Thinking Outside the Playground: Opportunities for More Playful Streets Amidst the COVID-19 Crisis

As we all adapt to our “new normal” within the COVID-19 crisis, it appears that measures such as physical distancing and avoiding large crowds will be around for quite a while. With playgrounds closed across the city and around the world, many wonder what this will mean for the future of our urban play spaces and children’s play. We know that children need places to play— but do they need playgrounds? In fact, playground closures present us with a unique opportunity to examine the public realm and create a more playful city going forward.

Throughout history children have played everywhere, from grassy fields to trash filled alleys. Even today, you need only spend an hour or so with a young child to get a sense of their incredible knack for seeing playability everywhere. While we know that children do not need particular equipment or supplies in order to play, the playground is extremely valuable insofar as it creates a safe, welcoming place to gather with other children in play.

The origins of the modern playground date back to German pedagogue Friedrich Frobel, best known as the father of kindergarten. In his book The Education of Man (1887), Frobel writes about playground play as beneficial to the physical, moral, and intellectual development of children, and asserts that every town should have its own playground. Frobel’s playgrounds were not centrepieces for manufactured play equipment but more garden-like spaces for natural exploration. Unlike his kindergarten concept, Frobel’s playgrounds did not become a widespread phenomenon. Adults took little interest and children continued to play in whatever places they might find—including, largely, in streets.

In the years following Frobel’s introduction of the playground concept, there was a different trend taking off— that of the private automobile. Driving gained popularity as a recreational activity as well as a status symbol. It also profoundly changed the way we think about our streets. Between the introduction of the car in 1886 and the sale of the first mass-market Model T in 1908, thousands of children died on the road. Today, traffic crashes remain one of the leading causes of death for children. In the early 1900s, New York City enacted bylaws banning children from streets in an attempt to remedy this problem. Across many countries, streets began their transformation from multimodal spaces into car-only speedways. Popularizing playgrounds lent a crucial helping hand.

While the individuals involved in spreading the playground concept worked with earnest concern for children’s safety and wellbeing, they inadvertently aided the automobile industry in helping it narrowly avoid a growing public relations disaster. The social theory that supported the development of playgrounds— that small, vulnerable children must be removed from the way of cars rather than cars removed from their spaces—might be called out as victim blaming if introduced anew in the present day. But with children’s play relocated to designated spaces, society began to accept streets as places for cars, not for the public. This has remained the dominant conception of streets in North America ever since.

The advent of playgrounds was a catalyst that fundamentally changed the way children use urban spaces, and where they are seen as belonging. For decades now we have designed and planned our communities as if the only places children are welcome is in the home, school, or the playground. The playground represents a rare public space where we see the child’s needs acknowledged and centred. Children are meant to congregate at the playground, and not to disrupt the orderly use of streets, parking lots, or public squares with their stray tennis balls or noisy skateboards.
With play spaces closed to slow the spread of COVID-19, we must prioritize the development of new opportunities for play and playfulness in our public realm. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Canada ratified in 1991, clearly enshrines children’s right to play. Article 31 of the Convention reads

“States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.”

Opportunities for play are crucial to children’s health and development. While it is important to do all we can to slow the spread of COVID-19, we also need to be thoughtful and creative in ensuring young people are given the best opportunities possible under the circumstances. Public space for play is a critical component to creating equitable childhood experiences for children who do not have access to private play spaces. As public discourse moves towards the safe reopening of restaurants, bars and businesses, conversation needs to be had about the rights and needs of our youngest citizens.

Children have a human right to freely access their cities and communities. While we have previously reduced them to the realms of school and designated play spaces, at this time we have the chance to imagine playful urban design in more spaces, and change the future of the way children interact with the city. Individually, citizens have already been stepping up to make their neighbourhoods more inviting to children. The “Bear Hunt” phenomenon, where neighbours put teddy bears in their windows for children to find while out for a walk, is a perfect example of a simple intervention that makes public space more responsive to children’s needs and shows them that they are welcome in their neighbourhood.

Another simple intervention is for road space to be reclaimed as multimodal to allow children room to play in their neighbourhoods. Dr. Peter Höfflin’s research in Europe examined hundreds of families and found a clear correlation between the number of minutes children play outside each day and the speed limit on their street. A quiet road or back alley provides a perfect space for children’s play, and allows for independent space that can be easily supervised by a parent indoors. In the age of constant parental supervision, this also makes play access more equitable as it allows children whose parents do not necessarily have the time to dedicate an afternoon to sitting at the playground, to play outside while their parent cooks dinner or works on another task at home.

With car traffic significantly reduced on many neighbourhood streets, we already see more children out biking, playing hopscotch or drawing with chalk in the roads. We have the power to make this more play-friendly version of our city a permanent reality. With appropriate calming measures, neighbourhood streets can return to their role as multimodal spaces that support public engagement, rather than transit corridors that divide us. This change of pace will not just support more opportunities for play in the immediate while other spaces are closed, but can help create a city where more playfulness is permanently integrated into the daily lives of children.

We look forward to the safe reopening of playgrounds and play spaces, whenever that may take place. We also look forward to a post-pandemic world where our public realm invites play and playfulness everywhere.

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May 15 2020