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# Child Friendly Urban Practices as emergent place-based neoliberal subjectivation?

## Abstract

As city-level decisionmakers generate urban policies and spatial interventions aimed at enhancing children's environments and increasing their health, wellbeing, and participation in urban life, they also impact the types of citizens cities produce. Yet, despite the increasing ubiquity of city plans targeting the creation of child-friendly environments, children-centered transformations within the urban built fabric have not been a major analytic theme compared to other economic, spatial, and welfare aspects of city restructuring in the context of neoliberal urbanization. In light of this need for greater empirical and theoretical exploration of child-centered urbanism, we compare and contrast how plans reorganize children's urban social space across different neoliberalizing contexts. Drawing on empirical research conducted in Amsterdam, Vienna, and Bristol in 2019, including 46 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders involved in child-friendly planning, we contribute to the understanding of how place-based subjectivation processes operate within these plans. We argue that child-friendly urban plans are instrumental in the process of creating subjects that have internalized the norms of neoliberal urbanization.

## Keywords

place-based subjectivation; child-friendly urban planning; neoliberal urbanization; urban wellbeing; urban sustainability

## From the promise of childhood in urban societies to child-friendly urbanism

City-level decisionmakers in the Global North are increasingly embracing and adopting a set of urban policies and spatial interventions aimed at enhancing children's urban environments and improving their health, wellbeing, and participation in urban life (van Vliet and Karsten, 2015; Perez-del-Pulgar, Anguelovski and Connolly, 2020). Such actions restore many ideas from the 19<sup>th</sup> century child-saving movement (Frost, 2010) and adapt those to fit the more contemporary targets of both urban sustainability and livability, and children's rights (to the city). Notwithstanding the increasing ubiquity of child-friendly urban plans in many cities in the Global North, children-centered urban transformations have not been a major analytic theme in the urban planning literature compared to other economic, spatial and welfare aspects of urban restructuring in the context of neoliberal urbanization (Brenner, Peck and Theodore, 2010; Brenner, 2019) with the exception of few critical voices (Goodsell, 2013; van den Berg, 2018).

This article attempts to redress this gap by exploring the extent to which and how child-friendly urban interventions and plans are reorganizing urban social space across different neoliberalizing contexts. We complete a comparative analysis of child-friendly urban planning processes and outcomes in Amsterdam, Bristol, and Vienna, including semi-structured interviews with key decisionmakers, stakeholders, and practitioners involved in the planning, provision and use of the main post 1990s child-friendly plans and programs in each of the cities, with a special focus on the ones that are currently in

place. Our analysis suggests that child-friendly urban interventions are instrumental in terms of the creation of subjects that internalize wider neoliberal norms.

### *Childhood public spaces and social utopia*

Children's public spaces in the Global North are one materialization of the convergence of a distinct perspective on childhood with modernist utopian social thinking (Ward, 1978; Burkhalter, 2016; Lilius, 2019; Light, 2020) that developed in European and North American cities in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There have been notable paradigm shifts in children's public spaces in this context that have run in parallel to changes in the conception of desirable childhoods and collective social utopias since the early child-saving movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Frost, 2010). The promotion of playgrounds was initially influenced by the moral and hygienic demands that challenged the living conditions of urban working classes. Children were to be taken off the streets into playgrounds, where public recreational and moral programming sought to infuse values of citizenship (Laurian, 2006; Lilius, 2019), gender (Gagen, 2000), race and nation (Murnaghan, 2013), nativism (Mobily, 2021), and exercise (Gagen, 2004). The first examples took place in the European outdoor 'gymnasiums' and Kindergartens and filtered slowly into the playground movement in North America.

At that time, the promotion and control of the playground shifted away from a private philanthropic venture of Church groups in Europe, and other philanthropic agencies and influential associations such as the Playground Association of America, the Junior Red Cross in the US, to one entrenched in the state (Murnaghan, 2019) and the role of local governments. By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century thousands of playgrounds were built in

towns and cities in Europe and North America, making these spaces a widely accepted feature of the public landscape (Murnaghan, 2019). In many of these playgrounds, children were often divided by gender, race, and age either by time or place, a separation which became epitomized by racial segregation in the United States, which legally persisted until the 1960s (Murnaghan, 2019). In the 1950s, the suburban ideal came to represent the proper place for childhood. Families with children started to disappear from cities, first in the United States and then in some parts of Europe by the 1960s (Lilius, 2019).

The anti-establishment counterculture of the late 1960s brought about the next revolution in ideas about childhood and children's environments. Influenced by ideals about autonomy, self-determination, and advocacy planning encouraging do-it-yourself (DIY) practices, many urban communities started to take charge of the construction of playgrounds and children's play spaces themselves, especially in the US (Burkhalter, 2016). In Europe, state agencies maintained an important role in providing public space, mostly through adventure playgrounds, non-hierarchical structures of self-administration, and the stimulation of children's autonomous learning about their everyday environment in order to be able to navigate, but also 'sabotage' (i.e. transform) it (Ward, 1978; Goodman, 2012).

The push toward children's autonomy within formal play spaces took a step backward in the late 1980s. Aligning with broader revanchism of socially conservative agendas which radically altered the general belief in social transformation and presumably also

the importance of childhood as a means for such transformation, children's needs in the urban space were neglected.

At that time, cities, especially larger ones, became increasingly car-centric and hostile to pedestrian life, with the few places reserved for children (e.g., playgrounds and areas generally considered acceptable for play) often rendered unattractive due to strict safety standards and/or commercialization. Playgrounds became increasingly perceived as dangerous and unsafe due to a lack of investment and a generalized aversion to risk, nurtured by popular accounts of urban terror and the reconceptualization of security in terms of people instead of states (Tonucci, 1997; Katz, 2001; Tochtermann, 2017). New spaces and activities emerged for children, including commercial (indoor) playtime activities and organized after-school activities (Karsten, 2005). The version of childhood being shaped by policy morphed at this time from being a means of social transformation into a means for the transformation of the self. The idea of childhood was mobilized to further a strong expression of individual responsibility rather than a societally-supported endeavor, as reflected in the middle class discourse of the individual pursuit of excellence and upward mobility (Katz, 2008; Donner, 2017; Miggelbrink, 2020).

### *Rediscovering urban childhood*

Against the backdrop of an increased international attention to children's rights – epitomized in the United Nations General Assembly adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 and UNICEF's Child Friendly City (CFC) initiative launched in 1997 – many local governments in the Global North have started to renew their interest

in parks and playgrounds as part of a commitment to enhance children's wellbeing and address the unprecedentedly high prevalence of childhood respiratory diseases, obesity and mental disorders (van Vliet and Karsten, 2015; Pérez-del-Pulgar *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, the return of capital and higher income residents to the city during the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Smith, 1979) has also had an influence on families who started to increasingly value high density and mixed spatial functions as a means for reconciling the demands of work and family life. This was especially the case for women, who effectively saw this as a means for replacing the confinement of suburban life with a more dynamic inner city lifestyle (Lilius, 2019). With families increasingly staying in the city after having children, the attention to children in cities has revived and, with it, an underlying attention to what role public policy should play in shaping childhood.

New childhood paradigms are reappearing under the broader concepts of child friendly, playful or family friendly cities (van Vliet and Karsten, 2015), often in strong synergy with urban sustainability rationales. Most child-friendly programs reinterpret past ideals about the suitability of suburban/rural environments for children (e.g., their need for contact with natural elements and the inappropriateness of some aspects of the city for children).

### *A child-friendly turn in the context of neoliberal urbanization?*

The renaissance of childhood's significance in urban planning in the form of child-friendly urban plans is commonly understood as reflecting municipal or bottom-up

ambitions to counterbalance the negative impacts of neoliberal urbanization patterns <sup>1</sup> (Brenner, Peck and Theodore, 2010) on children's access to and participation in non-commodified urban spaces and their associated health, equity and wellbeing concerns (Karsten, 2003; Lilius, 2019).

It is much less common to find approaches to the framing of child-friendly urban plans that view them as projects integrated within – rather than working against – (concentrated) neoliberal urbanization processes (Brenner, 2019). Exceptions include analyses relating child-friendly urban plans with processes of capital attraction and urban gentrification (Goodsell, 2013; Van den Berg, 2013).

Due to the tendency to frame child-friendly plans as counter-neoliberal programs, analyses thus far have not interrogated the extent to which the plans themselves become an articulation of the social, political, and spatial restructurations that accompany neoliberal urbanization. This limitation obscures a complete understanding of the processes that currently shape children's spaces in cities. In response, in this article we explore whether and how child-friendly urban plans, despite intent otherwise, are playing a role in the articulation of neoliberal urbanization, specifically in terms of place-based neoliberal subject formation or subjectivation (Brand, 2007; Miggelbrink, 2020; Traue and Pfahl, 2022).

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<sup>1</sup> We understand neoliberalization as a variegated but patterned and politically guided intensification of market rule, commodification, and (private) accumulation through (public) dispossession implemented through institutional transformation, realignment of hegemonic interests, and emergent forms of subjectivity (Brenner, Peck and Theodore, 2010)



### *Urban space as means of neoliberal subjectivation*

We understand subjectivation as a set of processes that generate dispositions to feel, think and act towards others and oneself, which require and mobilize subjectivity, defined as person's sense of identity, morals and worldviews, including ways of feeling and thinking (Brand, 2007; Traue and Pfahl, 2022). Processes of subjectivation therefore inscribe both processes of *subjection* to something (e.g. an ideology) and processes of *subjective agency* or *subjectivity*, that are variously emphasized in different approaches, according to their understanding of the subject (e.g. poststructuralist (Foucault, 1980) or interpretative (Schütz and Luckmann, 1989)). Processes of subjectivation emerge within social relations, between two or more entities, and contribute to the mutual stabilization of subject-producing societies and society-producing subjects. As such, subjectivation is considered a power effect which concomitantly constitutes and eclipses the power to resist of those being subjected (Foucault, 1980).

Processes of subjectivation are mediated by affectivity, agency and objectivation according to subjectivation research (Traue and Pfahl, 2022). *Affectivity* points to the emotional labor of interiorizing the norms required by processes of subjectivation. Subjects do not become 'subjected to' a norm without learning to feel and perform according to it. Affectivity is at the core of why subjectivation is a collective and self-reproducing process, as it not only informs how subjects react to experiences and feel what is expected from them but is also at the basis of what subjects expect from others. *Agency* in this context refers to the fact that subjectivation is not necessarily nor always a process of pure subjection, deprived of agency. Subjection is never total, and there is

no such thing as a collective subject, but rather -as mentioned above - collective subjectivations (Traue & Pfahl, 2022). Last, *objectivations* refer to the technologies that enable subjections and subjectivities to be communicated between interrelating entities involved in subjectivation processes. These are realized through social institutions and can be discourses, norms, laws, rights, symbols, social structures, or spatial orders (amongst others).

In this context, we refer to neoliberal subjectivation as a set of processes that ‘form’ subjects disposed to feel, think and act towards others and oneself in ways that contribute to the stabilization of neoliberal structures (e.g. market rule, commodification, and (private) accumulation through (public) dispossession) and vice versa (Donner, 2017; Miggelbrink, 2020). Among the many available objectivations or technologies through which these neoliberal subjectivations are communicated, we will focus on the ones symbolically and materially inscribed in child-friendly urban places. That is, we focus on child-friendly urbanism as a formation of urban place-based subjectivation. Urban place-based subjectivation processes, as processes promoting the constitution of a desired type of subject by modifying the built environment of individuals, have been explored as objectivations/means of neoliberal subjectivation processes in cities (Harvey, 1990; Kaika, 2010) but, to our knowledge, have not been explored in the context of child-friendly urbanism.

In response, this article explores the extent to which and how child-friendly urban interventions are articulating processes of neoliberal subjectivation, based on the discourse among those who shape the policies that determine a child’s experience of

the city. This discourse generally excludes children, despite being directly impactful upon their lives. Moreover, we explore how these spatial reorganizations differ across a variety of neoliberalization contexts in Europe in order to understand how gradients of neoliberal urbanization relate to the top-down reorganization of (children's) urban social spaces introduced by child friendly urban interventions implemented by city governments.

## Methods

### *Research design*

We designed a most similar comparative multiple case study (Yin, 2002) by selecting three European case cities that share a historic commitment to child-centered urban planning and a recent, locally formalized emphasis on child-friendly urban planning, but differ in the modality and regulatory structures of neoliberalization. These cities include Amsterdam (Netherlands), Vienna (Austria), and Bristol (United Kingdom). The primary dimension of Amsterdam's neoliberal transformation is roughly characterized by state-led gentrification through housing policy and public space interventions; for Vienna, it is broadly shaped by overlapping antagonistic policy layers juggling between resisting and fostering neoliberalization; and in Bristol's process, it is markedly characterized by a singular focus on longstanding austerity politics and budget cuts (Table 1) (Matheney, Perez-del-Pulgar and Shokry, 2022; Perez-del-Pulgar, 2022b, 2022a). This case selection allows us to examine the extent to which and how child-friendly urban plans are

articulating neoliberal subjectivation processes and to compare how these processes are similar or different across a variety of neoliberalization contexts.

**[Insert Table 1]**

### *Data collection*

The article draws on empirical research conducted in Amsterdam, Vienna and Bristol during April-July 2019, including 46 semi-structured interviews (19 in Amsterdam, 12 in Vienna and 15 in Bristol) with key decisionmakers, practitioners, and relevant professionals in child-centered municipal space and services planning, provision and use. These actors include city officials, private and public real estate developers, activists, charity/NGO workers, children's play workers and health professionals involved in the planning, execution and use of the most recent child friendly urban plans in each city. Interviewees were identified through internet searches, review of local media articles and reports, and snowball sampling. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 1.5 hours and were fully transcribed verbatim. We designed a prepared semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions to structure the interviews and to examine the priorities, goals, motivations, strategies, timing, planning processes and political alliances underlying the specific approach to child-friendly cities, spaces and programs of their programs; as well as interviewees' visions and rationale for what a child-friendly city or space was, why it was important and for whom. We gave interviewees space for elaborating on their own visions of what a child friendly city is, without imposing any a priori definition of it. Our focus was on adults' accounts and conceptions and on their key expertise, motivations, visions and experience related to

the topic of child friendly urbanism; children's voices are not included in this article as we sought to uncover how child-friendly spaces are shaped relative to broader urban agendas, and not to focus on the experience of the spaces (though, this would be a valuable follow-up). In particular, we sought to understand how the discourse in which children are fully excluded shapes the outcomes that fundamentally shape a child's experience of these cities. All participants provided informed consent for participation and audio-recording of the interview.

Following a case-study approach, in addition to primary data, we collected relevant secondary data to complement our understanding of the background, child-friendly urban plans and interventions, and urban development changes for each case. We identified relevant data from reports, policy and city planning documents, newspaper articles, grey literature and academic articles in order to triangulate the accounts of interviewees, to identify information that was mentioned superficially by the respondents, and to better understand the history of each city and the city planning rationales. Last, we kept a comprehensive record of fieldwork notes.

### *Data analysis*

Using Nvivo software to organize and carry out the analysis, we developed a mixed coding approach that combines deductive thematic methods and inductive grounded theory coding techniques. For this approach, we defined two levels of coding. The main level was deductive and involved the coding of our data (interviews, fieldnotes and secondary data) into a fixed coding scheme. The fixed coding scheme was based on the main conceptual and analytical categories we sought to understand related to the

relationship between child-friendly urban plans and neoliberal subjectivation, which were a) the characteristics of child-friendly urban plans that could be related to broader city agendas, b) the reorganization of (children's) urban places and c) references to subjectivation processes. Within these main themes, we then followed a grounded approach which led to the creation of sub-codes, listed in Table 2.

**[Insert Table 2]**

## Place based neoliberal subjectivation through child friendly urbanism

### *Amsterdam*

#### *Weaving the 'mobile' city into the urban agenda for children*

Urban play spaces regained centrality in Amsterdam's planning practice with the comeback of families to the city in the 2000s (Urban Planning Department, Interview 2019). The related initiatives are centered on human health and wellbeing, and in particular on childhood overweightness and obesity, which affects 1 in 5 children and young people in the city (City's Public Health Department, Interview 2019). The municipal plan *Amsterdam Approach to Healthy Weight (Amsterdamse Aanpak Gezond Gewicht- AAGG)* (City of Amsterdam, 2017)) puts forward an ambitious schoolground regeneration strategy, the construction of new playgrounds, training programs for families and professionals, 'action plans' for inactive youth, and interventions for neighborhoods with higher prevalence of overweight and obese residents in order to

address physical inactivity and poor eating habits among children (City of Amsterdam, 2017). *The Moving City Plan (De Bewegende Stad)* (City of Amsterdam, 2016), extends the promotion of an active and healthy lifestyle via public space interventions to all Amsterdam residents. Launched in 2016, it conceives of a city in which movement and exercise are a natural part of everyday life. The plan advocates for including movement in the design of neighborhoods, parks, streets, and squares with the ambition “to move all Amsterdammers”. It envisions plenty of space for cyclists and pedestrians, sports opportunities, and playgrounds in a city whose actual movements and exercise are monitored in a Movement Atlas (Beweegatlas<sup>2</sup>).

This tendency also reflects the irruption of the so-called ‘mobility turn’ (Sheller and Urry, 2016) in the field of urban planning, which places increasing attention to the active role of the built environment and of urban solutions in shaping healthier and more sustainable mobility dynamics. The benefits and purpose of these play and movement spaces for children are nevertheless based on vague assertions about wellbeing derived from a narrow vision of play that ignore that the logics of children’s lifestyle and movement, go beyond the planned order and reduces play to physical movement or sport (Municipal Adventure Playground staff member, Interview 2019).

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<sup>2</sup> Available at: <https://openresearch.amsterdam/nl/page/53734/beweegatlas> (accessed date 28 January 2024)

*Mobility as spatial ideology: Learning to be mobile through play, housing, profession and public space*

Although the genuineness of the intent behind both plans to improve public health is widely recognized, some interviewees find the rationale and execution of these projects problematic. In the words of one person involved with the municipal play strategy and adventure playgrounds, *“it’s a full social system that is not supporting play”* (Interview, 2019). This person points to an underlying intent within these plans to individualize the cause and responsibility of obesity as an individual behavior or lifestyle, which ought to be reversed by making spaces and activities that promote an active lifestyle available for these people. Although childhood weight problems and obesity affect low-income populations and ethnic minorities more than other groups (City of Amsterdam, 2017), the structural role of poverty and of neighborhood conditions in obesity remains unacknowledged.

This individualized framing lends itself to the stigmatization of overweight/obese people as inactive, poorly educated, and lacking self-control. In contrast, people with healthy and ‘normal’ weight are praised for being active, productive and disciplined. And it is precisely this stigmatization of ‘immobile’ racialized children and the implied ethical superiority of the healthy and mobile citizen that seems to be justifying changes in the public built environment of disadvantaged communities.

Additionally, through particular child friendly urban plans public agencies facilitate the monitorization, control and discipline of disadvantaged children’s bodies to promote the



acquisition of what is known as ‘doorstroming’ - a Dutch word for movement or flow. This ‘doorstroming’ is not only used to refer to the dynamism in public space but also to broader transformations in Amsterdam, especially in regard to housing (Vereniging [Association] 2e Nassastraat 8, Interview 2019). Since the 1990s, housing reform rationales prescribed “*that everyone ought to be flexible, in constant movement and development*” and that a person’s housing career ought to be in flux along with one’s professional and social status (Vereniging [Association] 2e Nassastraat 8, Interview 2019). These reforms have laid out a housing market characterized by a high turnover of temporary and increasingly unaffordable tenancies; for which the only exit seems to be home ownership that not everyone can afford (van Gent, 2013; Kadi and Ronald, 2014; Hochstenbach, 2017). References to the spatial ideology of ‘doorstroming’ are also present in rationales justifying public space investment in child friendly infrastructure as a means of positioning Amsterdam as a global center for transient high income and creative workers, tourists, and international company investments (Urban Planning Department, Interview 2019). Some local activists regard this as Amsterdam’s transformation into “*a transit space*”, with an institutional and physical architecture primarily supporting private accumulation at the expense of people’s ability to stay rooted in the city (Spokesperson Neighborhood association van der Pekbuurt, Interview 2019).

*“Who can afford to have a family under these conditions?”. Playful hypermobility at the expense of social protection*

While Amsterdam might be becoming more mobile and, in a way, more playful, several respondents regret that neoliberal policies are *“getting rid of the conditions that make it possible to raise a family (...) and actually challenging the reproduction of some groups in the city”* (BPW, Interview 2019). The hyper mobile and playful city reflects a form of *“escapism that totally neglects the need of social protection”* (Spokesperson Neighbourhood association van der Pekbuurt, Interview 2019). By constantly pushing mobility and active lifestyles in the absence of a strong institutional support for rooting oneself in a home and addressing the structural conditions that make neighborhoods unhealthy, the net effect exposes and familiarizes children to greater insecurities and movement. Amsterdam was once the site of social architecture praised for its social, child- and family-friendly approach to public space and housing provision (See Table 1) but is rapidly eliminating affordable and stable housing solutions for large families (Activist and Housing Specialist, Interview 2019).

These play strategies thus contribute to processes of commodification of urban space while operating as objectivations/means in the process of subjectivation of children and their families -and especially working class and racialized minority children-, into being attracted by *“liberty loving, middle class aesthetics of freedom that flirts with the idea of adventure often portrayed in idyllic, green, clean, walkable, harmonious communities”* (BPW, Interview 2019). The subjectivation process also ‘forms’ subjects disposed to feel that their identity, social mobility, and power depend on their individual ability to

remain hyper-mobile. In this context, low-income and ethnic minority residents mostly manage to stay put, but at a high cost for their self-worth and social identity, being increasingly stigmatized, controlled in regard to their destiny and health, and even held accountable for Amsterdam's housing affordability 'crisis' and increasing incidence of poor health. In this context, (social) housing and models of play in public space have morphed from engendering a universal right to the benefits of the city into a mode for subjecting non-mobile people and territories into hypermobility.

In short, some see the political project inherent in the promotion of the ethical superiority of mobility as *"dismantling the social city"* (Spokesperson Neighbourhood association van der Pekbuurt, Interview 2019) and increasingly producing what an activist called *"flexible precarious residents being forced to move from one precarious home to another"*. The subjectivation into hyper-mobility, creates insecurity *"for people who have already a lot of disadvantages in other spheres"* (BPW, Interview 2019) and whose condition becomes rather characterized by displaceability (Desmond, 2016). The *"flexible precarious"* are *"increasingly alienated from the land and their communities (...) because they know that they are not part of the community, only temporary"*, which hinders a common political identity and possible civic mobilization. Amsterdam's approach to child-friendly urban plans indirectly reinforce this approach by conditioning children to expect constant mobility as the norm, while not considering children's rights to the city and welfare issues within their main child-friendly urban plans and interventions. As well, Amsterdam's approach has little to no direct engagement with children in its development. Meaningful children's participation is notably excluded here.

## Vienna

### *A continuing legacy of small-scale and widespread, inclusive child-friendly interventions*

Since the 1990s child-friendly planning in Vienna has developed around three dimensions: (1) increased space provision; (2) participation / co-design; and (3) mainstreaming children's needs across all areas of planning. The goal of expanding space provision is rooted in a belief in the importance of urban public spaces for children as their first spaces *"to grasp both physically and conceptually things, plants, people and their environment"* (Stadt Wien, 2016). These first experiences have long been acknowledged to have high relevance for children's physical, mental, and psychosocial health (Stadt Wien, 2016). Rather than large projects, small-scale and continuous interventions have aimed at enabling a non-commodified, emancipatory, and participatory urban experience for children have characterized Vienna's approach to expanding the child friendly urban spaces since the 1990s (Stadt Wien, 2020). A Municipal Department for Space Obtainment (Magistratsabteilung für Platzbeschaffung) established in 1999 has built more than 100 places since its inception (Stadt Wien, 2016). Some recent examples include the conversion of parking spaces and once grey/traffic streets into play spaces and play streets (Wiener Wohnen, Interview 2019). In addition to the pursuit of more child-friendly spaces, the municipality is committed to the maintenance and improvement of existing play spaces. In this line, the recent Children and Youth Strategy, launched in 2020 with an ambitious budget of 16.25 billion euros (Stadt Wien, 2020), plans to add fixtures, improve lighting, build new sports elements,

and add affordable or even free activities and courses requested by children (Wiener Wohnen, Interview 2019).

In addition to increased space provision, the city also emphasizes participation and co-design as a route toward a more socially just and child friendly city. Planning and design processes include the systematic observation of children's behavior in public space and the organization of participatory workshops with children and caregivers (Smarter Together, Interview 2019) in order to understand what is needed and for residents to *"know that changes are for them"* (Smarter Together, Interview 2019). Here, children are understood as social catalyzers of urban transformations *"because through the kids, you get to the parents and even to the grandparents, and so you can really reach out"* (Smarter Together, Interview 2019). In 2019, a large project of children's active participation in planning was carried out with a large-scale participation process involving 22,500 children in about 1,300 workshops in order to run an evaluation of Vienna's nature and environment, community, connectedness, and mobility (Stadt Wien, 2020). Vienna's child friendly urban approach has also promoted the co-design of actual play spaces with children and caregivers since 1999 (Stadt Wien, 2002).

The child-friendly urban agenda in Vienna is also a platform for extending the rights and needs of children into various domains. The most recent 2020 Children and Youth Strategy advances a paradigmatic change in child-friendly planning, leaning towards the abandonment of the strong division between children and non-children urban spaces altogether. This tendency is partly reflected in Vienna's holistic understanding of what urban child spaces are, only a portion of which is the provision of public play spaces and

facilities. For instance, the municipality included the child friendliness of housing as an evaluation criterion – alongside other social, planning, ecological and economic criteria – in allocating land for developers. The Children and Youth Strategy also states an ambition to involve children in co-creating housing and educational buildings.

### From a social infrastructure for children's care to the questioning of the emancipatory project

The child-friendly agenda of Vienna has a broad understanding of the urban infrastructures needed for children's care, health, wellbeing, and inclusion that includes the institutionalization of children's structural needs (e.g., play, food, housing, education) as universal rights (Caritas Wien, Interview, 2019). Key structural issues identified for their welfare and wellbeing -- and especially vulnerable children and young people -- include access to safe and affordable homes, support for handling ruptures in children's educational trajectories, support for transitions out of care, affordability and/or free access of most activities, and strategies to confront ethnic-based discrimination (Caritas Wien, Interview, 2019).

### *Children's lived citizenship*

Far from aiming to create place-specific binding rules of spatial behavior, child friendly approaches in Vienna seem to be driven by an understanding of urban space as a co-created by children. The practice of being in contact with and shaping one's environment is framed as a political process constituting children's sense of citizenship (Wiener Wohnen, Interview, 2019), in line with emerging research on the concept of lived

citizenship in citizenship studies (Kallio, Wood and Häkli, 2020). Children are not only present and represented in urban space (i.e. provided with space to play) but their daily actions contribute to creating the conditions for political and social change. To this end, the municipality offers real possibilities for participation in urban planning processes and has a longstanding support scheme for children and youth associations with the aim to *“stimulate children’s understanding of democracy, to learn how to decide collectively, and to understand themselves as a group that has their own interests”* (Stadt Wien, 2016). The understanding of children as political urban subjects in terms of their city-making capacity is furthermore promoted through a spatial education program called *what creates space* (Stadt Wien, 2016) part since 2008 of the curricula for 10-14-year-old children in Viennese secondary schools. This quite unique educational program includes modules about space perception (*Me in Space*), public space (*Who Owns Public Space*), and urban planning (*How does the City Work*). It aims to strengthen the voice and participation of children by conveying knowledge about their surrounding built environment and encouraging them to reflect on their living spaces as social spaces and on their own responsibility and right to its creation.

In sum, rather than neoliberal place-based subjectivation, Vienna’s child friendly rationale and departure from extended neoliberalization trends in Europe aim to challenge children to decolonize their subjectivity (Rolnik, 2017). That is, to understand and identify dominant spatial ideologies and place-based subjectivation processes, to appropriate space by rendering conscious how space is not something natural, given, or unchangeable but rather socially produced and involved in processes of subjectivation.

## *Bristol*

### *From council-run child and youth infrastructure to a burden on volunteers and charities*

Bristol calls itself a green and child-friendly city in many of its recent plans. Its green strategy – a robust cycling infrastructure, the lowest carbon footprint of any British city and over 400 parks and nature reserves (Matheney, Perez-del-Pulgar and Shokry, 2022) – helped the city win the European Green Capital Award in 2015. It is also the only large city in England to still have a commissioned, funded youth service (Municipal playworker, Interview 2019). A Bristol Child Friendly Group<sup>3</sup> formed in 2015, and the *One City Plan*, Bristol's local Plan since 2019, includes a Children's Charter with ten pledges that set the rights and best interests of children as a priority for municipal decision makers (Bristol City Council, 2019).

Some residents and play activists nevertheless disagree with Bristol's reputation as a green and child-friendly city and denounce the incoherence between the extensive discursive support for child-centered and green planning and the unprecedented neoliberalization-driven budget cuts in both domains (Municipal playworker, Interview, 2019). For example, the abolition of the National Play Strategy in 2010 removed any national policy regarding child-centered planning and also cut play and youth services funding in England, which has dropped by 62% since 2010 (Wood, Bornat and Bicquelet-Lock, 2019). In 2018 the new municipal child and youth services model called Targeted

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://bristolchildfriendlycity.blogspot.com/> (accessed date 28 January 2024).



Youth Services (TYS) replaced the former Bristol Youth Links (BYL). As a result, municipal childhood and youth services spending was cut by 30%, the provision of play for children under 11 was completely eliminated, and youth work for 11-19-year-old children was narrowed to target only those most in need (Municipal playworker, Interview 2019). Moreover, the parks Department budget decreased by 66% from 2013-2019, with parks expected to be self-sustaining after April 2019 (Matheney, Perez-del-Pulgar and Shokry, 2022). As a result, most of the play and green spaces and services have been outsourced to local charities and friends of parks groups and many have closed because of the limited council funding they get (Municipal playworker, Interview 2019). Several playworkers warn that the future of play in Bristol is at risk.

Remaining services and play spaces mostly target children age 11 and above, which has clear development and wellbeing impacts (Municipal playworker, Interview, 2019): *“anyone who works with young people and children knows that the earlier you can intervene in the life of a young person, the better”* (Psychologist at Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), involved in an experimental project testing green space as therapeutic treatment for children and young people, in collaboration with the municipal child and youth services Interview 2019). Moreover, focusing only on the neediest children undermines the preventive role of the intervention (Municipal playworker, Interview, 2019). Furthermore, due to the framing of some services as charity, some marginalized groups fear stigmatization and as a result do not take up those services (social worker at Off The Record (OTR) -health support and information service for young people, involved in municipal project using green space and gardening as health and wellbeing intervention for young people Interview, 2019).

Within the different strategies to keep children's access to play afloat within the political conjuncture of austerity localism (i.e. delegation of the maintenance of Adventure Playgrounds and parks to charities and community groups) (Matheney, Perez-del-Pulgar and Shokry, 2022) and British neoliberalism, securing grant and trust funding is essential (Municipal playworker, Interview 2019), especially through the combination of environmental management, child and youth services, and health funds leading to the spread of nature-like palliative child centered spaces in Bristol.

### *The ideology of Space: Separation, Fragmentation, and Alienation as a Form of Subjectivation*

Nature-like, safe, and therapeutic spaces are often conceived as isolated, safe and protective refuges from children's adverse environments (OTR, Interview, 2019). Children in need are nevertheless also represented by state agencies as the subjects to be removed from safe community spaces (Municipal playworker, Interview, 2019).

The propensity towards separation is also exposed in more abstract terms in the way that the need for these therapeutic spaces is often justified in terms of children's individual pathologies, disregarding the notion that these are frequently the consequence of children's deprived socio-ecological conditions. As one child psychologist commented, *"I am thinking there's a much bigger picture here (...) the environmental stuff but also the social stuff (...) has a massive impact on physical health (...) and mental health (...) in the UK"* (Psychologist at CAMHS, Interview 2019). These

socio-environmental conditions are not really targeted or integrated within the vision of the play/therapeutic spaces and activities.

The separation of children's conditions from their socio-environmental context is thus therapeutically limited and takes more of a palliative lens.

*"We just treat illness instead of preventing, we're kind of at the end of the river trying to build a dam or whatever and actually there's always a lot of talk about prevention and early intervention. But for some reason there's not the time or the money to do that"* (Psychologist at CAMHS, Interview 2019).

These temporary nature-play-support spaces cannot compensate for deeper socio-ecological ills and can even lead to a potentially harmful schism/alienation or sense of guilt and/or shame for children towards their contexts and families:

*"We have (...) become quite frustrated by bringing (...) incredibly underprivileged young people into these settings and then sending them back to where they're from, without any follow up care, and no continued relationship with the outdoors and green space and actual world, and that, for me, just felt completely odd, and actually potentially more harmful than good"* (OTR, Interview, 2019).

In sum, the landscape of play spaces created in Bristol reproduces a form of subjectivation that tends to separate actual socio-ecologically entangled dimensions – such as the city and the natural and child-centered play spaces, adults and children, healthy and sick/in need – in a way that forecloses addressing the socio-ecological roots

of the issues. Moreover, the children's urban space spawns a distinct mode of subjectivation, based on a perspective that the 'normal' integrated subject is assumed to be fully autonomous and well-functioning with no need of social protection. Subjects in need of protection or care are regarded as a failure, which justifies being cared for but also separated and excluded from 'normal' society, institutionalizing their marginal position in the social structure.

## Discussion

Our three case studies of Amsterdam, Vienna, and Bristol depict non-linear, complex and context specific processes of co-constitution of child friendly urban practices, and subjectivities articulated within different neoliberal urbanization processes influenced by local urban trajectories, cultural traditions, and politico-economic conjunctures. We argue that the spatial transformations carried out in the context of child-friendly agendas comply with a series of characteristics, including the propensity for consensus that they inspire, their moral significance, their condition of everyday infrastructure and site of social and cultural reproduction – that make them relevant instruments of place-based subjectivation.

In Amsterdam, a planning culture that increasingly fails to address the structural care needs of children and families, especially ethnic minorities, has introduced a green and play-centered child-friendly agenda that successfully operates in favor of a restructuration of spatial practices, meanings, social hierarchies, affects and subjectivities that encourage and reward individual movement as a path to wellbeing

and progress, while stigmatizing stability and immobility. We have furthermore exposed how these child-friendly interventions are compatible with an underlying spatial ideology also present in other policy spheres in Amsterdam's neoliberal urbanization process (e.g. housing and public space), supporting entities and people with a high capacity for movement (e.g., tourists, expats, goods and capital) while displacing those with lower capacity for movement or in need of social protection (e.g., households with dependent members, children or older people, people reliant on place for their social reproduction and social bonds). Child-friendly urban interventions address greater vulnerabilities created by housing restructuring by disciplining the child and her/his family into being in movement. This feedback engenders acceptance of permanent physical and social movement while also enabling the justification of existing power structures as the result of an individual's level of mobility.

In Vienna, we laid out how child-friendly planning, by focusing on the widespread provision of play places, participation of children in the making of their everyday spaces and by paying attention to the structural factors affecting children's urban life, promotes a set of spatial practices, meaning, responsibilities, affects and subjectivities that supports the recognition of the child/citizen as producer of and produced by its surrounding environment. While pressures fostering neoliberalization are there to undo this tendency, child-friendly programs seem to be amongst those layers promoting an inclusive, affordable, and decommodified spatial order that opens up possibilities for emancipatory moments of mutual self-subjection where children emerge as subjecting and subjected reflexive subjects.

In Bristol, child-centered urban spaces are mostly directed at targeted groups – vulnerable, older children – and based on a palliative nature-health focus. We argue that Bristol's organization of child-friendly spaces is failing to address the structural causes of children's illbeing and care needs, rather serving to promote spatial practices, meanings, affects and subjectivities that favor the institutionalization of existing neoliberal power structures and inequities. In the absence of a recognition of the socio-environmental determinants of children's physical and mental health outcomes, our research suggests that these palliative and stigmatizing/divisive place-based interventions justify, reinforce, and normalize the fully autonomous and well-functioning neoliberal subject, while institutionalizing the marginal position of vulnerable children in the social structure.

Our analysis reveals that child-friendly interventions can be explored from the vantage point of their role in processes of subjectivation through children's socialization in specific environments and practices, which are instrumental to neoliberal urbanization processes. Although often relegated to technical or universal design prescriptions, child-friendly interventions embody and reproduce power. Although no space imposes specific subjects or actions (Lefebvre, 1974; Löw, 2008) child-friendly initiatives can be interpreted as entry points into a condensed and affectivity laden version of the dominant and desired societal values and principles. In our three case studies we found that the belief systems and structures by which urban children's spaces are sustained, spatial practices are fostered, and the rules through which children are supposed to feel, think and act towards others and oneself, are often versions of the structures by which

‘adults’ organize and sustain fundamental access to power, authority and resources in each of the cities.

When comparing all three cases, we found that the different neoliberal urbanization contexts of our case studies are articulated in the modes of child-friendly place-based subjectivation. Subjectivation processes in Amsterdam and Bristol, where neoliberal governance is strongest, reinforce the reproduction of certain children’s subjectivities more compliant with the demands and restrictions – including budget restrictions – of the neoliberal city. Both cities sustain practices and perspectives by which the ‘normal’ integrated subjects are assumed to be fully autonomous and well-functioning with no need of social protection, and subjects in need of protection or care are regarded as a failure. In Amsterdam and Bristol, child friendly place-based subjectivation processes are hierarchical in that they more strongly dictate the status of subjects according to broader neoliberal ideological principles applied also in other policy spheres. Furthermore, despite the emphasis on child-friendly urban planning, none of the child-centered municipal plans in these two cities appear to include attention to issues related to children's participation. In this sense, the main international programs framing local engagements with children’s welfare, rights and participation – epitomized in the United Nations General Assembly adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 and UNICEF’s Child Friendly City (CFC) initiative launched in 1997 – do not seem to be a source of inspiration for these local agendas. Rather, Amsterdam and Bristol seem to have different inspirations and local priorities which are not as much about welfare, rights and participation as about infrastructural provision.

In contrast, while child friendly interventions in Vienna also reproduce a certain subjectivity (and process of subjectivation), an active participation of children in these collective subjectivation processes is fostered, incurring in processes closer to mutual self-subjectivation. Children are subjected as subjects of rights, which enter in negotiation with the constituted spatial order on the basis of social relations of self-subjectivation between equals.

In sum, place-based subjectivation is inherent to any place creation or planning and to everyday experiences (Brand, 2007; Gabriel, 2014). In the case of planning for children, the subjectivation process is especially relevant but paradoxically goes largely unnoticed by planners and users, which renders its potential to subject even more powerful. Therefore, we argue that the politics of the production of everyday children's spaces is a prime site for the exercise of political power through subjectivation, especially in Amsterdam and Bristol. Seeing child friendly initiatives as functional or unimportant as 'play' infrastructure increasingly implies its instrumentalization and incorporation to the demands of neoliberal subjectivation processes.

## Strengths and Limitations

In this paper, we explore whether and how child-friendly urban plans are playing a role in the articulation of neoliberal urbanization, specifically in terms of place-based neoliberal subjectivation. Given that planning is an empirical discipline that by default approaches the city and its problems in a techno scientific way, the selected object of study (i.e. - child friendly plans and interventions projected on the urban space) is *a priori*



predetermined to entail some degree of instrumentality. This limitation is furthermore supported by the selection of adult planners and practitioners as interviewees, which further pre-determines our conclusion of the instrumentality of child friendly plans. This limitation could be contrasted in future studies with more phenomenological approaches of the concrete, lived social spaces created by these plans through a direct engagement with children and their families.

That said, the strength of this paper does not lie in disclosing the instrumentality of child friendly urban plans, but rather in unpacking processes by which these instrumental place-based urban plans are enmeshed within convincing, attractive, and emotionally embodied subjectivation processes that create the disposition of subjects to feel, think and act in ways that might seem to contravene the self-interest of subjects, while supporting the structure and needs of neoliberal urbanization.

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