

# The public value of child-friendly space

## Reconceptualising the playground

The public  
value of the  
child-friendly  
space

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The playground is a commonly advised means to integrate children into the public realm of “child-friendly cities”, yet research has tended not to examine it in relation to adjacent public space. This paper aims to understand the extent to which the playground – a socio-spatial phenomenon – facilitates children’s integration into the public realm, enabling critical examination of the “child-friendly space” concept.

**Design/methodology/approach** – An ethnographic study was carried out across three sites in Athens, Greece, where typical neighbourhood playgrounds replicate features common across the global north. Methods combined observation (167 h; morning, afternoon, evening), visual-mapping and 61 semi-structured interviews with 112 playground users (including adults and children from the playgrounds and surroundings). Rigorous qualitative thematic analysis, involving an iterative post-coding process, allowed identification of spatial patterns and emergent themes.

**Findings** – Findings reveal perceptions surrounding the protective and age-specific aspects of child-friendly design, limit the playgrounds’ public value. However, a paradox emerges whereby the playgrounds’ adjacency to public spaces designed without child-friendly principles affords children’s engagement with the public realm.

**Research limitations/implications** – Reconceptualisation of the “child-friendly playground” is proposed, embracing interdependence with the public realm – highly significant for child-friendly urban design theory and practice globally. Researchers are encouraged to compare findings in other geographical contexts.

**Originality/value** – This original finding is enabled by the novel approach to studying the playground in relation to adjacent public realm. The study also offers the first empirical examination of child-friendly city principles – participation in social life and urban play – in a Greek context, addressing a geographical gap in literature on children’s everyday spaces.

**Keywords** Playground, Child-friendly city, Athens, Ethnography, Public value, Public realm

**Paper type** Research paper

### The child-friendly playground

The concept of the child-friendly city (CFC) emerged from the child-rights agenda (NIUA, 2016; UN, 1996; UNICEF, 2017, 2004, 1989). What exactly constitutes a CFC is under debate. As van Vliet and Karsten (2015) argue: “The Child-Friendly City (CFC) label means different



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things to different people, influenced by their professional interests” (p. 1). Child-friendly principles have nevertheless informed design indicators (Broberg *et al.*, 2013; IRC/CERG, 2016; Krishnamurthy *et al.*, 2018; NIUA, 2016; Woolcock and Steele, 2008) and guidance relevant to the design and planning of urban space and spatial interventions (Aerts, 2018; CFCI, 2019; Hoogendoorn, 2012; Horelli, 2007; Krishnamurthy *et al.*, 2018; Kyatta, 2004; McAllister, 2008). Literature variously measures child-friendliness through children’s well-being (Howard, 2006; Malone, 2015; UN, 1996), through green spaces (Dublin City Development Board, 2012; Jansson *et al.*, 2016) or independent mobility (Cilliers and Cornelius, 2019; Malone, 2013; Nordström, 2010; Whitzman and Mizrahi, 2012). Other studies approach child-friendly space as a whole through its child-responsiveness (Aerts, 2018), comment on the advantages of undesignated outdoor play space (Krishnamurthy *et al.*, 2018) or discuss the qualities and relations it should foster (Horelli, 2007; Woolcock and Steele, 2008). However, connecting the majority of these diverse studies is the intention to integrate children into public life through urban space. The playground emerges through this literature as the commonly “advised” space through which to integrate children into public space (Aerts, 2018; Cilliers and Cornelius, 2019; Jansson, 2008; IRC/CERG, 2016; NIUA, 2016; Wessells and Kostelny, 2013; Woolcock and Steele, 2008).

It is commonly accepted that adult perceptions of childhood structure conceptions of the “ideal” places for children (Gülgönen and Corona, 2015; Loukaitou-Sideris, 2003; Valentine, 1996). Space not only accommodates but also reflects and produces social, economic and political relations (Rose, 1993; Soja, 1996). Olwig and Gulløv (2003) explain that restriction in movement and the division of space into go and no-go areas “mirror hierarchies and symmetries in the relations between different parts of the society” (p. 8). One of the groups affected is children. As Gallagher (2006) argues:

... recognition of children’s agency is tempered by an awareness of its limits: social space is produced through relationships that, in the main, subordinate children to adults. (162)

Child-friendly spaces are, therefore, not just places that children can use, but places that construct a definition of childhood and what is “proper” and “valuable” for this population group (See: Aitken, 2001; Gagen, 2000; Gülgönen and Corona, 2015; Holloway and Valentine, 2000; Loukaitou-Sideris, 2003; Rasmussen, 2004; Solomon, 2005; Valentine, 1996; Wilks, 2010). Led by a developmental perspective, child-friendly spaces often construct children as being in need of special treatment (Aerts, 2018; NIUA, 2016), informing spaces designed around “children’s competencies”, safety[1] (Lansdown, 2011; Woolcock and Steele, 2008) and security (Kyatta, 2004; McAllister, 2008), with an emphasis on scale, flexibility and segregation (Cilliers and Cornelius, 2019; Wessells and Kostelny, 2013; Wilks, 2010). The contemporary prototype of child-friendly spaces, materialising concerns about children’s safety and well-being (Cilliers and Cornelius, 2019; Howard, 2006; Wilks, 2010), is the playground. Educational, sculptural (Dattner, 1969), intergenerational (Daniels and Hohnson, 2009; Herrington, 1999) adventure (Lady Allen of Hurtwood, 1953) or commercial (McKendrick *et al.*, 2000), the playground space has undergone a variety of transformations (Solomon, 2005), reflecting society’s dominant perceptions about childhood and play in each era. Interestingly, the fence has been an enduring feature of the playground, rarely dispensed with and scarcely evolving over time. Even in the more radical and child-centred approaches to playground spaces (Dattner, 1969; Solomon, 2005), the fence was often a prerequisite for their operation, acting as the boundary between children’s and adult’s space, defining the play space itself. Cilliers and Cornelius (2019), exploring child-friendly design characteristics, argue:

Safety, for this purpose, refers to physical design elements such as fencing, lighting, and visibility. (n/a)

Despite the physical segregation of children behind the fence, playgrounds continue to be portrayed as the primary spatial means to engage children with public space and public life, acting as “entry points” (Olwig and Gulløv, 2003, p. 15); fenced islands in public space. Child-friendly design approaches often suggest age-specific spaces (Derr and Tarantini, 2016; McAllister, 2008; NIUA, 2016; UN, 2017); child-centred islands within the adult public. However, as Jansson (2008) argues: “playgrounds can be viewed as an excuse for the lack of child-friendly environments” (89). Research on the playground has often examined it as a self-contained space that accommodates play, without placing it in its general (socio-historical, cultural or spatial) context and without exploring its publicness and relationship to adjacent spaces (e.g. Nasar and Holloman, 2013). Since the playground is intended to engage children with public life, but is usually physically segregated by its design, this paper explores the publicness of the space as a quality essential to our understanding of the “child-friendly playground”.

The two main questions explored within this important context are:

What is the relationship between the “child-friendly” and publicness?

What is the playgrounds’ public value?

This study centres on Athens, Greece, where the typical neighbourhood play space replicates features common across much of the global north. The majority of playgrounds in Athens abide by the child-friendly perceptions translated to the “standardized playground” model (Solomon, 2005, p. 89) – easy to build, not needing frequent maintenance and designed according to the safety standards (Dattner, 1969), paved with impact-absorbing materials. Intergenerational play is not foreseen by the design. It is important to note that at the time of writing, there has been no plan to implement the CFC guidelines in Greece (Karagianni and Karioti, 2003). There is a gap in literature on understanding children’s lives and spaces in Greece. This study is significant as it offers the first empirical examination of the CFC principles – participation in social life and urban play – in a Greek context.

## Conceptual framework

### *Public space and public value*

Public is defined through its ability to accommodate different kinds of users and uses in the same space in a constant process of negotiation and participation (Knox and Pinch, 2009; Massey, 1998; UNESCO, 2017); a “communal living room” (Hertzberger, 2001, p. 48). Public space supports and places participation in the public realm and community life; an “open-ended” (Fernando, 2007, p. 57) “place of encounter” (Jiménez-Domínguez, 2007, p. 106).

The term public value[2] has been coined for this research in relation to the playground space, meaning the value the playground has as a public space; its publicness. It synthesises the concepts of access and interaction (Knox and Pinch, 2009; Petrescu, 2007; UNESCO, 2017) referring to the extent to which the playground space is accessible to different age and social groups, allowing co-existence or interactions between normal users (i.e. children and adults accompanying children) and non-users (i.e. adults not accompanying children) of the space. This term was chosen to directly contrast with the extensively used term, play value (Woolley and Lowe, 2013) and to direct attention towards the (potentially) public qualities of the space. Public value should not be confused with the often-used term “social value” (Czalczyńska-Podolska, 2014, p. 132) focusing on interactions between people of the same age group, namely children and youth (Solomon, 2005; Woolley and Lowe, 2013). Public value shifts the focus from socialisation as a child’s development of social skills between peers, to active interaction with a variety of ages and social groups.

*The child-friendly*

Drawing on UNICEF's Child Friendly Cities (CFC) framework (UNICEF, 2017), this study is novel as it will examine how the playground's child-friendly character affects its public value. Examining UNICEF's Child-friendly Cities and Communities Initiative (CFCI, 2019), the key child-friendly characteristics relevant to playgrounds and play spaces in the city can be identified as follows:

- (1) "Participate in family, cultural, city or community and social life." (n/a)
- (2) "Meet friends and have places and spaces to play and enjoy themselves." (n/a)

This study therefore focuses on the recurring theme in the child-friendly literature: children's "engagement with social life" (CFCI, 2019, n/a). The playground is selected as the main space within Athenian public space that is intended to be child-friendly and offers space to play. It is therefore examined in relation to its ability to engage children with social life, as represented here by the public realm.

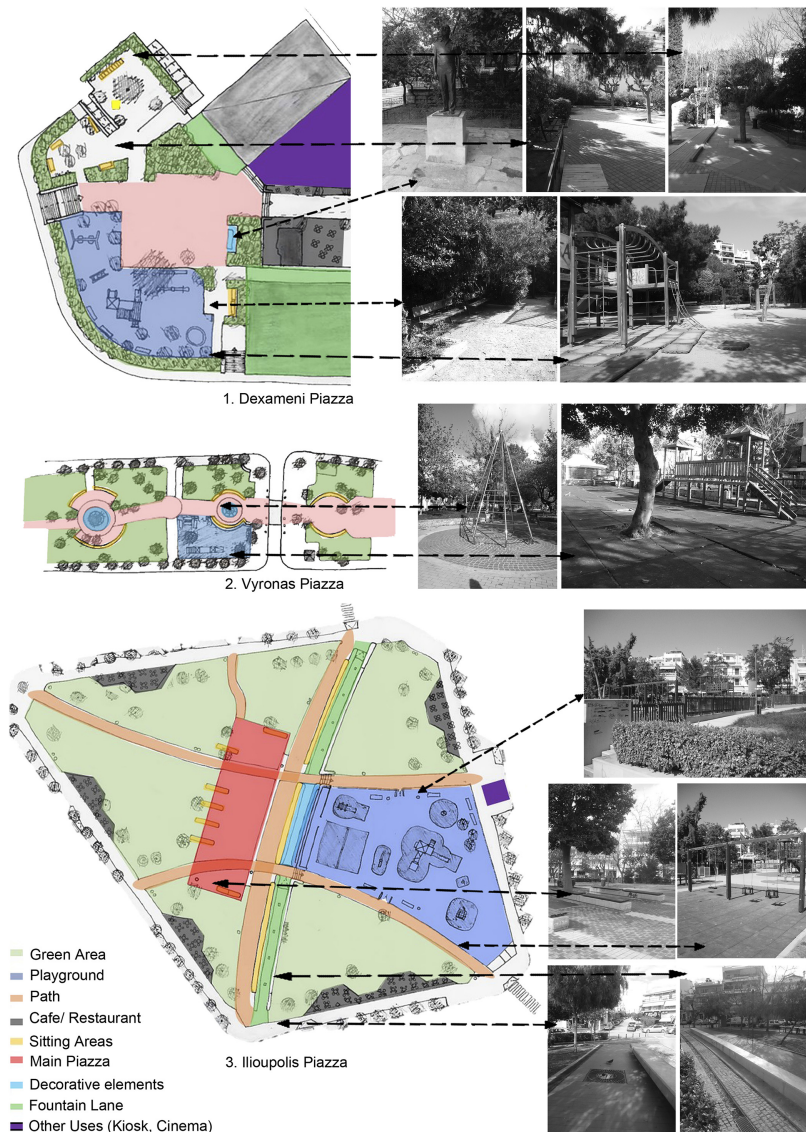
**Methodology**

As "architecture can be found in the actions and relational practices of everyday life" (Trogal and Petrescu, 2017, 11), this study focuses on "everyday geographies" (Horton and Kraftl, 2014, p. 181) and the mundane, rather than on states of exception. Architecture is here framed as a process rather than object (Stickells, 2011), located in socio-spatial interactions and occupation. Ethnography permitted immersion in the playground, here approached as a socio-spatial phenomenon. Three sites were chosen, each comprising a public piazza which included a fenced public playground (See: Plate 1).

These sites were paradigmatic cases (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 79), representing the typical neighbourhood play space in Athens, Greece. Located in neighbourhoods with contrasting socio-economic identities[3], the examples were chosen in order to diversify the conditions that might have an impact upon the common playground phenomenon observed (See: Table I). However, there was no intent to directly compare sites or to identify any relationships to socio-economic status within the findings. All of the playgrounds were outdoor, free to access, purposely equipped, local public spaces, designed with children's play in mind. All were fenced, clearly defined spaces, comprising metallic play structures and seating areas, some paved with soft material (See: Plate 1).

The lead author engaged in intensive, short-term ethnography, employing "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) over five months during 2016 and 2017. The data collection employed ethnographic observations, field notes, informal discussions and 61 semi-structured ethnographic interviews[4] in the field (Angrosino, 2007), using "theoretical sampling" (Ball, 1990, 165). Observations totalled 167 h in three public playgrounds and their surrounding public spaces and included mornings, afternoons and evenings, both on weekdays and weekends. 112 participants were interviewed (91 adults and 21 children); however, the total number observed cannot be calculated as all three playgrounds were part of a lively public space with constant flows of people. Mapping tools were employed to record the relationship between the spatial characteristics of each space and the participants' behaviours. "Descriptive diagrams" complemented observations, capturing movement, flows and interactions, thereby placing specific observations in space and allowing the depiction of interaction between the different areas. An identifying number corresponding to the field notes was given to each participant, while different symbols ascribed specific characteristics (i.e. female/male, guardian/child and adult/unaccompanied child).

For the purpose of this study, any participant aged 5–12 years old was considered a child. However, age in this research is not understood to imply any correlation with



**Plate 1.**  
The three sites – views  
and plans of main  
functions. (Photos  
taken by the lead  
author)

physical and cognitive abilities. Our reasoning is positioned in the post-structuralistic new wave of childhood studies (Spyrou, 2018), focusing on the relational and situated status of age (Kraftl, 2013). The notion of the child-friendly is examined under the lens of this relational socio-spatial construction of one’s identity and of ways to interact with and appropriate space (Horelli, 2007), focusing interest on “the ways in which idea(l)s of childhood are literally and materially constructed” through “local, banal, ephemeral, mundane, material practices” (Kraftl, 2006, 488). As a result, the research methods and questions were not focused solely on children, rather they were “user friendly” (Aitken and



Site	Neighbourhood location	Socio-economic identity of neighbourhood <sup>a</sup>	Urban development of neighbourhood	Piazza area	Playground area
1	Dexameni	Higher income	High-rise apartment blocks (average of five stories) High density – 11.06 people/ 0.1 ha (ELSTAT, 2011) Residential and commercial area Loose grid and organic plan	2,689 m <sup>2</sup>	700 m <sup>2</sup>
2	Vyronas	Lower income	Medium-rise apartment blocks (average of three stories) High density – 6,69 people per 0.1 ha (ELSTAT, 2011) Residential area Loose grid plan	2,282 m <sup>2</sup>	200 m <sup>2</sup>
3	Ilioupoli	Middle income	Medium-rise apartment blocks (average of three stories) High density – 6,11 people per 0.1 ha (ELSTAT, 2011) Residential and commercial area Loose grid plan	4,083 m <sup>2</sup>	540 m <sup>2</sup>

**Note(s):** <sup>a</sup>Dexameni (upper-middle), Ilioupoli (middle) and Vyronas (lower). It is important to note that Athens is a city that does not easily allow clear-cut quantifiable distinctions between the different districts (See: Maloutas and Karadimitriou, 2001). The lower-, middle- and upper-middle identities of the three areas are associated with the everyday and historically based perceptions of the districts, rather than a definitive economic, demographic or job-based categorisation.

**Table I.**  
Outline description of sites

Herman, 2009, p. 20). Children were approached as individuals, with movement back and forth on Punch's continuum (2012), in order to address and engage with each individual's competencies and needs.

The following findings draw upon the qualitative thematic analysis of the full data set, which involved an iterative process of coding and reflexive interpretation (Mason, 2002). This type of analytical process is guided by the research questions, but not by prior framework or theory: instead themes emerge from the inductive process. The analysis started with the pilot study, informing the refinement of methods. By the end of the data collection, the coding process was applied to the text-based field notes and interview transcriptions, allowing identification of patterns and emergent themes. The texts were also interpreted in the context of the descriptive diagrams made during fieldwork observations. This process produced "spatial patterns" that were then mapped in "analytical" diagram. The spatial patterns along with the codes and patterns emerging from the field notes and interviews analysis were then synthesised into broader emergent themes.

A selection of direct quotes from participant interviews and discussions and from the field notes are used to evidence the findings.

## Findings

### *The safe “public”*

Athens may be the largest city in Greece, but it is the least popular according to resident preferences (Manioui, 2012). The lack of public space and basic infrastructure, in combination with high density, affects residents' everyday lives. Home, or friends' houses, are the hubs of children's play (Kaisari, 2005), with municipal public playgrounds representing the notion of the child-friendly.

Findings show that the playground accommodated guardians' fears about children being in public. There is a vast literature exploring age as an organising principle for social control (Alanen, 2009; Alderson, 2000) and spatial segregation (Horschelmann and Blerk, 2012; Kraftl, 2006; Kylin and Bodelius, 2015; Olwig and Gulløv, 2003). Segregation and supervision emerged from fieldwork as the playground's main design requirement from the guardian perspective, representing the two main attributes of “proper” children's spaces (Aitken, 2001; Olwig and Gulløv, 2003, p. 101); the fence being the physical structure that made both possible. Guardians often commented on how they felt more relaxed in the enclosed “safe” space:

The fence is necessary. We control them more efficiently in an enclosed space (Father, Vyronas).

The playground's special design and scale, centred on children's safety and well-being, intensified the classification of the playground as “children's space”, hindering co-existence with the wider public and reducing its public value. Both guardians and people in the piazza perceived it as a place for childhood, providing “special equipment” for supervised “safe” and “valuable” play. The playground's special design was expected to guide children's play (See: Zeiher, 2003):

They should play properly. So they will not get hurt. And that way, other children can play as well (Mother, Ilioupoli).

As shown in previous literature, participants' conceptions of the “ideal” places for children revealed their underpinning perceptions of childhood (Gülgönen and Corona, 2015; Horschelmann and Blerk, 2012; Kylin and Bodelius, 2015; van Vliet and Karsten, 2015); the guardians in this study referred to a playground as being “good” solely in terms of safety. Guardians consistently referred to the need for a fenced space, with the quality of the play equipment given secondary importance. Guardians often admitted that they chose smaller playgrounds, offering fewer play opportunities, simply for the sake of perceived safety:

The other playground is new and large but it has too many doors! (Father, Vyronas).

However, as literature has previously highlighted (Jacobs, 1961; James, 1990; Valentine, 1996; Ward, 1978), the findings suggest discrepancies between adult and child perceptions and uses of space, revealing contrasting understandings:

[A mother walking through the piazza was negotiating with her boy] “. . . the other playground is bigger, better” to receive the answer from the boy “the other one is too crowded! (Field-notes: Vyronas).

While adults' answers revolved around safety, children tended to prefer spaces where their friends or other children were. They often expressed their preference for making the play infrastructure more challenging and as a result more interesting:

This playground needs a bigger slide (Boy, Dexameni).

At the same time, the playground did not take into account all the different abilities across the age span, emerging instead as an age-specific place with pre-defined ways to play and use the structures. Children have often criticised the limited potential of the typical “KFC” (kit, fence,

carpet) playground designs (Woolley, 2007). The structures were often too challenging for toddlers and too boring for older children, while excluding the larger adult bodies:

We do no't fit in the structures! These are for babies! (Father, Dexameni).

In line with other Western studies (Alderson, 2000; Smith, 1995), conceptions of age not only made the playground space a children's space, but also made play a child's "right":

He would ask me to climb the bridge but I did not want to climb. You feel this is for the children (Father, Dexameni).

Adult play in the playground was observed only on the broken play structures, which were not in use by children.

The intended "child-friendliness" of the playgrounds therefore constructed them as distinct spaces in which co-existence of different age groups was not supported, limiting their public value. People in this study did not perceive the playgrounds to be part of the public space, but rather places for children's use. Literature discusses processes of "othering" children in their use of public space (Aitken, 2001; Holloway and Valentine, 2000; Olwig and Gulløv, 2003; Valentine, 1996). This study supports this argument and suggests that child-centred spaces employ similar processes of "othering" adults (Weck, 2019; Wilson, 2013). Although there are studies approaching the playground as a space of children's socialisation (Bunnell *et al.*, 2012), the playgrounds' processes of "othering" adults here restricted their public value. There is evidence that the tailored design of the playground, as well as the physical characteristics of the surrounding area (i.e. number of shaded or sitting areas) supported the profiling behaviours that regulated playground access. The fence's physicality sent a clear message regarding the distinctiveness of this space:

So the children would not go out... or others getting in... strange people... You know, dangerous... (Mother, Dexameni).

Guardians' suspicions about adults not accompanying children in the space were often mentioned by those adults who tended to avoid these children's places, considering them superfluous and "childish" (Edmiston, 2008); "places only for children" (Blackford, 2004, p. 232):

No, I do not sit in the playground. There is so much space in the piazza, why should I go to the playground? (Man, Vyronas).

Physical characteristics and the number of sitting choices in the adjacent area were often mentioned by the participants as factors that either justified or questioned "outsider" presence in the playground space.

### *The play public*

Strong evidence emerged across the various sets of data that the playground, acting as a "play landmark", attracted and justified play outside its boundary, in the piazza. A play island was created around the playground space where people, taking advantage of the piazzas' affordances, sustained a new play space, distinct from the playground, but in constant relation to it. The piazzas' affordances were observed to compensate for the age-specific and prescriptive nature of the playground's infrastructure. The physicality of the fence itself (porous, allowing views) allowed games to transgress the playground boundary, while the piazzas' infrastructure (benches, statues, trees and stairs), or the lack of it, acted as complementary to the playgrounds' use-specific structures:

The boys play in the swings, they exit the playground, climb the statue and then run back again to the playground (Field-notes, Dexameni).



A paradox was observed, whereby the playground fence supported play outside the playground. The absence of the fence was mentioned by the guardians as potentially restricting play:

The older children have gotten used to it and they play football [outside]. If there wasn't a fence to protect the younger [in the playground] they [the older children] would not play here (Mother, Dexameni).

Guardians were often observed to stay outside the playground, while the children moving in and out of the playground took advantage of the piazzas' infrastructure – playing at the surrounding restaurants' tables or in the grassy areas and benches. Crucially, it was often argued during interviews and discussions that people – despite not always intending to play within the playground's boundaries – would not visit the area if there were no playground nearby:

No, I would not bother to come. I would have visited another place with a playground nearby (Father, Vyronas).

Space emerged as an “equal partner” in play, affording the co-existence of different kinds of games and interaction. In the play island, people were observed climbing or hanging from lamps and trees while taking advantage of elements they could use as goalposts for other games. Space was continually manipulated and reinvented. In contrast with child-friendly initiatives that create time-bound play spaces in public space on specific days through the year, this study's findings suggest that a new everyday was here created and sustained.

Play in the piazza contrasted significantly with that in the child-friendly playground, this time extending beyond children to also include adults. In the play island, the playground's institutionalised play was transformed to an everyday, intergenerational, co-authored interaction in the public realm, allowing interactions between different age groups, thereby redefining the binary between adults' leisure and children's play (Rojek, 1985):

Three old men are sitting in the concrete benches. They chase the ball every time the children kick it towards the green areas (Field notes, Ilioupoli).

Different groups of users, people of various ages and backgrounds, co-existed in the same space, interacting and socialising, ascribing public value to the public space.

Guardians and other adults often commented on how they preferred to play in the piazza, not restricted by either the play structures or societal perceptions about “good parenting” (Blackford, 2004), which manifested in use-specific areas. Adults were observed to play mostly in areas without a pre-defined use, but with spatial characteristics that supported their movement abilities:

We do not play because we cannot fit in the play structures [ . . . ] in the piazza we can play (Father, Ilioupoli).

The most striking finding concerning adults' play in the island was that not only did adults feel more comfortable playing, but adult play was also tolerated. It was perceived as “normal”, informing an inclusive, intergenerational realm:

And in the piazza... You play... What can you do? (Man, Ilioupoli).

This raises the question as to what constitutes a play space in the urban landscape. The findings support studies proposing that there is no connection between play infrastructure and playing outdoors (Gülgönen and Corona, 2015). Rather, the spatial affordances of infrastructure in the public space, although not designed to, emerged as factors supporting play in public, legitimised by adjacency to the playground. This study therefore moves its

focus from the playground space itself and proposes an extended playful space in the city: an emplacement without defined physical space that engages with the urban landscape and allows co-existence and interaction between various age- and social groups.

### **The playground's public value – reclaiming the child-friendly**

#### *The designed child-friendly*

Many papers argue how essential the child-friendly approach is in order to support inclusive spaces (Aerts, 2018; Derr and Tarantini, 2016; Krishnamurthy *et al.*, 2018; NIUA, 2016). This study framed the playground's public value through co-existence and interaction. When first approaching the playground space as a defined spatiality, its public value emerged as limited, informed by its child-friendly design and broader societal perceptions about childhood and safety. The physical element of the fence defined the playground as a space with meanings distinct from its surrounding space. The child-friendliness of the sites emerged through the notions of safety and protection, rather than engagement with the public realm, highlighting a tension between the different dimensions of the concept. The age-specific character of the playground structures, a characteristic often discussed in the child-friendly literature as supporting children's abilities (NIUA, 2016), constructed the playground space as a "special" space supporting conceptualisations of childhood as a precarious stage in human life (Olwig and Gulløv, 2003; Zeiher, 2003). The playground emerged as a space where children could meet similar-age friends and socialise with peers, but remain segregated from social life beyond. While previous literature has argued about the "failure" of the playground to engage children in public life (Cunningham and Jones, 1999, p.12; Jacobs, 1961), child-friendly projects and literature still consider them to be a way to integrate children into public space. Our findings question the effectiveness of this approach. It is often argued that: "designing for children, you design for everyone in a way" (A Playful City, 2019, n/a). However, the child-friendly design of the playground deterred adults from engaging with the space, limiting its public value.

#### *The unexpected child-friendly*

Although the playground's conceptualisation as a child-friendly, safe play enclave limited its public value, the surrounding piazza accommodated extended interactions. The playground's public value can here be understood to extend beyond its physical limits, materialising in interactions within a play island that occupied the adjacent piazza. What is interesting in this case is that this surrounding space did not abide by any child-friendly design intentions. Nevertheless, the spatial affordances supported children's competencies, allowing them to engage with the public realm – the intention of child-friendly spaces – sustaining co-existence and interactions between people of diverse ages. In contrast to previous literature (Day and Wagner, 2010; Valentine, 1996), the public realm in all three sites emerged as highly tolerant of children and their play, bestowing them with space and time. At the same time, while adults tended to avoid direct engagement with the child-friendly playground, the unspecified adjacent space afforded adult engagement in play, suspending normative functioning.

#### *Reconceptualising the child-friendly*

Child-friendly theory informed our understanding of the playground as a space for children's integration into public space. Underpinning child-friendly spaces is an assumption that a special approach[5] should be taken in order to include children in the public realm. This study questions this assumption, as it accepts the normative framework, which perceives children as "different"[6]. It is argued that a particular understanding of the child-friendly framework can, ironically, exclude the child as "other". Despite failing to engage children in

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public life, the playground space sustained an inclusive public realm just beyond its boundaries. As [Jansson \(2008\)](#) argues:

The playground is a place in which to have fun, but at the same time it is the adult world's contribution to children's outdoor environment and not self-evidently children's own place (p. 9).

The need to avoid basing children's engagement on their perceived difference becomes important, while at the same time avoiding "making the Other into the same" ([Moss, 2006](#), p. 190). Drawing on the observations in the "play-public", this study reconceptualises the child-adult dipole. Although conceptualisations of childhood and adulthood were clearly constructed in the playground space, indicating specific behaviours and structuring adult-child interactions, they became blurred when playing in the piazza. Returning to [Kraftl's \(2006\)](#) notion of the localised, banal constructions of childhood, in this study the notions of childhood and adulthood performed in the play island were reconstructed in a mutual way, interrelating and informing each other. "Children, like adults are not a homogenous group" ([Lansdown, 2011](#), 14); thus child-friendly does not suffice as a self-evident approach when discussing children. Despite being understood as a child-friendly space, the playground did not directly allow for children's engagement with public life. Drawing on the post-structuralistic new wave of childhood studies ([Spyrou, 2018](#)), this study argues that the discussion about children's participation should not revolve only around children's voices, but rather children's actions in space and the specific conditions situating the childhood experience in the everyday life ([Kraftl, 2006, 2013](#)). Noting that the "Dionysian" child ([Holloway and Valentine, 2000](#), p. 2) is seen with suspicion because she wanders outside child-friendly spaces, this study highlights that it is not only exclusion but also the ways in which inclusion is constructed that create "particular conceptualisations, identities and ways of being for children and adults" ([Prout and Tisdall, 2006](#), p. 237).

## Conclusion

This paper has investigated the extent to which the playground – as a socio-spatial phenomenon – facilitates the integration of children into the public realm. It transcends previous research as it has broken through the boundary of the "child-friendly playground" as a self-contained space and has considered its relationship to the wider public and adjacent spaces. It enables a critical examination of the "child-friendly space" concept. Two key questions have guided the study: What is the public value of the playground? and What is the relationship between the "child-friendly" and publicness?

Original findings reveal that perceptions surrounding the protective and age-specific aspects of child-friendly design limit the playgrounds' public value. The playground, the main "advised" way to engage children with the public life in CFC literature, emerged as an inadequate space in these terms. Despite the playground appearing to physically be part of public space (physically accessible to all users), it was not socio-culturally perceived as public. Rather it was designed as a distinct space, classified as "children's". However, while the playground's public value was limited inside its physical boundary, it afforded children's engagement with the public realm beyond. This interesting twist allows us to reconsider the notion of the child-friendly, its intentions and means of implementation.

It is vital to state that this paper does not argue for the abolishment of child-friendly spaces. The playground – through its very presence and identity, as well as the physicality of its fence – emerged as a necessary catalyst for the play island. Rather, through undertaking a novel approach, the paper proposes a reconceptualisation of the definition and orderings of the child-friendly playground. Approaching the city as a "concretion of certain channels of social relationship" ([Biggs and Carr, 2015](#), p. 99), the paradox emerging from this study

highlights the playground as an organic and indispensable part of the cityscape, engaging in public life, informing play and intergenerational interaction in public space, while simultaneously being a self-centred, secluded enclave. Building on these findings, one might ask how to make child-friendly spaces “adult-friendly”; how to give the word “childish” positive connotations and “de-criminalise” adults’ presence in these spaces, strengthening their public value.

The findings have significant implications for child-friendly urban design theory and practice globally, reconceptualising “the child-friendly playground” to embrace interdependence with public space. Future work could build upon the principles established here to provide practitioners and urban designers with an associated set of design guidelines.

The paper prompts reflection on play, age and space as an assimilation rather than distinct elements interacting with each other. The findings suggest child-friendly could be seen as an approach to space, which refers not exclusively to children but also other population groups (Biggs and Carr, 2015), reinforcing interactions and co-existence. Child-friendly design would therefore move away from proposing prescribed age-specific spaces and instead facilitate the creation of “children’s spaces” instead of “spaces for children” (Rasmussen, 2004) as well as undesignated play spaces, focusing on how practitioners could create opportunities for play and engagement in the city.

### Notes

1. “Safety is defined as the state of being free from harm or danger. This could mean harm or danger from living things (e.g. criminals, dogs) or man-made things (e.g. buildings, vehicles)” (NIUA, 2016, p. xi).
2. The same term is commonly used to refer to the value an organisation gives to society (Meynhardt, 2009). Here, however, the term is reappropriated to address and explore the interaction between the public realm and the playground space.
3. Dexameni (upper-middle), Ilioupoli (middle) and Vyronas (lower). It is important to note that Athens is a city that does not easily allow clear-cut quantifiable distinctions between the different districts (See: Maloutas and Karadimitriou, 2001). The lower-, middle- and upper-middle identities of the three areas are associated with the everyday and historically based perceptions of the districts, rather than a definitive economic, demographic or job-based categorisation.
4. The interview guides were organised under the following thematic sections: Context, Play, Outsiders, Boundaries, Crises, Rules and Space. Among those there were designated questions for guardians, children and outsiders.
5. As evidenced by the design indicators of child-friendly cities revolving around special infrastructure and provisions (Hoogendoorn, 2012) and informed by developmental approaches to childhood (NIUA, 2016; Nordström, 2010)
6. Often spaces created to support children’s public engagement retain their character as “children’s” functioning more as entry points (Olwig and Gulløv, 2003, p. 15) than spaces of public engagement (See: Aerts, 2018; Jansson *et al.*, 2016; Lansdown, 2011; Nordström, 2010) strengthening the view of children as “others”, being “outside” society.

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