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Planning for play: how are Barcelona and Regensburg using the approach and what have they achieved?

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of planning for play as a tool for advancing well-being and the flourishing of urban children through achieving citywide playability, and promoting it as an urban quality of child friendly cities. Using a comparative case study approach, the paper describes the similarities and differences between two distinct planning for play approaches as championed by two UNICEF recognised child friendly cities – Barcelona in Spain, and Regensburg in Germany. The paper adopts an integrative analytic lens based on the ideas of justice in city-making processes and cities as engines of human development, as underpinned by the Capability Approach. It offers lessons for municipal governments committed to promoting children's right to play through equity-focused participatory planning and rights-based approaches that address spatial, temporal, and social conditions supporting children's access to play and right to the city.

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1. Introduction

Children's play, which is an essential component of children's healthy development, has long been established as a fundamental human right of children as enshrined in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989). However, many play experts and child-rights activists perceive that play is endangered in cities throughout the world. This is largely due to the changing nature of modern childhood in an urbanising and motorised world shaped by the 'neoliberalization of spatial planning' that prioritises productivity, profits and competitiveness to promote cities as engines of economic growth, which is often pursued at the expense of social and environmental justice (Davoudi, 2018; Frediani, 2021). However, planning deeply influences children's lives and experiences in cities and yet planners are neither trained to work on behalf of children nor with children when they manipulate and shape the environment in which children live (Freeman, 2006). In examining the inadequate focus within planning on addressing children's broader spatial needs, Wood (2017) suggests that spatial planning often overlooks areas lacking direct economic value, which are often areas that are of great value to children. Equally, local developments can secure planning

permissions without considering the broader implications of children's access to public spaces (Wood, 2017). Such planning practices have significantly increased traffic on city streets, erased traditional play spaces through development-induced changes to the built environment, and decreased opportunities for outdoor play (Chatterjee & Nallari, 2024).

Many city governments, predominantly in high-income countries, seek recognition as a child friendly city, an idea initially conceived by UNICEF and UN-Habitat when they launched the Child-Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI) at the Habitat II conference in Istanbul in 1996 (Chatterjee, 2023). The CFCI seeks to strengthen the human development potential of cities underpinned by the UNCRC. However, it also goes beyond that to secure children's 'right to the city' (Bishop & Corkery, 2017; Chawla & van Vliet, 2017), which is a collective right based on the use value of urban space. Right to the city is linked to the right to appropriation (Lefebvre, 1968), which does not extend ownership rights but the right to use spaces in a city for everyday practices (Purcell, 2003). Using Lefebvrian logic (1996), by simply being in and inhabiting the city, children have the right to the city, and through their everyday freedoms and play, they appropriate the city as a means of claiming their citizenship. Play, by its very nature, is a fundamental building block of a child friendly city, as it contributes to the thriving of children in cities, and children's claiming of public spaces for play is an important way for children to participate in everyday life and appropriate urban space (Chatterjee, 2023). However, play has also been called the forgotten right, as only a few governments realise this right for children by promoting access to safe and engaging play environments (McKendrick et al., 2018).

The rights-based child friendly city, in viewing cities as engines of children's human development, utilises a Capability Approach as defined by Amartya Sen, wherein development is understood as an expansion of people's capabilities, or the substantive freedoms, to lead the kind of life anyone has reason to value (Sen, 1999). Expanding the idea of capabilities, Frediani (2010) connects the approach to urban and planning questions, and proceeds to explain that a person's capability is determined by the interaction of choices, abilities, and opportunities they have to achieve the things they value within the complex landscape of shared experiences and actions shaped by place, intersectional identities, social norms, and formal institutions. Play is a fundamental aspect of children's lives and is intrinsic to the pleasure of childhood. However, play is also a means to developing children's capabilities, as through play children forge pathways to create their own wellbeing, engage in valued activities, and navigate their environments in meaningful ways (Russell et al., 2023). The General Comment (GC) No. 17 (2013) on Article 31 of the UNCRC, which deepens understanding of the right to play, underscores the importance of play as a spatialised activity (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013). It details the conditions that support children's capability to play, including spatial, temporal, and affective factors. In GC-17's view, the poor recognition of play's significance in the lives of children results in a lack of investment in appropriate provisions, weak or non-existent protective legislation, and the invisibility of children in national and local-level planning. To address these issues at the local level, the GC-17 has outlined the obligations of municipal governments that serves as a framework for municipal work on promoting children's right to play based on the principle of sufficiency.

The GC-17 enabled UNICEF to bring a clear programming focus on the right to play in the revised CFCI framework (UNICEF, 2018) to support city governments in providing for the right to play in their children's local plans (Chatterjee, 2023). Almost all the GC-17

municipal obligations are directly linked to urban and local area planning as they pertain to spatial provisions of different kinds of play and leisure spaces and facilitate safe movement between them by supporting children's independent mobility. The GC-17 recommendations provide an important conceptual framework for rights-based and equity-focused planning to attain playability and play sufficiency. The increasing focus on play sufficiency, particularly within the United Kingdom, uses the idea of a play sufficient environment as a proxy and an organising principle of child-friendly environments (Russell et al., 2023).

This paper aims to explore how cities are implementing children's right to play when engaging with rights-based approaches such as the UNICEF child friendly cities initiative. This initiative is committed to promoting meaningful child participation in local governance and implementation of child rights by municipal governments to strengthen cities as engines of human development. Specifically, the paper is interested in understanding how effective 'planning for play' is in achieving outcomes for children and cities such as mainstreaming the idea of citywide playability as an urban quality in recognised child-friendly cities, and securing children's right to the city by ensuring children have the freedom to move safely and independently across the city to claim public spaces for play.

2. How do cities provide for play: a review of literature

Although streets have historically been the most frequented play spaces for children living in cities, a growing fear for children's safety while playing in the streets and fear of children and young people in the streets, led to a trend in Europe and the U.S.A. to segregate children from the common public spaces of the city into designated age-appropriate play spaces (Cavallo, 1981; Cranz, 1982; Goodman, 1982). Today, playgrounds have become a default public space for children in cities, provided by municipal governments worldwide. However, the typical municipal playground is preoccupied with safety concerns and ease of supervision, and does not understand play value and children's needs in an outdoor play environment. Play value, simply put, refers to how much play one can get out of something (Newstead, 2004). An environment, object, or piece of equipment is said to have high play value when it allows children to play with it in many different ways, integrate it into their play, or use it to expand or elaborate on their ideas and actions (HAGS, n.d). Researchers in the UK found that more natural play spaces tend to have higher play value in the outdoor play environment as they are less prescriptive (Woolley & Lowe, 2013). A German study compared the qualities and affordances for risky play between green playgrounds in urban parks and neighbourhood playgrounds in denser residential areas in Hamburg. It found that green, nature-based playgrounds were more versatile and adaptable in their design than neighbourhood playgrounds. They were qualitatively richer as they also offered equipment-free spaces for dynamic play experiences for different age groups and developmental stages and a wider range of risky play opportunities (Deniz & Kalburan, 2023).

Even though playgrounds continue to dominate the literature on outdoor play spaces of children, research from across the world has shown that play in a city is not restricted to playgrounds (Bishop & Corkery, 2017; Freeman & Tranter, 2012; Gill, 2021) but emerges in other planned as well as informal spaces whenever conditions allow (Chatterjee & Nallari, 2024; Jacobs, 1961; Ward, 1978). Many city governments are promoting access to a broader range of public spaces to make the city more playable by supporting

conditions that enable children to have richer and more diverse play experiences (Chatterjee, 2023). This is rooted in the idea that play does not necessarily happen only in designated spaces and at designated times, but is interwoven into everyday life (Lester & Russell, 2010). Planning research has long provided insights to support the creation of a citywide network of playable public spaces accessible by walking and cycling (ARUP, 2017; Krishnamurthy et al., 2018; Whitzman et al., 2010). Still, planning and design mostly promote play through discrete facilities that are considered places for children, such as playgrounds, schools, and sporting venues (Cunningham & Jones, 1999; Freeman, 2011). A notable model is the ‘play web’, which connects formal and informal play spaces through public transport and routes for walking and cycling. Originating in the Netherlands and introduced in Ghent, Belgium, it aims to create child-friendly neighbourhoods allowing children to move safely and independently. The play web approach emphasises that play is essential for children’s development, fostering creativity, social interaction, and emotional resilience (De Visscher & Bouverne-De Bie, 2008).

Child-friendly planning in Laviana, a UNICEF recognised child-friendly city in the region of Asturias in northern Spain, developed an urban development plan through active citizen participation, including children, creating the largest pedestrianised urban space in the region, linking several squares and spaces through a network of pedestrian streets, dedicated cycling paths, and reduced-speed streets (Chatterjee, 2023). Other European cities, whether officially recognised as child-friendly or not, are creating municipal programmes to leverage urban planning and make the urban environment more accessible and playable for children. In Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, a mayor-driven ‘City for Kids’ initiative is planning high-quality, open, safe public spaces for play, exploration, and social connections through data-driven insights with community-driven action (Štasselová, 2025). Elsewhere, planning acts and play sufficiency duties are mobilising local government action for improving children’s local environments with a focus on spatialising play, such as in cities across Wales and Scotland, and Leeds in England (Mannello, 2024; Tawil et al., 2025; Wood, 2024).

The literature referred to above predominantly draws from the global North, where child-friendly cities as well as child-friendly planning practices are supported by local governments who view this as a way to fulfil the rights of children in cities. There are examples, however, of planning approaches in the global South that have generated at-scale public spaces in cities with improved outcomes for children (Chatterjee & Dutta, 2024). However, they are outside the scope of this paper, as the focus is on two European cities.

3. Methodology

The paper aims to understand the effectiveness of planning for play in achieving outcomes for children and cities in UNICEF recognised child-friendly cities. In these cities, municipal governments are committed to child participation and strengthening cities as engines of human development using a rights-based approach. However, few child-friendly cities promote play through urban planning, though some notable examples can be found in cities across continental Europe, the UK, and the USA. As the British and American cities are new entrants to the CFCI, it will be premature to assess their achievements in promoting citywide playability through policies and planning driven by the rights-based approaches of the CFCI. This narrows the choice of

cities for this research to two European cities, Barcelona in Spain and Regensburg in Germany, that UNICEF has consistently recognized as child-friendly. These cities have pioneered this approach and have advanced much more than other cities in mainstreaming planning for play through citywide planning initiatives. Both have municipal governments that actively support the planning for play approach as an integral part of the CFCI – Barcelona’s ‘Plan for Play in Public Spaces with a Horizon to 2030’ that started in 2018, and Regensburg’s ‘Masterplan for Play’ planning approach that started in 2012. The two cities have implemented citywide projects to promote children’s right to play following the planning for play approach.

Initially, the first author had collected data from the city councils of Barcelona and Regensburg, facilitated by UNICEF, to develop case studies of planning for play for the UN intra-agency project – *Global Principles and Guidance for Public Spaces for Children acting on behalf of UNICEF, WHO, and UN-Habitat*. She sent a structured questionnaire to the city councils, who responded in great detail and also sent supporting documents, datasets, maps, and plans that better explained their approach to planning for play and its outcome. One follow-up interview was conducted after all the material had been reviewed to clarify doubts and to further probe important themes. This paper builds on the foundation of those initial case studies and conducts more in-depth learning-focused research from a comparative perspective to answer the following questions:

- (1) What is the approach to planning for play in Barcelona and Regensburg? How do they differ from each other?
- (2) To what extent have these two child friendly cities mainstreamed citywide playability as an urban quality of child-friendly cities?
- (3) What lessons can other cities learn from them for implementing planning for play from a rights-based perspective?
- (4) Did the planning for play approaches enhance children’s capabilities and spatial justice for children as outcomes for children?

The methodology adopted is a comparative case study based on secondary data to describe similarities and differences (Goodrick, 2014). The approach is suitable in this instance to understand the diverse motivations and commitments of these two city governments in different national contexts to initiate planning for play. It facilitates a comparison in cities that are large (million-plus city of Barcelona) and small (Regensburg has a population of less than 200,000). The focus is on outcomes for children’s play, rather than the technical aspects of urban planning.

The paper relies mainly on qualitative data. The first author invited two key professionals to serve as coauthors of the paper, each of whom played a significant role working with the city governments in shaping their planning for play. The first author designed a set of questions to deepen the probe into processes, results achieved, and outcomes, and the co-authors, with deep knowledge of planning for play through their direct work with city councils, responded to the questions and also collected more recent data from the cities which the authors collaboratively analysed as a team. The lack of evaluations of the planning for play approaches from a holistic perspective limits the discussion of outcomes and impact. To mitigate this to some extent, the first author, as a neutral third party with expertise in child friendly planning, right to play, and planning and

evaluation of child friendly cities, visited both cities to verify the extent of citywide implementation of planning for play and observe their use by children and adults. She has taken all the pictures used in this paper during her visits as evidence of playability in these cities. During these field visits, the first author interviewed planning professionals involved in master planning for play in Regensburg, working closely with the city government on spatial planning, design, and implementation. This opportunity did not arise in Barcelona and is a limitation of the paper. However, many scholarly and newspaper articles were utilised, which have studied the Barcelona example, focusing on the evolving plan for play, providing various perspectives on this model.

The analysis for the last research question probing outcomes for children used two conceptual frameworks suitable for assessing equity-focused and participatory planning to support children's right to the city:

- (1) Capability Approach as unpacked by Frediani (2010), where a person's capability is determined by the interaction of choices, abilities, and opportunities they have to achieve the things they value. In the context of right to play through the planning for play approach this would mean that the diverse choices and opportunities for play and recreation that are offered by the city, are those that children value. Furthermore, it implies that children have the freedom to navigate the city to access play opportunities safely. Finally, it facilitates the enhancement of children's abilities through the provision of opportunities for participation in planning for play. An evaluative lens based on this framing, as developed by Frediani et al. (2014) for urban development projects, further includes (a) involvement in diagnosis, (b) defining outcomes in a multi-dimensional manner, and (c) viewing project partners as active agents of change rather than as recipients or beneficiaries of the projects.
- (2) Public space and social justice: the five propositions or forms of social justice in relation to public spaces outlined by Low and Iveson (2016) provide a valuable framework to assess the important outcome of the planning for play approach – spatial justice for children and right to the city through citywide play. Five key propositions include: distributive justice, recognition, encounter and interactional justice, care and repair, and procedural justice.

4. Two approaches to planning for play: Barcelona and Regensburg

4.1. Barcelona's plan for play (2018–2030)

The 'Barcelona Model' of city development is a globally recognised urban planning approach that combines innovative design, cultural strategies, and sustainable practices to create a livable and inclusive urban environment. It has evolved, adapting to historical, social, and economic changes (Degen & García, 2012). The planning of the city government, led by the Comuns party from 2015 to 2023, committed to gender justice, sustainability, and the well-being of urban children. Children and adolescents make up 15 per cent of the population of Barcelona. A government measure on Children and Citizenship Focus (2017–2020) was developed as part of a Childhood Plan for reinforcing child-focused local public policy and designing child participation programmes such as 'Children talk: the subjective well-being of children in Barcelona'. These efforts underpinned

Barcelona's successful bid in 2018 for UNICEF recognition as a child friendly city. The opinions of a large and representative sample of 4,000 children were canvassed from across the city's 10 districts, and helped to shape the mandatory children's local plan within the CFCL. Children demanded more outdoor activities in a greener city as one of their priorities. The city was equally committed to addressing climate change and environmental degradation by increasing natural areas and promoting nature-based solutions, as outlined in its Climate Emergency Declaration (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2020) and the 2018–2030 Climate Plan (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2018). The Barcelona City Council developed the 'Plan for Play in Public Spaces with a horizon to 2030' with the support of the Institut Infància i Adolescència de Barcelona (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2019). The Plan aims to maximise the opportunities for free play and physical activity, and to enrich the social life of local communities for all ages. This is especially important as parents of young children fulfil a crucial caregiving role, and to enable children's access to public spaces, parents' needs must also be addressed.

4.2. Masterplan for Play in Regensburg (2010 onwards):

Regensburg is a city in eastern Bavaria, Germany, with a population of around 175,000, almost 23,000 of whom are aged under-18. In the 1990s, Germany experienced a demographic shift with a decline in the proportion of children and youth among the total population. Regensburg's politicians realised that creating a family and child friendly city could attract young professionals with families and students (heads of future families) to settle, which would enhance the city's competitiveness in attracting jobs and businesses. In 2007, the Regensburg city council passed the guidelines for a child and family friendly city (Stadt Regensburg, n.d.). In 2010, the city developed the Masterplan for Play as a legally binding planning instrument for child friendly urban planning to achieve child and family friendliness in all urban planning initiatives. In 2012, Regensburg started participating in the UNICEF Child Friendly City Initiative (CFCL), and in 2014, it became the first Bavarian municipality to be awarded the 'Child-Friendly Municipalities' seal by the 'Child-Friendly Municipalities' association, which is an initiative of UNICEF and the German Children's Fund (Kinderfreundliche Kommunen, 2018). The Masterplan for Play remains a key vehicle for making Regensburg a child friendly city.

5. How different are the two approaches?

Barcelona's Plan for Play is a time-bound action plan (2018–2030) with three main strategies or axes, 10 measurable milestones, and 63 action areas, all of which have implications for planning public spaces for children. This initiative is a collaboration between two City Council departments: 'Ecology, Urban Planning and Mobility', and 'Social Rights'. They have actively engaged with social organisations and the general public – including children, adolescents, and adults – through 24 in-person sessions at which over 400 citizens participated (March to December 2018) (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2019). In contrast, Regensburg's master plan for play is not a strategic project: rather, it is a legally binding planning instrument to be used for all urban planning initiatives.

The processes underpinning the two approaches are also quite different. Barcelona follows a data-driven, pan-city assessment of the entire stock of publicly held playgrounds through geospatial mapping and onsite assessment of the size, density, quality (such as the presence of green cover and the opportunities for different types of play and physical activities), and accessibility of every playground. The city also developed quality standards for upgrading the playgrounds managed by the city based on GC-17, a desk review of global standards, and consultation with key stakeholders within and outside the city council. The Plan for Play, however, does not restrict itself to only improving public playgrounds. The goal is to establish a network of public spaces – both planned and unplanned – where children can play freely around schools, schoolyards, plazas, and streets. This approach is based on research advocating for a citywide network of accessible play areas that can be reached by walking and cycling.

In contrast to Barcelona's top-down expert and data-driven assessment and planning principles, Regensburg is engaged in developing district-wide Masterplans for Play through bottom-up participatory processes involving children. In order to make the entire public realm of the city child friendly, the city of Regensburg uses different methodologies to map different types of public spaces. The city overlays data collected through surveys and audits by children and adolescents on land use maps and form-based maps to assess access to play and playability. The City Council's 'Spilleitplanung' (urban planning through youth participation) initiative regularly engages children and adolescents to assess the spatial quality of their neighbourhoods. Additionally, the city has established detailed technical guidelines and quality standards for playgrounds, safe access, and playability. Examples of guidelines include:

- The minimum size of a public playground is 500 sq. metres
- In any new development, a mandatory 12 sq. metre of open green space/inhabitant and a net of 1.5 sq. metre of playground space/inhabitant has to be provided
- All playgrounds have to be accessible by children themselves, and they have to be able to do so unsupervised from the age of six
- Proximity indicator for playgrounds: for children under 10 years within 400 m walking distance, for teens within 1000 m walking distance
- All apartment buildings with more than three apartments must have a little private play space that can be seen from a window of the apartment, so little children can be supervised when they play outside
- All districts of the city must have a youth centre with social workers and outdoor spaces that are always open to the public for play and sports

In Germany, accessible residential playgrounds are integral to the playable city network (Neumann, 2020). A study in Cologne and Hamburg highlighted that green spaces have a significant influence on families' decisions to stay or move. Having access to private gardens and shared green yards reduces the likelihood of relocation (Dovbischuk & Kley, 2024). There has also been increased demand for public playgrounds. A study across 18 municipalities found that rising land prices and urban density hinder playground provision (Brandhorst, 2018). While regulations exist, enforcement of quality standards for private playgrounds is minimal. Cities like Hamburg and Regensburg demonstrate best practice by following the German standard DIN 18034, which

encourages varied and nature-inspired play opportunities. Regensburg considers the 'DIN 18034-1:2020-10: Playgrounds and outdoor play areas' as the most important technical standard for the development of child and youth-friendly open spaces. This German standard applies to new planning and renovations, extensions, conversions, and modernisation of playgrounds and open spaces for playing. Regensburg's approach to planning for play can be summed up as mobilising child-led audits, intersectoral coordination within the city government, and implementing the quality controls mandated by the city to create detailed local plans in which public spaces for children are planned and designed with children. Through statutory and regulatory instruments, the city has ensured that provision for children's play is not confined to a few playgrounds: rather, playability permeates the entire urban fabric to encourage families to stay and raise their children.

6. Extent of playability of the public realm in the two cities

There are three core axes in Barcelona's Plan for Play that scripted citywide playability across the public realm (Table 1). Before the plan, Barcelona had built small standardised playgrounds based on local demand to cater for children's play. Plan for Play enabled two significant shifts in the city's thinking about children's play. A third shift emerged in the mindset of municipal staff.

- Shift 1: Instead of merely increasing the number of playgrounds, the city focused on improving the quality and playability of playgrounds while incorporating a wider range of play opportunities and affordances. The focus is on citywide renovation of existing playgrounds, and co-designing innovative new playgrounds inside prominent parks with children. The Plan for Play will phase out all small play spaces of less than 50 m² area and play areas with insufficient play affordances and play settings by 2030. The upgrading of playgrounds will follow the quality standards defined by the city.
- Shift 2: The municipal government extended its effort beyond just enhancing playgrounds to develop a playful ecosystem, incorporating designed and spontaneous public spaces where children often play independently. This includes improving the playability of schoolyards and the streets outside schools, expanding opportunities for play in traffic-safe public squares, and streets. The focus is also on creating car-free zones within the framework of Barcelona's celebrated superblocs, car-free days, play streets, and promoting pop-up play in public spaces.
- Shift 3: The Plan for Play in public spaces has influenced other city strategies and triggered a culture shift within the technical teams who design public spaces. They now ask how the design of a given public space will contribute to achieving the objectives and milestones of the Plan for Play. This resulted in considering opportunities for play for children and adolescents while planning diverse projects across street calming, greening, retrofitting, and upgrading leisure infrastructure in public spaces.

Barcelona's Plan for Play does not explicitly have an approach to wider urban planning for children at the level of local development planning. But due to the city's lack of large open spaces that can simultaneously satisfy all seven quality criteria

Table 1. The three axes of the Plan for Play and what they achieved.

Axis 1	Axis 2	Axis 3
Goal More and better spaces for play in the urban environment will be created by planning new play spaces and improving the existing infrastructure for play and recreation. Measures (a) Increase play spaces around schools: Traffic calming, improving access conditions, removing on-street parking, incorporating benches or planters to improve the quality of stay (see Figure 1). (b) Qualitative improvements of schoolyards: Greening and introducing loose parts such as sand and shaded seating (see Figure 2). (c) Increase in accessible playgrounds: Expanding the provision of accessible play spaces with play elements catering to the needs of disabled children. Results (a) Currently 217 schools or 1 in 3 schools in the city have transformed their surroundings with the Let's Protect the Schools programme (b) 33% more schools are using the schoolyard for outdoor classes after the schoolyard transformation projects. Through the Open Schoolyards programme, about 80 public nurseries, primary schools, and high schools have opened their schoolyards after school hours, on weekends, and during school holidays for community use. (c) All play elements in 55 playgrounds have been certified as accessible. Ten accessible playgrounds have been designed based on the guidelines co-created with the social network for accessibility within the City Council, which comprises NGOs, families, and professionals.	Stimulation of play, recreation, and physical activity in the streets and outdoors across the city. Increased opportunity for playing across ages in civic urban spaces (see Figures 3 and 4). Increased pedestrian spaces The 'Playing in the Squares' programme features around 50 squares to encourage outdoor play and socialisation, primarily in spring and summer, with pop-up activities for young children and families. Additionally, Glories Park offers the 'Place to Play 0-99,' a year-round service providing board games and play materials for citizens of all ages. 100 hectares of car-free public space in the city have resulted from various safer streets programmes that use permanent and temporary measures such as the superblock. These spaces are actively used by citizens for a variety of purposes, including play and physical activities for all ages.	Creating an enabling social environment through advocacy, policies on leisure time, monitoring and evaluation, and strengthening municipal services. Calls for 'social prescribing' of 1 h of outdoor play/day for children by doctors, paediatric nurses, and teachers. Amending the municipal ordinance for citizenship to be more welcoming of children in public spaces Communicating the diverse play opportunities by improving signage across the city and advertising universal accessibility. Agreements and alternatives to playing with hard balls without sanctioning or imposing ball game bans on streets.

established by the city, the Plan for Play promotes connecting numerous small spaces that offer at least three different types of play and leisure activities. This approach serves as a key planning principle where any site lacking adequate play options is analysed alongside other play spaces within a 300-metre radius. This assessment identifies other play opportunities in the vicinity to plan a connected play system. For instance, if no play structures within a 300-metre radius offer height (3 metres or more) for children over 10 years of age to experience challenging play, the principle is to incorporate such a feature into one of the nearby play spaces. There is also an emphasis on

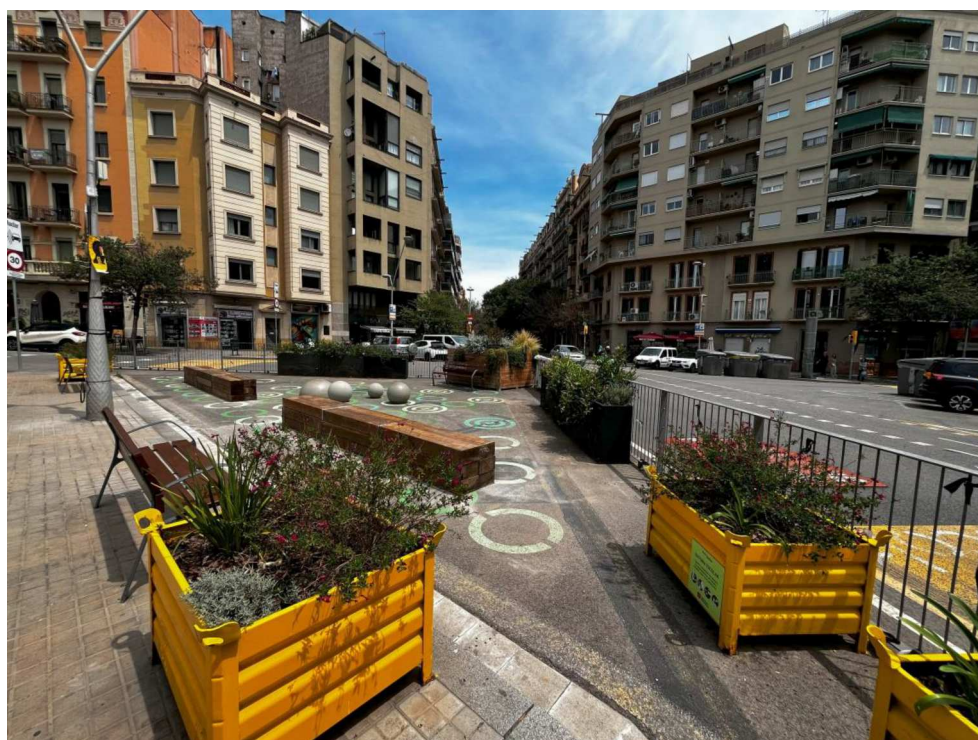


Figure 1. Placemaking around schools in Barcelona. PC: Sudeshna Chatterjee.

creating car-free public spaces in Barcelona using permanent and temporary measures (Figures 1–4).

The implementation of the Plan for Play in Barcelona faces significant challenges, particularly due to competition for space in the dense city. It also challenges the deeply entrenched planning practice of providing standard playgrounds with overly restrictive specifications, which prioritise safety and maintenance over the benefits of risk and spontaneous play for children. The milestones and targets in the Plan for Play addressed many of these challenges, but the ambitious objectives of the plan are difficult to accomplish with public funding alone.

Empowered by the city council's legal mandate for master-planning for play for all planning projects with likely impact on children and families, Regensburg has enhanced the playability of the city, notably by working directly with children and youth and strengthening planning criteria and regulations. The city currently has 188 playgrounds, but opens one new playground every year. The city has developed clear guidelines for playground areas and per capita open green space to which developers will have to adhere when they develop urban space. The city also follows these standards when it redevelops older areas. It invests time and resources to realise children's visions of play spaces and structures, instead of routinely installing standard play equipment from commercial catalogues (for example, Figure 5). The city's deep understanding of childhood cultures, coupled with respect for children's abilities to be skilled risk assessors in play spaces, once basic safety standards are considered, has led to a re-enchantment of public space through uniquely



Figure 2. Barcelona enhanced pre-primary school yards with loose parts, shading and seating as a community space after school and on holidays. PC: Sudeshna Chatterjee.

designed play spaces with high play value. Based on Amin's conceptualization of re-enchantment (Amin, 2006), Regensburg continuously remakes the city favouring modest, inclusive and experimental interventions with and for children.

While the city ensures that they meet the minimum technical criteria of play spaces, it also promotes the idea that a child can choose to play anywhere in the neighbourhood. It gives children spatial freedom to navigate the city and to decide where and how to play in any local space. Based on child-led needs assessment, Masterplan for Play has: (i) introduced a range of projects that have slowed down traffic in specific areas; (ii) improved road safety for children as they walk to school and leisure activities; (iii) created play streets in new developments; (iv) strengthened car-free zones in the downtown; (v) promoted child friendly planning of parks and playgrounds catering to all ages co-designed with children; (vi) provided a range of spaces for sport, adventure play, a self-build playground, a children and youth farm for experiencing nature with animals; (vii) developed youth and family centres in all neighbourhoods; (viii) made vacant land and natural areas such as the river bank accessible for play; and (vix) provided guidance for developing play spaces in new neighbourhoods and schools by installing attractive play equipment often co-designed with children. Elementary school yards are open to children after school, during weekends, and holidays. The outdoor spaces of youth centres offer opportunities for gardening and sports such as basketball, volleyball, bouldering, football and dirt park for biking outdoors (in one of the youth centres).



Figure 3. Play is embedded along walking routes along Barcelona's main streets. PC: Sudeshna Chatterjee.

Regensburg has created play master plans for two city districts: the city centre and a new development area to the southeast with a significant migrant and marginalised population. A master plan for a third neighbourhood has also been completed. These masterplans start with child-led walking audits and surveys of public spaces in the districts. The master plan for play added 'play points' in the historic city – to enhance playful interactions, as it lacked playgrounds. Mapping by children in the southeast district revealed physical and social marginalisation due to train tracks and wide streets separating it from the rest of the city. Children's concerns informed a long-term master plan to gradually implement projects for playgrounds and play spaces that are co-designed with children. Additionally, initiatives are underway to ensure children and youth can safely and independently access these areas.

7. Lessons for other cities for promoting the right to play through urban planning

Several lessons can be drawn from the planning for play experience of Barcelona and Regensburg.

7.1. Securing a mandate from the city council, driven by political will

Both cities initiated their planning for play initiatives once they secured a mandate. In Barcelona, improving the city through play is a citizen demand, often led by children's organisations, families, and children in child local councils that meet regularly as part of the child friendly cities initiative. Through this demand-led approach, politicians

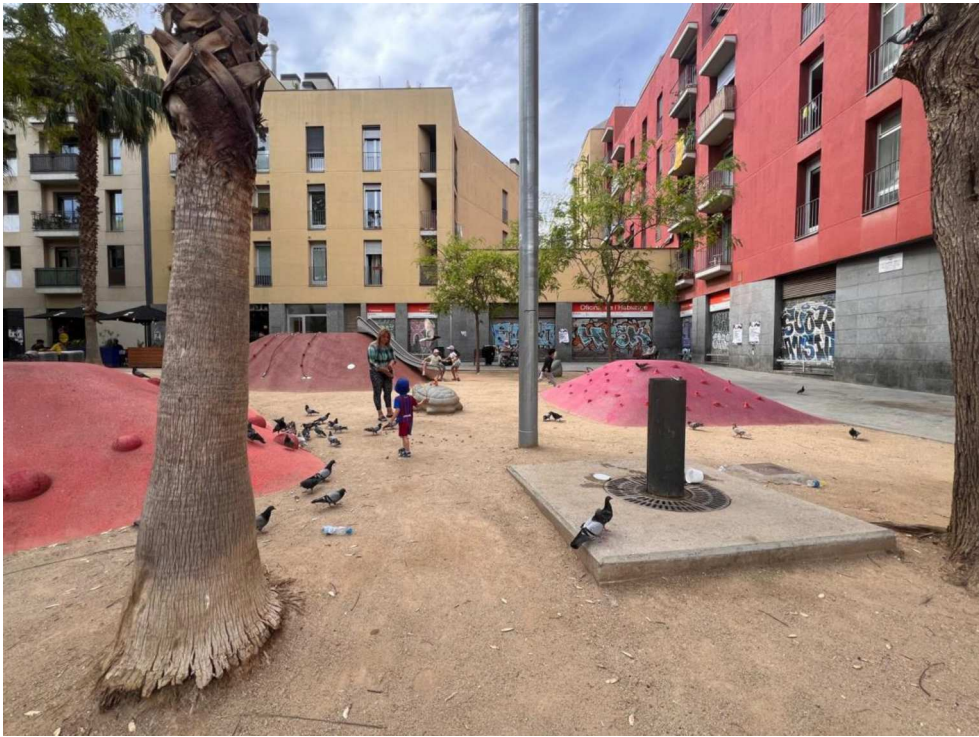


Figure 4. Barcelona targeted play provisions in deprived neighbourhoods. PC: Sudeshna Chatterjee.

acknowledged the importance of the plan for improving community life, not just for children but all citizens and resolves to take action through a timebound, budgeted strategic Plan for Play. This enabled wide-ranging stakeholder buy-in of the plans and the involvement of diverse actors at key stages to plan, approve, resource, and implement planning for play. In Regensburg, creating a family and child friendly city is a politician-led approach dating back to the late 1990s, which aims to attract young families to enhance the city's competitiveness. The vision of child friendly planning for a child friendly city was established through a legal mandate in 2010 as the Masterplan for Play.

7.2. Leveraging aligned urban strategies

Both cities aligned planning for play with broader urban policy goals such as improving air quality, road safety, urban greening, climate resilience, and gender and disability mainstreaming, in addition to the goals of improving children's and families' mental and physical health and overall well-being. These goals were to be achieved by encouraging outdoor activities, enhancing the inclusivity of public spaces, and creating more vibrant environments with enriched play opportunities. As child-friendly cities, Barcelona and Regensburg have committed to implementing a cross-sectoral child local plan, and as the planning for play approaches are aligned with this plan, they were able to align various municipal plans, strategies, and budgets.

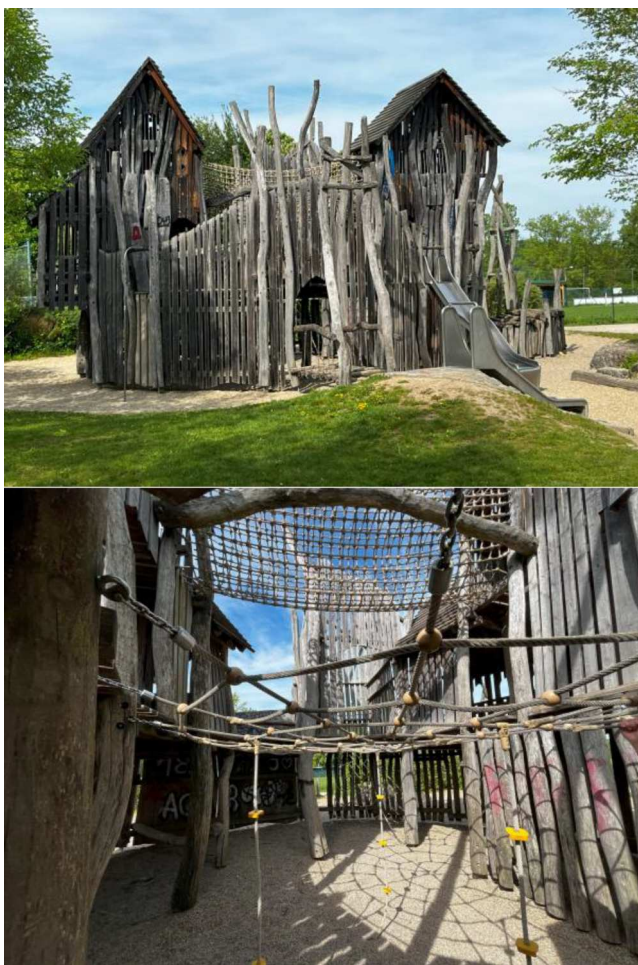


Figure 5. The Magic Castle, designed by children and built by the city of Regensburg. Left: outside view, right: inside view. PC: Sudeshna Chatterjee.

7.3. Institutional arrangements for planning for play in child friendly cities

Both cities established coordinating structures for engaging diverse stakeholders, including local government, civil society, schools, private entities, and international organisations, to plan, implement, and sustain initiatives. Barcelona's Plan for Play was developed with a specialised organisation, *Institut Infància i Adolescència de Barcelona*. A cross-sectoral, well-resourced municipal structure was introduced, comprising a Driving Group comprising political leaders and a Coordinating Group comprising municipal technical staff to manage and monitor progress against the Plan for Play. Regensburg adopted an important measure of officially putting the department of municipal youth work in charge of realising the city's child and family-friendly agendas. The measure ensures that a professional social worker – the city's youth welfare planner – participates in the planning processes by the city's different departments whenever the projects are perceived to have impacts on children, youth, and families. The youth welfare planner

safeguards the needs of children and families and upholds children's rights in all decisions made by the city. She also coordinates the child friendly cities initiative and closely monitors the progress of the cross-sectoral action plan of the child friendly city while managing the important stakeholders, including the mayor and local politicians who approve the programmes, projects, regulations, and guidelines for public spaces for children in the city council.

7.4. Citywide playability is attainable through urban planning:

Barcelona and Regensburg promoted the idea of playability as an urban quality of child friendly cities by investing in planning many different kinds of accessible and playable spaces. Public spaces developed through the planning for play approaches in both cities are essentially inclusive community spaces that support intergenerational play, recreation, caregiving, and socialising, thus making the idea of playability of public spaces more widely acceptable (Figures 6 and 7). A key finding from the two cities is that children and teens need a network of public spaces connected by bike and pedestrian paths in order to move safely and independently to claim the city for play. However, attaining safe and sustainable mobility goes beyond physical planning, an insight that led Regensburg to promote innovative initiatives such as the 'emergency island', where staff in local businesses are trained to offer help to children when approached by any



Figure 6. The traffic-calmed intersection within the Sant Antoni superblock is a great public space for children and the community in Barcelona. PC: Sudeshna Chatterjee.



Figure 7. A play point, co-designed with children in Regensburg's play space-deprived old city centre, serves as a vibrant intergenerational community space. PC: Sudeshna Chatterjee.

child as they walk to school and other places in the city and encounter any problem or need to call their parents.

7.5. Strengthening the legal and regulatory frameworks

Establishing regulatory instruments to ensure child-friendly urban planning is followed by all city departments is a critical preparatory step for both cities. Regensburg's legally binding approach does this more successfully. But Barcelona's targeted Plan for Play is also driving the development of guidelines. Both cities realised the importance of creating detailed planning guidelines and quality standards to scale the work of improving the play value of playgrounds when they are due to be renovated. This is achieved through regulations of size, and minimum standards for play settings. The introduction in Barcelona of more challenging play equipment, particularly for older children, aims to encourage risk management through play. Risk is taken into account while designing for play in Regensburg. German standards also ensure that enhanced accessibility of play settings, including more natural elements in play spaces among others (Figure 8). The city staff are now experienced in child friendly planning through child participation. But many external professionals and developers who partner with the city are not. The city needs to monitor compliance with the standards and guidelines established for child friendly public spaces to achieve the desired



Figure 8. Nature-based playgrounds in Regensburg that promote risky play. PC: Sudeshna Chatterjee

outcome. The child participation process involving these external stakeholders also need to be monitored closely by the city.

8. Outcomes for children: enhancing children's capabilities and spatial justice

The two case studies presented in this paper represent two different approaches to planning for play, although both approaches are grounded in the belief that planning for play can achieve better outcomes for both children and cities by mainstreaming playability as an important quality criterion of child-friendly cities through child-friendly planning. More recently, the work on play sufficiency in the UK has linked the idea of an accessible play sufficient environment to expanding spatial justice for children. Ministerial reviews of play in Wales have recommended that the right to play is sufficiently incorporated into strategic policy instruments and decisions by recognising play as a matter of spatial justice that requires making neighbourhoods and other public spaces more encouraging and welcoming for play, and ensuring that the views and experiences of children inform how neighbourhoods are planned and managed (Mannello, 2024). Planning for play in the two child friendly cities of Barcelona and Regensburg increased children's capabilities and expanded spatial freedom by using two evaluative frameworks based on the capability approach as applied to urban planning and development (Frediani et al., 2014), and spatial justice and public spaces (Low & Iveson, 2016).

8.1. Enhancing children's capabilities

The analysis is based on the evaluative lens that frames the capability approach for urban development projects developed by Frediani et al. (2014).

8.1.1. Involvement in deep diagnosis

Both cities appraised the extent of play deprivation and quality of play spaces to address children's marginalisation in public spaces. In Barcelona, 4,000 children from the city's 10 districts contributed to the city's diagnosis of the state of children in the city and shared their aspirations as part of the mandatory child local plan of the CFCI. The Plan for Play has elements of bottom-up (demands made by children) and top-down planning (geo-spatial mapping approach to create baseline information of the entire stock of the city's public playgrounds and to develop quality standards for their improvements). In Regensburg, in contrast, children are involved in regular audits, diagnosing issues that impact their lives in accessing public spaces for play. From grade three, children and teenagers participate in surveys and map their local areas with support from the city's youth welfare planner. They describe their routes to school, outdoor spaces they use, and issues they face in public areas, fostering a culture of city diagnosis among youth. Groups of eight to ten children lead neighbourhood walks for city officials, social workers, and planners to identify local public space problems and propose changes. These inclusive walks involve children from schools, sports clubs, and youth centres, including those with special needs.

8.1.2. Defining outcomes in a multidimensional manner:

Both approaches to planning for play perceive play as not merely recreational but a fundamental aspect of children's development and well-being. GC-17 provides a framework that is followed by both cities, succinctly articulating the intrinsic value of play to healthy child development and underscoring the value of play in all aspects of learning to enhance children's capabilities through participation in everyday life. The vision and milestones underpinning Barcelona's Plan for Play embed multidimensional outcomes, which aim to create a city committed to human development. The Plan for Play has taken a data-driven approach to improvements by documenting the baseline conditions and setting milestones and targets across a range of indicators. It connects to other municipal plans and strategies to achieve broader outcomes of improving mental and physical health of children and families, encouraging them to be more active outdoors, making public spaces more inclusive, and by investing in more natural play areas make the city more sustainable and resilient. Regensburg recognises that free and active play is crucial for healthy child development, along with clean air, nutritious food, and sleep. With this understanding, Regensburg is committed to providing children with access to green spaces, nature, and engaging outdoor environments that encourage exploration and free play. Guided by the city's youth services, the Masterplanning for Play initiative actively fosters a supportive living environment that prioritises both children's and families' needs. This initiative champions the inclusion of child participation in the planning and design processes of the city's physical spaces, ensuring that children's broader spatial needs and aspirations for play outdoors are met. By placing an emphasis on these principles, Regensburg is paving the way for more child-friendly city planning

and creating vibrant areas that encourage play and healthy child development (Chatterjee & Dutta, 2024).

8.1.3. Children as partners and active agents of change:

Regensburg has mainstreamed child participation within the Masterplan for Play approach by conceiving children as active agents of change and not only beneficiaries of plans and projects designed by adults. The city captures children's valued aspirations for play through direct participation promoted in multiple venues – schools, sports clubs and youth centres – supported by the city's youth welfare planner. The city also invests time and resources to realise children's visions of play spaces and structures instead of installing standard play equipment from commercial catalogues. The city's deep understanding of childhood cultures, coupled with respect for children's abilities to be skilled risk assessors in play spaces, once basic safety standards are considered, has led to re-enchancing public spaces through uniquely co-designed play spaces with children. In Barcelona, children participated in city diagnosis to develop the child local plan with a strong demand for access to green spaces and better play opportunities in public spaces, which led to the plan for play. However, there is no child participation in upgrading the large publicly held stock of playgrounds based on established quality standards. And children's direct inputs were not sought in the development of the quality standards. However, children do participate in the co-design of the 'super-playgrounds' that are fewer in number and larger in size than the typical municipal playground within residential neighbourhoods. They thus provide an opportunity for innovative design ideas based on children's aspirations such as to have iconic custom-made play equipment and incorporate diverse play types.

8.2. Spatial justice in the production, distribution and access to play spaces and enhancing children's right to the city

Low and Iveson (2016) provide a robust analytical tool for assessing the right to the city, a concept emphasising democratic process, participation, and equitable access and use of public spaces by marginalised groups. Children are considered a marginalised group when discussing spatial justice in cities. This marginalisation stems from systemic inequities in urban environments that limit their access to safe, inclusive, and equitable spaces by rendering them invisible in planning and design (Beth Schlemper et al., 2023).

Regensburg demonstrated a stronger commitment to procedural justice in implementing the Masterplan for Play and in producing public spaces for and with children. With the mainstreaming of child-friendliness by the Regensburg City Council, child participation is the key vehicle for including children's voice in decision-making and the master planning for play is no exception to this. Regensburg has adopted an important measure of officially appointing the department of municipal youth work to lead the city's efforts in developing child – and family-friendly initiatives, including the Masterplan for Play. The youth welfare planner plays a vital role in reviewing all upcoming projects to assess their impact on children and youth, ensuring that children's spatial needs are prioritised and that opportunities for involving children and youth in planning and co-design urban projects are maximised. This approach fosters a more inclusive process by mandating child participation in the Regensburg's planning of play approach.

Barcelona's playground and play space upgrade process is more top-down, and there is only children's participation in the design of a few upgraded playgrounds, mainly the 'super playgrounds'.

Both cities exhibited a commitment to distributive justice by targeting interventions to serve marginalised communities, groups and neighbourhoods deprived of open-spaces. Barcelona demonstrated this by planning for more and better spaces for play across the city with a special focus on deprived neighbourhoods to reduce territorial inequity, and greening schoolyards in neighbourhoods that were deprived of open space and opening them to the community after school hours and on holidays to promote outdoor play. The citywide mapping found that only 25% of play areas are accessible or have play elements certified as inclusive, but these are unevenly distributed throughout the city. The Plan for Play emphasised expanding the availability of accessible play spaces, including features that cater to the needs of disabled children. Regensburg's second master plan for play targeted the south-east district of the city, which houses a large migrant population, and engaged with a private developer to redevelop Brixenpark, a disused area of about 400 hectares that comprised derelict army barracks. Here, high – and low-income housing with private play spaces within the apartment blocks were introduced alongside a large public park, with play spaces for different age groups. This followed wide-ranging child participation. Regensburg also built high-quality play spaces within housing areas dominated by refugees and migrants.

Both cities were committed to improving the quality of play spaces. They recognised the importance of enhancing the play value and inclusion of risky play in the design of play structures to cater to children's diverse play needs. In allowing children to design play structures based on their fantasies, the cities recognised and respected the diverse ideas, identities, and cultural expressions of different groups children. 'DIN 18034-1:2020-10: Playgrounds and outdoor play areas' that Regensburg follows as the most important technical standard for developing child and youth-friendly open spaces, encourages taking risks into account when designing for play. It states as a rule that 'risks and dangers ... must be calculable and understood by children and adolescents' (DIN 18034: 2012-09: Safety and maintenance, general, P. 11). This encourages planners not to be risk averse and not to allow legal requirements to impair judgement, but rather to value the risk management benefits for children when playing in nature. However, there are also challenges. Ideas from the play sector are often not understood by the public administration or the public at large, and require sustained communication campaigns. Keeping these challenges in mind, Barcelona's Plan for Play is providing a space to expand good practices that are developed locally in neighbourhoods such as setting up play kiosks that stock loose parts for play, providing foam balls in squares to overcome the bans on ball games, and promoting tactical urbanism interventions to claim public spaces for play on a temporary basis.

Both approaches furthered the goal of interactional justice by promoting respectful and non-discriminatory practices, including creating an enabling social environment supportive of play. Barcelona advocates for outdoor free play in health and education, and has worked to change attitudes towards children's play in public spaces. Regensburg believes a play structure does not make an urban space child friendly: quality implies high play value and an environment that is welcoming of childhood cultures. This ethos informs how all public spaces in the city is developed, either by design or by simply

valuing children's playful presence and right to actualise the environmental affordances of all features in a public space. Regensburg's master planning for play has introduced play points in the heart of public spaces in the city centre to embed play in pedestrianised, busy mixed-use streets along major shopping spines and tourist destinations to facilitate playful social interactions.

Both cities have invested in the care and repair of public spaces. As Barcelona is a large city with more than 900 playgrounds maintained by the city council, the first step was to map the entire stock of play spaces and analyse the deficits of each using geospatial tools and on-ground surveys. Then the Barcelona City Council prepares the list of playgrounds to be upgraded each year using the seven quality criteria established by the Plan for Play and to meet the 10 milestones set by the plan for 2030. Regensburg also prepares a list of playgrounds for renovation each year based on constant monitoring of all play spaces by relevant stakeholders in the city administration, as well as by children through well-established feedback loops through workshops and interaction sessions with children at school, and youth centres, among others. This approach is more relevant for a smaller city with a deep political commitment to child and family friendliness for over 20 years.

To achieve multidimensional outcomes for children, the cities demonstrated a commitment to enhancing children's capability to play by enhancing choices and opportunities for play. The approach to planning for play further expanded children's collective right to the city by prioritising children's spatial needs in planning, fostering inclusivity through equity-focused targeting of urban improvements, and creating sustainable frameworks to mainstream playability as an urban quality for fulfilling the right to play in urban environments.

9. Conclusion

Barcelona and Regensburg have employed diverse strategies to enhance the playability of their public spaces, aligned with the obligations of municipal governments as outlined by GC-17. The cities acted on children's desire and ideas for improving access to outdoor play in public spaces, and the need to create more child-friendly urban spaces. This befits a city that presents as child friendly. Today, both cities have an overarching consensus about 'what to do' to plan for play as established through mandates, processes, regulations, and guidelines. With the two planning for play approaches being deployed at scale, Barcelona and Regensburg can be said to have mainstreamed the idea of citywide playability as an urban quality of child friendly cities. The approaches have also ensured that children enjoy spatial freedoms by moving safely and independently across the cities to access diverse public spaces for play, recreation, socialisation, and leisure activities.

Regensburg's Masterplanning for Play approach, being a legally binding rights-based approach, will survive political transitions and is self-sustaining, drawing from cross-sectoral budgets of the city council. In contrast, Barcelona's Plan for Play is an outcome-based strategic action plan for achieving the objectives of many different agendas of the city over 12 years by leveraging the co-benefits of play and playable outdoor spaces for health and well-being, a child friendly city, an inclusive city with vibrant public spaces, and a sustainable and resilient city. Despite the many wonderful objectives and achievements of Barcelona's Plan for Play to date, it is not clear how

such a non-statutory plan can survive political transitions or what its future will be after 2030. The differing approaches to planning for play in both cities notwithstanding, and the challenges associated with funding and the implementation of new ideas developed in the play sector by public administrators, the cities have made significant progress in enhancing the playability of public spaces. These efforts have improved children's opportunities to play out and have advanced the recognition of children's right to the city while promoting children's rights in child-friendly cities.

Disclosure statement

The research undertaken for this paper is the original work of the authors, informed by the authors' previous work done for UNICEF, UN-Habitat, and WHO. This paper independently builds on prior research by introducing new research questions, conceptual and analytical frameworks, and interpretations. The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the authors and do not reflect those of any organizations with which the authors are currently or have previously been affiliated. Additionally, the research and analysis presented in this paper did not receive any funding from any source.

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