

A Right to Decide: Empowering Children to Shape Cultural Space Transcript

0:09 Mala Yamey

Hi everyone, thank you for joining us today. And welcome to UP Projects' latest *Constellations* ° *Assembly* event as part of our *Pushing for Spatial Justice* series, *A Right to Decide: Empowering Children to Shape Cultural Space*. Thank you so much for joining us this afternoon. My name is Mala Yamey, and I'm the Curator at UP Projects. If you require a visual description, I am a mixed-race woman in my early 30s with medium length brown hair and glasses. So for those of you who may not know us, UP Projects is a leading public art commissioning organisation specialising in social justice - social practice, sorry, meaning, all of our work involves engaging communities through the process of creating public art projects. UP Projects online *Constellations* ° *Assemblies* are designed to share learning and knowledge relating to pressure, pressing issues facing the public art sector today. As part of our latest series titled *Pushing for Spatial Justice*, we are exploring the role that art and artists can play in advocating for more inclusive cities. A series takes inspiration from Thomas Aquilina's research into spatial justice, in particular his 2025 essay, *Who's right, what right, and where's that right?*. Through these events focusing on varying rights to public space, we will be highlighting the importance of community voices in determining whose rights and what rights centred. Our talk today, *A Right to Decide*, will explore the role of public art and co-creation in sustaining and championing UNICEF's child friendly cities in the UK and wider Europe. We'll be looking particularly at the case studies of Helsinki in Finland, the first Nordic city recognised by UNICEF in 2024, and Nottingham, UK, which is a candidate for official recognition as a child friendly city. So for today's event, we're thrilled to be joined by five amazing International and UK speakers who I'll briefly introduce now. There's no order to this, but I'll start with Pirjetta Mulari, who is the Chief of Children's Culture for Helsinki and Director of Annantalo Arts Centre. Then secondly, we've got Sanni Priha, who's an artist from the Other Spaces collective in Helsinki. We've got Cathy Mahmood, who is the ChalleNGe Manager at Challenge Cultural Education Partnership in Nottingham. And we've got Rebecca Beinart collaborative program lead at PRIMARY in Nottingham, and the event will be moderated by Manijeh Verghese, CEO of Open City. You can find further information on each speaker's work and their bios in the link which we will have just put in the chat. Before I hand over to our speakers. I would like to quickly mention some virtual housekeeping, so if you experience any technical issues, please use the chat button at the bottom of your screen to privately with our dedicated tech support.

And if you would like to ask the speakers any questions during the discussion, please do so via the chat. There will also be an opportunity for you to ask questions verbally at the end of the discussion. So at that point, please use the raise hand button and Manijeh will invite you to unmute your microphone. But please feel free to keep your cameras on, as it's so lovely to see everyone who's in the room. And to see our speakers consistently, we recommend that you either select the speaker view or select gallery view and click follow hosts video order. Closed Captions are available by selecting the CC button at the bottom of your screen. And we also have Sumayya Si-Tayeb, our BSL interpreter, with us today. So if you require BSL, please also pin them on your screen, as you heard at the beginning. We are recording the discussion today. I do hope you enjoy it, and without further ado, I'm delighted to hand it over to Manijeh to begin the discussion. Thank you, Manijeh.

4:06 Manijeh Verghese

Thanks, Mala. And as I mentioned, my name is Manijeh Verghese. And to give you a visual description, I'm an Indian woman with shoulder length black hair, and I'm wearing, if you can see a bit of it, brightly coloured, red, green, black and white jacket. I'm really excited to be part of this discussion today and to hear more from our amazing lineup of speakers about what it means to create a child friendly city, as well as ways to meaningfully engage and involve children and young people in the co-creation of our cities and spaces. This is something I've long been interested in, but specifically right now, through our work at Open City, where we have an education pathway that engages young people from ages 8 to 18+ in the making of their built environment. I'm also the Mayor's Design Advocate for the Mayor of London and the research and urban design practice Publica authored guidance on making London child friendly for the Greater London Authority in 2020. And so I think Anna from Publica is going to be on this call in the audience, so hopefully she'll be able to contribute when we open it up to the audience for questions later. But just to frame the kind of urgency of this discussion, I just thought to give you a few stats. I think by 2030, 60% of urban citizens globally will be under the age of 18. And currently in the UK, the House of Lords Built Environment Committee is inviting oral and written evidence to better understand the role that children and young people can play in shaping the built environment. Since their current challenges right now in the UK, we're trying to build 1.5 million new homes by 2030 a programme of new towns and expanded settlements and several major infrastructure projects, and that's going to provide the context for a lot of today's young people to live out their future lives. So involving their perspectives feels absolutely critical. I think over the next hour or so, we're going to hopefully involve you all in a really exciting discussion. As Mala mentioned, we're going to be hearing

from speakers from two case studies of child friendly cities at different points in that trajectory, and really looking in more detail at how artists, commissioners and institutions can work to ensure that children's voices and young people's voices, their needs and priorities are integrated into how we make decisions about our cities. So to start with the kind of framing of this around the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child. It defines children's rights in three parts, the right to be safe and protected, the right to a high quality and sustainable environment, and the right to involvement in the decisions that affect them. A UNICEF Child Friendly City is a local system of governance committed to fulfilling children's rights where the voices, needs and priorities of children are integral to public policies, decisions and services. It ensures that children live in safe environments, have access to the services they need, and can influence their community. And the Child Friendly City's Initiative acts as a framework, usually over a three-to-five-year period for local governments to achieve these goals. So with that in mind, I wanted to ask each of our speakers to start by talking about what the Child Friendly City has come to mean for each of you in your work, especially in terms of how you've engaged children and young people in projects and or policies or processes. So maybe Cathy I can start with you?

7:20 Cathy Mahmood

Hello. Yeah, that's great. Good to be here. And thank you very much for having me. So I'm Cathy, and I am just to describe myself briefly. I'm wearing a black top. I am middle aged and have brown mid length hair. Okay, so for me, the - it's come to, but for me, the definition of Child Friendly City, and what it's come to mean for us in Nottingham is that really it's an approach, it's the commitment to ensuring that we are working together as a whole city. It's really making - it's developing how we think and collaborate and programme everything that we do for children and young people in the city. So obviously, we're on this journey. You know, we haven't yet had our official acknowledgement as a Child Friendly City, but we do believe that we can be a child friendly creative city in the way that we're working together. And that means that we're on a mission to ensure every child engages with arts and creativity in schools and in their communities, and within that my role is to facilitate the way that partnership happens across arts organisations. And with anyone that works with children, wherever they might be, that they feel like they have a place to belong and learn and share together. So yeah, so what we really want to do for our Child Friendly City here in Nottingham is share resources and opportunities so that children really see themselves in the in the ways in which things are developed and they can really genuinely have a voice. So yeah, overcoming barriers to participation is at the heart of everything we do, and we're really wanting children's

rights to be recognised and for them to understand their rights. So we speak up for them but give them the mic as well and amplify their voices.

9:24 Manijeh Verghese

Great. Thank you, Cathy. Maybe Rebecca we can come to you next?

9:30 Rebecca Beinart

Thanks so much. Hi everybody. I'm Rebecca, and to give the description, I'm a white woman with brown hair pulled back. I'm wearing glasses, some small green earrings and a green jumper. So I guess to build on what Cathy was saying, I'm also based in Nottingham, and I'll be sharing a kind of case study about a very neighbourhood-based project called *Build, Create, Play*. The project that I'll be sharing has really centred on the redevelopment of a local playground and really long-term work with children in that micro local area around the playground, which is opposite the art centre where I work. And I think building on what Cathy said, this really sort of focused neighbourhood approach is just one small contribution in the city-wide initiative. So from my perspective, from that experience, I think that becoming a Child Friendly City happens through a network of smaller neighbourhood-based initiatives that work in connection with a city-wide vision. And I guess it's in those kinds of specific places and projects that children get a very hands-on experience of being involved in something and being involved in change making. I also feel like it's been really important to learn more about child-centred and child-led practices, and to have the opportunity to work with groups who already put that into practice. So there's something about amplifying good practice where it's already happening, really learning from community youth projects, from play schemes and schools, as well as from the different partners that have been involved in the whole scheme.

11:16 Manijeh Verghese

Great. Thank you, Rebecca. And now to move from Nottingham to Helsinki, and Pirjetta I'm bringing you in.

11:23 Pirjetta Mulari

Yes, hello. And with visual description, I am white female, red haired at the moment, and I change my hair sometimes, and wearing blue and green. Greetings from this time actually quite sunny, sunny here listening with the climate change, we tend to be quite warm in May already, so it feels like summer. Thank you for inviting me to

this forum, because it has really made me think that you know what is - what is actually the UNICEF definition of a Child Friendly City? And I understood that, I think that children culture activities and Helsinki have for long time have been child-led, child-centred. In many ways, we have been very aware of children's rights to art and culture. And it may be because Finland is a vast country and we actually have very good municipal politics, or that we tend to say that everything every child in Finland needs to have right for arts and culture. So it's in our genes, in a way. In my own work, I think that what the Child Friendly City has most brought is, for instance, child impact assessment in all our processes, which is something that we didn't possibly do in that kind of way that nowadays we do. And I think that the nomination has really made a difference in different sectors. For instance, our urban environment division at the moment, they're really looking for how to participate children and young in decision making, for instance. So I think that, you know, looking at our Helsinki City Strategy to participation has been a big value. So I'm bringing in *Culture Kids* as a project here, and I'm really interested in also opening up a bit more how we have children and young people in the decision making, for instance, in Helsinki. So lovely to be here.

13:53 Manijeh Verghese

Thanks, Pirjetta. And Sanni, can I come to you next?

13:57 Sanni Priha

Hello. I'm Sanni from Helsinki. Nice to be here. Thank you for the invitation. I'm a white woman in my mid-40s. I have brown short hair, and I'm wearing glasses and a peach shirt. So I'm an artist and researcher, and I'm member of Other Spaces collective, since 2013. And Other Spaces is a performing group that invents and develops physical collective exercises through which it is possible to experience other modes of being and experiencing than human. And I'm here to talk about really, our project called *Rhizome* project, which we did already in years 2020 and 2023 so it was prior to this Helsinki being named as a Child Friendly City. So I'm talking about the period of work that I've done with the collective prior to the initiative. But since our collective was originally founded in 2004, and we really had not done very much work with children, specifically until 2018 when we started working more on projects that engaged children. So it's a very interesting thing to think about how the work has developed as artists, how we have changed the methods of working since we started engaging with children more. But so I think one of their questions is that we really thought about with children, is the question of how to frame the space for doing these exercises, that needs to have a safe

space for children to both be connected with each other, children being connected with adults: bodily, physically touching - how you create that kind of space where you are free to express yourself without being embarrassed. How we - how do we guide and instruct things that creates this kind of atmosphere, that these things are possible. And how we create space for children to talk about their experiences, something that might be very new for them, previously not - non experience sensations, how they can - how we can create a space for them to openly discuss these kinds of experiences as well. So that is one question. But I think one of the things with this project, *Rhizome* project that I'm bringing here today is that is the question of structures and public art projects; how they operate, how they are funded, and how this project came to be was that the project was commissioned as a public art project by HAM (Helsinki Art Museum) as a Percent for Art project, and that means that 1% of the publicly funded construction or renovation budget is allocated to art projects. So typically something concrete and long lasting. So when this old school building that we worked with, so the project was a collaboration with a primary school and Helsinki Art Museum. But when this school building, young Jugendstil - old Jugendstil building was put into plan to be renovated, this Headmaster, Jouni Leivo decided that they were not interested in having a new art object, painting or sculpture in the building, but instead wished to commission an art project that would engage and participate the students. And the consultant and curator of the Percent for Art Project, Kristiina Ljokkoi from HAM, approached Other Spaces collective to carry out an art project with the school. So in general, this way of understanding public art as that can be also live art and socially engaging with people in general, and in this case with children specifically, it was kind of a brave and progressive and unexpected from behalf of the school and the museum. So as artists, we jumped in to this project that we had never done before and trusted that we can with our previous almost 20-year experience, try something like this with children as well. So I think this is something that is interesting in relation to the question of the Child Friendly City and how we can engage with public art productions with children. And maybe, just one final point, I could mention that what we have in Other Spaces, thought in general, with working with children, we have mainly worked or some more projects that are that we call transgenerational, so that or intergenerational, that we invite people of all ages to come together into participatory performances. And the idea being that people from all ages can learn from each other. And in this case, we think that the adult can learn from children, very much, and this is the kind of space that we try to create in our work in general.

20:51 Manijeh Verghese

Great. Thank you. So having heard like a sneak preview from each of our panellists, I think we're now going to move to a round where they'll each have the opportunity to delve deeper and share their screens to show us some visuals to go alongside it. So I think I might start first with Cathy to come back to you to speak more about the steps that Nottingham has been taking to become a Child Friendly City, and specifically the ChalleNGe initiative.

21:17 Cathy Mahmood

Yeah, of course. So here in Nottingham, we have a program that's been supported by the Arts Council called Child Friendly Creative City that I mentioned, and it's building on all kinds of work that's been happening. I've been in this role for seven years, so over that time, it's been very much like developing relationships across the city with arts organisations that work with children, young people, local authority based folk people that work in housing and health and education, so that, so that when, so that we're ready for opportunities. So it feels like something that we're always going to be working towards, because it's about how children access and engage with their city. And while Nottingham has a really vibrant, incredible arts offer, we've got some wonderful museums, galleries and theatres, there's always more to do to embed children's voices in decision making and overcome barriers to participation in that art software across the city. And essentially, we're wanting children and young people to be the, you know, to see themselves while their children within the cultural life of the city, and for them to be the ones that are shaping it. So we're move moving away from just talking about arts offers and bringing those to children, and more to do with co-creation and programming together and how that can happen. So over the last few years, we've intertwined our cultural education partnership with the wider city ambitions to become an internationally recognised Child Friendly City. And this means we've been using the languages of children's rights much more, and we talk about creating a cultural guarantee for children in Nottingham through our Cultural Accept programme. I am going to share my screen because it brings it alive a little bit, doesn't it when you see some images. So let me just do that as well, and you can have a look at some of the things that have been going on in Nottingham. Just get that up. So let me just check that works. Can you see it?

23:47 Mala Yamey

Not yet.

23:58 Cathy Mahmood

Old good? Okay, so this was the launch. This first image was from the launch of the *Child Friendly Creative City* programme at *Primary Parliament*. We have a primary parliament in Nottingham that meets every term, so three times a year, over three days in our big, beautiful council house, and children from about 30 primary schools come together over that time to really explore the issues that are important to them, so it gives them a voice. And they meet counsellors and decision makers and have opportunities to share the things that often come out around safe and healthy environments and the, you know, good parks and green spaces and their the importance of, you know, not bullying each other and not dropping litter, and the things that children, super, you know, really care about. And I suppose one of the things that has really struck me; when we first began the sort of UNICEF journey of becoming a Child Friendly City, there was a discovery phase in the first year where about 9000 children participated in surveys and events and workshops and were asked to draw up the priorities, the key badges that we would work towards. Health and wellbeing, education and learning and safety was a were the three key priorities, and equal and included was decided to be a golden thread between all of them. And so, yeah, the key thing that struck me was that children gave us all a really clear message that they wanted Nottingham to be a kind and inclusive city, and I feel that has given us all a really clear mandate to work towards that in everything that we do. So, what - how becoming a kind and inclusive city can reach through into these cultural offers and the opportunities that children have in children have, kind of drives us all I think, within the challenge partnership. These were lots of - there are loads of organisations involved in ChalleNGe and the wider network. But when we were successful in our Arts Council application and the Place Partnership bid, these were some of the named partners who also are contributing through their own projects, as well as the work that they're doing with schools and communities. And so we're bringing together like a vast range of programming and planning and resource to make sure that children, wherever they are in the city, can have opportunities to engage in arts and culture. You can see here that there are galleries, there are theatres, there are universities, cinemas, dance organisations, all sorts of things. So it's really kind of drawing on all art forms. And a lot of the organisations that we work with have associate artists that are now also becoming part of the network as individual practitioners as well. And the way that we're wanting to support those individual practitioners and create a creative task force for the city through various kind of training events and other things. This is really bolstering the infrastructure and ecosystem in Nottingham, making things possible really. So I wanted to just show you a few pictures of things to inspire you and show you what we've been up to. This is a project that we enjoyed last summer where we

took over an empty space in the city centre. It was in the Victoria Centre where we could where people weren't necessarily coming on purpose to take part in arts activities, but where we could sort of draw them in and they could access a whole range of different daily opportunities to take part. You know, we had a colour - a cardboard making area, huge chalk walls, a big sticker wall there, where we asked children and their parents to draw their special places in their own space, within their city and within the world and add them to the wall. All sorts of different artists and creative practitioners, including young creatives, were there to facilitate sessions throughout the summer, and it was fabulous. And rather than be in one place this summer, we're going to be touring the Summer Arts pop up around neighbourhood spaces this year. So that's an exciting prospect. Another thing that we've been doing we - this is a voice box. It looks a bit scary, but it's one of the voice boxes that we now have about 20 voice boxes that have all been designed by children. They're all bespoke. And it's all-around pupil voice in schools, and an opportunity for pupils to anonymously say - talk about the things that are important to them, the things they'd like to change within school. And it's really focused teachers attention on the ways in which they have genuine pupil voice and make changes. There's a lovely video that you can watch with some other sort of change based on pupil voices, and it's an ongoing programme. So more schools are asking for their voice box, and we're hoping that we get at least half the schools and about 120 schools in Nottingham with a voice box over the next year, which would be great. And one of the things that we do is work really closely with local communities and local arts forum to develop arts festivals in their places, because it's not just about what's going on in the city centre. It's about Nottingham city as a whole, in neighbourhoods and all across all across Nottingham. So these arts festivals are just a brilliant way to have a focus on local creativity and what people can do within their own spaces and communities. And it brings people together, and it's just the heart and soul really of a lot of the work that we do. And this, the talking about children's rights and their right to a broad, adventurous, creative education has led us to develop something called the *Cultural Rucksack*, which is whole range of opportunities for teachers to feel inspired and supported by the art sector, but also to work to understand the needs of schools and the things that teachers can also teach us within the art sector as well. So things that have come about because of this programme are things like the SEND Galleries Group, which is for children with additional needs to access galleries because they were often missing out on trips and things. So we're developing a whole host of opportunities to ensure that teachers are able to overcome the barriers to organising visits to beautiful arts venues. But, and try and find ways in which we can embed, you know, regular visits for each year group to a Nottingham venue, and overcome common issues like transport, or overcome common challenges that might be around just

understanding what's going on to like, recognising that we need to gather the engagement data so we understand which schools are engaging with which organisations and can fill gaps where possible. So the *Cultural Rucksack* programme has a really big ambition, and it obviously needs all of these incredible partners to make it real and bring it to life. And all of our partners are engaging in understanding what they can do, what they're - who they're currently engaging with we share expertise and we share knowledge across the city to really empower each other. So we have a whole CPD programme for teachers and artists and arts organisations, and that's become a really important aspect of our work. And then finally, there's a - we also have a youth cultural partnership. So it's a kind of younger version of the strategic cultural partnership in the city, and it draws on young people from 16 to 24-year-olds who are representing an art form or an organisation. And they become the ChalleNGe - they are the ChalleNGe Youth Board, and they have their own website and go organise their own events, and it's a kind of part of our governance structure. So I think that's still the important aspect of finding out what children are wanting and needing, and it being younger people themselves that are asking some of those questions. So yeah, I'll stop sharing my screen. I hope that gives you a flavour of some of the things that we've been up to. And yeah, am I back?

33:32 Manijeh Verghese

Yes, thank you. That was brilliant and a great way to show like, I guess, how you really engage the whole city in kind of putting children and young people at the heart of decision making. I think Pirjetta maybe to come to you next that Helsinki became a Child Friendly City in 2024 so could you tell us a bit more about I think you mentioned you're going to talk about *Culture Kids*. But could you talk about how this has been upheld since in practice, as well as through cultural offerings?

33:59 Pirjetta Mulari

Yes, very much. So, yes. So *Culture Kids* is a programme where we invite all the families that have a baby. So this is a programme for zero to six-year-olds; kids and their families. So it's an ever-changing audience in that sense, and it started in this format in 2020, and it means that if you have a zero to six-year-old child in your family, you are invited to two free cultural activities a year. And we have 30 organisations in Helsinki who are offering these events. And they are city theatres, the Finnish National Theatre. There is museums, there is a circus centre, dance theatre, Finnish Museum of Photography, so a whole range of different organisations. And thinking of the UNICEF child friendly values, the whole

programme is based on the idea that every child is invited to art and culture, regardless of where they live or their programme. And we believe that once you invite families and children from the early age, quite naturally, they are engaged to art and culture, not just one of stands, but on a long period. Accessibility is a key principle of the programme. It's designed to be really low threshold and easy for families to take part in, and we really ask feedback from the families. So at the moment, we have 18,000 feedback answers from families and kids how they have felt about the activities and so on. So, and we also yesterday, we actually had a forum with all our *Culture Kids* organisations. So we had 30 organisations again, sharing their practices, sharing this feedback. So it's a constant process of working. And I think that the most important thing is that we're really trying to engage the children in the feedback, because we believe that they actually know better than the adults. It's just our problem if we can't actually ask the way the kids can answer. And a strong focus is on children and families in more vulnerable situations. So we have really human resources to go into our neighbourhoods to tell the families about the programme to help them register and so on. And I think that this also has brought into a question cities cross sector cooperation. So we're actually working with the social sector. So when a baby is born, they go to the nurse for the first or second time. So the nurse is actually introducing that "hey, there is the *Culture Kids* programme, would you like to join?". So it's very important that our education, early childhood education, Social and Health Services, also recognise the needs and this kind of programme. And now that there has been actually a private funding for this programme until now, there is Jane and Aatos Erkko Foundation that has funded the programme, and in this Helsinki new city strategy, this is all actually in Helsinki budget now. So we continue running, coordinating to the programme with Helsinki city budget, and I want to show at the same time that I speak a bit that you understand what - what these things are. So you can see that there has been a lot of events, a lot of institutions, and, of course, the baby activities. They're really designed for the babies and their adults, and it's more participatory than anything else. There is as you see, babies can make art. There are musical activities for babies, and it's interesting that our city library has actually been part of it, and they have really played with text and theatre, and even our sports services found their cross-sector way, so they were playing with dance, circus and physical activity. The museums have actually found new audience members. They - our Design and Architecture Museum has really revealed the new sector of babies and their adults for their audience. So this has also been interesting learning process for our cultural institutions. So I really recommend as a city, if you are able to build up a network of institutions of the city around you, because many times cities like Helsinki, we have the resources to actually be - build up accessibility and things that the smaller organisations might not have, so we can really work together to make

the city more child friendly. And I think in this sense that we get the children to be participating in things much more. I could talk so much more on this, but I think that this was a good glimpse. I'm very happy to answer any questions on this.

40:58 Manijeh Verghese

Brilliant, thank you so much. And like I think lots of common themes emerging between what you said and what Cathy said before. And I also love the idea that we're tapping into kind of social and health related networks through the nurses visit. So hopefully we can come back to pick up on that. I think Sanni moving to you next. I think in the introduction, you mentioned how your collective, Other Spaces, is engaged in participatory performance work, but evolved and adapted this to work with school children through this *Rhizome* project at the Helsinki Art Museum. So I wonder if you could elaborate a bit more on that project, and I think you have some exciting visual material to show us as well?

41:36 Sanni Priha

Yeah, thanks. I will share my screen to begin with. I so I hope you can see and hear me now?

42:19 Manijeh Verghese

Yes.

42:19 Sanni Priha

Yeah, great, so well, the Other Spaces group has a long history in creating specifically participatory performances and exercises, and where exercise itself is considered as an art form. And our exercises are based on precise but simple bodily techniques which can be or adapted by everyone and for their own body, regardless of their age and abilities. So of course, also for children. So that the idea behind these exercises is they are like transformational exercises, psychophysical exercises, and through which, or by that getting in touch with different forms or of experience can alter us and our behaviour, and it the exercises can increase our understanding of mutual equality and interdependence between all kinds of living being beings. And so we learn about animals and plants and geological formations and machines and even humanoids with through our exercises. We have developed over 200 exercises so far in our through our history. But then also the exercises are based on scientific research or relevant theories, so we always give background information

about the phenomenon or the being that is being studied in the exercise. So when we started thinking about the project with schools, and the rhizomatic theme being the kind of thing that brought things together for us or allowed us to investigate several kinds of themes. We had to start thinking like how we first of all open up the concept of *Rhizome* with 7 to 12-year-old students. So we made to something that was kind of maybe, well, not completely new, but we have done some audio-visual work before as well. But so we made a video presentation that visualised different phenomenon that we studied in relation to the *Rhizome*, the concept of *Rhizome*, and what we also did, but we also adapted a little bit our existing or old exercises that we wanted to introduce to the children so that they were simple enough to remember. And also we had to adapt the duration of the exercise to, first of all, to suit younger participants. Some of our exercises have previously been quite like from, let's say, from 15 minutes to three days long durational exercises. So we had to change, make some scaling of duration for to also to fit the individual classes. We also made some alterations with the with the workshops, depending on whether we were working with the seven-year-old pupils or 13, almost like coming to teenage years. So different, different approaches, little bit, but with the same theme. But the overall mission was not so much to change our working methods to suit children, but to present the student also with our practice as a form of art that most of them had not previous experience of when we talk about participatory performance art, it's still not exactly popular, popular art form. And we - but we really wanted to work as seriously, as playfully as we would with normal adult audiences as well. Now I'm forgetting to show the slides here, but here we have the school building where we started from. This is the school that went into renovation. And here we see the in the right-hand corner below we have the Eira area where, where they moved for the duration of three years. The whole school moved here into this. You can see maybe a little bit of that grey building there behind the trees. And that was their - the school building for three years, and that's where we worked with the pupils. But yeah, maybe, maybe the biggest alteration, or the biggest question that we had to think about was really the question of working with the school during the school time where the students are not voluntarily coming to the workshop, so we were kind of in between, or really had to think about the question of like they are in school environment when they kind of have to do what they're told to do, and so, and we normally work with from voluntary basis, obviously, people come if they want to. So this was a question that we thought about a lot, and there's not really an answer to that, but maybe I could show you a film extract from documentary film that we did of the project we observed the process with one class that we were allowed to film with. So we have about half an hour documentary about the full project, but I'll show you a few minutes clip.

50:01 Video

[Students speaking in Finnish]

53:12 Sanni Priha

So we started the project with introducing our own practice, and ended it by the facilitating workshop, where the workshops where the school students could come up with an idea of a subject they wanted to study through an exercise that they developed the technique for themselves, and then did with the whole school the exercise. But maybe the, maybe the - what to, what I would still like to come back to, is also the one of, the one of the main things of our exercise is also after the exercise to share the experience and kind of new knowledge that is gained through the exercise. So here you can see some of the some of the student's experiences from those exercises. And I think one of the most noticeable was that that we were able to create a space for the children to feel that they could rest and relax, and that was something meaningful for them. And I we realised that this is actually something that is not that often thought about when thought we think about thing how to engage with children, that they also need places to rest and have a moment to think about the meaning of life, like somebody said after experiencing the being mushroom, for example. But maybe. I'll stop sharing here.

55:04 Manijeh Verghese

Thank you so much, Sanni. Is great to see people just moving collaboratively and like the hearing the reading of some of those quotes about what that experience meant to them. And it seems like across the presentations network that are emerging as a theme, whether that's of communities, of organisations, rhizomatic ones, but maybe that's a great segue to you Rebecca, to tell us more about *Build, Create, Play* which is so much more than a project to remake a playground, but also to build relationships in and with public space. So maybe you can tell us more about how that engaged children and families with their rights to play, to safety and the importance of community building.

55:44 Rebecca Beinart

Thanks so much. I will also share some images as I speak, so just bear with me. Okay, can everyone see that? Great. Thank you. So, *Build, Create, Play* was a project, as I said, working with local families and young people around a place called Ronald Street playground, which is just over the road from PRIMARY, the art centre where I'm based, and is in an inner-city area in Nottingham. And the playground

was a very neglected space with rundown equipment, and it was earmarked for redevelopment that was going to be supported with something called Section 106 money. So just briefly picking up on the point that Sanni mentioned earlier around the Percent for Art scheme. We don't have that here in the UK, but the Section 106 is a small contribution when a new development like housing or student accommodation is being agreed and that should go into supporting city infrastructure in the area where the development is - that doesn't always happen. So the playground was planned to be redeveloped, but there were some delays during the covid pandemic, and there was uncertainty about how, when and if the playground development would go ahead. So some initial conversations we had with people living locally surfaced quite a lot of frustration and also fear; a feeling of kind of being forgotten. So we started the project to try and ensure that local people, particularly children who use that space, had a voice in the process and were involved in decision making in some way. And it started with a pilot project, running sessions with artists and play workers, working together to start conversations with the families and children around that playground. So artist Charlotte Tupper ran sessions alongside the Toy Library, who are a local playwork organisation. And a lot of those early sessions were around bringing different materials onto the site and playing and seeing how that activated the space. And I suppose, helped to kind of imagine and talk about the future in a very tactile way; so thinking about form, colour, texture, shape, the feeling of the space, rather than a slightly drier language of planning. So as with many public realm projects, the timeline for the redevelopment was quite uncertain. It took a long time for the council to obtain the additional funding that they needed, and throughout this kind of ups and downs and yeah, the sort of uncertainty, and the slow process of what was happening at the city level, it felt really important to keep a spotlight on Ronald Street and to keep a direct and open dialog between decision makers and the young people who use the playground. So in the end, we worked for over two years, continuing to run regular play sessions on the playground, and Ismail Khokon joined the team as a lead artist when Charlotte was less involved, and we continued to work at the Toy Library. And through all of this, in addition to the focus on the playground and change that was going to happen, we hoped would happen, and how it happened, fundamentally, the project was around building relationships with local families and children and providing a consistent play offer and access to lots of regular sessions in an area that's had a lot of cuts to services for children, and that's something we may won't have time to kind of go into in a little bit more depth, but I think it's really important one in relation to some of these projects we've been talking about. I think I just wanted to centre play. You know, the whole project was around a playground, and it was around how important it is to be able to play in public space in cities. And throughout everything that we were doing, play

was kind of a way of using and claiming public space. It was a way. It was the way by which we were understanding - understanding how children use the playground, what their needs were, the needs of different age groups, and it was also a way of maintaining visibility. One of the things that came up quite frequently in different stages of the project and the conversations was around - Cathy already touched on safety being something that had been raised in Nottingham for children and young people who'd been involved in the wider child friendly city conversations - and that came up a lot, particularly in the winter, around sort of access to spaces, how it felt to move through your neighbourhood in the dark. And building on this conversation, one of the things that we did through the sessions was to work with the children to create a light parade that sort of highlighted their ideas about safety in the neighbourhood and also invited different people in the neighbourhood to kind of participate and to see what they were doing. We also - one of the play workers who we worked with really brilliant all the play works. He worked with a really brilliant and I just want to honour Ben Rogers, who I'm kind of referring to now, who we sadly lost last year, and he was a really key part of this whole programme. And he talked about the way that public that play in public space, helps to build community and supports young people and families and making connections and feeling a sense of ownership and belonging, and also the importance of having spaces outside of school and home to gather and play and form relations and figure things out, and to do that in a place that feels safe. As the project developed, we built a good relationship with the parks department of the council and with local councillors. And I think, just to mention, I think one of the key things in developing these sorts of partnership conversations, projects or spaces where children's voices are really genuinely listened to, is also about the adults who are involved, and if they're open to that. And we were lucky that somebody kind of joined that parks team who was really proactive, and so they came down to various points of during the sessions, and listened to what the kids were saying, looked at the different kind of visuals and things that had been shared and made, and models had lots of discussions. And all of this helped to inform the final designs for the playground. And when the designs were ready, there were kind of options that were brought to the young people to decide between. And finally, as a result of this kind of ongoing relationship and project and dialog that's spread over all this time as that final development of the playground was agreed, the council created this nine-meter-long space for a public artwork that could be painted onto board so it could be kind of updated and changed in the future. And the artwork was designed by Ismail for a series of workshops that focused on capturing movement and forms of play and imagination, working really closely with all of those young people we've been working with over the years. And that was launched alongside the new playground in summer 2023. And I think just the final point I'll add before wrapping up is that I

think that the development of the playground itself and the public artwork were really important impetus and central focus for the project and for also kind of seeing tangible change in neighbourhoods where children had actually been invited to and taken the risk of sharing their opinions and the energy and all the input into this. But beyond that, there's been a long-term commitment to providing regular creative play sessions and to building this really kind of long-term relationships and community around this site. And also we continue to do sessions over at PRIMARY as well. So I think that the in some ways, there's kind of less physical outcomes have been the most important ones for us in terms of the project I'll wrap up there.

1:04:24 Manijeh Verghese

Yeah, great. Thank you so much. Rebecca, I think it was really amazing project. But also I think important to centre the challenges of working in these spaces where there are limited resources, where people have been exposed to kind of cuts and deprivation over a long period of time, and the importance of kind of continuous programming and access to play at the heart of cities is, you know, continues to be urgent. I've got lots of questions for all of you, but I'm conscious of time, so I thought maybe it's good to first, like open things up to the audience, because I can see that there are already some questions in the chat. I think the question I can see by Jess, maybe is a good place to start, because I think it picks up from where you left off around who are all these initiatives really for? And I think when you were talking about centring kind of play in the city, it made me think of like how we kind of lose our sense of play as we grow up. So Jess, are you happy to ask this question? And we can unmute you, or do you want me to read it out?

1:05:32 Audience Member

I can ask, hi. I'm going to read it as I've written. But yeah, I've been reflecting a lot about the different presentations and all the programming that you guys are doing, and it's really interesting, and it's been making me think a little bit about like, who is really being developed when children participate in these creative activities, or city making like, are we building long term civic capacity and cultural identity for the children so they have an engagement in cultural activities from a much earlier age? But are we also maybe using their presence and perspective to relearn something that we may have diluted in ourselves; imagination, curiosity, an instinctive claim on public space and indeed play? And if that is, if that relearning is generally part of what's happening in this work, how do you evaluate this? How do you sort of adapt evaluation techniques and processes to capture these impacts?

1:06:32 Manijeh Verghese

I don't know who wants to take that first.

1:06:38 Cathy Mahmood

I'm happy to take it if you like, first, it's interesting question, because we're actually looking at all of our valuation processes at the moment and putting together various packs and guidelines and things for all of the partners. And I think it's both, isn't it? I mean, we're not doing one or the other I think we're really wanting children to feel valued by and seen like, valued by the city and like they have a sense of belonging to some of these spaces that sometimes it's hard to get through over the door, or some arts venues aren't always as welcoming as we'd want them to be, necessarily, or people don't feel like for them. So a big part of what we do is trying to make sure that welcome is really clear for everybody to feel like access and openness is for and arts for everybody. So that's a really important thing that we're trying to do, definitely for children. But obviously, I would hope that everybody that works with them for ChalleNGe also has opportunities to be creative themselves, and that we are embodying the things that we want our children to also have an opportunity to do. So we need to also find the time as a partnership to reflect and play and experiment and come up with things and discover, not be afraid to fail sometimes, and share the learning and be really honest in that, in our partnerships and in our collaborations, because it's, it can be kind of, it's long term work, and it's all about trust building, whether it's across the partnership of professionals from different sectors, or whether it's, you know, one to one work with children. So I think for evaluation to be a bit more direct on answering the question, I think we need to just make sure that our evaluation processes are creative themselves, and I'm honest, and these are million ways of doing it, but yeah.

1:08:50 Pirjetta Mulari

I could continue a bit. I think that there is a research topic on itself, because I think that in city scale, you often go for quantitative numbers, and this really would be qualitative thinking and so on. And I think that this in *Culture Kids*, we can actually have resources for evaluation and what you are explaining, I think that we're really doing both we are, in the end, we are participating children and so on. But I think that we're really trying to get our imagination back as adults. I really feel it also in everyday life, because the world is mad at the moment, and so we need to also think, think different. So these times are also challenging thinking, and there is a lot of play imaginations, actually in the hard speech, also in media at the moment in Finland. So thank you for this question. It made me think a lot.

1:10:05 Manijeh Verghese

I just wanted to check, first of all, if Rebecca and Sanni, if you wanted to add anything to that question, but also just to see if there was any more questions from the audience.

1:10:18 Sanni Priha

Maybe I could continue still a bit further. Well, to be honest, our group is not very good with we haven't been very systematic in evaluation. We will operate as freelance artists, mainly. So this is you know, what that means in terms of evaluation collection. But what our goal, really long time - pedagogical goal - is to look ways to meet the challenge of the Anthropocene and ecological crisis, and we want to increase the understanding between species, and at the moment, we have a project about peace. So, we - it's not - we are always thinking about the circumstances that we live in and try to find ways to collectively change our position and attitude, to make it better. And also in terms of ecological thinking, we think that these exercises are a meaningful way to experience nearby; you don't have to travel far. You can make an exercise and visit other spaces. So this is our philosophical point of view. So we really, of course, make it for ourselves because we enjoy. It's about pleasure as well. It's about enjoyment, individually and together, and learning to enjoy corporeally together, collectively. So this is what it's for, in principle.

1:12:15 Manijeh Verghese

And Rebecca, did you want to add anything?

1:12:19 Rebecca Beinart

I think it's great to have everybody else's answers and I'll let space for one more question.

1:12:26 Manijeh Verghese

Okay, great. There's one more question in the chat from Elizabeth. Would you like to ask it yourself? Yeah, hopefully they can unmute.

1:12:46 Audience Member

That's better. Yes, have any of the speakers involved young people, children with access requirements in their work? Because, you know, there are some additional approaches that you might employ that would also benefit everybody when thinking about spaces in the city, I'm thinking about multi-sensory - thinking about multi-sensory experiences and play.

1:13:21 Rebecca Beinart

Maybe I respond to that first just to say yes, and that you bring up kind of multi-sensory approach was a really big part of the process for the project that we've worked on. And also, I guess, having the kind of experience of the different play workers and things that they brought along, and the artists and the things that they brought along so that there was lots of different ways to be a part of participate in sessions. Also, I think the kind of play-led approach meant there was no, although we were sort of broadly talking about the playground, what would happen to it in the future. The whole approach is very much about doing what you feel like doing when you're there with support and guidance if you need it, but that there's - it's that kind of freedom to pick up and interact with things and be in the space as you come. I'll let someone else add in.

1:14:26 Manijeh Verghese

I think Cathy, you spoke about the SEND galleries group, so...?

1:14:30 Cathy Mahmood

Yeah, we're the way that we're approaching things is through communities of practice and supporting action learning projects. So schools can apply for Action Learning funding to bring groups of children with additional needs to gallery spaces. But that funding can also help creative practitioners go in and do pre-visits with the school, get to know the teachers and SENCO leads and really learn from that experience, so that then when they come back to the gallery, the gallery staff are also learning about the experience, and it's all about what we can learn and share together. And you're absolutely right that getting things right for children with access needs will improve things for everybody in other ways as well. So we're working collaboratively and have that open SEND galleries group for any school to send staff to join in that conversation and dialogue. And by doing the action learning visits and having children there, there's obviously ways in which we're evaluating those programmes as well and developing case studies. So we've recently employed two new access inclusion specialists to work alongside

ChalleNGe and specialists from the Attenborough Arts Centre in Leicester, as well as our kind of critical friends with that type of work.

1:15:58 Manijeh Vergheese

That sounds great. Pirjetta, please go.

1:16:00 Pirjetta Mulari

At Annantalo Arts Centre for Children and so we have constantly children or young people with special needs in the house. And we have two, actually, groups. We have a dance group with children of special needs, aged 7 to 18. So everything we do, we always involve them. For instance, we will have a big renovation. So we have had actually round tour with the with them. But it goes much deeper for pedagogic and so on, because we have all the school children coming to our house eventually. So it's a lot of work with different needs with kids, so we try to involve them as much in all our activities, thinking and learning every day. We have 14 artists working in our house, so we have a staff that can really work on things like this.

1:17:00 Manijeh Vergheese

Great, Sanni. I didn't know if you want to add any last words before we wrap up?

1:17:06 Sanni Priha

Well, no, I don't we. We have so little experience with working with children to begin with, and we haven't had a specific project with children with special needs, but, but, of course, we don't - when we worked with school children, they were all included in the project. So and in some of the other performances - participatory performances - we've had elderly people with special needs. So, for example, well, difficulties to move from the chair. So, so they have been instructed to use their way of movement, and it's been so far good experiences for all, especially these transgenerational projects, when, when they have been corporeal connection, regardless how you how you are capable of moving yourself. So there we have some beautiful experiences, but, but this is something that we really try to think about constantly that how we could find ways to engage with all kinds, all kinds of bodies and beings. Thank you.

1:18:54 Manijeh Verghese

Yeah, that's a great, great point to close this conversation. It's we've got so much more to discuss that maybe we need a follow up session. But I think that intergenerational approach is maybe what makes the Child Friendly City's initiative so powerful. Because often when you start with children, you bring a whole community together because of their families, carers, teachers, educators, like there's I think it's a great way to really make sure that cities make us all feel equal and included. And I thought those were great words as a kind of thread that stitches the initiative together. So yeah, I just wanted to end by saying thank you everyone for attending, and huge thanks to our four amazing panellists and to UP Projects for making the space for this conversation which feels ever more urgent to take place and for us all to learn from. So thank you.

1:19:46 Mala Yamey

Thank you. Thank you so much. Manijeh, Sanni, Pirjetta, Rebecca and Cathy. It's been really, really insightful to learn about the ways in which you've brought children into dialogue. With culture from as early as the day they were born - in Helsinki to regular involvement in framing their rights in the primary parliament in Nottingham. And what's really stayed with me is the importance of being open to creating spaces for children to be genuine, genuinely listened to, and that we really need consistent programming and an embedded infrastructure for children to engage with cultural organisations in our cities. Thank you also to everyone for participating and for your great questions, and thank you to Sumayya Si-Tayeb, our amazing BSL interpreter, our next *Assembly* series will take place later this year, so please do keep an eye out for the details of the events, dates and speakers, and do sign up to our *Constellations* ° *Assemblies* newsletter, which I think Jack has just put in the chat. I'd also like you like to encourage you to join our *Constellations* ° *Exchange*, which is a group on LinkedIn which enables the *Constellations* community to connect and share resources and thoughts, and it's really great to see so many people have joined already. If you would like to share any reflections on the today's event or further reading and resources, please do join the group, and we look forward to seeing you there again. There is a link in the chat. And finally, your feedback, talking about evaluation is really important to us and to help make sure our assemblies are responding to your needs and requests, we've added a short survey link in the chat, which would be really grateful if you could take a couple of minutes to complete. Thank you so much for joining us today, and another huge thank you to our wonderful speakers and to the fantastic team at UP Projects. I look forward to seeing you all at our next *Assembly*.