-building. To persuade adults that children's relationship with cities matters, and to shed light on how it can be improved.

The adults who shape cities have a massive impact on the lives of children. Yet children are all but invisible to them. Within the UK's planning system, for example, newts and bats are deemed more worthy of attention.



The truth is that the vast majority of urban planning decisions and projects take no account of their potential impact on children, and make no effort to seek children's views. On the rare occasions where children are involved, all too often the results are unhelpful, unilluminating and make little or no difference.



It is partly because of critiques of children's participation that my book takes a different tack. It places greater emphasis on children's everyday lives, on measurable changes in the built environment, and on evidence of the difference these changes have made.

This is not to say that children's rights and participation should be ignored. Children are citizens in their own right, who experience cities and neighbourhoods differently from adults.



The notion of a broad, healthy diet of childhood experiences (analogous to a healthy food diet) is central to child-friendly urban planning. It is encapsulated in the idea of children's everyday freedoms.

In spatial terms, these freedoms can be seen as having two dimensions. The first dimension focuses on children's mobility, especially under their own steam. The second dimension is the number and type of spaces and facilities on offer.



In a sense, the ultimate goal of child-friendly urban planning is to turn the playground inside-out. Rather than building play reservations, the job of the child-friendly planner/designer is to remove the fences and gates, and invite children into the public realm beyond, so they can enjoy rich, engaging experiences and encounters with the people and places around them.

In any ranking of child-friendliness, one neighbourhood that would score highly is Vauban, an essentially car-free masterplanned district in the German city of Freiburg.



This figure shows an idealized neighbourhood, inspired by (and loosely modelled on) Vauban, which pulls together the key physical features of child-friendly urban planning and design in diagrammatic form. The diagram is offered as a provocation, not a blueprint.



Rotterdam has arguably devoted more money, time and energy to building better neighbourhoods for children than any other city on earth. Urban Playground sets out why the city's leaders made it a priority, what has been done, the impact it has had, and the lessons and insights it holds for other cities.



Urban Playground also pulls together key initiatives from some other cities that, while not matching the ambitions of Rotterdam, have brought a strategic lens to child-friendly urban planning.



The book focuses on making change happen. It offers a set of principles, building blocks and tools that will help plan and deliver effective programmes.



In cities in the United States, we cannot pretend that all bodies have the freedom to move through, occupy, and enjoy public space."

Isis Ferguson, associate director at Placelab, University of Chicago

In ethnically and culturally divided societies, people from different groups have unequal access to public space, and divergent experiences of it. In response, strategic programmes need to focus explicitly on black and minority ethnic children and families and the neighbourhoods where they live.



The worldwide demand for urban housing is predicted to lead to the creation of the equivalent of a new city of 1 million people every week for the next 30 years. It goes without saying that these need to be as healthy, sustainable and liveable as possible.

So what does a child-friendly lens add to health, sustainability and liveability? It gives great moral purpose and impetus to progressive, inclusive planning, and is unsurpassed as a way to overcome unreasonable opposition. Moreover, the resulting schemes will work better, not only for children but also for other groups whose needs and concerns are so often ignored.



British cities are notable in Urban Playground by their absence (with London a partial exception). The interest generated by smaller housing schemes like Marmalade Lane in Cambridge is encouraging. However, the picture in England is clouded by the prospect of major reforms to the planning system. In Wales and Scotland – in contrast to England – national policy is more supportive.

Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg's school climate strike protest has added a compelling voice to the call to tackle the global climate crisis. Her youth – which she sees not as a form of identity politics, but as underscoring her stake in the collective future of all life on this planet – added authenticity and moral authority to her message. Thunberg shows how children act as a powerful lens through which we can reframe social, economic and environmental challenges and injustices. Looking at planning and design through children's eyes does not just offer fresh perspectives and a compelling new urban vision. It reveals the best way to set cities on a firm course away from ecological, economic and social decay.

Postscript

Every word and image of my talk so far is taken from my book. I worked hard on them, and hope they speak for themselves. I will close with a last observation about where we are right now. My gut feeling is that the pandemic changes very little. The basic moral case for child-friendly urban planning still needs to be made. I do wonder if the traumatic experience of lockdown could prove a springboard.

Because you could say that the overarching experience of children over the last 30 or 40 years has been of a gradual, creeping lockdown. We grown-ups now have a profound sense of what that means. So I am cautiously optimistic that the time is right for children to take their rightful place at the heart of the city, and as a central focus of urban planning and design.



Thank you.