

# The Forbidden Fruits of Urban Exploration



LINO HELLINGS

Stipo Consult (urban strategy advisors) created a temporary team especially for Child Friendly Cities, consisting of urban planners, designers, education designers and public space artists:

- Dennis Lohuis, public space & design, Ontwerpbureau Puntkomma
- Emer Beamer, interaction & education designer, Butterfly Works
- Hans Karssenberg, urban strategy, director Stipo Consult
- Hester Ezra, conceptor / art director, Butterfly Works
- Ineke Aquarius, urban concept developer, Stipo-team / Butterfly Works
- Lino Hellings, art in public spaces, founder of DogTroep
- Karin Peters, public space designer, Stipo-team.

**Our shared wish is to combine our experiences in order to make the city more attractive for children and the other way around. Our approach, concepts and ideas for solutions are based on practical and strategic experience.**



*Sesame street, Almere, The Netherlands*



*Attractive cities for children*

## Executive summary

In this proposal, we take four steps: from basic trends, to vision, to a new approach, to a new concept for a child friendly living environment.

The four most important **basic trends**:

1. most children live in a city
2. the rise of double income families and their consequences:
  - new! green orphans
  - the battle for the streets
  - the traffic jammed elementary school
  - new need for (semi)private outside space
  - how youngsters became a nuisance
3. the need for life long learning
4. the rise of the super size generation.

Our **vision**: a young and vibrant cityscape. A city that is good for and full of children, is good for everybody.

Our **new approach**, getting past standard solutions, is based on three basic philosophies:

- modern collectivity
- the new children's economy
- public space as a learning challenge, the forbidden fruits of urban exploration

The **new concept** we suggest for Child Friendly Cities, is the Urban Children Environment Approach (UCEA). We give a range of possible elements, and an approach for the Urban Children Environment, based on:

- adding a learning layer to existing elements in public space
- activities and facilities for children
- amount and characteristics of children in the area
- competitors of the children regarding use of space
- (semi) private space for semi public use in the light of modern collectivity
- existing children's economy.

As a **concrete examples** of adding a –hidden – learning layer to existing elements, the Music Fence of Dennis Lohuis; of creative use of space, the Urban Trampoline of Karin Peters, the case study of the Urban Children Environment Approach "a walk with Maeve in de Pijp" of the whole team.

## 1. Basic Trends

Based on the following trends, we've developed the approach and concepts laid down in the following chapters.

As a start, we see four essential trends for any concept for child friendly cities:

1. most children live in a city
2. double income families, activities and space:
  - green orphans
  - battle for the streets
  - traffic jammed elementary school
  - (semi)private outside space
  - youngsters as a nuisance
3. life long learning
4. over-consumption

### 1.1 Most children live in cities

A growing number of children is raised in cities. Over the last decades, people around the world organise themselves more and more in cities and this is expected to be an ongoing process for a long time. Even in the well-planned Netherlands, (medium) cities are the most important habitat for children and youngsters.

This means that raising children in cities is no longer a choice: it is common! Growing up in cities is a fact. Therefore the circumstances and conditions in cities have to be looked at as a place to grow up.

Besides that, raising children in a city *can* be a choice. A new class of parents seems to rise, that sees growing up in a city environment as an important value. Policymakers constantly underestimate the number of parents who would love to live in the city. The fact that most people choose for a suburban environment, when they enter parenthood, does not mean that *everybody* chooses so. While it has often to do with the available houses and residential environments. This niche is an undiscovered market.

#### Intermezzo: the unplanned families in Borneo Sporenburg Amsterdam

The recent city development of Borneo Sporenburg in Amsterdam vividly shows this new niche of parents. Planners targeted their plans for this area on *DINKYs* (double income no kids), but soon after the first apartments and houses were delivered in this new neighbourhood, they turned out to attract many families with children. The lack of facilities for children now causes traffic jams each morning, because of parents driving their children to schools elsewhere; and e.g. long lines in the nearest swimming pool in the next-door district. A solution was found in a new school made in an office building, that had already been planned (see photograph).



*De Schijf in Borneo Sporenburg Amsterdam: is it an office? Or a school?*

## 2. Double income families

In an increasing number of families, both parents have a job. In Europe, elderly people are becoming a relatively larger part of the total population. In almost every sector, a shortage of available labour force will be formed. The coming twenty years, pressure on labour participation will only grow. The double income family, both parents working fulltime, will become even more dominant.

Double income families have **high income & little time**. This influences their behaviour in every way:

- a. Parents are more away from home. In the seventies and eighties, New Towns lead to green widows. Nowadays, we see the emergence of the **"green orphans"**. This will call for formal and informal facilities for children during the full labour day of their parents. It is important to focus on the extra curriculum hours of the child (activities outside school hours). Are we looking for the Swedish model: children can spend their day from 8:30 until 19:30 in the same building, where outside school hours other activities are organised?. Or can we also think of informal alternatives?
- b. The increasing number of second cars of households (also in cities), causing huge pressure on cities public space. For children playing in the street, parked cars are the biggest competitors. New solutions are needed in this **"battle for the streets"**.



*Cars or kids: battle for the streets*

- c. Before work, parents quickly drive their children to school. The surroundings of the school become less safe for other children to walk and cycle. This leads to more parents starting to bring their kids by car. Unsafe space and **traffic jams around elementary school** are the results of this "tragedy of commons". The first drive-in school plans are being made as we speak.
- d. There is still need for a private space outside the house, but less time and willingness to maintain a garden. There is need for a new view on **(semi) private outside space**: on verandas, balconies and terraces, in front- and backyards and in collective semi-private gardens (maintained of course by someone we collectively hire).

- e. The life within the house becomes more important and networks in the direct neighbourhood decline. The living area becomes – in the view of many inhabitants – a zone for the individual comfort and peace. The house is a quiet island in a sea of work, a retreat. **Youth hanging out** on the streets all of a sudden become, a nuisance and a reason to complain. The level of tolerance has lowered.

### 3. Life long learning

Life long learning becomes increasingly important in a knowledge based economy. Economies compete on skills, knowledge and innovation. The ambitions of the European Union in the Lisbon Agreement, illustrate the importance of a life long learning.

This has many effects on children. Dealing with new situations and cultures becomes an important part of life. Learning about other culture(s), learning to learn and social skills are three essential basic skills to develop in an early age.

New philosophies on the education system are being debated as we speak. In our view, this should however also have an effect on the facilities and the public space we offer children. And this also offers leads to how to organise the extra curriculum time of our children.

### 4. The super size generation

In Western society, a health issue emerges due to over-consumption and lack of sports and daily body activity. The number of children with weight problems increases drastically. This has already been a problem in the US for a while, but now also in Europe we see the problem of obesity arise. Parent groups discuss it, books on healthy food skyrocket and health organizations put this problem high on the agenda.

For public space, this means new, creative ways are to be found to **tempt children for their daily movement**.



*the super size generation*

## 2. Central Vision: a young and vibrant cityscape

Our central vision is: **a city good for and full of children, is good for everybody**. It is in everybody's interest when children grow up as responsible and happy adults. When there are safe places available for children, part of the time, they can develop themselves independently without supervision. When children are happy, parents are happy too. A healthy and safe environment for children is good for everybody.

In our vision it is also a value for the rest of the city to be able to see children. A young and vibrant city, seeing children in the cityscape, is good for the mental health of the city dwellers. Children as art in public space!

The big Sinterklaas parade (the Dutch Santa Claus) for instance, with streets full of happy young children, gives a complete different vibe than the same street during Monday morning rush hour. Therefore in everybody's interest ... children should have a (visual) place in the cities public place.



*Young and vibrant cityscape: children in the streets with Sinterklaas*

### 3. A new approach

Our vision, combined with the basic trends require a new and rich approach. An approach away from the usual short term solutions. Short term solutions like creating places to hang out for youngsters on the edge of the living zone, where they don't bother us – but where youth mostly don't want to be (in Dutch "hangplekdenken"). And short term solutions like the formal mini-playgrounds for smaller children (in Dutch "wikipipdenken").



*A Dutch 'JOP': a planned Youth Meeting Place for youngsters*



*A Dutch 'wikipip'*

The approach of our team is based on three basic philosophies:

1. modern collectivity
2. the new children's economy
3. public space as a challenging learning space / the forbidden fruits of urban exploration.

Combining the philosophies with the living environment approach (is called 'leefmilieus' in the Netherlands), defined by Stipo Consult<sup>1</sup>. We suggest to create an **Urban Children Environment** method, defining the existing living environments from the eyes of children.

### 1. Modern collectivity

Currently we notice a new trend towards new collectivism in cities. After the ongoing individualism, people start to form self-chosen communities to get back a sense of togetherness, not organized through a church or belief, but through lifestyles. In cities, you see groups of people searching for collective living-forms, aiming for an ideal balance between individual freedom, surrounded by people with the same lifestyle, providing a safe and stimulating environment for their children. To make life easier for everyone. This leads to a demand of semi-public spaces, to be used by self chosen communities. A community of 50 living units seems to be ideal for this purpose, to reach a balance between individual freedom and collectivity. As a result of this trend, we see an upcoming interest for new forms of the typical small estates: a group of houses in a circle around a public space mainly used by the inhabitants.



*Looking for new, modern versions of the 'Begijnhof' in Amsterdam: collective garden between houses with small private front yards*

A related trend in the field of housing is that of "little time, quality time". People have less spare time, therefore they don't want to spend too much time on domestic work. Urban dwellers often choose for a large balcony / terrace instead of a garden, because it is easier to manage. Together with the search for collectivism, the collective backyards might offer great possibilities for semi-public (less visual) space for children and their parents!

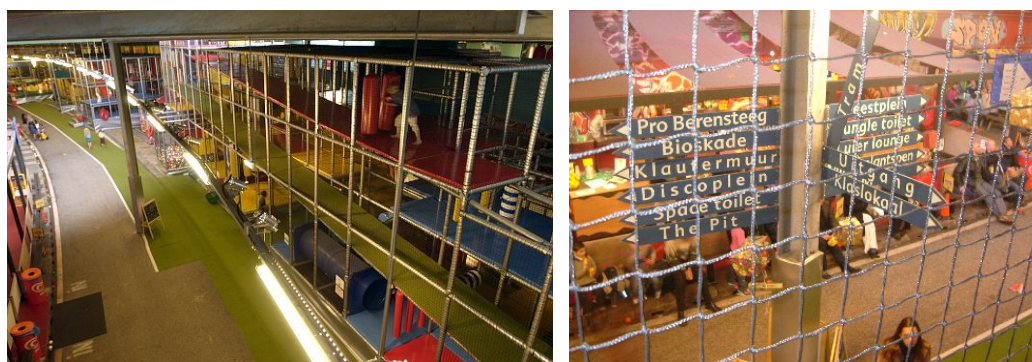
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<sup>1</sup> Stipo has defined living environments for the city of Alkmaar in the Netherlands and for the region Parkstad Limburg (seven cities and villages in the south of the Netherlands), both available in Dutch at [www.stipo.nl](http://www.stipo.nl).

## 2. Children and economy

Children spend a lot of money and a lot of money is being spent on children. Often facilities for youth and children are seen as a social and a government investment. A lot of money is spent on toys, events and daily expenditures like food and cloths. You might expect parents to be willing to spend a certain part of that budget on a appealing, challenging, safe and educative environment. Adults complain about their city youngsters being behind screens all the time, instead of playing outside or exploring the neighbourhoods.

The question we would like to raise: how can we seduce and facilitate children to go out and explore and parents to invest in their children's public space?



*Children and economy: the playing paradise TunFun for kids and youngsters in Amsterdam*

## 3. Public space as learning space

Learning to be responsible for your actions and behaviour starts at an early age. The official institutions are somewhat overvalued in our view. Children learn most lessons in life amongst other children and by exploring their environment. Therefore, public space should be seen as supportive to the learning of children. And the organisation of childhood should be taken back to the streets. The alternative we would want to prevent from happening is to further institutionalize the learning time of children outside school hours. This underestimates the importance of learning on the street, and also creates a too large economic pressure in the long run.

### ***Risks and public space***

If they can, parents will keep children away from risks. Nowadays this results in keeping them away from public space. Childhood is institutionalised. Children are being taken from school to playground to their sports facility everyday. By doing so, parents also keep their children (partly) away from exploring their environment and meeting other children on the streets. In lower income areas however, children become 'streetwise' by playing on the streets – their parents do not have the recourses to organise a daily program for them. Children are confronted with the adult world at an early age.

### ***Responsibility***

In the future children and youngsters must bear responsibility in 'real life' situations. Children are mostly proud to get some responsibility, to get small tasks, like e.g. be 'klaarover' (help other children with crossing streets). Giving children responsibility leads to taking responsibility for public space. Practice what we preach: if we give the streets back to the children we will have to claim responsibility for our streets. Not only professionals, but also children.

### ***Curiosity and entrepreneurship***

Humans are curious and inventive, and so are children. They will use whatever they find to learn and to play with, whether they find it on the streets or whether it is presented to them by institutions. The aim is to merge institutional learning and learning on the street by making the barrier between institution and public space more penetrable.

*Tell me and I will forget  
Show me and I might remember  
Involve me and I will understand  
- Confucius -*

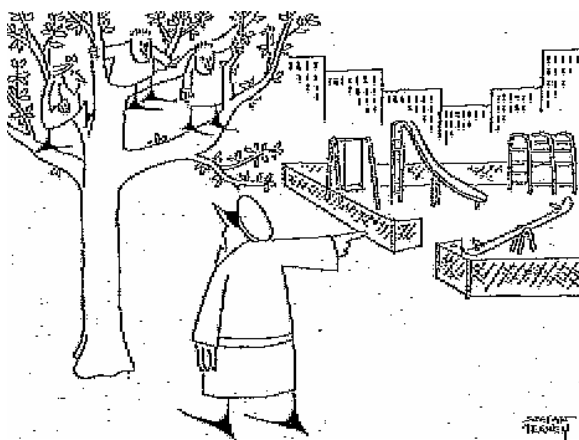
In these times of economic recession, there is a lot of discussion on the lack of entrepreneurial skills and attitude. How can we teach our children entrepreneurship? It is not taught in elementary school and might not fit in the learning targets. But it can be catered for in public space during the out of school time. For these skills, creativity training, self confidence and, above all, experiential learning are essential. *Learning by doing!* This is an important lead to concepts for a public learning space.

### ***Learning outside – a luring perspective***

Today, adults live their lives more and more inside houses, cars, malls and tube stations and children in urban areas seem to follow the behaviour of their parents, at least for a while. For children in an urban environment, playing outside, learning outside will once again have to be a luring perspective in comparison to staying inside. Once you are 15 – you are not allowed anything, but your world gets bigger everyday and you get smarter everyday. The human impulse of shouting during a moment of silence, exploring a deserted place and sneaking into a forbidden zone is at its peak during puberty. Teens are drawn to the streets, out of the safe environment of their parents homes. They are looking for places to meet each other and be away from the regulations of their everyday life. Teens will not always do what is allowed to them, they will often do what is forbidden.

### ***Forbidden fruits***

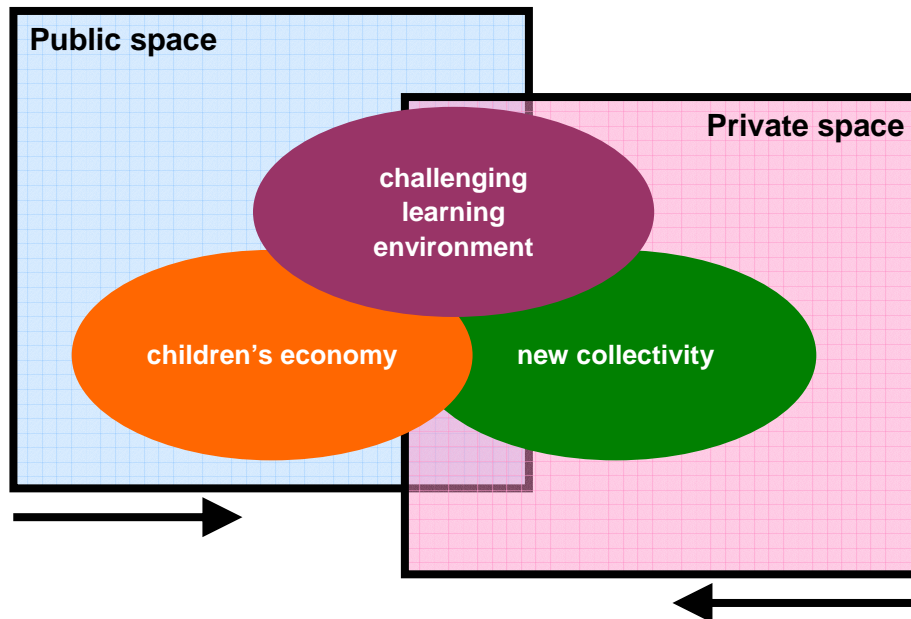
So give them forbidden - but safe - places, too. Give them restrictions for their own good, but make sure they will not fall too deep if they break the rules. The city doesn't have to be dangerous, though it may be dangerously attractive. The city contains the forbidden fruits of urban exploration.



*The forbidden fruits of urban exploration*

### What we need

We (planners and artists) introduce a concept in which we add a layer of playful, tempting and challenging learning opportunities to public space, and to the objects that are already there anyway.



*A layer of playful, tempting and challenging learning opportunities to public space*

## 4. Urban Children Environments: UCEA

The new concept we suggest for Child Friendly Cities, is the Urban Children Environment Approach (UCEA). The first step is defining the general urban children environments.

Stipo developed the *living environment* strategy (Dutch: leefmilieu) from the wish to create planning tools that give the possibility to steer on the same criteria as the inhabitants use themselves when choosing their living environment. Instead of steering on numbers of houses and facilities related to target groups (like Dutch planners were used to), we want to involve criteria like:

- the price-quality proportion of the houses,
- the identity of the public space / *city scapes*,
- what is happening / available activities and facilities, social atmosphere, *city culture*.

In this method, we first define the existing living environment. Then, we define the wanted living environments based on the demands of the users, trends and desires profile of life styles. Finally, we put these to together in the transformation task. This is a map plus drawing representing the desired identity and atmosphere.



Drawings made of the wanted living environments in Parkstad Limburg

The living environments defined in Parkstad Limburg have names like: post-war low-rise houses, extension environments, flat areas, garden villages, old village centres, ribbon developments, high quality new developments, spatial & green.

In the city environment, space is scarce by definition. The consequence of the basic trends is that pressure on public space will only rise, because of more and more second cars per household. We aim to combine this with the wish to create a challenging learning environment for children. This calls for creative double space use in many aspects, winning space by smaller front yards, and using the need for new modern collectivity.

For the Urban Children Environments, we can imagine names like:

- hidden inner city adventure (areas with possibilities for creative use of space in inner cities, like 'TunFun', using doorways, semi-public alleys, etc.)
- tree house area (areas with possibilities for reconsidering the available green public space, creating possibilities for informal playing grounds)
- industrial exploration (areas with possibilities for using temporarily empty buildings, made safe *and* 'forbidden' for youngsters)
- parking / play field (areas with possibilities for using parking places for playing kids during office hours)
- roof top freedom (areas with possibilities for creating safe playing spaces on rooftops)
- kerb adventure (areas with possibilities for using street elements like kerbs and artificial holes for plays like stoop ball and play marbles)
- alone close by (areas with possibilities for use of semi-public space in concepts of new collectivity where youth can play close to home but independent)
- underground cool (areas with possibilities for using space underground for play grounds, new sports, urban exploration, etc.)
- forbidden fruits (areas with possibilities for "facilitating" forbidden places appealing for youth to discover).

### **The Urban Children Environment Approach (UCEA)**

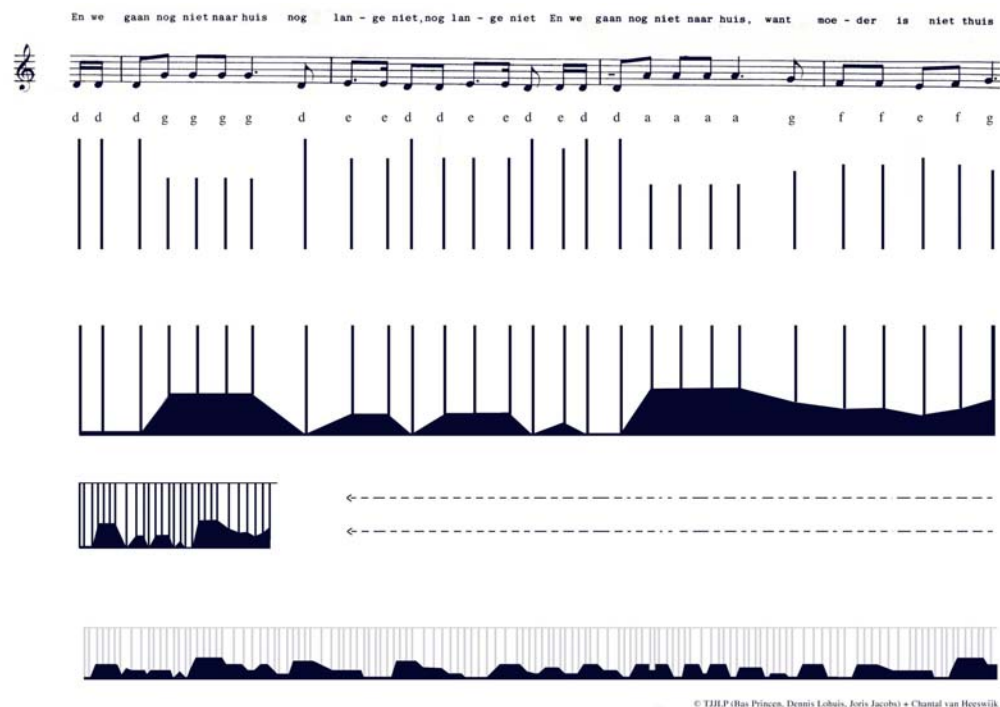
Next to the "usual" criteria for defining the living environments, in the urban children environments, the following criteria will be essential:

- available public space and existing elements that have a potential learning layer; structurally adding that learning layer for children to the existing functions that are there in the public domain anyway, such as fences (see example below)

- available activities and facilities for children (possible to build on)
- amount and characteristics of children living in the area (age groups, income groups parents, expectations for the future)
- competitors of the children regarding use of space (such as parked cars), and the possibilities to create innovative combinations
- possible (semi) private space that is available for semi public use in the light of modern collectivity. This is interesting from the point of available extra space and from the point of possible strategies to finance and organise the transformation task
- existing children's economy: this is interesting from the point of desirable social and cultural city scape and from the point of possible strategies to finance and organise the transformation task.

**Example: learning layer on existing public space elements, the Music Fence**

As an example of adding a learning layer for children to the elements that are already anyway in public space, Dennis Lohuis of our team created the musical fence. It takes a fence around a school yard as a starting point. The fence consists of bars in different sizes and lengths. When you slap it with e.g. a key or a lunch box, you hear a melody (we thought the Dutch song 'we gaan nog niet naar huis, nog lange niet nog lange niet' / 'we won't be going home, for some time still, for some time still might be appropriate).



The Music Fence is a result of a research to illegitimate use of elements. This design is not only practical but also fun, and creates a – first hidden – learning impulse for smaller children. An object like a fence that is needed anyway gets a new learning layer added to it. This double use of space effectively does not require any new spatial use.

This design is just one example of adding a layer of learning to an existing element in public space that stimulates curiosity and creativity. Our proposal is to create an Urban Children Environment by structurally adding a hidden learning layer and re-designing the existing objects in the urban living environment.

**Example: using available space, Urban trampoline**

As an example of using the available space in a creative way, Karin Peters of our team created the urban trampoline.



**Example: case study, a walk with Maeve in de Pijp**

As an example of the Urban Children Environment Approach, we made a walk with our role model Maeve in a typical inner city neighbourhood focussing specifically on safety.

*introducing Maeve*

*The playground in the Sarphatipark is not interesting for Maeve (4 yrs old) any longer. She rather climbs in trees and just runs around with her friends. In September she will go to the Dalton school, just behind the Ceintuurbaan in the neighbouring area. It would be nice if she could walk semi-independently. Perhaps supervised by older children who are specially trained as traffic-peers.*



*phonelolly*

*A new walkie talkie makes it easy for children to let their parents know where they are.*

*a line of yellow jackets*

*Educative and playful traffic course on Wednesday afternoon could continuously be organized. In a long route the children are being picked up at school and their houses. Since we want them to be welcome and visible in our cities, they all wear yellow jackets.*





**the 'children-on-bikes-strip'**

Along child friendly routes through the city, a part of the pavement could be preserved for children on their bikes. The parents cycle on the street, the children cycle next to their parents on their own protected strip.

**safe spots**

Some of the numerous small shops can be safe spots on the route, where children can go to when they have hurt their knee, or call their parents. It creates a better customer relationship and helps the community.



**the children's traffic light**

We can aid the children crossing the streets by designing a children's traffic light. Designing a traffic light like at a railroad crossing can be considered. Motorists are confronted with the presence of children in a humorous and positive manner.

**grid policy**

Welcome children to your neighbourhood for they are the start of positive changes: create a 'grid' of playgrounds fitting to the radius of action of children. Within 100 meters a children find a little playground and a safe spot. Widen the pavement on one (sunny) side of the street and narrow it on the other side. This will also slow down traffic.





This is much better than a climbing frame!

### **PlayStreet**

*'On Wednesdays and on Sundays – traffic is banned and the children own the street.' The use of a clearly present barrier is a signal that this street is a Play Street. A 'game framer' keeps the street clean from dog dirt.*

***These are just a few examples of practical solutions following a clear and positive perspective on welcoming children in our cities.***

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