



ILLUSTRATION

## URBAN PLAY

# How Playful Cities Strengthen Health, Equity and Urban Resilience

**Play is serious in city-making. In dense, fast-changing urban environments, playful moments in streets, housing and public infrastructure shape how people experience the city every day. Play is not only fundamental for children, but it is also important for young people and adults as it supports learning, social connection and resilience across the life course. When cities make room for play, they create healthier, more inclusive and more liveable urban systems for everyone.**

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## The Power of Play

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Play is essential to children's well-being, happiness and development. Through play, children build physical, emotional and social skills, while developing important qualities like curiosity, confidence and resilience. These benefits do not end with childhood. Playful environments also support young people and adults, offering opportunities for creativity, stress relief, social connection and informal learning. From teenagers using streets and squares as places to meet and move, to adults finding moments of joy or rest in public space, play contributes to well-being across generations.

Crucially, the benefits of play depend on who can access them. Inclusive play environments, designed for different abilities, ages and needs, enable people with disabilities, or neurodiverse users, caregivers and older residents to participate on their own terms. When play is embedded into everyday streets and spaces, rather than confined to specialised facilities, it becomes more visible, equitable and socially inclusive.

## The Quiet Play Crisis

Despite growing evidence of its importance, play remains undervalued in many cities. Children today often have less time, freedom and access to play than previous generations, as everyday environments are shaped by traffic, risk aversion, commercial pressures and shrinking public space. Play is increasingly confined indoors or pushed to the urban fringes, rather than embedded in daily neighbourhood life.

This quiet erosion of space for play reinforces wider inequalities. Children in lower-income, informal or car-dominated neighbourhoods are often the least able to access safe, stimulating places to play.

## The Role Cities Play

Cities are uniquely positioned to reverse this trend, not just by building more playgrounds, but by treating play as essential urban infrastructure. The presence of children in public space, their ability to move independently and their everyday access to nature are powerful indicators of how well a city is working for everyone.

While playgrounds and parks remain important, cities can greatly expand opportunities for play by embedding it into everyday streets, transport hubs, schools and public institutions. By shifting from a facilities-based approach to an integrated children's infrastructure network, cities can create streets and spaces that support play, movement and connection across ages and abilities.



Tainan Spring, a public urban lagoon in Taiwan.  
Image: MVRDV / Daria Scagliola



Shade Parade—a street installation in Montreal, Canada, where moving parasols create playful shade and encourage movement.  
Image: Daily Tous Les Jours / LatrompetteStudio

## Tools and Practice: From Guidance to Delivery

Arup's *Playful Cities Design Guide* supports city-makers in progressing from including play as isolated design pilots to making systemic change. The guide helps cities identify where play can be added in everyday spaces, how to design inclusive, low-barrier play environments, and how different forms of play can build skills linked to education, social cohesion and climate action. Complementing this, Arup's *Nature-Based Play* publication highlights how integrating play into green and blue infrastructure can simultaneously support children's well-being and urban climate resilience.

Play-based design principles are reflected in Rome's City of Joy (*La Città della Gioia*) masterplan, where public space is reimagined as a network of interconnected "islands of play" linking markets, courtyards and community facilities. Co-designing with children and caregivers helped test playful, flexible interventions that support social interaction, informal care networks and local identity.



Urban Play Framework.  
Image: Arup / Real Play Coalition

## From Pilots to Playful Systems

For city leaders, embedding play is not about adding a new policy agenda: it is about maximising the impact of existing investments. Transport, housing, public space and climate adaptation projects all offer opportunities to integrate inclusive and nature-based play.

By designing cities that welcome children and by involving them in shaping solutions, cities can move from pilots to playful systems, creating healthier, more equitable and more resilient places where people of all ages can move, connect and thrive.

| A render of a courtyard designed as a shared play space that encourages interaction in the City of Joy (La Città della Gioia).  
Image: Arup / ACPV Architects / Asset / P'Arcnouveau

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