



Building for the future
Child in the City
November 2023 - Brussel

*Give youth
space!!*

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Research by Jantje Beton shows that children prefer to play outside in the playground. Unfortunately, research shows that more than a quarter of the playgrounds in the Netherlands will disappear within five years. Currently, 300,000 children in the Netherlands never or hardly play outside. As a result, these children cannot develop properly. Examples from Jantje Beton show what this means for children and young people. See for this: https://jantjebeton.nl/?gad_source=1&gclid=EAIaIQobChMIi-bVwYK_gwMVjBStBh2qOAX2EAAAYAiAAEgJn_fD_BwE.

At the international conference “building for the future” of Child in the City in Brussels I came across many similar examples and at the same time inspiring examples of how you can make a city or village attractive for children and young people. An inspiring conference with around 300 participants from 37 countries around the world. The conference was co-organized by the municipality of Brussels and also opened by a very eloquent Ans Persoons, Brussels State Secretary. She indicated that Brussels is so beautiful because it is an imperfect city.

That makes Brussels lively, vibrant, exciting and challenging. At the conference we mainly talked about the relationship between youth and public space and the way in which you can involve children and young people in the design and use of play and meeting spaces in public. And there’s a lot going on in that regard. The slogan “build a city for children and you build a city for everyone” has stuck with me after all those workshops and lectures.



MORE ELDERLY PEOPLE THAN YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE WORLD

If you look at youth in a global perspective, the number of elderly people in the world is increasing, also in age, and the number of children born is decreasing. In China, for example, the elderly population is increasing and the number of children is decreasing. From 41% IN 1953 to 21% in 2020. Research in Beijing shows how important it is for grandparents who look after their grandchildren, which is very common in China, that meeting places should be close to the home, both for the elderly and for the children themselves. Large city parks seem attractive to people, but not if you have to combine several things, such as babysitting, shopping, and meeting other local residents.

This leads to intergenerational conflicts in various places in cities. Both interest groups are competing for more space and place to live and relax. In a city like Gothenburg in Sweden they have solved this by creating friendly play areas for both the elderly, with plenty of seating areas and fitness equipment and green play space for the children.



BRUSSELS; CITY OF DIVERSITY AND GREAT CONTRASTS

Back to Brussels: The Brussels Capital Region has approximately 1.2 million inhabitants, spread over 19 municipalities, of which the city of Brussels is one of them with approximately 200,00 inhabitants. Fatima Zibouh, diversity and inclusion expert in Brussels, explained what that diversity looks like in the Brussels region; 74% of the population does not have a Belgian background, there are 184 nationalities, 104 different languages. 30% of all children in Brussels live below the poverty line. Just for comparison, in Amsterdam about 16% of all children grow up in poverty.

Fatima mainly investigated which topics young people find important for their lives in the city. She arrived at the following list in order of importance: social contacts, identity, climate, mobility, public spaces, safety. And if you look at the relationship between young people and the use of public spaces for social contacts: 70% of the public space in the Brussels urban region is for traffic. And Brussels has very rich districts and very poor districts.

At the conference we visited the Marolles, one of the oldest and previously poorest neighborhoods in the city of Brussels itself. An impressive and inspiring excursion past skate parks, basketball courts for girls, concrete apartment blocks and a very wide 24/7 school in the middle of the Marolles.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SPACE USE BOYS AND GIRLS

The workshops on the use of spaces by young people revealed clear differences between boys and girls. There is mainly the idea among administrators that "girls don't hang out". Research in Ghent shows that

59% of girls do not feel welcome in public parks because boys claim those spaces. 91% of girls have experienced harassment in parks, while 37% of young people in public spaces are girls. But local research in Brussels shows that girls do want to be outside, but that public spaces for girls are not designed in a female-friendly manner. There have been many actions in Brussels from the women's movement. In this link you will find a good example of this https://www.zijkant.be/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Girls-Play-The-City_rapport-NL_def.pdf

For example, girls find a football or basketball cage with one entrance very annoying. They prefer a room with multiple exits so that boys or other men cannot close in on them.

In Brussels they made a basketball court completely pink and boys don't like that either. The Vital cities G.I.R.L. project (gender inclusive space is alive!) creates girl-friendly spaces in Ronse, Roeselare and Antwerp, together with municipalities and welfare organizations.



Important principles are:

- co-creation of the spaces with the girls
- create fun activities with and by the girls
- provide communication options (Wifi)
- ensure safety
- create social connections rather than just competitive ones
- use female role models
- zero tolerance for harassment, and educate boys to share and respect spaces together
- work together with partners and the municipality

The link shows a nice example of how you can approach this.

<https://www.vitalcities.be/src/Frontend/Files/MediaLibrary/03/poster-child-in-the-city.pdf>

FORMAL AND INFORMAL PLAY AND MEETING AREAS

At a workshop they asked children what kind of place they wanted in their village. The answer was “a Macdonald”, upon further question it turned out that the children were mainly concerned with the following matters:

- a dry and warm place to meet
- not too much parental supervision
- free WIFI

In Berlin, research was conducted into meeting spaces for young people and it turned out that a beautifully designed play park attracted few young people. Why? A metro station near the park had free Wi-Fi and a canopy. For teenagers, their own residential area is becoming less important: they like free WiFi, free public



there are also 'hidden Champions' who cannot be invented by adults and are nevertheless popular among young people. In Envigado in Colombia, remote spaces are organized by young people themselves with activities such as festivals and skateboarding events. The neighbourhood itself also comes alive.

www.s2cities.org.

It is therefore better for administrators to first talk to young people about what they consider important. The Flemish Platform-C (www.platform-c.be) uses the pokebowl methodology. An attractive method to discuss with children and young people about, for example, the design and use of play and meeting places.

<https://sites.google.com/view/platformc/pok%C3%A9bowl>

transport and a place where adults cannot directly supervise. But the place should also not have too many hidden places, for example bushes and shrubs, because that also provides opportunities for strange types.

Administrators quickly think that a formal play and meeting place is important. But



PLAYGROUNDS FOR CHILDREN

Various international studies show that the distance between home and a playground determines how often a child plays outside.

This can amount to a factor of 6, according to American research. In Finland, the distance between a childcare location and an outdoor play area is not allowed to exceed 300 meters. Then it is used a lot. Children also want a playground that is safe, but not too public. And if play

equipment is placed in a playground, they often turn out to be not pleasant to play with in the winter. Too much cold iron in a climbing frame to grasp. You can also set up good play areas for children with autism, where these children have places to retreat.

Polish research showed that children mainly look for a playground to play when they go home from school, and not the other way around. Especially when children walk home themselves, they are more likely to play outside. Unfortunately, it also appears that in Poland parents often drop off and pick up their children by car, which means that children play outside less, with all the consequences that entails.

The workshop on games and playgrounds in Glasgow showed that for poor families in Scotland; Poor quality leisure leads to vulnerable adults. And around 25% of all children in Scotland live below the poverty line. Playgrounds in poor neighbourhoods for children are the most unsafe. Many shrubs and bushes are not seen as nature-friendly, but rather as unsafe. Used heroin

injections, condoms and other filth mean that children and their parents often take a detour to get home and therefore do not quickly play outside.

FINALLY

Every time I visit youth organizations abroad or participate in conferences about youth, I return inspired. With examples, anecdotes or new contacts to plan a new visit. and you see recurring examples from all those different countries that you have to let young people think along for themselves, give them a safe and appealing space in their own neighbourhood or in places that are appealing to young people. And that we must ensure that youth do not face another generation in the “fight” for public space. Because then the youth could lose. And if you lose the youth, you also lose the future. This is all too true in the Netherlands, even when you see how often play areas lose out to new construction, roads and nature compensation.

It’s a shame that there were so few Dutch participants at this wonderful conference. Administrators, policy officials, urban planners, child and youth workers can learn a lot from this.

Interested in the next conference? Then follow the Child in the City newsletter: <https://www.childinthecity.org/>

