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**Book Review**

Book Review: *Urban Playground: How child-friendly planning and design can save cities*, by Tim Gill

Pat Petrie

Emeritus Professor, Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, UCL, UK; p.petrie@ucl.ac.uk

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**Peer review**

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London: RIBA Publishing, 2021, 208pp, ISBN 9781859469293 (pbk)

Tim Gill is well known in the play world as an advocate for children's play and their right to be heard in what concerns them. For some years director of the Children's Play Council (now Play England), he was seconded to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to lead the first ever government-sponsored inquiry into children's play. Author of *Childhood in a Risk Averse Society* (2007), his latest book, *Urban Playground* takes his subject further, this time from the point of view of town planning. Significantly, the book has been brought out by RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) Publishing, a home for the professional expertise necessary in urban planning.

The limitations imposed by urban design on human life, on images of the child and a 'good' childhood, has a place in social pedagogy theory. They are also a challenge for social pedagogues as an important, too often negative, aspect of the social context for their work. The planning and management of the built environment have a strong influence on the lives of its inhabitants and hold important clues about what kind of person is seen as socially normal. Briefly, the 'normal' human appears to be an adult, not disabled, can afford to run a car and can cross roads safely without assistance. Their private spaces, typified by the private car parked outside their self-contained home and garden, are privileged, but also confining when it comes to informal interaction in the local community. Those outside the 'normal'

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category are more dependent on resources such as public transport and physically accessible spaces, free or with low-cost admission.

In the developed world, unaccompanied children have largely disappeared from the urban landscape. Gill suggests that they can be an indicator species for cities: 'the idea is that the presence of children shows the quality of urban habitats, in the same way that the presence of salmon in a river shows the quality of that habitat'. Gill sets out how urban children are increasingly subject to adult supervision, have little access to the general community and have fewer opportunities to interact informally with other children or with the natural world; the results range from mental health difficulties to disease caused by traffic fumes and lack of exercise.

The book is a call to action. It has many examples of child-friendly planning drawn from different continents. He groups the examples according to the rationale they serve, whether relating to economy and demography, sustainability and community, and/or children's rights, health and well-being. A critical friend, Gill does not shy away from showing where they fall short of their full intention. Vauban, a neighbourhood of 5,500 inhabitants in Freiburg, Germany, with 'accessible public green space, good walking and cycling networks, and a direct tram service to the city centre', serves all the above intentions. Crucially, almost all cars must be parked in car parks on the periphery of the neighbourhood. Its success is seen in the child-friendly, people-friendly use that inhabitants make of its outdoor spaces: walking, cycling, playing and generally taking opportunities to meet each other informally. Rotterdam, a more ambitious example, makes use of traffic-calming devices and the provision of green spaces and play areas. It is based on economic and demographic considerations as well as children's rights, health, and well-being.

*Urban Playground* is an attractive book, with detailed descriptions, diagrams, photos and analysis. It sets out how local and central government can reduce current disadvantages for children – and people more generally – through imaginative urban planning. It is up to children's advocates – parents, teachers and social pedagogues among others – to urge them to do so.

