

Planning for Play-Friendly City: Global Narratives and Local Interpretations in the Context of Istanbul

Dzheylyan Safet Karaulan Sozuer

Affiliation: Istanbul Technical University

Email: karaulan21@itu.edu.tr

Yasin Çagatay Seçkin

Affiliation: Istanbul Technical University

Email: cseckin@itu.edu.tr

Abstract

The concept of a “play-friendly city” has gained prominence in urban planning, highlighting the essential role of play in children's development and well-being. This paper investigates global frameworks promoting children's right to play and examines how cities interpret and implement these principles in diverse local contexts. It first reviews the theoretical foundations of play-focused urban planning, underscoring its importance in creating inclusive environments that support children's physical, cognitive, and social growth. It then analyzes international policy narratives and city-level strategies, identifying shared objectives and local adaptations. Finally, Istanbul is examined as a case study, with a particular focus on the Istanbul Play initiative, which seeks to embed play into the city's planning processes through holistic, participatory, and community-driven approaches. The study forms part of ongoing doctoral research aimed at developing decision-making tools to guide local authorities in planning for play-friendly urban environments.

Keywords: play-friendly city; urban development; local adaptation; strategic planning; decision-making

1. Theoretical and Practical Dimensions of Planning for Children and Play

Play is widely recognized as a fundamental aspect of children's physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development. Through play, children develop creativity, problem-solving abilities, social skills, and resilience, all of which contribute to their overall well-being and healthy growth (Ginsburg, 2007; Lester & Russell, 2010). Urban environments have a profound influence on the quality and quantity of opportunities children have to engage in play. Thoughtfully designed cities can offer safe, stimulating, and accessible spaces that encourage children to explore, interact with peers, and connect with nature, which supports not only individual development but also community cohesion (Hart, 1997; Fjørtoft, 2004). In contrast, poorly planned urban areas often restrict such opportunities, limiting children's physical activity and social interactions, which may negatively affect their health and well-being (Veitch, Bagley, Ball, & Salmon, 2006).

Designing child-friendly cities involves integrating specific principles into urban planning and development to prioritize children's diverse needs and rights. Among the most essential principles is ensuring mobility and accessibility, which means providing safe pedestrian pathways, dedicated cycling lanes, and proximity to essential services such as schools, parks, and healthcare facilities (Llewellyn & Wheeler, 2013). Safety and security are also crucial components; implementing traffic-calming measures, ensuring adequate lighting, and creating well-supervised, welcoming play areas are necessary to allow children to play independently with minimal risk (Hillman, Adams, & Whitelegg, 1990; Moore, 1986). Furthermore, urban environments should support play and learning by offering ample green spaces, interactive installations, and flexible public areas that stimulate children's cognitive, emotional, and social development. These spaces function as informal “third places,” facilitating learning, creativity, and community engagement outside of home and school contexts (Worpole, 2000; Malone & Tranter, 2003). Equally important is community engagement in the design and planning processes. Involving children, parents, educators, and other local stakeholders helps ensure that play spaces meet the actual needs and desires of users, promoting ownership, inclusivity, and sustainability (Hart, 1992; Burke & Grosvenor, 2008).

Increasingly, urban planners and policymakers recognize children as active agents in shaping their environments rather than passive recipients of adult decisions. Participatory planning approaches that involve children directly in decision-making processes empower them to express their experiences, preferences, and ideas regarding urban spaces (Chawla, 2002; Skelton, 2007). Techniques such as guided neighborhood tours, creative workshops, drawing exercises, and storytelling have proven effective in eliciting children's perspectives, often

highlighting needs and opportunities that adults might overlook (Filler, 2007). This participatory approach aligns with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which emphasizes children's rights to be heard in matters affecting their lives (UNCRC, 1989). Embedding participatory methods within urban governance not only enhances democratic decision-making but also leads to more responsive, inclusive urban environments that better support children's rights and well-being (Tremblay, 2014).

2. Global Narratives and Planning Frameworks for Child-Friendly Urban Environments

Urban planning increasingly acknowledges the essential role of play and recreation in shaping inclusive, healthy, and vibrant cities. Across the globe, municipal strategies and international policies converge in emphasizing children's rights to safe and accessible play as fundamental to sustainable urban development. This chapter synthesizes the guiding global frameworks alongside pioneering city plans from Barcelona, London, Dublin, Nottingham, Berlin, and Australia, illustrating a shared commitment to embedding play within urban design.

2.1 International Policy Foundations

The cornerstone of the global movement toward child-friendly cities is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Article 31, which guarantees every child the right to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, and participation in cultural life. Building on this, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment No. 17 (2013) elaborates on the significance of play in children's development and urban environments. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), emphasize inclusive, safe, and accessible green and public spaces that promote well-being and social cohesion. These global mandates set the normative framework urging cities worldwide to prioritize play infrastructure and policies.

2.2 City Plans as Expressions of Global Commitments

The examined city plans operationalize international principles within localized contexts, offering concrete frameworks, strategies, and actions that reflect and advance global aspirations. City authorities increasingly integrate play into urban planning approaches as a means to enhance the quality of life, promote social cohesion, and foster healthier, more inclusive environments for all residents.

Barcelona's Public Space Play Plan Horizon 2030 integrates play within a broader sustainability agenda aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), emphasizing well-being, inclusion, and environmental quality. The plan positions outdoor play and physical activity as core policy priorities for a healthier urban life. It reflects UNCRC principles by aiming for universal access to diverse, accessible play spaces and promoting inclusive environments for all ages, genders, and abilities. The interdisciplinary drafting process and comprehensive implementation strategy illustrate how global norms can be translated into actionable urban policies. (Barcelona City, 2019)

Through its Good Growth Plan and Supplementary Planning Guidance (2011), London aligns with the UNCRC and SDG frameworks by embedding children's rights into urban design, prioritizing independent mobility and safe access to play. The London Play Plan advances the concept of a "child-friendly city" by shifting focus from isolated playgrounds to integrated neighborhood play ecosystems. Its emphasis on safe routes and pollution reduction through initiatives like Ultra Low Emission Zones demonstrates the intersection of environmental health and play, consistent with international sustainability goals (London City, 2012).

Dublin's City Play Strategy 2022–2027 explicitly references international legal instruments such as the UNCRC and General Comment No. 17, grounding its vision in children's rights. The strategy promotes a coordinated, cross-departmental approach to ensuring equitable access to quality play opportunities, reflecting the global narrative of inclusive urban environments. The city's commitment to participation and inclusive design further embodies the principles of meaningful child involvement advocated in international frameworks. (Dublin City, 2022)

Nottingham's Play Strategy 2008–2020 aligns with international policies by defining play as a right and emphasizing inclusion, safety, and community engagement. It promotes accessible, well-maintained play spaces

throughout the city, supporting social inclusion and well-being—key themes within the SDGs and the UNCRC. The strategy's emphasis on sustainable, inter-agency collaboration reflects global calls for integrated governance in child-friendly urban planning. (Nottingham City, 2008)

Berlin's Urban Development Concept Berlin 2030 offers a holistic vision that integrates play and recreation within broader goals of sustainable and inclusive development. Its focus on public participation, including engagement with future generations, mirrors international calls for child participation and community inclusion. The city's approach to balancing urban density with green spaces fosters livability, social cohesion, and environmental sustainability—central pillars of global urban development agendas. (Berlin City, 2015)

Australia's Play Strategic Plan 2020–2025 embeds play within national frameworks of public health and urban design, recognizing it as a fundamental human right. The plan's alignment with UNCRC Article 31 and SDG goals reinforces the global priority of accessible play for all children. Through legislative and urban design reforms, and grassroots initiatives such as the 1000 Play Streets Movement, Australia demonstrates a multi-level approach to implementing international play frameworks. (Australia Play, 2020)

2.3 Synthesis of Global and Local Frameworks

Together, these city plans and international policies articulate a shared vision: urban environments must be designed and managed to facilitate daily, meaningful play opportunities for children. The global policy frameworks provide normative guidance, emphasizing children's rights, equity, and sustainability, while city plans translate these ideals into concrete commitments and strategies tailored to local contexts. A key convergence across these documents is the recognition of play as a fundamental right, grounded in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which frames play as essential not only to children's development but also to their active citizenship. Additionally, inclusivity and accessibility are central concerns; universal design principles and cross-sector collaboration ensure that play opportunities are available to children of all abilities, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Furthermore, play is increasingly understood as an integrated element within broader urban systems, embedded not only in designated playgrounds but throughout transport networks, green spaces, and community facilities—promoting independent mobility, environmental health, and seamless access. This vision is complemented by a strong emphasis on participation and co-design, with children and communities actively engaged throughout planning and implementation processes, thereby reflecting the principle of meaningful involvement and agency. Finally, the role of play is linked to wider urban objectives such as environmental sustainability, public health, and social cohesion, recognizing that fostering playful, inclusive environments contributes to the well-being of the entire city. Despite these advances, challenges persist in scaling up the integration of play within diverse urban contexts and ensuring equitable access for all children. Emerging innovative approaches, such as London's "Slow Build" model and Australia's digital Playground Finder, illustrate the potential for responsive, adaptive play planning that can better meet the needs of rapidly changing cities. Looking forward, continued alignment with evolving international frameworks and the strengthening of inclusive governance mechanisms will be crucial to advancing child-friendly urban futures that fully embed play as a vital element of city life.

3. Istanbul's Journey Towards Becoming a Playable City

Istanbul's vast and complex urban fabric presents both significant challenges and unique opportunities for embedding play within the city's evolving landscape. As a city that straddles continents and cultures, with sprawling metropolitan dimensions and diverse socio-economic realities, Istanbul's pursuit of becoming a "playable city" illustrates how global narratives on child-friendly urbanism adapt to local specificities.

3.1 Overview of the Istanbul Play Initiative

Istanbul's journey toward becoming a "playable city" reflects an ambitious and contextually nuanced effort to embed play within a highly complex and diverse urban environment. As a sprawling metropolis bridging two continents, Istanbul's urban fabric is characterized by vast dimensions, diverse socio-economic realities, and multifaceted spatial patterns. These factors distinguish Istanbul from many other cities undertaking similar

child-friendly urban initiatives, making its approach to play deeply rooted in local interpretations while still engaging with global narratives. (IMM, 2022)

The Istanbul Play initiative, anchored by the Istanbul Play Master Plan, represents a comprehensive framework aiming to integrate play into the very fabric of the city beyond conventional playgrounds. It embraces a holistic planning vision that seeks to incorporate play opportunities throughout the urban environment—whether in streetscapes, parks, community centers, or informal spaces—ensuring play becomes a seamless part of everyday urban life. This shift towards a “playable city” is guided by the recognition that children’s right to play is not limited to designated areas but must be interwoven into the broader urban experience. (IMM, 2022)

A fundamental aspect of this initiative is its strong emphasis on community engagement. Given Istanbul’s cultural diversity and complex social dynamics, the planning process prioritizes collaboration with local residents, families, and children to create public and play spaces that resonate with their specific needs and cultural contexts. This participatory approach fosters local ownership and encourages sustainable use of public areas. Moreover, the initiative seeks to align urban planning policies with international frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ensuring that play is integrated into wider municipal policies that promote children’s well-being and rights. Efforts to strengthen institutional coordination and embed play considerations into broader urban development policies are critical elements of this policy integration. (IMM, 2022)

3.2 Comparative Analysis with Other Cities

While Istanbul’s play initiative shares many foundational principles with global examples of child-friendly cities—such as London, Barcelona, and Dublin—the city’s unique characteristics present distinct challenges and opportunities (Meier and Thiel, 2014; IPA, 2017). Unlike these relatively compact European cities, Istanbul’s enormous size and sprawling urbanization extend far beyond the boundaries of formally controlled urban patterns (Yardımcı and Şenol, 2020). The city’s rapid expansion includes large informal settlements and irregular development that complicate efforts to provide equitable access to safe, inclusive play environments across all neighborhoods (Akkaya, 2015; UNICEF, 2018). This complexity stands in contrast to cities with more uniform urban governance where play infrastructure can be coordinated more systematically (Karaman, 2018).

Furthermore, Istanbul’s urban fabric is extraordinarily heterogeneous, ranging from dense historic districts and tightly knit neighborhoods to sprawling suburban zones and informal settlements (Çelik, 2019). Such diversity demands adaptable and context-specific play solutions that accommodate varying spatial conditions—from intimate courtyard spaces in compact areas to expansive green parks in suburban localities. This variety differs significantly from cities where the urban form is more homogeneous, requiring less tailored interventions (Dover and Daly, 2021).

The socio-cultural dimensions of Istanbul also shape its approach to play. Traditional attitudes, family structures, and concerns about safety influence how public spaces and play are perceived and used (Dover and Daly, 2021). Unlike cities with long-standing traditions of public child-friendly design, Istanbul’s initiative places particular emphasis on cultural sensitivity and community engagement to foster acceptance and participation in public play (Hart, 1992). This cultural dimension adds a layer of complexity to the planning process, necessitating thoughtful dialogue and inclusive design.

Institutionally, Istanbul continues to develop its governance mechanisms to better facilitate children’s participation and cross-sector collaboration in urban planning (Karaman, 2018). While some cities have established mature interdepartmental frameworks dedicated to child-friendly urbanism, Istanbul is still evolving these structures to enhance accountability and effectiveness (UNICEF, 2018).

3.3 Outcomes and Future Directions

Istanbul's play initiative aligns closely with global aspirations to recognize play as a fundamental right and essential component of children's health, well-being, and social inclusion. The city adopts a rights-based framework that draws from international commitments while tailoring implementation to local realities. (IMM, 2022)

Since its inception, the Istanbul Play initiative has achieved promising outcomes. Innovative play environments have been introduced, showcasing a range of approaches such as natural playgrounds, interactive installations, and the creative reuse of public spaces that reflect Istanbul's unique cultural and environmental context. The initiative has also succeeded in raising awareness among policymakers, urban planners, and the general public about the importance of play as a core urban function. (IMM, 2022)

Looking forward, Istanbul's efforts focus on strengthening mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the impact of play spaces on children's well-being and community life. There is a clear commitment to continuously refine policies, incorporating new insights and feedback from stakeholders to improve the quality and inclusivity of play provision. Scaling up successful pilot projects to reach Istanbul's diverse neighborhoods, including informal areas, remains a central priority. Embedding play within broader urban strategies—such as transportation planning, housing development, and green infrastructure—will be essential for sustaining progress. (IMM, 2022)

Crucially, the city aims to deepen participatory frameworks, ensuring children and communities have a meaningful voice throughout planning, implementation, and evaluation processes. Istanbul's experience demonstrates how global principles of child-friendly urbanism can be interpreted and adapted to address the specific challenges of a sprawling, diverse metropolis. This adaptive process offers valuable lessons for other large, rapidly growing cities seeking to make play an integral part of urban life.

4. Conclusion

This study, situated within the broader framework of doctoral research, has explored the complex interplay between global narratives of child-friendly urbanism and their localized interpretations in the context of Istanbul's ambitious journey toward becoming a play-friendly city. By examining international policy frameworks alongside the specific urban, social, and cultural realities of Istanbul, this research highlights both the universal principles and the distinctive challenges that shape how play is integrated into city planning.

Play is increasingly recognized not only as a fundamental right of children but also as a critical component of healthy, inclusive, and vibrant urban environments. Integrating play into urban planning contributes significantly to the physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development of children, while fostering community cohesion and enhancing the overall quality of public spaces for people of all ages. Embedding play in urban design challenges planners to move beyond isolated playgrounds and instead create interconnected, accessible, and diverse play opportunities that respond to the varied needs of children and families within complex cityscapes.

The comparative analysis of international city plans reveals several prominent principles that underpin successful play-friendly urban strategies. These include ensuring accessibility and inclusivity for all children regardless of age, gender, ability, or background; promoting independent mobility and safe routes within neighborhoods; embedding play within broader sustainability and public health agendas; and fostering meaningful participation of children and communities in planning processes. Plans from cities like Barcelona, London, Dublin, and Berlin consistently emphasize the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration, adaptive design approaches, and ongoing monitoring and evaluation to sustain play infrastructure that evolves with changing community needs.

The comparative analysis with other global cities underscores Istanbul's unique position as a vast, diverse metropolis with sprawling urbanization patterns that extend beyond conventional regulatory boundaries. This complexity necessitates adaptive, context-sensitive approaches that go beyond replicating international models, emphasizing community engagement, cultural inclusivity, and flexible planning strategies. The Istanbul Play initiative and Master Plan exemplify this localized interpretation by embedding play into a wide range of urban

spaces and fostering collaboration between policymakers, communities, and children.

Importantly, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how play can be systematically incorporated into public services and urban planning processes, moving beyond ad hoc interventions to more holistic, sustainable frameworks. As part of an ongoing doctoral study, the insights gained here aim to inform the development of a decision-making tool for local authorities. This tool is intended to support strategic planning for play, ensuring that children's rights and needs are at the core of urban development policies and practices.

Ultimately, the study reinforces that fostering play-friendly cities requires both a commitment to global child rights frameworks and a nuanced appreciation of local urban realities. Istanbul's experience serves as a valuable case study, demonstrating how cities with complex, rapidly evolving urban fabrics can successfully integrate play into their public spaces and policies. The findings offer practical guidance for policymakers and urban planners seeking to create inclusive, vibrant, and equitable environments where children can thrive.

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