

Designing spaces that users can define

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Children playing in the Crown Fountain at Millenium Park, Chicago. Photo • Courtesy Andy Tinucci

Comparing her experiences of living with children in Rome and Chicago, architect Monica Chadha concludes that culture and social norms may be more important than explicit rules in making a city child-friendly. Making a link with the Reggio Emilia approach to the design of early childhood centres, in this article she asks what are the implications for thinking about urban design.

In theory, it is always welcome when those in charge of aspects of urban life explicitly consider the needs of children. Paradoxically, however, incomplete thinking about what children need can be worse than not thinking about it at all, as it can lead to unexpected restrictions in circumstances which have not been properly considered. Four examples from my home city of Chicago – two positive and two negative – help to illustrate the point.

To start with, the examples of overly prescriptive policies. Some years ago I wanted to explore the city with my small twin girls using public transport. The Chicago Transit Authority has a policy of welcoming strollers on the city's buses, but only when they are collapsed before boarding. While this works well when each child is accompanied by an adult, it makes life difficult for one parent with two children. My only option was to carry the twins onto the bus in their car seats, and leave them there while I got off the bus again to collapse the stroller.

The second negative example also comes from the city's public transport. When the girls were older, we started to get around by bike. The city's transit policy is to welcome bikes on trains, but with a limit of two bikes per train car. In other words, the twins and I could take our bikes on the train only if I were willing to leave one young child, or bike, in a different car.

In contrast, the most positive aspects of parenting young children in a cosmopolitan city have involved rules that don't explicitly consider children at all. Over the last couple of years, Chicago has introduced cycle lanes on the city's roads, separated from traffic by bollards and often by a row of parked cars. These lanes were not explicitly informed by the needs of children, and make no special provision for children – but they have the effect of making life much easier for the urban parent than the aforementioned child-specific policies.

My final example concerns my and my children's favourite place in Chicago: Crown Fountain in Millennium Park. Opened in 2004, designed by Jaume Plensa and executed by Krueck and Sexton Architects, the fountain is a black granite reflective pool bounded by two glass brick towers that project video. Intermittently, water cascades down the sides of the tower or spouts through the 'mouth' of local residents whose faces are projected onto the towers. This space has become a place for families to gather. Kids sit around, or run about splashing. They stand under the fountain and get soaked, or walk around the edge and observe.

I believe the key to the fountain's success is that when it was commissioned, it was not with the intention of it becoming such a gathering place. Had it been designed as a pool for children, it would have been bound up with the kind of rules and regulations on usage that typically apply to playgrounds, and are designed to minimise the possibility of parents litigating against the city in case of accidents. It is precisely because the fountain wasn't programmed explicitly for children that it has become a place where children are drawn to play. We are left to explore and interact with a piece of art, defining our own experiences.

Culture and social norms

These insights are easier to explain than to operationalise in design thinking, because they come down to culture. When my children were young, I had the opportunity to spend 4 months with them in Rome. Here I encountered a different relationship between the city and children, in which nothing felt overly

prescriptive, but everything felt welcoming to explore. We drew with chalk on cobblestones, ran around piazzas, played in small parks and discovered place after place that was an adventure for a child.

The most instructive contrast was the public transport system. Except in extreme rush hour, when buses were more crowded and tempers more frayed, I invariably found drivers and passengers were patient, understanding and generous in helping me to navigate public transport with the girls. There were no rules about strollers – just a general sense that children were citizens, too, and needed to be cut some slack as they partook of city life.

Naturally, there are trade-offs involved. It takes more time for an adult to get on a bus when accompanying small children and a stroller – so how do you balance the needs of individual travellers and the wider public? There is an analogy with disabled people, who also have special needs on public transport. In most cases a strong social norm has evolved that able-bodied passengers sitting close to the doors are expected to offer their seat when an elderly or handicapped passenger boards the bus.

No doubt there are instances in which this social norm breaks down. But would it really be a good idea to try to define specific rules, along the lines of the collapsed-stroller policy? You could set aside a specific number of seats on the bus, say, for passengers who use walking aids – but what about passengers who don't use walking aids but are still in more need of a seat, such as heavily pregnant women? What happens when more disabled passengers want to board than there are designated seats available?

The risk is that making rules explicit could weaken the more vaguely defined but powerful norm of deferring to those more in need. Something similar applies to children. Rather than trying to be prescriptive about every circumstance in which a child may interact with an aspect of urban life, we need to think about ways in which we can nurture an urban culture in which social

norms are welcoming of children's often unpredictable needs.

Implications for architects

As an architect, I try to apply in my own work the principle of not being overly prescriptive, and designing spaces which users will be able to define. In particular, I've worked with the Reggio Emilia approach in the design of early childhood centres. Founded by Loris Malaguzzi in 1945, this approach to education celebrates the self-guided potential of the child. The philosophy encourages self-exploration and the guiding principles focus on the natural development of the child and the relationship the child has with their environment. Values include the sense of belonging to a community.

At Ross Barney Architects, our design of the Louise M. Beem Early Childhood Center at the College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn focused on self-exploration and discovery. We lowered windows and turned them into nooks. We gave the youngest kids floor to ceiling windows facing the playground. Each classroom exited directly to the outdoor exploration areas. We made mounds out of bunny grass to roll on. Even the teaching observation rooms had two-way mirrors that were dropped to the floor so kids could crawl up, touch and see themselves.

The point was to consciously refrain from creating spaces with predetermined uses, as far as possible, and instead to allow for exploration. The Reggio Emilia philosophy parallels the broader urban environment in which I believe children can thrive. Our public spaces should be places where kids can explore freely and feel a sense of belonging – and sometimes the most limiting environments are those consciously designed for children.