Research Paper

The Metropolis and the Child: Healthy Childhood Spaces for a Healthy City

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Abstract

The fact that the majority of the world's population lives in cities brings the city and its inhabitants face to face with all kinds of problems and dangers. Especially big cities or metropolises such as Istanbul are faced with the consequences of this density in many areas from traffic to pollution. For everyone living in the city, the problems of the city have consequences that negatively affect life. Undoubtedly, one of the groups most affected by these problems is children. It is clear that the opportunities offered by the city to children are becoming more limited day by day and negatively affect their development. The main motivation of this research is based on this determination. The research will analyze children's spaces in the public space in Istanbul, and will reveal the problems/constraints of these spaces with the findings. One of the questions of the research is: "What opportunities does the city of Istanbul, offer to children?" The discussion based on this question leads the researchers to the second question. The second question of the research is how these possibilities can be expanded with the potentials of the city. As a result of the research, strategies and suggestions for this purpose will be revealed. These strategies will be discussed with their consequences for children's spaces in particular and the city in general. It is clear that for the healthy cities of the future, first of all, raising healthy individuals and this can only be possible with qualified/healthy environments.

Keywords

healthy city, healthy childhood, healthy child space

1. Introduction

The fact that the majority of the world's population lives in cities exposes the city and its inhabitants to all kinds of problems and dangers. 56% of the world's population lives in urban areas, and the UN World Urbanization Prospects report (2018) predicted this rate to increase to 68% by 2050. According to the same report, 2007 was the first year in the world that people living in urban areas outnumbered those living in rural areas. The ever-increasing urban population is a critical issue in many respects, and it is a subject that needs to be evaluated and studied meticulously in terms of almost every discipline, from economy to sociology, from planning to ecology. From the perspective of planning and architectural disciplines, it is difficult or probably impossible to say that cities can provide healthy-qualified environments for urban dwellers, even under current conditions. So, while the idea of an accessible, healthy city is an unattainable ideal even now, what will be the situation in the near future when the urban population will gradually increase? This framework makes us ask several questions: What is a healthy city? What steps should be taken in order to make today's cities healthier, moreover, considering the future? What are our weaknesses/vulnerabilities? Of course, it is not so easy to answer these few questions that we have easily listed. In that case, we can think of breaking down the problem with a method that we can probably be used to in our daily lives, and we can discuss the different dynamics in the subject separately.

For example, this article focuses on the healthy city issue under the sub-title of "children's spaces". Based on the idea of the necessity of healthy children's spaces for a healthy city, the study asks the following hierarchically developed questions: What is a healthy city?; How should "children's spaces" be in a healthy city?; Are "kids spaces" healthy in today's cities? What can be done to improve children's spaces? The study first approaches this investigation from a general perspective, and then deepens the subject with examples from the "children's spaces" of the city of Istanbul.

2. First Question: What is the Healthy City?

There are many studies in the literature on the subject of healthy cities. For example, according to WHO(2022)[1], a healthy city is one that continually creates and improves its physical and social environments and expands community resources that enable people to mutually support each other in fulfilling all the functions of life and reaching their maximum potential. A healthy city with a different perspective; are places where pollution, crime, stress and unemployment are minimized, where all people meet their needs regardless of their age, gender, race, physical and social status, and lead a healthy life. According to Goldstein and Kickbusch(1996) the features of a healty city are as follows: clean, safe physical environment, basic needs met for all people., strong, mutually supportive, integrated and nonexploitative community, high degree of public participation in local and city government, acess to wide variety of experiences, interaction and communication , promotion and celebration of historical and cultural heritageThese approaches call for a city that is clean, safe, supportive, open to experiences, with opportunities for interaction and communication, and underlines the issue of healthy living. In this context, the importance of open spaces in the city is clear. The open spaces of the city are accessible and used by everyone, from children to the elderly, from the rich to the poor, and in this respect, how they are planned is extremely important.

The "Urban Planning for the Future of Cities" section of the World Cities Report (2022) emphasizes the effects of outdoor spaces on child development and human health: " *Effective strategies to ensure continuous use of parks and open spaces by citizens are critical for maintaining their mental and physical health. Outdoor physical activity is essential for healthy child development, avoiding cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, reducing obesity rates and building children's social and emotional skills.*"Indeed, the issues of proper planning of new open spaces and improvement of existing open spaces are especially important and even vital for children.

3. Second Question: What kind of spaces should cities offer to children?

"Children grow up in a world designed for grown-ups. Shop windows are to high to see everything, toilets are to high to use comfortably, light switches cannot be reached by the youngest."

(Morena and Truppi, 2011)

Research about the city and searches for the future have brought up other topics besides the concept of "healthy city". Some of them are: inclusive planning, city for all, livable city and child friendly city. This section focuses on the intersection of children and the city. The main questions are: have children been taken into account - adequately - in the planning or formation of cities? Since one of the most important steps of a healthy future is a healthy childhood, are we aware of the importance of planning the places where childhood takes place in terms of child development? Have we given enough thought to children's

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[1] World Health Organization

physical characteristics, psychological needs, or safety needs? Did we ask the children? Are our cities child-friendly?

Child-friendly places are defined as places where the health and well-being of all children, regardless of their individual characteristics, access to housing, transportation, communication, education and infrastructure services, and have a say in all matters that concern them (Severcan, 2015). In other words, no matter how many children's playgrounds you build in a city, unless the necessary opportunities are created holistically, it will not make that city child-friendly. Birol(2009) emphasizes this as follows: "*Placing the children's playgrounds in the city where there is heavy motor vehicle traffic and therefore cannot be reached easily by the child, and ignoring the design of other urban furniture in these areas, considering these spaces independently of their surroundings, limiting these areas by using walls or other dividing elements, ignoring the physical conditions of the urban environment that creates a decoration for these areas, the relationship of this environment with the human scale and especially the child scale, and the quality of the space in its essence, will not make that city a "child friendly city" even though there are many playgrounds in the city."* According to Nam and Nam(2018), a child-friendly city is a city where children's voice, needs, priorities and rights are an integral part of public policies in its programs and decisions.

The child-friendly city undertakes the followings to all its young citizens (Bekun, 2019, as cited in Riggio, 2002): to be able to participate in family, community and social life; to be effective in decisions about their cities; express their ideas about the city they want; access to essential services (health, education, etc.); drinking clean water; protection from exploitation, violence and abuse; to walk safely alone in the streets; meeting and playing with friends; having green areas for plants and animals; living in a non-polluted and sustainable environment; participate in cultural and social organizations; to be supported, loved, cared for and to be equal citizens with access to all the services the city offers, regardless of ethnicity, religion, income, gender and/or disability. Yılmaz (2015) also listed the criteria of urban livability for children under the headings of ecology, land use, public space, transportation, health, safety, design, education, culture and development.

While the research and publications listed above touch on many issues, they underline the following issues for children in the context of urban open spaces:

- Ensuring that they can meet and play with their friends in natural, safe, clean open spaces.

- Ensuring the safe usability of public spaces for all children at any scale and without discrimination.

- Ensuring the active participation of children in the decisions taken about the city.

3. Framework and Field of Research

According to the United Nations world population estimates, when the child population ratios of 27 European Union (EU) member countries are analyzed, it is seen that the child population ratio of Turkey is 26.9%, higher than the child population ratios of the EU member countries (TUIK, 2022). This also highlights the importance of the issue for Turkey. Istanbul, on the other hand, is a big metropolis where different lives flow side by side. Consisting of 39 districts with different characters, the city is built on an area of 540,000 hectares, has 962 neighborhoods and has a population of 15,462,452. More than 4 million children live in Istanbul, which constitutes approximately 17 % of the country's total child population aged 0-17. All these datas underline the importance of the relationship between children and the city for Istanbul.

In this section, the research will analyze the children's spaces in selected areas in Istanbul by sampling and will reveal the problems/constraints of these spaces. In accordance with the scope of the study, the research area is limited to a district of the city –Çekmeköy- which is located on the Anatolian side of Istanbul and has 21 neighborhoods. Cekmekoy district, which is settled on an area of 148.08 square kilometers, has

a population of 264,508 (Çekmeköy Municipality, 2022). Çekmeköy is bordered by Beykoz in the north, Ümraniye in the southwest and Sancaktepe in the southeast. While forests surround the district from the north and west; the Omerli dam borders the east; the southern border is formed by the Şile Highway, which connects Ümraniye to Şile. Ömerli dam basin is the largest water basin in Istanbul; the forest existance in Çekmeköy is 74% (Çolak, 2015).

Cekmekoy district, located in the periphery of Istanbul, has developed rapidly due to both the increase in transportation opportunities and its geographical advantages. As Özgür (2006) stated, Çekmeköy, which is on the Şile connection of the TEM road, has become the target of large construction companies due to its proximity to the TEM and being surrounded by Alemdar forests. With the effect of the ring roads added due to the 3rd Bridge added to the Bosphorus in 2016, the interest in the district has increased and still continues to increase. Cekmekoy, which was once a small village far from the center, has now become a large district/municipality. In a way, Çekmeköy is a place at the intersection of urban and rural. Bu bağlamda In this context, the name Turan and Ayar gave to their work (2006) is remarkable: Çekmeköy "Urbanized Village". This gap can be easily observed in the geographical structure of the district.

The demographic structure of the district and, in parallel, the living areas vary. There are many different types of living environments ranging from slum settlements to mass housing estates and luxury single family homes. Çekmeköy also has a rich diversity in terms of socio-economic status. The most distinctive feature of Çekmeköy is that it is located side by side with villa sites and shantytowns or areas where irregular and unplanned structures made up of illegal structures are located. Often there is a street or just a wall between this opposition. With these differences, Özgür (2006) describes Çekmeköy as *"a place where spatially fragmented and socially very different groups live"*. Ekici (2011) in his study examining Çekmeköy, draws attention to the richness of natural resources, but the concentration of closed site settlements that spread rapidly towards these natural areas. So, how are the "children" spaces in Çekmeköy, which has undergone a rapid development and change?

4.1. Method of the Research

The questions of the research developed in the context of urban open spaces are as follows:

o   What opportunities does the city offer to children?

o   How can these possibilities be expanded with the potentials of the city?

Figure 1 Method of the Research

The main case of the research is Çekmeköy district. During the compilation of information on the characteristics of the area, literature (articles and theses), the local government's website, statistical data and on-site observations were utilized (Figure 1). As a result of the analysis of these, a method based on the determination, classification and examination of children's places in the district was followed. Accordingly, the urban open spaces of the Çekmeköy district were examined under the headings of streets, parks, school gardens and others.

4.2. Findings

- **Streets:** Streets are essential parts of everyday life for access in the city. However, nowadays, pedestrian access is ignored and inconvenient, as streets in cities are predominantly associated with vehicle access. Considering the use of children, this situation becomes even more critical. For example, in Çekmeköy, some of the streets do not have sidewalks, while in others the sidewalks are very narrow and moreover, these sidewalks are mostly occupied by cars (Table 1). The height of some pavements is not suitable for children or even adults. Therefore, the streets, which were playgrounds in the past, are not safe even for pedestrian access today. Therefore, even if there are qualified playgrounds in these settlements, it is not safe for children to access the parks.

Table 1 Examples from the streets of Çekmeköy

1	2	3	4	5
insufficient pavement width	negative relationship between tree trunk and pavement	negative relationship of the lamppost with the pavement	a car parked on the pavement	unsuitable pavement height

- **Playgrounds:** Activities and sharing are very important for children who start to learn about life in playgrounds during childhood. (Atıcı and Öztürk, 2021). There are 109 parks in different sizes in Çekmekmeköy (Çekmeköy Municipality, 2022). These parks vary in terms of use. Some have fixed sports equipment for adults (Table 2 eg 1). Few parks are larger than others (Table 2, eg 3) and host events (such as concerts, theaters) that will allow the participation of a large number of people. When we look at the playgrounds in Çekmeköy (Table 2, for example 2-4), it can be observed that these are generally made of plastic equipment (such as slides, swings, seesaws) placed on floors covered with rubber material. The possibilities offered by these areas are limited. It is difficult to say that playgrounds are designed according to the criteria determined for these areas. Since they are not designed as natural areas, and it cannot be said that natural elements (such as trees, soil water, garden plants) are given a meaningful place in these areas.

Table 2 Examples from Çekmeköy Playgrounds (The data and images in the table are taken from the Çekmeköy Municipality website.)

	1	2	3	4
name	142. Sokak P.	Akasya P.	Cemal Güngör P.	Güneysu P
area	322,05 m2	582,02 m2	38.286,30 m2	383,02 m2
N.	Alemdağ N.	Kirazlidere N.	Taşdelen N.	Çamlık N.
image 1				
image 2				
image 3				

- **School gardens:** School gardens are designed as safe areas for children and can be considered as active children's areas outside of school time. However, as in the rest of Istanbul, the majority of the existing school gardens in Çekmeköy were left as empty spaces covered with firm ground.

- **Others: (Recreation Areas)** Large recreation areas have been created within the forest areas in Çekmeköy (Table 5). In these areas, family activities, playgrounds, walking-sports opportunities are provided. These areas, which are generally accessible by car, are mainly used for weekend activities. Although these green areas offer an important potential for the city, they offer limited opportunities for children to use and access in their daily lives.

Table 4: Çekmeköy District Recreation Areas (The data and images in the table are taken from the Çekmeköy Municipality website.)

	Çatalmeşe	Küçükkoru	Nurtepe	Reşadiye
functions	buffet, wc, security, restaurant, prayer room, amphitheater, walking path, parking lot, picnic area, children's park, zoo, adventure park	book cafe, walking path, sports equipment, artificial turf, playground	-	buffet, prayer room, picnic area, walking path, security
images				

Although various critical points have been highlighted above from the Çekmeköy district, these determinations can be made for almost every part of Istanbul, perhaps for other cities in the world. So what can we do to produce healthy spaces for healthy childhood in the light of all these determinations?

5. Suggestions

If we go back to the question we asked at the beginning of the article, what can be done to improve children's spaces? In the light of the reviews and evaluations in the previous section, some suggestions are listed under the headings of spaces and principles for "children's spaces".

5.1. Spaces (Which?)

Children are perhaps the most important actors in the city. In this respect, all public spaces of the city should be organized in a way to include children's spaces as well. Many areas can be counted among these areas, from closed public spaces to squares. However, within the scope of this study, evaluations of children's spaces are made under four headings in a limited framework in the context of open spaces in the city. For this reason, suggestions are made under these headings.

- **Child Friendly Streets:** Child-friendly streets are more livable streets that create an environment with low traffic speed where residents can socialize, children can play outdoors, ride bicycles, meet and talk with friends (Genç and Erkan, 2020). Efforts can be made to ensure that the streets are reintegrated into urban life instead of being abandoned to cars, and that they become livable, not just places to pass by. In this context, the first step should be to ensure the safety of the streets for pedestrians, especially children. The rules should be shown in a way that is understandable for children and necessary markings should be made. Sidewalks of sufficient width and correct height should be considered, and ramps should be planned where necessary. Intermediate areas protected from sun and rain should be created, and urban furniture and lighting elements should be placed in suitable places. Bicycle tracks should be planned, pedestrian areas should be enriched with landscape equipment.

- **Children playgrounds:** First of all, the importance of children's playgrounds in urban green space planning should be understood. Children's playgrounds should respond to the developmental characteristics and needs of children with different characteristics and should support user participation from the design stage. These areas should allow children to have free experiences and stimulate the sense of discovery and curiosity. Playgrounds should be equipped to allow children to explore nature and our ecosystem, witness the natural cycle, and thus grow up as nature-friendly individuals. The child is expected to describe his environment in the playground. He/she can transform the materials in the space into a toy of his/her own by adding different interpretations. The purpose of creative playgrounds is to design. Children are expected to produce different solutions to the problems they encounter by using materials such as mud, soil, clay and water. The less fixed play materials (swings, slides, etc.) are used, the more functional the creative playgrounds will be (Kuh and others, 2013).

- **Bringing School Gardens to the City:** The participation of school gardens in the city as natural open play, activity and experience areas offers important potentials in many respects. These areas should be accessible to children outside of school hours; It should be planned to host activities such as games and sports. As emphasized in the title of playgrounds, it is important that school gardens are planned in a way that centers nature.

Listed above are some suggestions for the improvement/development of "existing" children's spaces in the city. On the other hand, it is clear that as the city grows, the number of new and qualified children's spaces should also increase. The most important approach in sustainability is undoubtedly the efficient use of existing resources. In this context, it is important to evaluate the idle areas in the city (dead-end streets,

construction debris, empty spaces, etc.). Consideration should be given to bringing these areas to the city as natural open spaces that everyone can access and use, and to reproduce these spaces mostly for children.

5.2.Principles (How?)

Children should be able to socialize together in the city, play freely, explore their environment and themselves. In the meantime, they should be able to make decisions freely and yet face the consequences of those decisions. In order for the child to develop physically and mentally, it is necessary to take risks, make his own decisions, and solve his own problems. One of the most important methods of building self-confidence is play. In order to develop self-confidence, the child must first feel himself in a safe environment. This section focuses on the characteristics of the above-mentioned children's spaces. In other words, the features suggested to be included in the design of these spaces are listed under the guidance of the researchers' suggestions, according to both literature reviews and fieldwork observations.

- **Importance of Nature:** Instead of the games played in open areas with standard parking equipment and which can be described as a "classic" playground, games played on wooded and rough terrain not only cause children to get sick less often, but also enable their motor skills to develop more healthily (Mulavic, 2017). Nature consciousness should be instilled in childhood, when children grasp everything easily. Children can attain this consciousness, for example, in the places where they spend most of their time, in playgrounds. Games played outdoors and in a free environment contribute to the balance and health development of children.

- **Diversity and Inclusion:** In cities, playgrounds of a quality and size that can meet the needs of children of different age groups should be included in the development plans. In Landscape Design studies of children's playgrounds, the land should be diversified in terms of topography, structural and natural diversity should be ensured in different playgrounds, and areas should be designed to include different habitat types in accordance with ecological principles (Cağlar, 2020).

- **Accessibility-Equality:** It is necessary to ensure the homogeneous distribution of children's playgrounds throughout the city. Many children in low- and middle-income groups cannot fully meet their basic needs such as shelter, health and protection. Children of high-income families, on the other hand, can either not use their right to socialize freely, walk around and play games with their peers in a world with strict rules determined by their families, or they can use it with a limited amount of time. (Özbay, 2019). However, the most important feature of cities is that they are heterogeneous, that is, children, young people, adults, and old people with different characteristics are together in the city. The city's facilities should be accessible to all children, regardless of income. Outdoor playgrounds in the daily life of the city are indispensable parts of the city for the social development of the child. (Atıcı and Öztürk, 2021)

- **Security:** The intensification of uncontrolled traffic, social fears, violence, lack of public space and facilities have made cities a hostile place for children and young people (Atıcı and Öztürk, 2021, as cited in Bartlett, 2002) However, perhaps the most important feature of children's use of open spaces in the city is that these areas have been made safe for them. Feeling safe will allow them to freely explore and communicate with themselves and their surroundings.

- **Participation:** In the Little Prince, a sentence begins like this: *"The grown-ups never understand anything on their own…"* That means we should ask the little princes and princesses. When child-friendly city initiatives are examined in developed countries, it is seen that great importance is given to the improvement of the physical environment, such as the development and increase of recreational areas such as green areas and parks, and making the streets safer places by ensuring the participation

of children. In these initiatives, it is also important to ensure that children, as independent and autonomous citizens, participate in decision-making and policy-making processes in all matters that concern them (Tandoğan and Ergun 2013, as cited in Riggio, 2002). Moreover, with this participation, children will develop a sense of belonging to the places they have contributed to, and they will embrace these spaces.

In this context, a pioneering project implemented by the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality will be mentioned. Within the scope of the project organized by the Istanbul city council, more than 6,500 children between the ages of 6 and 14 became "Masters of Care" with great excitement, motivation and sense of responsibility at the workshops they attended and at the "Istanbul Asks Children" stations created in public spaces. Within the scope of this project, the children presented the aspects of Istanbul that they love and are proud of, their problems from their own perspectives, and created creative solutions for them. Let's exemplify how they perceive the workshops in which they take part as active participants, in their own words: An 8th grade student said, "*I felt like a part of the society thanks to this program. It made me feel valued.*" A Grade 6 student said, "*It is very nice to have children's ideas on this project. There are children in Istanbul as well*!" (Istanbul Çocuklara Soruyor, 2022)

The design approaches listed above are suggestions that are frequently suggested by researchers and can be easily implemented without much effort. Probably, similar findings can be encountered in other cities and countries, and similar suggestions can be listed. However, there is no doubt that if they are realized, they will create significant social changes and differences. This is perhaps the most important initiative we can take for the future: creating opportunities, environments and opportunities for children to reach and use their potential.

6.Conclusion

While children form a large group in urban life, they are the least considered in all political, physical and social plans and arrangements. However, children constitute the group that deserves special attention the most because they lack political and economic power. (Parlak, 2019). It should be seen that urban planning and space design policies and decisions should be made by involving children in every sense. It should not be forgotten that today's child will be tomorrow's adult, every investment made for children is also made for healthy and strong societies of the future. When making decisions regarding the city, we must first consider children's rights, ensure that children can walk safely on the street alone, and make spatial arrangements regarding basic rights such as education, culture and art accessible to every child, regardless of religion, language, race or gender. Moreover, children constitute the most vulnerable group that will be most affected by the possible consequences of every decision taken on the city and life.

All public spaces in the city should be planned sufficiently to allow safe access and use, including all citizens as well as children. Planning studies are also important for regions under development, such as Çekmeköy, which is researched within the scope of the article. In addition to improving the existing open public spaces to include children, new and qualified children's spaces should be located in a way that all children can access.

Industrialization and population growth, rapid and irregular urbanization, environmental problems, poverty; They have taken away the opportunity of children to live their childhood freely. The first action to be taken for the future is to give back the opportunities taken from them as soon as possible. It is clear that for the healthy cities of the future, first of all, it is necessary to raise healthy individuals, and this can only be possible with qualified/healthy environments.

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