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# Learning from the presence of young children in urban public spaces

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**LEARNING FROM THE PRESENCE OF YOUNG CHILDREN IN URBAN  
PUBLIC SPACES**

**APRENDENDO COM A PRESENÇA DE CRIANÇAS PEQUENAS NOS  
ESPAÇOS PUBLICOS URBANOS**

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**LEARNING FROM THE PRESENCE OF YOUNG CHILDREN IN  
URBAN PUBLIC SPACES**

## APRENDENDO COM A PRESENÇA DE CRIANÇAS PEQUENAS NOS ESPAÇOS PÚBLICOS URBANOS

Abstract : In recent times, several studies have been conducted on children's urban experiences. These studies predominantly reveal a decline of their presence in public spaces, alongside with a rise in the adoption of 'child-friendly' design. In this article, I focus on the presence of children within everyday public spaces. I interrogate what insights young children can offer urban designers. Through immersive filming methods with children aged 2 to 6, I outline a repertoire of presence. In this text, I delineate the concept of "opportunistic presence." This prompts reflection on children's ability to thrive independently of designers, thereby contributing to the (re)enchantment of the cityscape.

Keywords: children's studies. public spaces. ambiances. urban planner. subversion.

Resumo: Em tempos recentes, várias pesquisas têm sido realizados sobre as experiências urbanas das crianças. Esta pesquisa revelam predominantemente uma diminuição de sua presença em espaços públicos urbanos, ao lado de um aumento na adoção de design 'amigo da criança'. Neste artigo, foco na presença de crianças dentro de espaços públicos cotidianos. Pergunto-me o que é que as crianças pequenas podem trazer aos designers urbanos. Através de métodos de filmagem imersiva com crianças de 2 a 6 anos, esboço um repertório de presença. Neste artigo, delinheiro o conceito de "presença oportunística". Isso provoca reflexão sobre a capacidade das crianças de prosperar independentemente dos designers, contribuindo assim para o (re)encantamento da paisagem urbana.

Palavras chave: pesquisa sobre crianças. espaços públicos. ambientes. planejador urbano. subversão.

## 1 HOW CHILDREN ARE CONSIDERED?

While research on childhood has often focused on children's absence from urban public spaces, the approach I propose emphasizes studying their presence in the spaces of their daily lives. Children represent a significant portion of the urban population globally (UNICEF, 2012). However, they are often neglected in social science research on contemporary societal and urban challenges. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that children are active participants in social dynamics (Chombart de Lauwe, 1990), who share the same daily experiences and physical spaces as adults within society. Following Breviglieri (2015), I argue that studying children's everyday experiences in the city can provide valuable information for urban planners. He raises the following question: "What insights does a child's journey through the streets offer us?". Through this inquiry, he investigates the architect's role and responsibility in shaping, and potentially impoverishing, the urban experience for our youngest citizens.

Today, children's experiences are generally addressed in terms of absence. While in the past children used to play outdoors freely, they now undergo a "long process of containment" (Ariès, 1960) in dedicated, domestic or private spaces. Fear and risk management play a significant role in shaping the experiences of youngsters. They limit their outdoor activities, at least in terms of autonomy (Rivière, 2016). This decline in outdoor activities is accompanied by an increase in time spent on indoor activities such as digital entertainment (Loebach & Gilliliand, 2016), and by the development of private, commercialized recreational spaces (Sullu, 2018).

However, the city is considered a learning and recreative environment (Noschis, 2006) where children experience social interactions and "tinker" with their everyday spatialities (Abu-Ghazze, 2002). Moreover, in recent years, an increasing number of cities, primarily in the global North, have been working towards the inclusion of children through "child-friendly cities" initiatives (Cordero-Vinueza et al., 2023). It seems necessary to question these new forms of development and to critique the standardization of so-called child-friendly spaces.

## 2 HOW TO CAPT CHILDREN'S DAILY PRESENCE IN PUBLIC SPACES?

These thoughts are based on my doctoral research into the ways in which young children are present in the public space. A field study was carried out with six children (aged 2 to 6) in Sfax (Tunisia) and Grenoble (France). This work involved an immersive in their daily lives, managed with filming material. Special attention was given to the perceptible effects of urban ambiances on children's bodies. Through, repeated viewings of the footage, I outlined a repertoire of forms of presence. Particular attention has been given to naming the different forms: "orchestrated", "shared", "corporeal", "opportunistic", "displaced", "rhythmic", and "contained". The restitution employs various channels: text, sound fragments, videographic compositions and photograms intermingle to finely describe how children's presences are.

Each of these forms of presence could provide with useful information for urban planner. However, in this proposal, we focus on one aspect of our results, the form of “opportunistic presence”. I've chosen to describe this form in detail because it seems to be the form that best illustrates children's capacity for subversion. In fact, children encourage us to question the role of urban designers. Moreover, I consider that giving a detailed account of one form in particular helps most to understand the degree of finesse required to comprehend the sensitive and bodily dimensions of urban's presences.

### 3 OPPORTUNISTIC PRESENCES

I define opportunistic presence as the presence that takes full advantage of urban spaces. While the chosen term is open to debate, it conveys the idea that children know how to find hidden spots and transform the conventional uses of spaces and objects. There are various types of opportunistic presence, and they are each presented as a sub-category in the following sections.

#### 3.1 Edge presences

Film observations revealed that children use the edges of spaces, corners, and nooks that adults often overlook. Just a few centimeters of flat edge are enough to create a racetrack for a rhinoceros. Upon seeing the curb, Hector (2, Grenoble) starts running, stops, and places the two toy animals he holds in each hand on the wall. With an outstretched arm and a firm grip on the plastic object, the child quickens his pace to launch the rhinoceros at full speed along the track. He is focused on his hand movements, which occasionally mimic the animal's steps, or react to obstacles, like a gutter, that appear on the racetrack. Hector is guided along the edge by his hand.

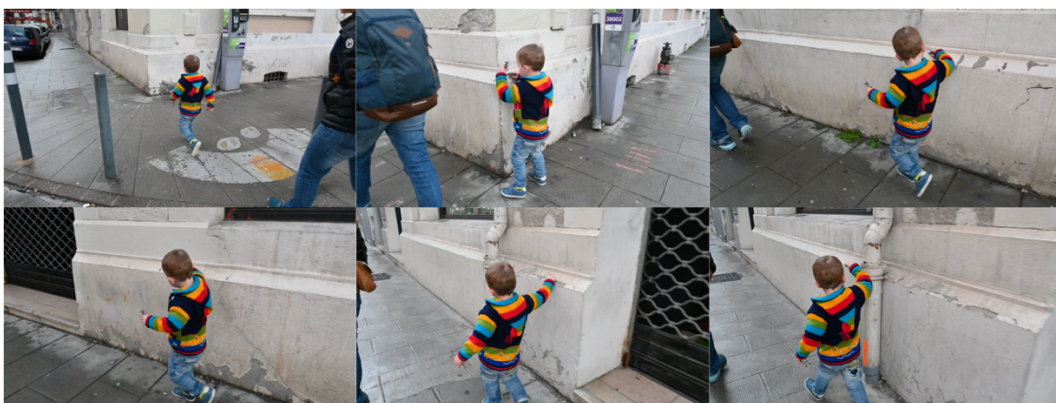


Figure 1. Urban racetrack for rhinoceros  
Source: Produced by the author (2023).

In other situations, it is the whole body that occupies the edge by balancing on the pavement or an access ramp. Adèle (5, Grenoble) concentrates hard to avoid falling off the wooden curb, her body curled up. With one hand, she holds on to the rope that marks the boundary of the planted area, and with the other, she holds her bag to prevent it from hindering her progress.

Similarly, Nicola (5, Grenoble) uses a low metal barrier separating the sidewalk from the flowerbed to speed up on his scooter.



Figure 2. Micro adventure  
Source: Send by a parent (2023).



Figure 3. Propulsion ramp  
Source: Produced by the author (2023).

### 3.2 Steep presences

In the cities of Grenoble and Sfax, characterized by flat topography, slopes serve a practical function: allowing vehicles to pass or enabling wheelchairs or strollers to ascend a sidewalk. Children know how to use these slopes for other purposes, such as testing their balance. For example, Nicola (5, Grenoble) walks along the slope of a dropped curb.



Figure 4. Slope balance  
Source: Produced by the author (2023).

Urban slopes are summits to be climbed. Malek (5, Sfax) walks up to a pile of gravel with one hand on his hip. As he takes his first step, he loses his balance and spreads his arms to steady himself. His whole body is engaged in the climb. At the top, he tries to grab the edge of a wall twice. The height gives him a sense of confidence and freedom; he looks down and indulges in a few dance moves.



Figure 5. Urban summits  
Source: Produced by the author (2022).

Gaining a bit of height, even just a few centimeters, seems to give children a sense of strength. From the top of his promontory—a pavement that towers 20 centimeters above the road—Gaspard (3, from Grenoble) shouts at cars and pretends to stop them with his hands. His strength seems to be multiplied by the height he has reached. From up there, he uses his fingers as binoculars to peer into the distance.



Figure 6. Promontory  
Source: Produced by the author (2023).

### 3.3 Textured presences

Children exploit the city's potential, particularly its diverse textures. Interruptions in movements and special attentions highlight the variety of urban textures. The frictions between a child's body and urban surfaces can generate new sounds. In a downtown park in Grenoble, Adèle (5) runs on the asphalt, veers off then jumps to straddle a gutter. On the other side of the gutter the ground is covered in gravel. Adèle lands and walks, rubbing her feet on the surface for about ten meters, arms outstretched. Re-centering herself, she resumes her normal stride and runs through the grass.

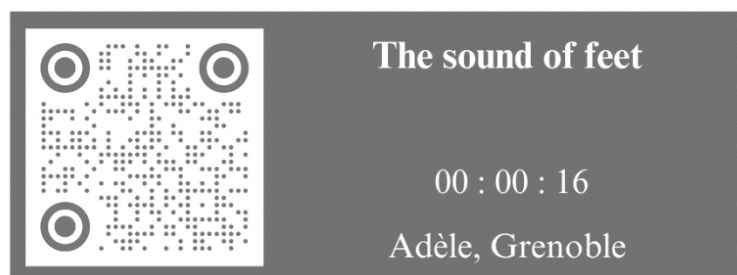


Figure 7. The sound of feet  
Source: Send by the parent (2023).

Malleable textures are also favored. In an alley specially designed for children in front of the school, children gather around a strip of gravel in the center. This strip is the last unfinished part of the "Children's Street" project in Grenoble, which includes pedestrianization and the installation of child-friendly urban furniture. The children are watching the ground. They crouch down, pick up the stones, kick them with their feet, and observe how other children handle them.



Figure 8. The wonderful construction site area  
Source: Produced by the author (2023).

This unplanned space creates excitement among the children. On the other side of the Mediterranean, in the sandy alleys of Sfax, Malek (4) walks leisurely with his arms hanging by his sides. He slows down, his gaze fixed on the ground. He takes a step back and presses his foot into the sand, staring at the imprint left by his sandal. Taking off his shoe, he bends down and presses it into the ground with his hand. He examines the mark, stands up, and slips his foot back into the sandal.



Figure 9. Footprint  
Source: Produced by the author (2022).

### 3.4 Musical presences

Musical presences refer to children's ability to transform the city into a musical instrument, revealing its sonic potential. Through their movements and use of alternative pathways, children create new sounds and contribute to shaping urban ambiances. Nicola (5, from Grenoble) is walking with his mother and older brother along a pedestrian path in a park. He deviates from the concrete path to walk on metal grilles laying on pebbles. His steps are insistent and produce a vibrant metallic sound in the gap between the vegetation and the concrete.





Figure 10. Metallic vibrant sound  
Source: Produced by the author (2023).

Gaspard (3, from Grenoble) is walking down a quiet street late in the day. He is holding a wooden stick in his hand. Before crossing the street, he taps the stick against a pole, creating a metallic sound. The stick falls, he picks it up. He crosses the street and strikes the next pole, which creates a ring. He walks towards the other side of the sidewalk to get closer to the row of poles that delineates it. The poles are spaced about 3 meters apart, and Gaspard taps each one once or more. Different metallic notes emerge from his interactions with the poles, creating a somewhat dissonant melody.

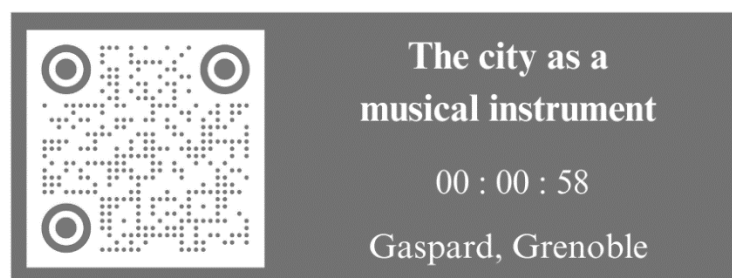


Figure 11. The city as a musical instrument  
Source: Produced by the author (2023).

### 3.5 Archaeological presences

This subcategory refers to the way children, like archaeologists on an excavation site, have the ability to find things hidden in the city ground that arouse their curiosity. Malek ( 5, from Sfax), is standing in front of his house with older children. While the older kids relax together, he takes the time to explore this familiar space which is always full of surprises. Today, a can catches his eye. With one hand on his hip, he bends down to pick it up, turning it over in his hands and observing it with acute attention. An older child urges him to put the can down. After avoiding the old child's hand to keep the can, Malek resumes his exploration. He taps his fingertip on the metal, creating a light splashing sound. After a brief pause, he looks into the hole of the can and puts his finger inside. His mother quickly tells him to stop. Frustrated, Malek raises his voice then throws the can with an arm movement that starts from his back. It clatters to the ground, and Malek runs off in the opposite direction.

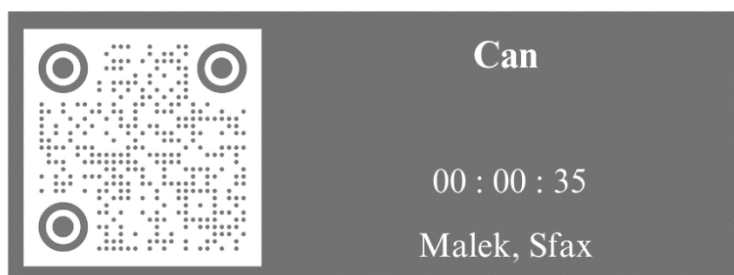


Figure 12. Can  
Source: Produced by the author (2022).

Hector (2, from Grenoble) is walking to the nursery with his hands in his pockets. Accompanied by music playing from a mobile phone and the bustle of the market, he makes his way along a footpath. Walking straight ahead, he steps on a branch. An "oh, oh, oh" escapes from his mouth as he bends down and he picks up the twisted stick. An unknown adult walks by and says, "Great find." Quickly, the stick transforms into a dragon and starts to chase Hector's father.

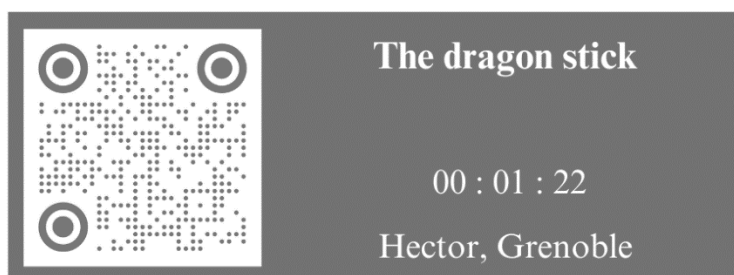


Figure 13. The dragon stick  
Source: Produced by the author (2023).

### 3.6 Imaginative presences

This second example of this last category contributes to defining a final subcategory: imaginary stories triggered by everyday events. If a stick can be transformed into a dragon, it can also become a fishing rod. On his way home from school, Gaspard (4, from Grenoble) inserts a stick into various holes in the pavement, hoping to catch fish or tree leaves.



For a group of three little girls, aged 5, from Grenoble, taking the tram becomes the boarding a "plane" flying to Tunisia, or the unveiling of a "third heaven." Their entire bodies engage in mimicking the process of strapping themselves in, driving, and gazing out at the sky.

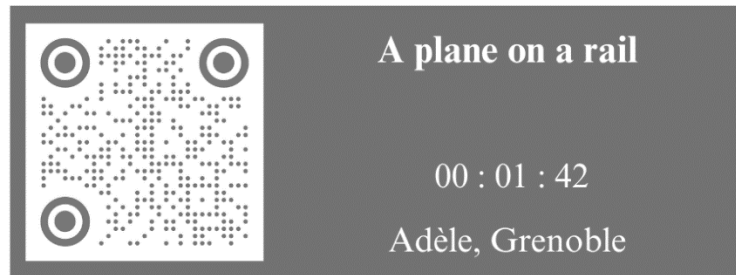


Figure 14. A plane on a rail  
Source: Send by the parent (2023).

Malek is walking home from his grandparents' house. He is chatting with both of his parents, his "Spider-Man" school bag snug on his back. As he reaches a bend in the quiet street, he leaps over a gully. Lifting a leg and an arm on one side, he struggles to maintain his balance. His mother cheers him on with a "Well done!" and then adds, "He's doing what Spider-Man does, he loves it."



Figure 15. Spiderman pose  
Source: Send by the parent (2023).

#### 4 CONCLUSION

This research addresses the need to find ways to capture and describe a central aspect of urban experiences that is diffuse and difficult to verbalize. In fact, putting into words and naming forms of presence is delicate. Words sometimes fall short in fully capturing the essence of children's experiences and could benefit from greater precision. Striking the right balance between clarity and finesse in expression is essential to faithfully convey the diverse situations encountered by children.

This focus on understanding the sensitive forms of everyday urban presence is essential for work on ambiances, as it aids in grasping the diversity of perceptions of urban environments. Additionally, exploring their representations and translations serves as a valuable tool for dialogue and debate with city planners.

In an era where architects and urban planners are urged to "re-enchant the city" (Hurstel, 2006), exploring the form of opportunistic presences could be enlightening. Although the definition of re-enchantment remains vague, the term is widely used by designers to refer to

approaches aimed at rehabilitating public spaces for purposes of conviviality, vegetation, aesthetic enhancement, and gamification.

It can be interesting to examine how children seize upon edges, textures, and urban treasures to create the unexpected and the enchanted in overlooked corners in which older city dwellers rarely linger. Do we truly need to re-enchant the city when children effortlessly bring enchantment to it? How can we draw inspiration from children to infuse the city with enchantment without succumbing to standardized recommendations?

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