

A Child-Friendly City is Slower, More Permissive and Better for Everyone

Text Mari Ariluoma, Veera Moll



Puotila School Yard, Helsinki, Nomaji 2020. On the schoolyard, there is an edible garden for the children to use. Existing vegetation was preserved as much as possible. Photo: Maite González Laurens

In a child-friendly city, play spreads beyond parks, and car users have to be flexible, envision landscape architect Mari Ariluoma and researcher Veera Moll. Through discussion, they found eight principles for planning a child-friendly city.

1. Children are allowed to be seen and heard.

Ariluoma: Let's start from a very basic idea. Veera, you have studied the history of urban childhood in Helsinki in your recent doctoral thesis. How were children considered in urban planning in the past?

Moll: Children became part of urban planning in the 20th century. At first, this was reflected in the increase in playgrounds, but in post-war suburbs, the role of children was already central. The surrounding nature was thought to provide ideal places for play. Separating motor traffic from pedestrians was also thought to increase children's safety. In many ways, the suburbs can be seen to have succeeded in their mission of creating good living environments for children.

Ariluoma: At the same time, the separation of the different functions began, didn't it?

Moll: It could indeed be argued that the consideration for children in the urban environment has been a history of displacement. At first, play was moved from the streets to playgrounds, then from the city centre to the suburbs. The places where children already were, such as courtyards and streets, were not seen as suitable for them. Similar attitudes are evident in today's city. Children are seen as best suited to spaces designed especially for them, while the rest of the city is a playground for adults and car traffic. This should change.



The vast green areas of post-war suburbs provided plenty of places for children to play. Boys sitting on a outcrop in Puotinharju, Helsinki, in 1970. Photo: Simo Rista / Helsinki City Museum

2. Find alternatives to the car-focused transport system.

Moll: I would start by thinking about a child-friendly environment primarily in terms of what prevents children from moving about and playing, and I would try to influence this. Children often play and move about naturally. Until now, it has been believed that if we just plan carefully enough for both car traffic and children, we can achieve a satisfactory outcome for everyone. However, this is not the case. If we genuinely want to make it safe or even possible for city children to play and move about, then we need to significantly restrict car traffic and, for instance, slow down traffic speeds considerably. At the same time, we also need to make room for

those who, for example, have to travel by car due to mobility issues. Can you think of anything other than car traffic that clearly restricts children's movement and play?

Ariluoma: Additionally, various administrative and liability issues deliberately drive play into its own dedicated enclaves. At the same time, it is somewhat forgotten that children also use other urban environments. People don't want play activities anywhere else, because it involves safety and maintenance issues. This reflects how narrowly we view play and the stimulation from the environment. Squares, parks and yards could be seen as holistically playful, and play equipment is not always needed for this. For example, nature in the city often provides affordances that children can utilize. The commodification and standardization of play has made play environments somewhat pre-digested and unimaginative.

3. Children can walk or cycle to school.

Moll: So how then do we resolve these issues? Accessible and affordable public transport, attractive and safe walking and cycling conditions, and moderate car traffic speeds are a good starting point. For children, a specific measure could be school streets, with various actions to limit car traffic. Mitigating drop-off traffic makes the surroundings of daycare centres and schools safer and more pleasant. This is quite a challenge at a time when school sizes are increasing and the temptation to travel by car is growing. However, if many other cities abroad can do this, we can too! Some school street experiments are already underway in Finland. In general, activating people's everyday journeys would be a big thing for public health and should be encouraged.

Ariluoma: Street space could really be utilized in a much more diverse way, for example by increasing the amount of vegetation and seating opportunities and integrating various functions into the street space. At the same time, a better environment is created for all pedestrians and cyclists. In particular, on routes that are heavily used by children and young people, their perspective should be given far more consideration.

Moll: In addition, so-called play streets are interesting. The idea behind play streets is to temporarily close selected streets to traffic and dedicate them to children's play. In addition to the play itself, at best they encourage other city dwellers to spend time on the street and socialise. There are encouraging examples of this, for instance in the UK, it would be great to see something similar in Finland as well!

4. Experiment with different seasons.

Ariluoma: Things can indeed be done by experimenting casually. We should also learn from these experiments and make successful solutions permanent. For example, the temporary park in Helsinki's Töölö Bay has been successful because it is not just about play, but also where parents and young people can enjoy themselves. A couple of years ago in Helsinki, tree trunks were brought to the city centre's summer streets for climbing and the children found them immediately. Temporary experiments can be used to test even quite radical solutions in the street space. When the solutions are not immediately permanent, there can be some shake-ups, for instance regarding the aforementioned administrative and liability issues.

Moll: It's gratifying during the winter to see children taking over, for example, piles of snow. Could this be supported somehow? And could we learn more from the different seasons? Snow piles in the winter, a small "play market square" next to the market square in the summer, creating a setting for outdoor play in the slush. And is darkness just a problem, or could it somehow be used to our advantage – what do you think?

Ariluoma: Sounds great. At least in Helsinki there has been a lack of attractions for children and families with children in the city centre. And there really should be safe places to play in the snow in the city as well. For example, clean snow could be piled up somewhere for children to play with. A winter play street could be one that is left mostly unploughed and where you can build snow castles.



Helsingin Summer Streets, Nomaji, Sweco 2022. The streets in central Helsinki were temporarily transformed into pedestrian-friendly spaces which brought the forest into the city. Existing materials were used, such as the trunks of felled trees and stored stones. The vegetation was designed so that it could be reused later on. Photo: Caroline Moinel

5. The environment provides opportunities for diverse movement.

Moll: Of course, it is not always necessary to plan specifically for play and children's movement. It is enough that the environment is safe enough and that play and movement are not impeded.

AriLuoma: Exactly. It seems that playful urban spaces are created with a suitable lack of control or by stealth. An example that comes to mind is the roof of the Amos Rex art museum, which would probably have been prohibited if it had been designated as, for instance, a climbable square. But because it just "appeared", the liability issues strangely dissipated. In the same way, it has been possible to design skateable urban space; when it is not specifically named a skate park, the liability issues and potential problems disappear. As funny as it may seem, leaving a certain word out of the plans may actually allow a certain function.

Moll: At the same time, it can be argued that built play environments are already so well established that adults in particular need them as a sign that it is OK to bring children there to play. In addition, actual playgrounds are important everyday meeting places for families, even though they could be designed more ambitiously, appealing to a wider range of age groups. However, developing an urban environment that is attractive for play and moving about should not be limited to playgrounds alone.

AriLuoma: For example, there is generally a desire for squares to be meeting places for the city's inhabitants, but often the challenge is how to enliven the urban space. In addition to providing a place to sit, squares should also be opportunities for spontaneous play and movement, for example through artworks that enable play.



Children on the yard in Prinsessantie 4, Roihuvuori, in 1970. Photo: Simo Rista / Helsinki City Museum

6. Children have the opportunity to interact with nature in their everyday environment.

Ariluoma: Local nature is also one of the most important criteria for a sustainable and child-friendly city. In many suburban planning projects, the idea has been that children can move around independently, with green spaces forming uninterrupted networks. Myllypuro and Länsi-Herttoniemi in Helsinki are good examples of this. These areas are, from this perspective, still well-functioning. There can also be nature, however, in a densely built environment. The solutions are just different, for example, street space or roofs can be utilised.

Moll: Indeed, as early as 1947, Otto-livari Meurman wrote in *Asemakaavaoppi* (“Town Planning Theory”) that children’s recreational needs cannot be met only by playgrounds, but also by hills for climbing and tobogganing left in their natural state, as well as wooded areas for playing hide-and-seek or climbing trees. This understanding of the need for nature for children and other city inhabitants is important to keep in mind and to study carefully the suburbs when carrying out infill building there.



Kaapelipuisto, Helsinki, Nomaji 2023. The park between the Dance House Helsinki and the neighbouring residential buildings was made as green as possible and organized to provide opportunities for play and movement, although maintenance traffic is also accommodated within the park. Photo: Maite González Laurens

7. A versatile school or daycare yard encourages spending time outdoors.

Ariluoma: Regarding school streets, there has recently been a public debate about large-sized combined schools and daycare centres and whether they are in the best interests of the child. In some places, the trend leads to increased distances that children have to travel daily and weakening opportunities for active mobility. Furthermore, in dense urban areas it is no longer possible to arrange sufficient outdoor space for large school buildings. In this case, schoolyards are then primarily made to be wear-resistant, which rarely entails a material world and stimuli similar to the natural environment. The schoolyards cannot meet children's needs in many respects, and the pressure to use the urban environment more extensively for moving around with children is growing.

In theory, the local environment could be used more extensively as an extension of the activities of schools and daycare centres. In this case, the entire city, or at least the area around the school, could be seen as a learning environment and designed from that starting point, for example in accordance with school street typology adopted in Paris. In practice, all of this, of course, requires resources and a will

from the staff of schools and daycare centres to take advantage of these opportunities.



Children playing in the courtyard of a block of flats in Töölö, Helsinki, in 1950.
Photo: Eino Heinonen / Helsinki City Museum

8. Children's perspective and ideas enrich the design process.

Ariluoma: Children are rarely involved in urban planning, or it remains superficial, and final decisions are often based on adults' views on safety or liability. In learning environment projects, children are included in the brainstorming, but it depends a lot on the designers and adults how the ideas are received.

Moll: It really requires ingenuity, resources and motivation to consider methods that are suitable for children of different ages.

Ariluoma: Typically, for example, the client's side might think that there is nothing here that children could influence. Children can nevertheless bring valuable perspectives to the discussion; for example, nature and places for social encounter are often emphasised among children's wishes.

Moll: Child impact assessment is one tool for this, and it should be actively used and applied in the development of cities. ↵

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