

Analysing the potential of small-scale public spaces adjacent to primary schools of Athens as drivers of more child-centred urban practices

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Abstract

This article intends to illustrate the current relation of children in Athens with the public space of the city. In order to do so, it investigates the background of the current adult-oriented urban practices and how these affect the right to the city for other social groups, specifically children. It analyses how the right to play (namely, the main activity of a child) could be used as a parameter that ensures the universal right to the city. In the last part of the article, an analysis of a research that took place in Athens (March-December 2020) is provided. The research findings, combined with the previous theoretical analysis, are able to provide us with valuable insight as to the steps to be followed in order for the focus to shift towards more child-friendly and inclusive urban practices for contemporary cities - Athens, in particular.

Keywords: child-friendly city, inclusive urban planning, school, community, Athens.

By whom and for whom are our cities designed?

The public space of a city is of primary importance in terms of shaping the everyday experiences of individuals. And yet, public space cannot be considered a neutral field that provides equal opportunities for all (Spain, 1992; Weisman, 1994). Public space has to be studied as a sociocultural product of each society that (re)produces its values and priorities.

However, the decisions that shape our urban environments were made within the context of rigid, top-down practices by 'experts' and politicians who were (in their vast majority) middle-aged adult males of specific social and economic background. As a result, the cities in which we still dwell today, their urban structure and services, were contextualized and designed within the scope of a 'model citizen' that matched the profile of the persons taking the decisions for the city in the first place. The experiences, needs, and desires of other groups of citizens (such as children, women, the elderly, persons with functional diversity etc.) were considered minoritarian, and thus not encouraged to be expressed publicly and influence urban practices. In neglecting the needs and rights of those who don't fit in the category of 'model citizens', our cities ignore social diversity and function by way of discrimination; they have become spaces of inequality, incapable of offering equal (financial, political, personal etc.) growth opportunities for all.

Contemporary cities have been shaped as environments that promote and facilitate the remunerated work of productive adults (Tonucci, 2005; Spain, 1992). Housing, mobility, health, entertainment, the market itself follow the guidelines of a working adult (Tonucci, 2005). Although care is one of the pillars of human civilization, non-remunerated care activities are considered of less importance and thus neglected and ignored compared to the approaches of more 'profit-oriented' and 'production-oriented' urban practices which prevail.



Furthermore, on a global level, women today are still the ones mainly in charge of non-remunerated care activities (reproductive activities). According to the latest research conducted by the Hellenic Statistical Authority, in Greece, nowadays, women spend four times more time on care activities than men (ELSTAT, 2013).

As the geographer Miralles-Guach (2016) claims, even the mobility patterns in the city have a discrete gender-based manifestation that relates to the different spheres of activities (productive - reproductive) and the complexity of said activities which each individual exercises. Contemporary urban planning is focused on the productive sphere and, as such, places much emphasis on commuting to/from work. A linear mobility pattern (home-work-home) is prioritized, making use of a private car which is the most convenient means of commuting between predefined destinations of longer distances. According to the research done by Miralles-Guach, it is more often working men who follow this mobility pattern. On the other hand, the mobility patterns of women tend to be polygonal, since they combine activities of different spheres. Women make shorter but more complex routes and they move more often on foot and by public transportation. Their role as the primary caregivers of their families, affects their urban mobility, thus making them move in more sustainable ways.

The use of private cars has been, without a doubt, in the heart of the urban planning of the city, its structures, and facilities and has taken priority over other uses of the public space. For the non-drivers (children, the elderly, a high percentage of women, etc.), the city tends to be considered an unsafe, hostile environment to move in (Tonucci et al, 2001). As Lady Marjory Allen of Hurtwood mentioned as early as 1968, 'Cars, lorries, and children do not make a good mixture. Traffic is strong and brutal, children are small and tender.' The public areas of the city have gradually lost their function as public spaces, as spaces to promote socialization and the sense of community. On the other hand, in recent years, our private spaces, our homes, have become more and more self-sufficient. As Tonucci (2005) highlights, 'We no longer need to go out to the city in order to fulfill any of our needs. Thus, we tend to wish to return to our homes the soonest possible and only move between private "safe" places.' Cities give the impression of spaces full of perils to be avoided, especially by the more vulnerable citizens. Non-working, non-productive citizens are limited in private or custom-designed spaces in order to feel comfortable and safe.

Although much has been done for adults, and even more for working adults with automobiles, children seem to be neglected by urban strategies. Even the spaces designed for children (day-care centres, preschool facilities, play parks, etc.) tend to adopt the idea of small 'fenced-in spaces' (Bozzo, 1995) in which specific actions take place and nothing unexpected happens. According to Bozzo (1995), 'the perception of these spaces is immediate and it terminates in the very instant in which it is perceived, security is achieved through a clear-cut separation of the inside from the outside'. These spaces aim to provide parents with a sense of security rather than satisfying children's actual needs or providing them with all the necessary stimuli for a multidimensional, emotional, social, and physical development. The streets and public spaces increasingly seem to be void of children, as the latter divide their time between school and organized post-school activities. In our cities, children are prevented from having experiences of fundamental importance for their development, such as adventure, research, discovery, risk, overcoming obstacles (Lynch, 1979). The increasing disappearance of children (and other groups of more vulnerable citizens) from the streets and public spaces of our cities, indicates a dramatic loss of democracy and inclusion in urban areas.

Considering the right to play as a parameter for urban change

In order to find the first reference to 'the right to the city', we have to go back to 'Le droit à la ville' by Henri Lefebvre, published in 1968. Lefebvre advocated the reappropriation of space by its inhabitants, who should be the true protagonists (Sugranyes, 2010). According to Lefebvre, the right to the city is inscribed in the possibility of satisfying the basic needs and

also enjoying the public space in its entirety by regaining the community sense and fostering social relations. The right to the city must be understood as a right 'to urban life, [...] to places of encounters and changes, to the rhythms of life and uses of time that allows the full use of these moments and places' (Lefebvre, 1969). Ortiz (2010) looks at the right to the city as an integral right related to other rights that evolve in the urban space, always open to welcoming new demands, reflecting the evolution and challenges that urban life presents. The struggle is aimed at ensuring the rights of those forced to live on the margins of the interests of political and economic elites that have the power to plan and manage urban space (Pérez Sanz, 2013).

The children's right to the city is manifested through their main activity, *play*. However, *play* is not considered a parameter of urban design and development. According to Muxi (2011), a paradigm shift is necessary since space is not neutral, but rather an element that conditions us and, as such, it does so in a different way for each individual, depending on our social identity, age, gender, physical capacity, nationality, etc. In order to achieve a paradigm shift, we should consider reassessing the different daily experiences and the perceptions, needs, and desires of diverse citizens as useful sources of information and as part of the demands that make up the right to the city. Cities have to be safe, familiar environments that provide comfort as well as equal opportunities for all their citizens and support their development in all possible ways.

As elaborated above, contemporary cities have been designed taking into consideration the needs and desires of a 'model citizen' which happens to be an adult male driver. But how would the city be shaped, if we dared tailor its functions according to the needs and desires of a child citizen? And what would this further offer to other social groups that are forced to live on the margins?

'The younger citizens not only represent the needs of all citizens but also the needs of the city considered as a large ecosystem, which is currently an ailing one. In this sense, the child may be said to be a sensitive environmental indicator and when the child is all right it means that the city has found its natural function as a place of sharing, cooperation, and solidarity.' Tonucci & Risotto (2001)

The child, as approached by Tonucci & Risotto (2001), is chosen not for the purpose of providing this group of citizens with greater resources or services, but rather for the purpose of choosing the smallest unit as a guarantee for all; the furthest away from the logic and mentality of an adult male motorist in order to guarantee that everyone's needs will be heard and taken into consideration. This would result in transforming the parameters used for assessing urban policies and all the aspects shaping our cities towards a more child-oriented and, thus, more inclusive and human-oriented perspective. Urban strategies tailored to a child who needs to play would inevitably provide an urban space of higher quality and, thus, an everyday urban life of higher quality in general, resulting in a more sustainable and egalitarian urban development.

Play as a basis of human civilization

Since 1989, the right to play has been recognized under Article 31 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child. However, *play* has not received yet the focus it deserves in the urban development agendas of contemporary western cities – Athens, in particular. The reason for this might be that the significance of *play* is ignored and underestimated as something particularly childish. Play and childish behaviour are seen as the opposite of political behaviour and, thus, children are disempowered agents in most aspects of public life (Cele et al, 2015).

Our approach to *play*, cannot but be influenced by Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*' theory (1949), where play is approached as the basis of human civilization. Playing is considered a human function as essential as thinking and working and, according to Huizinga (1949), 'the genesis

and development of human cultures have ludic and playful attributes'. To understand play as a force that is not merely inflected by culture but also generates culture, we need to grasp the importance of *play* as an instrument of civilization (McDonald, 2019).

On a city level, Jane Jacobs, in her famous work entitled 'The death and life of the American cities' published in 1961, also approaches play as a spontaneous yet critical socializing activity that needs to take place in the city, in even the most unexpected places and circumstances. She defends the importance of maintaining every day, small-scale, interstitial urban spaces as a means of maintaining community, rather than designing ad-hoc spaces for play and socialization.

From playgrounds to playscapes: a new perspective for urban strategies

The importance of outdoor space for the development of children and the contribution of outdoor play is documented by several researchers and studies (Wooley et al 2006). However, contemporary playgrounds offer little space and limited play experiences to children. As demarcated areas that are exclusively intended for child games, they restrict the essence of play as a part of human nature (Lefavre et al, 2007). Play areas are not embodied in the urban structure of the city as crucial elements. They are designed in a biased manner in terms of their structured and specific modalities of play, rather than as part of the creative and open process described by Huizinga. They are just seen as a convenience, and always dissected by the rest of the public space, in the name of safety (which ironically indicates how unfriendly and dangerous is urban environment unanimously considered). Furthermore, much more than just providing an environment for children's play, playgrounds have an important function in the public space, i.e. bringing families together.

The approach of playgrounds as limited spaces, designed ad hoc for play, doesn't foster the autonomy of children nor their spontaneous ludic behaviour. Most playgrounds offer a configuration of prescriptive items that only hinder the child's imagination (Lefavre et al, 2007). Furthermore, expanding regulations place more and more emphasis on security and safety at the expense of creativity. The inclusion of risk is considered irrelevant when designing of a space for children, since this space has to provide adequate control and protection by the adults. However, this approach seems to ignore the significance attributed by many studies to the significance of risk in child development. As Lady Marjory Allen of Hurtwood has pointed out as early as 1968, 'if during its early years a child is deprived of the opportunity to educate itself by trial and error, by taking risks, in the end, loses confidence in itself and loses its desire to become self-reliant. Instead of learning security, the child becomes fearful and withdrawn' and as Tonucci (2005) emphasizes 'Risk must be considered an essential component for play: it is from the process of encountering new difficulties and overcoming them that comes the awareness and satisfaction of learning.' It is often difficult for us to feel secure enough to permit our children to take risks, however, it is of great importance that we come to a point where we realize that in doing so, we are encouraging them to develop and grow up.

In addition to the disappearance of the concept of risk from children's play, children cannot even play by themselves anymore. Since the city is considered an unsafe and hostile environment, they are condemned to move around accompanied by their adult caregivers. This sense of child autonomy, which has been ignored by urban strategies, would increase creativity and a spontaneous ludic spirit. Proximity could encourage more families to let their children move around the neighbourhood on their own. However, this calls for the adoption of a different urban strategy for play spaces and networks of play that would infiltrate the whole city fabric. According to Tonucci (2005), play spaces should be numerous, nearby family homes, albeit of smaller size. This perspective stands in stark contrast to the large-scale installations, parks and projects that are practically inaccessible to most of their beneficiaries (Tonucci et al, 2001), yet promoted by contemporary urban development strategies.

Furthermore, this hinders the revival of communities who need small, easily accessible spaces, rather than large areas that usually require the use of transportation to get there.

Thus, we reach the conclusion that in order to play, children need the cities which they live in; because the play environment must grow together with them (Prezza et al, 2000; Chawla, 2001) and be much more intriguing and real than a 'fenced', ad hoc designed space. A city can provide its younger citizens with the unconditional right to play only if it can restore its public spaces, streets, sidewalks, squares, to their original function, namely as the meeting and interaction points that used to be in the pre-industrial era. The city has the potential to be a lively playful space. We come across it in the ways in which urban residents (not only children) appropriate public space. In these ways, public space acquires identity and cultural value (Lefavre et al, 2007). There is a need for an alternative perspective capable of introducing the essence of Homo Ludens in the urban context.

At this point, a small change in wording could be introduced by shifting from playground to playscape, a concept that could open up new perspectives towards more ludic urban strategies. Playscape is more about a design strategy than a spatial configuration. In this strategy, play infiltrates all design stages as an essential parameter able to provide children and other city dwellers with socialization and growth opportunities. Play infiltrates all urban planning processes and projects. Play planning encompasses the design of the entire neighbourhood, not just the playgrounds, since children do not play only in playgrounds - they play wherever they move. Furthermore, play is for everyone, not for children alone. Putting play in the heart of urban practices would result in a more proportionate equilibrium between space dedicated to cars and outdoor areas for all city dwellers (children, youths, adults and the elderly).

The need for children participation

In order to guarantee that play will be in the heart of urban practices, it is crucial to learn from and collaborate with those who know better how to play: children. Children's participation in public life and decision-making processes, has gained interest in childhood studies literature over the past decades, following the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), with Article 12 thereof stating that children have the right to be listened to and to be consulted on decisions that affect them and that every child has the right to survive, live and grow in all possible ways. In other words, children have to be recognised as full citizens (Simpson, 1997), as 'beings' and not 'pre-adult becomings' (Holloway et al, 2000), as citizens now and not in future (Simpson, 1997).

The city experiences of children and youths differ from those of adults and the former happen to be the experts when it comes to their own lives. In terms of planning, researchers agree that children possess certain competencies that planning should incorporate (Cele, 2006) and that there is an educational value in participation (Hart, 1997). It is also argued that participation is valuable in terms of fostering children to be active citizens, promoting democracy and empowering children versus the adult community (Thomas, 2007; Tisdall, 2008). However, there is great confusion and uncertainty when it comes to recognising children as active social stakeholders with power to participate in social and cultural contexts (Cele et al, 2015). According to Tonucci and Risotto (2001), the difficulty lies in the fact that children are willing to express their opinion, but adults are not always able to be the recipients of their messages. In addition, it is very common for normative and restrictive assumptions to prevail as to what to expect from children's 'childish' views and proposals for the city, and as to the extent to which children can be recognized as social stakeholders. Even in countries where children have a strong position in society (i.e. Scandinavian countries), they are excluded from planning processes due to the high degree of rigidity and complexity of the planning process, the lack of representation as well as the lack of competence on the part of planners (Cele et al, 2015). In order to include children's views in urban planning, it is

necessary to adapt participation practices to children competencies and investigate their everyday interaction with their environments, rather than demanding their participation within strict and formal institutional contexts (Varvantakis, 2018). In other words, it is crucial for participation to occur within the domain of their representation (Varvantakis, 2018). This shall enable their spontaneous, natural and playful inclusion and participation in the public sphere.

Conducting a research in Athens

Context

It was not until 1994 that the first Geography Department was created in a Greek university. Thus, it is not surprising that the evolution of the discipline of geography in Greece lags behind and there is almost no human geography research focusing on children and youth (Ferré Baylina et al, 2011). Geography studies in Greece are focused more on Geographic Information Systems (GIS) than cultural and social geography (Vaiou, 2005). Especially the study of children in public spaces is a new topic in the Greek context. Contrary to the situation in Western and Anglo American countries (Holloway et al, 2000; Karsten, 2002, 2003; Katz, 2004; Tandy, 1999; Valentine, 1997, 2004), this issue has not been among the interests of Greek researchers until now.

In big Greek cities, especially Athens, neighbourhood life has considerably deteriorated in the past decades. This affects people's everyday lives, especially of those who, because of gender and/or age (children, the elderly, women), spend more time closer to home (Ferré Baylina et al, 2011). Spending time outdoors (playing, hanging out with neighbours, etc.) is becoming less and less common. However, in Athens, there still exists a cultural tradition of extensive use of the public spaces as gathering and socializing points, which, lately, occurs only in particular times and contexts (religious festivities, flea markets, summer activities etc.). Our research seeks to contextualize the potential of this local cultural tradition and vital need of the people to use public space in the Mediterranean cities, which we consider an essential part of the everyday lives of Athens residents, especially children.

Playgrounds in Athens are not numerous and most of them are in poor condition (in terms of infrastructure and maintenance). Furthermore, the existing playgrounds are not appropriate for babies or children older than ten years. Along with excluding older children, often, playgrounds do not fully address the biological needs of their users. For instance, there are no water fountains or public toilets. Those elements are probably missing because the planning of public spaces deals mainly with design and physical elements but often neglects the basic needs of users (Ferré Baylina et al, 2011).

On the other hand, schoolyards of primary schools, in numerous neighbourhoods of Athens, tend to be the only remaining open public spaces in the area. In addition, primary schools, in general, tend to be some of the few remaining spaces that, to date, still foster a sense of community in the neighbourhoods. Parents, families and caregivers spend some time everyday outside the school when waiting to pick their kids up. During this time, they chat and watch the children play. However, they tend to spend little time in these spaces. In our research, we intended to analyse why caregivers do not spend more time in these in-between spaces, how this could improve and which could be the role of school in enhancing its function as a driver of social interaction in the public spaces of Athenian neighbourhoods.

Objectives

The research focuses on the analysis of small/medium-scale public spaces (i.e. small squares, parks, sidewalks) adjacent to primary schools in Athens. The main objective was to investigate whether these public spaces meet or could meet the requirements of functionalities that promote children's play, the comfort of their caregivers and, in general, if and how they promote the sense of community. The choice of these specific spaces was made

because the public space around school can be seen as a potential field of extending the educational, play and learning functions to the community.

Specific questions were raised:

- How can public spaces adjacent to primary schools of Athens become in-between spaces that promote children's play and the sense of community? Which are the challenges to be met?
- How can the design of public spaces adjacent to primary schools provide a ludic environment for children and the sense of community for adults?

Methodology

The research methodology was planned in such a way as to be based on participatory reports of qualitative data, with particular emphasis on the method of experiential participatory action research (PAR), as it has been developed in contemporary scientific research (Chevalier et al, 2013; Pain et al, 2007). At the same time, material would be collected and analysed from secondary sources as well as semi-structured interviews with primary school teachers and parents. However, due to the pandemic of COVID-19, the experiential participation of children and teachers was not possible, since schools stayed closed for a long time and researchers were not allowed to arrange face to face meetings with students. The research was eventually based on the collection and analysis of material from observations of these public spaces by the researchers, semi-structured interviews via video conference with teachers and parents, as well as online questionnaires filled by teachers and primary school students.

Research stages

1. Observations by researchers

The observation process took place at the public spaces outside four (4) public schools of Athens, at the end of school time, when adult caregivers gather and wait to pick their children up. The indicators that were observed and analysed were the following:

- The school location in relation to the existing urban fabric.
- The condition of the public space around school (urban infrastructure, maintenance, etc.).
- The use of the public space around school by the students and their caregivers after school time (time spent, kind of activities, etc.).
- The mobility patterns from/to school by students and their caregivers.
- The relation of the school with other important public spaces in the neighbourhood and its ability to serve as a social focal point for the neighbourhood.

2. Online questionnaires (students, teachers)

There were two forms of online questionnaires designed (students - teachers). The questionnaires were sent by email to public primary schools of Athens from whom we received answers by 48 students and 41 teachers. Teacher questionnaires focused on why they use/ do not use public spaces adjacent to schools for their courses, how often they use these spaces, how they incorporate them in the educational activities, which are the challenges they meet and, lastly, which are the criteria that must be met so that teachers could feel more safe and comfortable to teach class to a public space more often. Student questionnaires focused on whether students would enjoy having lessons outdoors in the public space, which locations in their neighbourhood they prefer for play and which are their favourite play activities outdoors.

3. Semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via video conference with 4 primary school teachers and 4 parents. The interviews, of informal nature, had an average duration of 1 hour and were organized in groups of 2 or with only one interviewee. The main objectives would emerge from a discussion over the following questions:

- How does the public space around school relate to the educational function of the school?
- How does the design of the public space facilitate the creation of a learning and play environment for the child?
- How can the presence of children and their adult caregivers in these areas be supported and foster play and the sense of community?

Research findings

In all four primary schools, it emerged that the adult caregivers are mainly women (mothers, grandmothers, etc.) who arrive at school approximately 5'-10' before the school bell rings and leave as soon as their children finish school. Only a low percentage of them use nearby public spaces after school, such as a playground. This is also probably because playgrounds are not often situated near schools. Some of them leave on foot and a slightly higher percentage leave by car. None of the four schools depicted is connected with other public spaces (via a pedestrian street or another kind of urban network) of the neighbourhood and this is usually the case for most primary schools in Athens. The public space around school (especially in front of the main entrance) is usually a narrow pavement. In some cases, there are trees providing shadow but no kind of urban infrastructure was observed and parents search for alternatives in order to find some comfort while waiting to pick their children up (i.e. sitting on curbs of nearby shops/ houses). In addition, the absence of spaces of adequate size in front of school entrances creates traffic conjunction when children finish school. The presence of cars as well as the lack of adequate space and infrastructure does not allow children and their caregivers to stay longer, play and socialize there.

Upon having analysed the questionnaires given to teachers and students, the following conclusions are drawn. A high percentage (approximately 49%) of the teachers do not use public spaces during their lessons (they only use them within the context of specifically organized environmental programs), since they believe that the public space is a hostile environment where they have to face far more difficulties than those faced in a classroom. Such difficulties are the physical safety of children, the presence of unknown people, strict school regulations and rigid laws that leave no room for teachers to act on their own by making use of the public space. Specifically, the teachers underlined that in order for them to be able to use public spaces with their students, it is important to have adequate public spaces nearby school (proximity factor/the school needs to belong to a network of public spaces), to be able to move to/ from these spaces safely (accessibility/safety factors) and the spaces themselves to be adequately designed for children and equipped with basic infrastructure (i.e. WCs, water taps, shadow) that would facilitate their presence there. Most teachers mentioned that they would be interested in using public spaces with their students provided that all the aforementioned requirements were met. Last but not least, some teachers focused on the need to change the mentality about school and its relation with the community and the need to shift from the traditional educational practices in Greece to a more child-focused educational system that would provide them with the freedom and flexibility to adapt more educational activities to their daily program.

On the other hand, a large part of the children themselves do not seem to be in favour of their leaving school and having lessons outdoors. Their opinions seem to be divided on whether they would like more educational activities outside school or not. Although they confess that the course would be more interesting outside where they could enjoy the

Mediterranean sunny weather, they are concerned about the multiple stimuli that would probably not allow them to focus on the lesson. They mention that noise and the presence of unknown people are factors for distraction and lack of concentration. This may be because the lesson in the classroom is not as student-centered as we would like to believe. It also indicates that there is strong bias, even among children, that learning happens only in classrooms. The lesson should include adapted and playful activities, through which children should practice skills such as imagination, creative thinking and writing, as well as critical thinking. If all this can be applied in the classroom where a multitude of stimuli can be given to the students, it is certain that the natural stimuli existing in public spaces can play an active role in shaping the behaviour and social development of students.

As for the use of public spaces after school, children prefer to use, on occasion, the bigger squares of their neighbourhoods (which are not always near their homes; however they offer better conditions and infrastructure). They only use the public space outside their school as a waiting area or sometimes they stay there for play after school, but only for a limited amount of time. Where there is a pedestrian street in front of the school offering basic infrastructure (i.e. benches), students use it and spend more time there before and/or after school (approximately 10-15'). As a teacher mentioned:

'Children use the sidewalk in front of the school entrance. Early in the morning (before the start), the older children sit on the benches waiting for their classmates so that they can hang out. When they leave (school), the younger children may 'throw away' their bags and climb the stairs or a hill and often play hide and seek under the supervision of their parents. This lasts for about 10 to 15 minutes.'

However, even in this case, children do not stay longer there, since they often have to attend after-school activities (organized sports activities, foreign language classes, etc.).

Parents also seem not to often use urban public spaces with their children. They prefer to send children to after-school organized activities (which they consider more valuable) than walking around and playing freely in the public space with them. One of the main reasons is the lack of a sense of security stemming from the presence of traffic, the average-to-poor condition of the public space and the lack of child-friendly urban infrastructure, as well as the lack of an existing culture of families making use of the city's public spaces. The low quality of public space makes them feel that they want to offer something of better quality to their children. It is only during weekends that they occasionally organize excursions to parks/the nature with the family and/or friends.

Conclusion

The research has shown that there is potential for the public spaces adjacent to schools to function as social drivers and initiate a shift of mentality (from indifference to participation) regarding the function of public space in Athens. The fact that they are located in-between school and the neighbourhood provides them with attributes and social qualities missing from the mainstream urban planning of the city. However, there are several challenges to be met.

On an institutional level, there is a need for urban practices to shift towards a more child-friendly and play-centric approach. In order to do so, it is important to exchange good practices and know-how with cities that already implement such practices. The new practices must reassess the importance of play and provide incidental play opportunities throughout the public realm, of an informal and spontaneous nature. Local stakeholders should conduct surveys that will reveal where the need for new opportunities is most urgently required as well as where existing play areas are under-used because of their bad location, boring/unimaginative layout, lack of maintenance etc. In this context, it is of great importance to involve actively the citizens and children themselves via participatory practices of joint

accountability. These participatory processes will also provide important feedback to better understand the local play culture, since, to a child, the play potential of a neighbourhood does not only pertain to the presence of good playgrounds.

The role of school as a driver of play in the public space, a link between children's everyday life and the public realm, is crucial for the initiation of such processes. Public spaces adjacent to schools should be revamped taking into consideration their role as ambassadors of play and educational activities outside school, in the community. These spaces can become the drivers of play networks in Athenian neighbourhoods and must be characterized by a sense of proximity, safety and autonomy by means of providing safe travel routes to children and an appropriate, well-maintained infrastructure. Last but not least, as revealed through the discussions and the questionnaires filled in by teachers, there is also a need for a clear legislative framework that can provide teachers with the freedom and flexibility to implement educational activities in the public space.

Planners should be more sensitive and aware of places where people live and where they bring up their families, so that children and their families can feel they belong to a community that is intimate, where they can meet and chat with their neighbours and take a breather away from familiar human pressures (Allen, 1968). The presence of children and their caregivers in a public space can create more opportunities to enhance the sense of community within a neighbourhood. A city where children are able to enjoy autonomous mobility and incidental and free play is a city that the rest of us will also be able to enjoy together.

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