Playweb Plan: Integrating Play and Children’s Mobility into Neighborhoods

Antwerp, Belgium
CASE STUDIES IN NEIGHBORHOOD PLANNING
FOR YOUNG CHILDREN AND THEIR CAREGIVERS

Cities included in this series

Antwerp
Barcelona
London
Melbourne
Paris
Philadelphia
Portland
[...]
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Our work is to rapidly convert cities into places whose systems nurture human life. An important facet of this work is to share information and analyses of such experiments with a broad audience, from practitioners, advocates, and zealots, to newcomers who are curious or concerned about the future.

Each case study in this series is analyzed through the lens of how it benefits the health of young children and their caregivers, and details how it was carried out. These cases are one part of “Born Thriving,” a suite of publications created to mainstream infant, toddler, and caregiver-focused neighborhood planning in Tirana, Albania.

Born Thriving is carried out in collaboration with the Municipality of Tirana, with the support of Bernard van Leer Foundation’s Urban95 program. This research benefited from the work of TUT-POL (Transforming Urban Transport Political Strategies and Tactics) at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, led by professors Diane E. Davis and Lily Song.

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Finally, we extend our gratitude to the many people we interviewed for these cases, and their generosity to candidly discuss the challenges in their work from which we can all gain so much.
PLAYWEB PLAN: INTEGRATING PLAY AND CHILDREN’S MOBILITY INTO NEIGHBORHOODS

Antwerp, Belgium
Weighted population density: 2,340/km²
People near services: 43%
Avg. block size: 40 blocks/km²

Tirana, Albania (2019)
Population: 906,166
Weighted population density: 10,786/km²
People near services: 63%
Avg. block size: 39 blocks/km²

Key Actors: lead officer in the city development department, Antwerp Youth Service, residents, youth, Kind & Samenleving

Keywords: children’s independent mobility, playable streets, open streets, traffic calming, pedestrianized networks, “playweb”

The story of Antwerp’s playwebs shows how prioritizing children’s health in neighborhood planning not only improves access to play, but contributes to larger mobility goals within a city-planning agenda that strives to move away from car dependency. Antwerp’s play space plan has created car-free, cycling- and pedestrian-oriented routes in neighborhoods in a network across the city. Although elements of municipal politics in recent years have pushed for pro-car policies, a nonpartisan municipal agency, Youth Service, has been able to sustain play space planning initiatives and has been able to endure changing political climates to promote pedestrian and cyclist infrastructure.
The Antwerp “playweb” initiative began in 2006, led by Youth Service, to create a neighborhood “play masterplan” that outlines both general guidelines and specific actions to ensure changes to public spaces are designed through a child-friendly lens. Fourteen neighborhood playweb plans have been completed, and three new plans are currently being prepared. Outcomes include over one hundred play streets (streets closed for as little as one day to allow for open outdoor play), school streets, and garden streets. Other resultant changes to the built environment are upgraded playgrounds or children’s sports facilities where researchers identified an unmet need, particularly in areas with social housing.

The Flemish organization Kind & Samenleving, a child-friendly-planning research organization, served as a technical partner for the city of Antwerp. They define a playweb as “a network that includes all informal and formal (play) places, and the routes that connect these places.”

The playweb consists of four key principles:

**Network:** an interconnected chain of significant places for children, which includes formal or informal play areas and the routes that connect them.

**Spatial stratification:** many “layers” of urban planning, of which the playweb is just one.

**Participation:** interviewing children and their parents on the most meaningful play spaces (particularly informal ones).

**Collaboration of key actors:** drawing up the plan alongside actors from various relevant sectors, such as urban planning, mobility, welfare, and both civil servants and elected officials.

The process of creating the playweb is equally important as the space itself. The design process involves two phases: data collection (interviews with participants, site visits, and GIS mapping) and policy proposals that define actions for the selected neighborhood. In each neighborhood, a project team analyzes the quality of existing play space and its accessibility by pedestrians and cyclists. The project team—consisting of representatives from the municipality’s planning department, Youth Service, and consultants from Kind & Samenleving—first collects data from children in schools in each neighborhood. The data collection is done through class workshops on topics like the children’s routes, perceptions of places and streets, and emotions they associate with each location. This data is used to conduct

What makes this project supportive of infants, toddlers, and their caregivers?

- **Traffic calming:** The project reduced motor vehicle traffic on routes that children themselves identified as important.
- **Reduced stress:** The networked connection of play and school streets creates more opportunities for infants, toddlers, and their caregivers to have meaningful and stress-free interactions on walks to school, and therefore for children to be able to be independently mobile.
- **Environmental health:** Active-transport networks reduce air pollution levels caused by driving and idling, which are disproportionately harmful to children’s health.
- **Improved play:** The program’s renovation of playgrounds, parks, gardens, soccer fields, basketball courts, etc., creates more spaces where children can gather and play.

**BACKGROUND**

The Antwerp “playweb” initiative began in 2006, led by Youth Service, to create a neighborhood “play masterplan” that outlines both general guidelines and specific actions to ensure changes to public spaces are designed through a child-friendly lens. Fourteen neighborhood playweb plans have been completed, and three new plans are currently being prepared. Outcomes include over one hundred play streets (streets closed for as little as one day to allow for open outdoor play), school streets, and garden streets. Other resultant changes to the built environment are upgraded playgrounds or children’s sports facilities where researchers identified an unmet need, particularly in areas with social housing.

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a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis. Online surveys are also conducted at children’s local recreation centers, sports clubs, or other public spaces. Surveys were found to be most effective for children ages ten to twelve, as they are the most effective means of mapping certain neighborhood features.

For the second phase of the process, the team returns to schools to collect a round of feedback before finalizing the proposals. This process ensures a child-friendly perspective in the masterplan, which details the networks of parks, playgrounds, recreation space, schools, and other public spaces. The municipality of Antwerp commissions reports by Kind & Samenleving for each district, which summarize the mapping of the existing play networks, the findings of participatory workshops with children, potential bottlenecks, and the recommendations to enter into the final masterplan.²

One example of a neighborhood where this process led to an effective change in the built environment is in the Borgerhout district of Antwerp. The masterplan finalized in 2016 identified that Vinçotteplein, a small neighborhood square already pegged for redevelopment, was underutilized by children who did not play soccer. Since there were already plans to densify the area through an increase in social housing, the masterplan proposed that the use of this square be reevaluated. An analysis of the existing routes recommended integrating arts and games into the area and improving pedestrian and cyclist access between the square and a nearby park. These changes resulted in recreational and public space that is more accessible to ITCs; they also built on the identified routes used by children in the area, reducing motor traffic and thus contributing to safer and more independent mobility through the expansion of the square.

One advantage of this planning process is that it considers children’s experience of public space, but this kind of research is resource intensive. As Wim Seghers, the playweb adviser for the city of Antwerp, explains, the process can take up to a year, and thus far has not adequately included parents or caregivers: “a point of focus is that we should have almost the same number of opinions from adults and parents as we have from children. That was never the case until now, so that’s still a work in progress.”³ There have been safety concerns voiced by parents throughout the process. Although anecdotal, one pattern that the team noticed was that

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resistance from parents was more common in the car-centric neighborhoods.

Additionally, while it was not difficult to gain the support of both local politicians and the community, the implementation of playweb proposals depends on the political will in each particular district, specifically how supportive each local councillor is. The political context of Antwerp has, at times, become a barrier to implementing new proposals outlined by playweb: “When you make a masterplan like this, you’re saying you want to investigate how to make neighborhoods more child friendly. Of course, nobody is against making something more child friendly, but the feedback we get from children is usually about too much car traffic. A lot of the proposals are about traffic calming or redefining the public space—taking some space from cars and giving more to the citizens. In our city we have a conservative majority, and for them those changes are not so popular.”

According to Seghers, an incremental approach that highlights the importance of safe child mobility has been the most effective way to counteract resistance from pro-car segments of the city. The experience of Youth Service indicates that once an initiative like this is done in one neighborhood, it becomes easier to create demand in other areas and eventually incentivize local politicians to be supportive. A child-oriented masterplan on the neighborhood scale has established a guideline for every new project in each district, where designers and planners can refer to the playweb plan to understand how to make their intervention.
child friendly. Ultimately, it becomes the work of Youth Service and district council members to protect the identified routes of children, maintain improvements, and ensure that changes to public space always keep in mind the condition of children's play space.

This case highlights the importance of evidence-based interventions and comprehensive outreach with children in spaces such as schools, sports clubs, and local recreation centers.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR TIRANA**

The Antwerp project’s research method highlights the special understanding that children have about what attracts them to certain play spaces, and what they do or don’t like about their everyday environment.

The playweb approach is a valuable toolkit that would be useful if adapted in any city, particularly given the lack of attention devoted to play and play space design. A database inspired by the Antwerp playweb framework in Tirana would map out the countless formal and informal play spaces and make recommendations for how they can be improved according to best practices.

Particularly important is their attention to how various locations make them feel; this provides important insight into how a walk to school can be improved, for example, in order to be less stressful or frightening.

The idea of extending the school streets initiative into a walking and play network for children is especially useful for Tirana, where students are very likely to live within walking distance to their schools. Tirana’s ubiquitous informal trails can offer a way of achieving safe pedestrian networks without having to come into conflict with drivers. In cases where a road needs to be closed, as was the case in the Antwerp project, any proposed expansion of the school street into a pedestrian network needs to emphasize children’s safety in its messaging.

The first pedestrian network should be one that is unlikely to face great resistance, yet still distinct enough to make an impact. As shown in Antwerp and in the United Kingdom, one successful play street initiative opens up the opportunity for more political support, and highlights the need for a multi-stakeholder approach.
NOTES


4 Seghers, interview by Ketema.

5 See the case study in this series, “Play Streets: Residents Promote Public Play Space” (Tirana: Qendra Marrëdhënë, 2020).
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These case studies are part of “Born Thriving,” a multi-year program to mainstream neighborhood planning principles focused on the needs of young children and their caregivers in Tirana, Albania.

Born Thriving’s written guidance consists of three volumes: neighborhood design guidelines (vol. 1); the neighborhood indicator baseline (vol. 2), and neighborhood planning case studies (vol. 3).

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Qendra Marrëdhënëie (Relationship Center) collaborates with local institutions to build just spaces for children and those who care for them.

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