

Space to Grow

Ten principles that
support happy, healthy
families in a playful,
friendly city



Every baby is born learning. Each time she is fed, comforted, or played with, she makes new connections about how people behave. From her first steps outside to the inside of her first nursery classroom, the places she goes teach her about how the world works. Science shows these early experiences shape the developing brain and set the foundations for later learning and health. In turn, these experiences are shaped by the physical and social spaces in which young children and their families live.

If you could experience the city from an elevation of 95 cm—the average height of a 3 year old—what would you change?

This simple question is at the heart of Urban95, an initiative created in 2016 by the Bernard van Leer Foundation to help change the landscapes and opportunities that shape young children's lives.

About The Bernard van Leer Foundation

The Bernard van Leer Foundation is a private foundation focused on developing and sharing knowledge about what works in early childhood development. The Foundation is based in The Hague, Netherlands, and provides financial support and expertise to partners in government, civil society and business to help test and scale effective services for young children and families. Urban95 is the Foundation's 30 million euro initiative whose aim is to maximise positive interactions between young children and caregivers in cities. Urban95 is rooted in the belief that when urban neighbourhoods work well for pregnant women, babies, toddlers and young children, they also tend to nurture strong communities and economic development.

A partnership to improve urban public life for young children and families

In 2017, Gehl Institute and Gehl have partnered with the Bernard van Leer Foundation on its Urban95 initiative to explore how public spaces in a city might better support young children and their caregivers. The focus of our research includes not only parks and playgrounds but also plazas sidewalks, and streets.

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Here, we outline some of our initial findings, which we hope can inform and inspire planners, designers, public health advocates, and community members who are fighting for more child-friendly cities.

About Gehl

Gehl is an urban design consultancy offering expertise in the fields of architecture, urban design and city planning. Regardless of complexity of a project, their process always begins with people. They focus on how the built environment connects to people's everyday life. Gehl considers lively and widely used public spaces to be vital keys to quality of life in cities and to overall well-being. Gehl has studios in Copenhagen, New York and San Francisco. Since its foundation, Gehl has championed public life by applying multidisciplinary research methods in cities around the globe.

About Gehl Institute

Gehl Institute enables cities for people through knowledge creation that advances systemic change. A 501(c)(3) organization based in New York City and working globally, Gehl Institute's work makes people more visible in policy, design, and governance decisions about the public realm. In addition to developing research, the Institute designs compelling public programs that engage decision makers, industry influencers, researchers, and civic leaders on the importance of public life in their communities.



10 Principles

1. Make young children and caregivers visible

The built environment is generally designed without much thought for the needs of young children and their caregivers. Changing this mindset is critical, and will result in a public realm that better supports a variety of groups, including disabled and older adults. Collecting public life data to understand specifically where and how young children and their families live and spend time outside will help cities tailor their efforts to have the greatest impact. For example, counting and documenting where people walk, sit, and go about daily activities creates a picture of how young children and their caregivers navigate the city. This data should then inform design decisions that enhance public spaces. Importantly, cities must work with caregivers at every step of the data collection process. Following a public space intervention, they must also ensure that a formal system is established for incorporating future community feedback and providing maintenance staff and informal stewards with the resources they need.



2. Nurture curiosity

Freedom to roam, seek out peers, and explore public spaces helps young children prepare for the unpredictability of life. Yet, with each generation, the typical radius within which a child is allowed to explore on her own declines significantly. The built environment should offer children the space to seek out adventure and set their own limits, within reason, while ensuring a general level of safety. Public spaces can cultivate mutual trust and respect between children, their caregivers, and the wider community. For example, in Copenhagen, some schoolyards that would

typically be fenced in elsewhere are left open and double as shared spaces for the broader public, including very young children, when school is not in session. Additionally, many children in Copenhagen learn to ride bikes as soon as they are able to walk. Joined by a caregiver, children as young as 1 or 2 can traverse city streets using “walking bikes” that foster independence and exploration. When children are encouraged to navigate the built environment within subtle boundaries, it allows even the youngest children to explore, learn and trust.

3. Get dirty

Young children’s brains are rapidly developing and benefit from a variety of built and natural elements that support this process, offering diverse smells, textures, sounds and challenges that might change with the seasons. For example, uneven surfaces in playgrounds and schoolyards let children climb, while soft landscapes let them dig, build, and get dirty. Caregivers, too, can participate in such active learning by demonstrating that experimenting is allowed—and fun. Very young children depend on such interactions with both their caregivers and the environment in order to learn. The design of public spaces can support this behavior by providing, for instance, accessible rest areas with running water for washing up. Heterogeneous play environments enable fun, healthy, and brain-stimulating interactions between adults and their children.

4. Enhance what’s close to home

Children want to play everywhere. Accordingly, they should enjoy access to playful public spaces beyond sanctioned play areas such as large parks and playgrounds—which may be hard to get to and exceed the “small scale” of a child. Cities can prioritize their networks of smaller, residential green spaces to enhance the lives of young children and their caregivers. These modest neighborhood spaces—located in areas that families can easily reach by walking or biking—offer opportunities to meet neighbors, build community, relax and play. Cities can also add value to the public assets immediately next to home, such as street trees and sidewalks, by improving their health and quality. Because young children and their caregivers experience a limited range of mobility, mapping and locating public services in areas accessible to them is critical. Lastly, as cities look to improve these assets, they should also create opportunities for ongoing community engagement efforts and inspire ownership over shared public spaces among residents.



Photo: Oded Antman / Bernard van Leer Foundation

5. Take back the street

Ensuring that streets are safe is key to enabling the presence of young children everywhere, and enhancing both their own and their caregivers' experience of a city. Comprising 25 to 30 percent of the total area in most cities and 70 to 80 percent of all public spaces, streets are one of the most vital and underused civic assets in the public realm. Streets are not just pathways that people move through, but also places to spend time and interact with others. They are especially important to consider when planning for young children. A small child's mobility radius is limited; therefore, the streets closest to home become her most often accessed public spaces. Additionally, a young child's perspective—whether walking or being pushed in a stroller—is much closer to ground level than that of most

adults, and children are disproportionately affected by exposure to pollution. Establishing programs for residents to add plantings and trees promotes clean air while fostering social bonds. Simplifying the process of adding seating in places where caregivers would otherwise have to stand or sit on informal objects encourages more walking and time on sidewalks. Play streets and block parties give kids space to play and neighbors an excuse to meet, and can build support for greater local ownership of the street. Adding curb cuts and other accessible design features makes moving a stroller easier, along with wheelchairs and pushcarts. Finally, clustering homes, stores, schools, services, and offices closer together helps the very youngest and their parents to take back the street.



Photo: Eleazar Cuadros / Bernard van Leer Foundation

6. Take collective responsibility for children

What if every child is the community's child? Parents in cities can often feel isolated, exhausted, and lacking in support for what is an around-the-clock job, especially during the first critical years of their children's lives. Courtyards, parks, streets, and plazas that are intentionally designed to be both shared and child-friendly offer opportunities for families and caregivers to connect and foster a support network with one another. Parents and city staff can work with communities to create culturally specific programming that meets the desires of children and adults of all ages. These spaces not only promote social interaction and improve connections between individuals, but also strengthen the larger system of community which can provide collective support to those who need it.

“When it comes to design of public spaces that promote happy, healthy children, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”



7. Co-create community

Public spaces serve as important sites for people to come together and cultivate a sense of social connection among and across communities. Therefore, the design and ongoing maintenance of these spaces are key. To encourage resident stewardship, city leaders must ensure that the voices of parents, children and caregivers are incorporated at every stage of the planning and maintenance process. This requires going to where these groups are instead of expecting them to seek out planning meetings and ways to contribute input. When the built environment is accessible, participatory and dignified, it allows for relationships to build among caregivers and children alike.

8. Work across boundaries

For kids moving from sidewalk to street to park to playground, the built environment composes a singular urban experience. City governments, in turn, should demonstrate a high degree of coordination across departments (e.g. transportation, parks, education) to achieve better-maintained and healthier public spaces for children. Early childhood development is impacted by planning decisions and activities of all sectors. The ways in which children activate and experience public spaces might not fit neatly within specific city schedules, opening and closing hours, or physical boundaries. For example, keeping spaces clean and clear of obstacles helps maintain a safe environment for our youngest residents—who are close to the ground and use all of their senses, including touch and taste, to experience their environments. Cities can sync up the maintenance schedules of different municipal departments so that public parks are cleared of litter before the grass is cut, minimizing children’s exposure to hazardous particles. When multiple entities feel responsible for the full experience of a public space, they are more likely to collaborate and make it thrive.



9. Measure, improve, repeat

Rather than waiting for the perfect plan, create an experiment and measure its impact. Enhancing the built environment for young children and their caregivers may require testing concepts that have not been tried before. Be bold and pioneer new ideas. Tweak to improve them and then repeat. Temporary projects, also called pilot projects, can catalyze the change process and build common understanding about the potential benefits of design renovations among stakeholders. Working with the community to measure the impact, such as collecting information on how many children and caregivers spend time in a park throughout the day, helps local residents see the space differently as well. Once there is a baseline understanding, setting performance improvement targets (e.g., 20 percent more children in the park) is a useful way to come to agreement about goals. It is important to measure again after the improvements are in place and repeat this cycle. The potentials reveal themselves while the understanding of the shared spaces deepens.





Photo: Courtesy of Kidogo / Bernard van Leer Foundation

10. Strengthen the best ideas

The realities of government, management, and finance structures can present impediments to repeating and scaling even successful pilots. But crafting compelling stories about your work, and developing easy ways for the city to adopt new ideas, can lead to more long-term support for programs. Demonstrating, for example, how the presence of more street trees enhances the public realm for young families by bolstering the city's public health infrastructure and improving pedestrian

perceptions of safety, can generate more support for the expansion of existing street tree programs. Move from management, where someone is responsible for the daily operations of a project, to governance, where the project is part of the broader system of public spaces. Build a network of champions who know at first hand the importance of your work and the potential of future projects.

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