Special Issue Combining Safety and Equity in the Post-Covid City: New Trends between Local Policies and Bottom-Up Practices

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*Guest editors*

**Gabriele Manella**
**Madalena Corte-Real**

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What is a city? This is the question

Letizia Montalbano, Elena Pagliarino[1]

# Examining Regeneration Experiences of Urban Outdoor Spaces Through the Lens of Children's Rights[2]

## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic seriously impacted the wellbeing of children and young people all around the world. In Italy, they were among the most affected by the State restrictions to prevent the diffusion of the virus (Tonucci, 2020). As UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) reports (Mascheroni *et al.*, 2021), in Italy children's home confinement and school closure were the longest among European countries. Niri (2020) points out that despite the fact that one of the fundamental principles of the Convention on children's rights is that of their best interest «in every problematic situation, the best interest of the child/adolescent must take priority» (Art. 3 of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child), during the lockdown no need of children and adolescents was deemed compelling enough to warrant specific exceptions in government prescriptions aimed at limiting the spread of the pandemic. Their necessity to access outdoor spaces for fresh air was acknowledged only after the needs of dogs and runners were addressed (*ibidem*). The closure of playgrounds was one of the first prevention measures implemented in Italy during the pandemic (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 - A girl looks at the close playground during the pandemic (Source: Pagliarino).

Schools were closed immediately afterwards. Walks by the sea, in the woods and city parks were prohibited. The pandemic highlighted soon the disparities in access to nature for urban children since only those from higher socioeconomic status families had access to private green spaces

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and vacation homes in natural areas (Rios *et al.*, 2021). For the other children, even the access to the condominium courtyards was precluded.
According to various authors (Ammaniti, 2020; Bianchi, 2020; Niri, 2020), this disregard for children reflects a long-standing situation that the pandemic has only exacerbated. Based on UNICEF's comparative report on child wellbeing in rich countries (2020), Italy records the worst results. As regards the school system, in the Seventies, Italy was a model at European level (Bianchi, 2020), in particular for the inclusion of children with disabilities (Laws n. 118/1971, n. 370/1976 and n. 517/1977) and the school full-time (Law n. 820/1971) which is not a simple enlargement of the school time but an opportunity to experiment with a holistic education. However, as early as the Eighties, a trend of decline and disinvestment emerged and persists today (*ibidem*). According to the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) (2023), Italy holds the lowest position among OECD countries in terms of indicators reflecting the quality of its educational system.
This situation reflects the marginality of childhood in the political agenda – what Tonucci (1996) calls the «invisibility of children» – which clashes with the stereotype of a country where families are large and children are pampered or even spoilt. Instead, the typical Italian family is becoming smaller – Italy is among the Countries with the lowest fertility rate – and more isolated. The solitude of Italian children is aggravated by «the loss of public realm» that is the disappearance of traditional bonds which linked the family nucleus with the extended family and the residential community due to the construction of anonymous neighbourhoods of housing complexes, usually unconnected to the historic urban fabric, and poorly provided of outdoor spaces for socializing and children's play (Lorenzo, 1992, p. 6). Childhood is placed at the centre of society only seemingly (Bakan, 2012). What strategies can be deployed to counter the social irrelevance of girls and boys, highlighted and exacerbated by the pandemic? This article intends to contribute in answering this question with a reflection on the role of cities' outdoor spaces to the complete fulfilment of post-pandemic childhood.

## 1. Theoretical framework

This work focuses on urban spaces that facilitate children's rights by fostering their physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development, as well as their active participation in social life and their capacity to contribute to the transformation of urban environments (Giusti, 1998). Thus it builds on and complements the existing literature on urban sociology, environmental education, and the new sociology of childhood, especially that which has developed reflection on the social construction of childhood in dialogue with the sociology of law and in relation to the international Convention on the Rights of the Child (see for example, Belotti & Ruggiero, 2008; Baraldi & Iervese, 2014). In the following paragraphs, this literature is explained by dividing it according to the children's rights to which it refers. However, children's rights are connected to each other, i.e., the right to autonomous mobility contributes to the right to play, education and sociality among peers, while the right to a healthy environment or that to be listened should be transversely guaranteed in every space dedicated to play, education, mobility, self-expression, and socialisation.
The final right under scrutiny in this literature review, namely the right of children to participate, holds particular significance in the new paradigm of childhood sociology. Since its affirmation around the end of the Seventies, the new sociology of childhood (James *et al.*, 1998; Belloni, 2006; Corsaro, 2015), has had a predominant interest in the daily lives of children in all their spheres of life, recognizing children's ability to be active subjects gifted of agency. The concept of agency is further explored through children's active engagement in shaping their immediate territorial surroundings, as they partake in decision-making, planning, and action within the urban fabric,

contributing to their lived experiences within the city (Forni, 2002; Pinzello & Quartarone, 2005; Paba & Pecoriello, 2006).

### *1.1 The Right to Independent Mobility*

The autonomous mobility together with free play on the street are considered fundamental in children's construction of social, cultural, and civic identity (Ward, 1978; Paba & Perrone, 2004) and in their transition to adulthood (Matthews, 2003). According to Karsten (2005), the freedom of children to move around their neighbourhood or city without adult supervision has dramatically declined in recent decades in Western countries, due to urban planning choices that have favoured car circulation. The spaces precluded to cars have been reduced, public spaces have been transformed in car parks, the movement of pedestrians and cyclists has become more dangerous (Jacobs, 1961; Ward, 1978) for the increase of accidents and air pollution (Lorenzo, 1992, p. 15). The reduction in children's autonomous mobility is also due to social factors such as the weakening of community ties, the educational choices of parents who do not always favour the proximity between school and home and the social pressure for the increasingly omnipresent adults' control on children even during their free time (O'Brien, 2003; Karsten, 2005). «We are no longer used to seeing boys and girls traveling public spaces; for a long time they have been confined to special places, under guard, under surveillance» (Mottana & Campagnoli, 2017, p. 10). Nevertheless, children need a city that they can experience as a large playground (Bozzo, 1998) because the right to safety travel, unaccompanied by adults, is instrumental to the full affirmation of their rights to play, go to school, or meet peers.

### *1.2 The Right to Play*

Article 31 of the Convention on the rights of the child has long been considered «the forgotten article» because there is still some resistance in recognizing play as an essential right (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013). Teachers and parents attribute to play a meaning strongly influenced by adults who direct authorize, limit, and sometimes grant it only in exchange for adequate behaviour. It happens, therefore, that overly agitated classes are threatened by their teacher with "skipping the break" or "spending the break sitting at the desk". In many parts of the world, the tolerance towards the natural behaviours of children and adolescents in common spaces is decreasing, because they are perceived as a source of disturbance, disorder, and danger (*ibidem*). This led to the increasing appearance of bans on some types of games or to the complete prohibition of children's play in common, public and private spaces (i.e., condominium courtyards and gardens).

Play and recreation are essential for children's health and wellbeing. They promote the development of creativity, imagination, self-confidence, autonomy, as well as physical, social, cognitive, emotional, and social abilities, contributing to all aspects of the learning process (*ibidem*). Gray (2011) notes that free play with peers has declined sharply in Western countries and that such decline is associated with the rise of psychopathology in children and adolescents.

The neighbourhoods close to the places where children live and go to school are important settings for play, but there has been a progressive transition from outdoor play spread across every space of the city, such as streets, squares, sidewalks, and courtyards, to play concentrated in dedicated areas or contained in private spaces where children mostly play alone, with a negative impact on their cognitive, emotional, and social development and on their wellbeing, due to the decrease in outdoor physical exercise (O'Brien, 2003; Karsten, 2005). The choice to relegate children's play to dedicated spaces progressively causes a form of childhood segregation (Jacobs, 1961; Ward, 1978; Ariès, 1993; Tonucci, 1996). These "spaces for them" are frequently gated and fenced-in, not always close to children's residences, thus requiring accompaniment for access,

and sometimes inadequately equipped to foster imaginative, active, social, and risk-testing play (Brown *et al*., 2019).
Several authors highlight the multiple benefits of playing outdoor and warn about the increasing disconnection between children and nature (Sobel, 1996; Moore, 1997; Gill, 2014). Playgrounds serve as environments that promote children's development particularly in the absence of natural settings such as meadows, woods, and streams (Apel & Pach, 1997). But excessive control over children and overprotectiveness have shaped the development of playgrounds (Malone, 2007). Therefore, prioritizing accident prevention results in increasingly protected and pre-determined play experiences, ultimately limiting the opportunities for children to express their creativity during play.

### *1.3 The Right to Education in a Safe Environment*

This study examines the right to education within the context of the city's responsibility to ensure its complete realization, focusing specifically on the right within a conducive and healthy environment that supports learning in all its dimensions. Loris Malaguzzi, the founder of the Reggio Emilia Children Approach to education, conceptualized the physical environment as the "third teacher", emphasizing its role in the learning process. Also Maria Montessori theorized the pedagogical value of a "prepared classroom environment" as a significant agent of learning. However, the right to a physical environment suitable for meaningful learning was severely compromised during the pandemic. Education was first shifted online and then regulated by distancing measures, diminishing its physical and social dimensions. At the same time, the pandemic highlighted the necessity of integrating contact with nature into education, reigniting interest in outdoor education and revitalizing a longstanding concern of environmental education –the centrality of experiences in nature – which is increasingly relevant and urgent as the children's disconnection from nature grows (Sobel, 1996). There has been a renewed interest in the external spaces of schools, such as school gardens and courtyards, as well as all urban spaces useful for a meaningful learning. Place-based approaches to education suggest to connect schools with their communities and surroundings to create an educational community throughout the city where both the physical place – the built and natural environmental space – and the social, political, and economic assets are the core values of the learning experience (Freire, 2000). Sobel (1996) stresses the importance of children and youth-driven processes in place-based education. Hart's model of children's participation (1979) passes through a school able to connect students with the larger community, but public school systems in most nations remain completely isolated from their surrounding communities and environments. The teacher and environmental educator Franco Lorenzoni (2020) suggests to build generative links with local administrations, health authorities, and associations, starting with opening the schools all day, to host multiple formal and non-formal education activities, giving space to collaboration, dialogue, and participation. «The city is itself an environmental education, and can be used to provide one, whether we think of learning through the city, learning about the city, learning how to use, manage or change the city» (Ward, 1978, p. 152). The *City as Classroom* is the message that Marshall McLuhan *et al*. (1984) conveyed to teachers, inviting them to utilize the city as a tool to encourage children to observe, feel, and perceive their own urban environment. This involves adopting unconventional educational paths, thereby stimulating their awareness of being social actors gifted of transformative power over the world around them.

### *1.4 The Right to Participate in Decision-Making*

Among the pioneers in examining the city through the lens of children in urban planning, design, and management were Jane Jacobs (1961) and Kevin Lynch (1977) during the post-war decades. In the Seventies, Colin Ward furthered this exploration with her famous book *The Child*

*in the City* (1978), introducing an innovative, anti-authoritarian model to interpret the relation between children and urban public spaces within the realm of social sciences. More recently, an emerging global child-friendly cities movement shifted the focus onto their needs, experiences, and views. In 1996, UNICEF launched the Child Friendly Cities Initiative (childfriendlycities.org), which promotes the realization of children's rights at the local level by supporting a network that includes municipal governments, civil society organizations, the private sector, academia, media and children themselves. The international initiative Urban95, supported by the Bervard van Leer Foundation, reimagines cities from 95 centimetres, the average height of a three years old child (Vincelot, 2019). Viewing the urban environment from a "frog's perspective", where adults must crouch down, bending their legs to reach children's eye level, reveals a significant shift in the functionality and accessibility of cities, thus underscoring the vast gap between urban design and the actual needs of children (Forni, 2002). Child in the City (childinthecity.org) is another indipendent foundation aimed to strenghten the position of children in cities, promote and protect their rights. Cities Alive (ARUP, 2017) proposes a "children's infrastructure" that is both a physical and social network that allows children to experience the city. Similarly, several environment education experts (for example Sobel, 1996) stress the concept of the network, borrowing it from ecology and proposing a widespread system of spaces and interventions connecting the "neighbourhood nature" with the one outside the city.

In 1991, in the Italian city of Fano, Francesco Tonucci founded "The city of children" project with a specific political objective: empowering children to play a leading role in the urban governance. Since then, numerous cities have joined the project, forming an international network that supports municipalities in implementing the participation of girls and boys in the governance of the city, the transformation of public spaces to facilitate children's free play and autonomous mobility, particularly on the home-school journey, as well as the participatory planning involving boys and girls (Belingardi *et al.*, 2018).

While this movement's values were and are beyond reproach, it has had very little influence on the structure of cities (ARUP, 2017). According to Brown *et al.* (2019), a right-based approach to urban policy means respecting the right of children to participate in the process of decision-making, through engaging with children, listening to them and involving them in co-design activities and co-creation of public spaces. However, there are very few experiences developed in a way that allows such voices to be heard and respected (Bishop & Corkery, 2017; Brown *et al.*, 2019). There are plenty of resources available, but it is still necessary to undergo a cultural shift, valuing children's and young people's knowledge and ideas.

Recognizing children as agency actors is the central node of the entire sociology of childhood. The authors cited within the realms of urban sociology and environmental education literature also share the vision that acknowledges children's ability to be active social actors within their cities. The concept of agency is also taken up by the participatory approach in urban planning (Ciaffi & Mela, 2006) aimed at the active involvement of participants living in a given territorial context. In this sense, the active engagement of children is pivotal, as their perspective is inherently connected to their immediate surroundings. It embodies a tangible, deconstructive, and spontaneous ecological gaze. Importantly, their perspective is less influenced by adult-centric biases, interests, and expectations. Furthermore, it is marked by imagination, openness to experimentation, innovation, and a forward-looking orientation (Forni, 2002; Pinzello & Quartarone, 2005; Berritto, 2022).

## 2. Methodology and analytical approach

The article reflects on public spaces such as playgrounds, city gardens, and parks, school gardens, and courtyards, as well as other open-air spaces like streets, squares, arcades, and sidewalks. Additionally, it considers private spaces such as condominium courtyards and gardens. The reflec-

tion is conducted by examining some well-established experiences and other innovative ones that occurred during the pandemic in several European cities. These initiatives are characterized by addressing children's rights to education, play, security, association, self-expression, and being heard through the use of outdoor urban spaces. Children's rights-based approaches have had little strategic influence on the built form of cities to date (Bishop & Corkery, 2017). «While progress has been made in the last 30 years, rights-based approaches to urban policy are not yet widespread, but their adoption would be transformative» (Brown *et al*., 2019, p. 2). The paper focuses on the narrative of such initiatives, through a multiple case study approach, categorizing them according to the right to which they correspond, following the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (hereinafter referred to as CRC or the Convention). CRC is an international treaty that aims to protect the rights of children worldwide. It was signed in 1989 and adopted on 1990, and 196 countries have ratified it so far (Italy did it through the Law N. 176 of 1991), making it the most widely ratified human rights treaty. The Convention includes a wide range of rights relevant to city life including: the right to education (articles 28 and 29), the right to play (article 31), the right to express their views and have them taken seriously (articles 12 and 13), the right to a safe and healthy environment (article 24), the right to freedom of association, i.e., children meeting others and joining groups (article 15).
Applying the lens of children's rights highlights not only the pressing issues exacerbated by the pandemic but also how they were intertwined with pre-existing conditions of inadequacy or delays in creating the necessary environment for the fulfilment of rights. The selection of experiences was driven by the imperative to document a phenomenon – the urban initiatives in response to the pandemic – at its onset. The aim was to encompass a diverse range of cases (metropolises, medium and small cities, towns) and addressing different needs. This inclusive approach sought to provide an overview of what was happening, spanning across Italian regions (North, Center, and South) and Europe. The rights-based perspective enables us to comprehend both the state of emergency resulting from the health crisis that denied those rights and the responses implemented to guarantee children's rights. This unprecedented urgency, arising from the nature of the pandemic, prompted the selection of cases observable from within (Turin, Bologna and Berlin are the cities where the authors live and work) as well as others developed during the pandemic. These cases brought attention to well-established experiences, born in response to previous crises, highlighting the notion that every crisis carries opportunities for change (Morin, 2020). The experiences were selected from those collected by institutional organizations, networks, associations, movements, cultural events, and academic conferences attended online or in person (i.e., UNICEF, comune.info, rivistaeco.it, labsus.org, childfriendlycities.org, childinthecity.org, lacittadeibambini.org, biennalespaziopubblico.it, lungi.it).

## 3. Results

In the early stages of the pandemic in Italy, playgrounds were the first urban spaces to close, followed immediately by schools, without providing any alternatives. Distance learning would only commence in the following school year, six months after the onset of the pandemic. Walks by the sea, in the woods, or in city parks were prohibited. Home confinement was particularly challenging for children, especially those without access to private outdoor spaces, as even entry to the common areas of condominiums was restricted. With the end of the lockdown and the resumption of many activities, preventive measures for children have been eased. However, they have still been significantly hindered in meeting their basic needs for play and socialization.

### *3.1 Outdoor Schooling*

The pandemic, marked by home confinement, school closures, and remote learning, has intensified the separation between children and nature, highlighting the adverse effects of the absence of nature on children's wellbeing (Rios *et al.*, 2021). Discussions were held regarding the reinforcement of outdoor education or utilizing non-school buildings in the city to mitigate the risks of contagion associated with indoor and crowded environments. Expanding and multiplying learning spaces became imperative in the aftermath of the pandemic, prompting a thorough reassessment of open-air environments. Tables and benches emerged like mushrooms in many city parks to address the demand for outdoor study spaces, yet outdoor education holds a profound pedagogical significance that extend far beyond the quest for less crowded and healthier environments (Zavalloni, 2009). The concept of outdoor education was not new in Italy, which has a historical background of open-air schools. Established for the first time at the end of the First World War to aid in the physical recovery of delicate children, they emphasized the importance of outdoor life, sunlight, and contact with nature. These schools were founded on hygienic-sanitary motivations as well as innovative pedagogical ideas. Maria Montessori and Giuseppina Pizzigoni were among the pioneering pedagogists to emphasize the formative role of educational activities grounded in contact with nature. *Casa del sole* in Milan, for example, was built according to the educational principles, which were among the most advanced in Europe, inspired by the Waldorf schools or *La Rinnovata* by Giuseppina Pizzigoni. Today, the pedagogy of open-air school places centrality on the relations between children and nature, conceptualizing nature not merely as wild and distant, but as the encompassing environment – both natural and built – that surrounds us. Outdoor education emphasizes the connection between schools and their surrounding communities end environments, with the aim of building «a learning community in a learning city» (Hart, 1979; Freire, 2000; Farné *et al.* 2018). In Italy, there are various expressions of outdoor pedagogy, such as outdoor schools (scuoleallaperto.com), schools in the woods, etc. The pandemic could have been an opportunity for a large-scale outdoor education experiment, but it was stifled. New outdoor school initiatives were limited, and even field trips and school excursions were prohibited until April 1, 2022, more than a year after the onset of the pandemic. However, there was some activity in the external areas of school buildings, albeit not for educational purposes. In fact, school courtyards and gardens are the most immediate and accessible spaces for implementing outdoor education, yet they are still undervalued. They are designated for recreation, providing the time for children's socialization and free play during the school day. Various initiatives are underway to make these spaces accessible beyond school hours, not only for students but for all citizens. This recognition transforms schoolyards and gardens into public urban spaces dispersed throughout the city, proximate to homes, facilitating the expansion of public space. The city of Turin was a pioneer in this field with the *Cortili aperti* (Open schoolyards) project. In Turin, there are over two hundred school playgrounds. In almost all cases, these spaces are monofunctional, serving limited-time children's recreation and having minimal connection with the social and urban context in which they are located. Through collaborative efforts between various divisions and services of the Municipality, schools, and by entrusting the custody and care of the spaces during non-school hours to local associations, nine school courtyards have been opened. The regeneration planning was conducted in collaboration with children and young people, facilitated by the efforts of the Sustainable City Laboratory of Turin Institution for Responsible Education. The children's creativity was tested with the constraints of regulatory aspects, space characteristics, and available resources. This led to practical technical solutions encompassing building interventions, furnishings, green areas, as well as innovative solutions for play and socialization. This initiative was made possible through a broader vision of urban recreational spaces: the open school courtyards project is linked to the strategic plan of urban play areas. Within the Municipality of Turin's experience, three noteworthy aspects are evident: i) co-planning with children, ii) inter-sectoral consultation involving different public institutions, and iii) integration of the action within the city policy.

The city of Collegno, in the metropolitan area of Turin, went a step further. Amidst the pandemic, when schools were closed and strictly regulated, parents of two peripheral institutes, the Calvino primary school and the Rodari nursery school, facilitated the opening beyond regular hours. Through collaborative agreements with the schools and the municipality, these spaces were utilized for homework, workshops proposed by parents, other citizens, or associations. Additionally, they were utilized for organizing community' meetings where the school played a central role in local empowerment and solidarity.

The pandemic made it evident the strategic role of active collaboration between administration and parents' associations, such as the case of Manin Di Donato in Rome, where parents have held the keys to the school for almost twenty years, managing spaces during non-school hours, weekends, and summers when the school is closed. It was precisely this participatory model that ensured the social stability of both the school and the local community. This model assisted families with their primary needs and empowered to find creative solutions to address children's loneliness, creating spaces for socialization and meetings even beyond school premises. Skills and relationships developed over this twenty-year experience proved crucial in navigating the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Social distancing necessitated new ways of playing during school breaks to prevent physical contact. At the Fortuzzi school in Bologna, Gianluca Gabrielli and his students rediscovered or invented games that could be played "at a half-distance" (Lauria, 2020). Games were conceived to overcome the constraints imposed by the pandemic, and often those very limitations became opportunities for play. For instance, «Nina at a certain point faced the problem that we no longer recognized each other due to the masks, but we could turn it into a game of guessing which expression was under the mask, because we can express feelings even just with our eyes, but you have to practice…» (*ibidem*).

According to Claudio Tosi, craftsman and educator of the Italian Federation of CEMEA (*Centri per l'Esercitazione ai Metodi dell'Educazione Attiva*, Centres for the exercise of active education methods), the pandemic, with its distance learning, eliminated the third dimension by reducing the educational experience to an image on the screen. Hence, it is crucial to restore the three-dimensionality of the gaming experience: «we need games at full volume» (*ibidem*). In 2019, the first *boîte à jouer* (box to play) of the Jouer pour Vivre association was installed in a Parisian school. It is a container, ranging in size from a trunk or suitcase to that of a shipping container, filled with various objects and recovered materials (pipes, fabrics, boxes, cardboard, tires, etc.), provided to children during breaks to foster creativity and collaborative play in schoolyards. This embodies Bruno Munari's concept of de-structuring forms to unleash infinite playful and creative possibilities. It also resonates with Maria Montessori's insight that learning takes place through the child's experience, with adults having the sole responsibility of preparing the environment and allowing the experience to unfold. After the pandemic, the *boîte à jouer* gained popularity due to its ability to enhance children's skills that are essential for promoting resilience, such as imagination, experimentation, autonomy, and cooperation.

In some cases, the initiatives were initiated by local associations to counter the unequal effect of the pandemic. In the historic centre of Genoa, around Via del Campo and Via Prè streets, an area full of fragility and social diversity, where families live in small, often dilapidated houses and lack internet connectivity, two initiatives were born during the Covid-19 lockdown: *Hub di quartiere* (Neighborhood hub) and *Liberi tutti insieme* (Free all together), promoted by a group of local associations to address the educational needs of children and young people on the margins of the educational system. *Hub di quartiere* is a local collection and delivery point for educational tools, encompassing not only tablets and PCs but also open and collaborative web resources. These resources enable educators, volunteers, and students to interact both in person and remotely. *Liberi tutti insieme* seeks donors to provide financial support to the hub. The aim of these initiatives was to maintain an educational relation with disadvantaged children and young people, fostering their digital and human connection, and creating awareness and solidarity

within the local community. In another city centre suburb, the Quartieri Spagnoli of Naples, the *Lib(e)ri per crescere* (Free/Books to grow up) project by the cooperatives La Locomotiva and Progetto Uomo, with the support of the Municipality of Naples, established a space to promote reading among children and teenagers, especially through shared reading between parents and children. During the lockdown, the project coordinators recognized the need to adapt it, and the activities continued remotely by sharing a story each day on their Facebook page, telling stories over the phone, following the example of Gianni Rodari, or simply engaging in conversations and providing companionship over the phone. Once the confinement ended, the *Biblio Ape* (Ape van library) was activated: a van filled with books that travels around the city and creates reading points.

### *3.2 Expanding Children's Play Opportunities*

The need to create additional playgrounds close to home, utilizing even the interstitial and the residual spaces - such as those between houses - became evident during the pandemic. In Amsterdam, following the Second World War, Aldo Van Eyck observed children engaging in free play in abandoned and empty spaces. Based on this observation, he designed hundreds of playgrounds, filling the physical and social gap left by the war and establishing a widespread network of playable spaces throughout the city.
In Italy, the *Giardino del Guasto* (Guasto's garden) is an historic garden designed with similar principles. It emerged on the ruins of the Palazzo Bentivoglio in the heart of the historic centre of Bologna. Designed in the Seventies by architect Gennaro Filippini on behalf of the Municipality, it was later abandoned, but rescued from decay at the end of the Nineties by the homonymous association. It is an elevated garden with large concrete structures, including snakes and dinosaurs, covering the previous ruins and following the natural land contours. It draws inspiration from William Robinson's natural gardens, Maria Montessori's educational principles, and observation of children's free play on the ruins and their responses to the renovation work. Due to its layout, the garden naturally encourages distancing without separation (Montalbano, 2022). Through a planned access schedule at different times and specific events dedicated to children, parents, and educators, the garden became a space for children's free play during the pandemic (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2 - Free play at the Il Giardino del Guasto, Bologna (Source: Montalbano).

Today, the notion of «in-between realm» of Van Eyck is gaining prominence in the experiences of various European cities. The revitalization of residual and abandoned spaces, through a creative process that breathes new life into them, has been explored by projects such as *Esto no és un solar* (This is not a building site) in Zaragoza. Here, neglected land in the city centre was transformed into public spaces for children. The initial and crucial step involved the removal of barriers like rubble, debris, and rubbish that rendered the land inaccessible. Subsequently, the revitalization process employed simple and recurring materials, colours, and construction details to impart distinctive characteristics to these spaces, making them easily recognizable and embraced by the citizens. Ghent in Belgium aspires to be the most child-friendly city in Flanders and is actively establishing play areas, even within urban micro-spaces (those residual areas often lacking a specific function). The Play Everywhere concept, pioneered by KABOOM! (kaboom.org/play-everywhere), engages communities, including children, to envision spaces in their neighbourhoods that could be transformed into «playspaces». These could include unconventional spots like a laundromat, grocery store, sidewalk, or bus stop. These experiences serve as powerful examples, illustrating that even small and modest interventions can yield significant impacts.

The significance of play environments designed to educate children about risk became especially apparent during the pandemic, when children were predominantly viewed as passive recipients of preventive measures. Danish architect Carl Theodor Sørensen pioneered some of the earliest adventurous playgrounds, known as *skrammellegepladser* or junk playgrounds. This innovation stemmed from his observation during the Second World War that children were playing everywhere except on conventional playgrounds. Children were provided the materials and tools to essentially build their own playground out of bricks, wood, and other waste materials. The concept was picked up on by British landscape architect Lady Marjory Allen who created over thirty-five adventure playgrounds in the Sixties and Seventies lead by the motto «better a broken bone than a broken spirit». In Berlin, *Abenteurespielplätze* (adventure playgrounds) stand out as compelling examples due to their capacity to promote free play and imagination, encourage movement (particularly beneficial for combating rising rates of childhood overweight), and introduce an element of controlled risk. Playgrounds that promote risk provide a controlled environment where children can engage in exploratory and challenging play. Participating in risky play is instrumental in fostering resilience, developing coping skills, and nurturing autonomy in children. Moreover, it plays a pivotal role in enhancing body and spatial awareness as kids actively experiment with the potentialities and constraints of both their bodies and the surrounding environment. Engaging in controlled risk-taking on playgrounds teaches children how to confront and overcome fear, uncertainty, and the disappointment that may accompany failure. These acquired skills are essential not only for managing health risks but also for instilling a sense of responsibility in children. This approach emphasizes active engagement and learning, steering children away from being passive recipients of preventive procedures and empowering them to navigate the world with a heightened sense of awareness and responsibility.

The prohibition on playing in common spaces within residential complexes during lockdowns led to the emergence of various initiatives and experiences in different cities. In Bologna, the project *Vietato vietare di giocare* (Forbidden to prohibit play), undertaken by Cinnica network and *Libera Università del Gioco*, initially engaged various experts addressing the issue of private communal spaces restricted for children's play. Subsequently, it led to significant change mirroring developments already achieved in Rimini, Ravenna and Milan. This change involved overcoming the prohibition through the approval of an amendment to the building regulations, asserting the right of children to play in accordance with the Convention on children's rights, specifically in the courtyards, gardens, and outdoor areas of private residential buildings.

Moreover, additional initiatives have emerged with the aim of establishing areas dedicated to play, unrestricted movement, and socialization by temporarily closing off sections of the city to vehicular traffic, particularly in zones frequented by children, such as those adjacent to schools

and playgrounds. Certain municipal administrations opted to restrict traffic solely during specific times of the day, such as school entry and exit hours, creating temporary school zones. For instance, to alleviate congestion in playgrounds during the lockdown, the Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg neighborhood in Berlin introduced nineteen *Temporäre Spielstraßen* (streets closed to traffic during designated hours and/or days to facilitate children's play). These spaces, often managed by the community, proved to be spaces venues for social interaction, resilience, and community bonding for both children and adults (Dickmans, 2020). Several local administrations, such as the Municipality of Milan, opted for enduring structural interventions that deeply transform the urban landscape, pioneering the concept of permanent school zones. In alignment with Law n. 120/2020, which introduced amendments to the regulations outlined in the Highway Code, these zones are designated areas near schools where enhanced protection for pedestrians and the environment is assured. The newly designated pedestrian spaces are equipped with natural elements like trees, shrubs, and flower beds, along with amenities promoting play and socialization such as ping-pong tables, picnic spots, benches, and bike racks. Furthermore, these areas are seamlessly connected to the broader city through newly constructed cycle paths. Milan, in this way, is creating novel public spaces, particularly geared towards children, where social distancing and road safety are prioritized, allowing for safe and enjoyable communal experiences. Through the initiative *La città va a scuola* (The city goes to school), implemented across five cities in the metropolitan area of Turin, school squares – acting as urban transitional space connecting schools and city – were collaboratively designed. This process involved cooperation between schools, public administrations, and local associations. The aim was to establish partnerships and legitimize the use of space in areas that are frequently neglected and prone to conflicts among diverse social groups.

In 2022, the count of school streets across Europe reached an estimated 1,250, with notable performance in London, Barcelona, and Paris (Clean Cities, 2023). The origin of the first-ever school street can be traced back to Italy, specifically in Bolzano in 1989. It took nearly three decades for the concept to gain momentum elsewhere, with schemes emerging initially in Parma and then in Milan. A significant turning point occurred with the *Streets for Kids* events from November 2021, catalyzing transformative shifts. Recently, the mayors of Rome and Milan have unveiled plans for 110 new school streets and 87 *Piazze Aperte per ogni Scuola* (Open squares for each school) indicating a growing commitment to these innovative urban interventions (*ibidem*).

Recognizing that merely closing specific city areas to car traffic may not suffice to ensure the safety of children's play and movement, the city of Bologna initiated a project aimed at restricting car speed to 30 km/h throughout the historic centre (bolognacitta30.it). This measure not only enhances the safety but also contributes to a quieter and less polluted urban environment. Additionally, to further promote the safety of children and their families, Bologna introduced the *Negozi amici* (Friendly Shops) project. This network encompasses over 100 shops that provide assistance to children and families, offering amenities such as access to water, restroom facilities, shelter from the rain, phone charging, waiting spaces, help in case of danger, and support for breastfeeding (comune.bologna.it/eventi/rete-negozi-amici).

The exceptional nature of the pandemic facilitated the discovery of swift and effective solutions. School squares and streets – whether temporary or structural – and novel approaches like tactical urbanism, open streets, slow streets, and play streets experienced a significant boost during the pandemic. What sets them apart is not only their pandemic-driven acceleration but also their appeal as simple, cost-effective interventions. Moreover, these modest transformations signify more than just physical changes: they mark a cultural and political shift (Jacobs, 1961). Through these adaptations, the city transforms into a space that not only facilitates the lives of its younger residents, offering protection and opportunities for autonomy and responsibility, but also rekindles a sense of community that has dwindled over the years. The act of welcoming, even through neighbourhood shops, extends beyond a simple gesture of consideration towards children and parents during a particularly sensitive period. It embodies a political and cultural

choice that renders public space more child-friendly (*ibidem*). Jane Jacobs eloquently captured this idea when she wrote: «I am convinced that urban science and urban architecture must become, in the real life of existing cities, the science and art of catalysing and nurturing this dense fabric of active relationships» (*ibidem*, pp. 12-13). The Italian *Biennale dello Spazio Pubblico* (Biennial of Public Space), bringing together urbanists and architects, dedicated its 2021 edition, titled *Children and Public Space*, to a contemplation of the future of cities with a heightened focus on children's needs. As part of this effort, they launched an awareness-raising initiative titled *A un metro di distanza* (One meter away) (Andreoni & Rota, 2021).

### *3.3 Participating in the City*

As expressed by Niri (2020, p. 28-29), «during the lockdown, markers were not considered an essential good. Children were also denied the right to express themselves, representing the world and what was happening. The last markers were used up to draw rainbows with the words "everything will be fine", a typical example of how adults are able of putting into children's mouths and hands what they would like to hear». To advocate for the recognition of children and their needs, the Libera Università del Gioco association in Ravenna launched the *Liberare tracce d'infanzia* (Freeing traces of childhood) initiative, inviting families to use coloured chalk and draw on the streets around their homes, leaving behind traces of children's presence. The initiative served to alleviate children's sense of loneliness and to remind adults that children are not disappeared and want their voice to be heard. With a similar intention in Bologna, during the Easter holidays of 2021, which were spent in home confinement, a black rabbit crafted from recycled wool from an old sweater mysteriously emerged from the closed gate of the *Giardino del Guasto*. Additional two hundred identical bunnies were distributed to the children in the neighbourhood by the art director of the association that oversees the garden and works in the local nursery school. She assumed the role of *Citofonella*, the intercom fairy, ringing doorbells to reassure and entertain children.

The neglect and invisibility of Italian children during the pandemic has been criticized by several authors (Ammaniti, 2020; Bianchi, 2020; Niri, 2020; Tonucci, 2020). Immediately after the lockdown, Lorenzoni (2020, n.p.) proposed: «To counteract this lack of attention, we require a symbol, perhaps a dream, a modest one at the outset, envisioning dedicating Sundays of Phase 2 [the phase of the pandemic marked by the reopening of many socio-economic activities], to unrestricted movement of children. Adults would have the freedom to move as long as accompanied by children [...] Though it may appear as a bizarre, futile, and superficial idea in the face of an uncertain future and pressing contemporary challenges, it is precisely in such challenging conditions that we must nurture our imagination and propagate ideas capable of shaping a more just and constructive future. The prospect of beholding a city devoid of cars presents an invaluable opportunity. It has the potential to ignite our imagination. In the world's oldest country, the reopening of cities with a focus on children could serve as a positive indicator of a change of direction». However, to find experiences sensitive to understand children's perspectives and engaging them in the process of changing cities, we need to look back before the pandemic.

In Pievebovigliana, situated in the province of Macerata on the slopes of the Sibillini Mountains, a small village profoundly affected by the 2016 earthquake, a participatory design and self-construction initiative unfolded for the external space of the temporary prefabricated school. The project SCIAME *Spazio Costruito Insieme Aperto a Molteplici Esperienze* (Space Built Together Open to Multiple Experiences) involved children aged 3 to 14 over the course of an entire school year (2017/18). Various stakeholders, such as the cultural association Les Friches, La città bambina of Florence, and the Reggio Children Foundation, collaborated to decode children's desires and needs. Families and municipal technicians played active roles in all project steps, emphasizing the belief that the school is an integral part of the community, territory, and a collective

educational endeavour. Participatory planning and self-construction were considered essential elements in the process of reclaiming public spaces after experiencing trauma.

The Indire-Labsus observatory on community educational pacts examines examples of shared governance in education, where collaborative agreements aim to foster an inclusive school as a collective asset, encompassing both tangible and intangible benefits. According to their research (Labsus, 2022), it became evident that the actors engaged in school care actions or the utilization of school spaces, particularly external ones, are predominantly associations, followed by teachers and school managers, with parents being the least involved. While children are actively engaged in the activities of these pacts, they are seldom direct interlocutors. Only a few municipalities, such as Collegno in the province of Turin, formally extend collaboration to include them. In most cases, experiences are limited to gathering children's ideas and suggestions for regenerating public spaces. For example, the *Giardino dei Desideri* (Garden of desires) pact on the outskirts of Milan involved the community in the regeneration and maintenance of a public garden. Additionally, projects focused of urban micro-regeneration with natural and cultivated plants, particularly in peripheral and more degraded neighbourhoods, such as *A Piccoli Patti* (In Small Pacts) in Milan and *PROGIREG* in Turin, have also engaged community participation.

*Table 1 - Highlighted aspects of the analyzed cities' outdoor practices and experiences*

| EXPERIENCE | TYPOLOGY | ACTIONS | BENEFITS | TEMPORAL DIMENSION | POSITIVE IMPACT OF & OPPORTUNITIES FROM THE PANDEMIC |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Casa del sole* (Milan), *Rinnovata Pizzigoni* (Milan), *Scuole all'aperto* network | Open-air-schools and outdoor education | Education in a healthy environment, emphasis on the relation with nature in the learning experience | Education and health | Historical experiences<br>Pre-pandemic | Raising awareness about the importance of contact with nature, expanding and multiplying outdoor learning spaces, large-scale experimentation of outdoor education |
| *Cortili aperti* (Turin), Calvino and Rodari schools (Collegno), Manin Di Donato school (Rome) | Open schools, school's courtyards, and gardens | Spaces open beyond school time and for other social groups besides students, emphasis on participation and bottom-up processes | Play, education, community engagement, and solidarity | Pre-pandemic<br>During pandemic | Skills and relationships developed before the pandemic allow to continue during the pandemic |
| Fortuzzi school (Bologna), *Boîte à jouer* (Paris) | New ways of playing in school's spaces | Play spaces and tools to develop children's skills such as imagination, creativity, autonomy, and cooperation | Play, socialization | During pandemic | New ways to play respecting social distance and fostering resilience |
| *Hub di quartiere* and *Liberi tutti insieme* (Genoa), *Lib(e)ri per crescere* and *Biblio Ape* (Naples) | Common educational spaces outside the school | Spaces and tools for education outside the school through community engagement, emphasis on educational poverty and inclusion | Education, community engagement, and solidarity | During pandemic | New ways to continue pre-pandemic initiatives |
| Aldo Van Eyck's playgrounds (Amsterdam), *Giardino del Guasto* (Bologna), *Esto no és un solar* (Zaragoza), micro play spaces (Ghent), KABOOM! Play Everywhere | Free play spaces | Unconventional play spaces, utilizing even micro space in the city and reclaiming abandoned spaces | Play, socialization | Historical experiences<br>Pre-pandemic<br>During pandemic | Multiplying outdoor play spaces respecting social distance |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Carl Theodor Sørensen's *skrammellegepladser* (Copenhagen), Marjory Allen's junk playgrounds (London), *Abenteurespelplätze* (Berlin) | Adventure playgrounds | Play spaces and tools to develop children's risk-taking | Play, socialization | Historical experiences | Raising awareness about the importance of risk-taking in building resilient children |
| *Vietato vietare di giocare* (Bologna) | Play in common private spaces | Ensuring the right to play in private common spaces | Play, socialization | Post-pandemic | Raising awareness about the paramount importance of children's play |
| School streets (Bolzano and Rome), permanent school zones and school squares (*La città va a scuola*, Turin, *Piazze aperte per ogni scuola*, Milan), *Temporäre Spielstraßen* (Berlin), *Negozi amici* and *Bologna Città 30* (Bologna) | City safety | Reduced speed limits for cars and spaces temporarily or permanently closed to car traffic for children's play or to ensure safe access to school, emphasis on the use of public space | Safe movement, play, and socialization | Post-pandemic | Multiplying and accelerating initiatives |
| *Liberare tracce d'infanzia* and *Giardino del Guasto* (Bologna), *A un metro di distanza* | Listening to children and children's expression | Initiatives to make children's voices heard | Rights to expression and to be heard | During pandemic | Raising awareness about the children' rights to expression and to be heard |
| SCIAME (Pievebovigliana), *Giardino dei desideri* and *A piccoli patti* (Milan), PROGIREG (Turin) | Community educational pacts involving children | Involvement of children in giving ideas, designing, and implementing interventions, emphasis on co-planning with children | Education, participation, and citizenship | Pre-pandemic | |

To emphasize the essential aspects of all these practices, a table (Table 1) has been compiled to synthesize the typology, actions, and benefits. The table also incorporates the temporal dimension to separate and highlight the positive responses from institutions or society during and after the pandemic, contrasting them with those developed before the pandemic, included historical ones. Notably, we omitted an attribute for the scale of initiatives, given that these are primarily local endeavours originating in one or more cities, yet possessing the potential for nationwide replication. Finally, we added an attribute to synthesize the impact of pandemic on these practices, as well as the opportunities that have arisen as a result of the pandemic.
The beneficial impact of well-established positive practices on institutional or societal responses during and after the pandemic mainly occurred through the following primary processes:

- raising awareness about their significance and value, including their enabling conditions like skills and social relationships, that prioritize the best interests of children;
- enhancing existing good practices, such as utilizing outdoor spaces for play and education;
- accelerating their implementation, particularly when they were still *in nuce*, achieved through simplification of bureaucratic procedures or grassroots pressure from citizens and associations, as well as participatory planning and management;
- enriching them by diversifying practices while adhering to the constraints imposed by the pandemic.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusion

There are more people living in cities and more children growing up in cities than ever before. However, children are often overlooked in urban planning (Bishop & Corkery, 2017). The pandemic underscored the extent to which the needs and desires of children have been neglected, emphasizing the significant connection between their health, development, and overall wellbeing and the outdoor spaces within the city. Despite the tragic nature of the pandemic, it has also presented opportunities for reflection and action regarding the potential for urban regeneration with focus on respecting and promoting the fundamental rights of children. In this article, these possibilities are explored by examining historical cases conducted before the pandemic, as well as others implemented during the pandemic emergency. These cases focus on the concept of outdoor education, schools that are open to the community and their surroundings, and the educational potential inherent in public spaces, primarily playgrounds. These experiential typologies come together in the concept of the learning city: a city that reimagines its structure and functions within an educational continuum, widespread, suitable, and adaptable to the various places within the city. It actively seeks and discovers opportunities for expression in interstitial and residual spaces, in border spaces (such as those between school and city, like school zones), in the continuity between public and private spaces, and, most importantly, in the dialogue among the individuals inhabiting these spaces, beginning with children and young people themselves. The significant challenge for future coexistence in cities involves experimenting with a citizenship model that accommodates diverse needs and desires. In today's urban landscape, people and ideas converge in increasingly confined and populated spaces, hosting a myriad of lifestyles that often coexist in conflicting ways. In this context, children should transcend their homes and classrooms, emerging as actors who envision, construct, and transform their environment. They should be active citizens, not merely users of the places they inhabit and traverse (Ward, 1978). Numerous studies have presented empirical evidence supporting children's agency in urban life, acknowledging their capacity to be active social actors within their cities.

Achieving this objective, despite the current scarcity of participatory initiatives, requires adopting a child-sensitive framework, crouching down to the "frog's perspective" (Forni, 2002). This approach enables us to understand the profound transformation in the functionality and accessibility of cities and highlights the gap between urban structures and the needs of children. Seeing cities through children's eyes – that means both focusing on children's development and involving children in urban planning (ARUP, 2017; Bishop & Corkery, 2017; Vincelot, 2019) – will deliver long-term benefits, affecting current and future generations (Brown *et al.*, 2019). A child-friendly approach will contribute to build safe, healthy, and socially inclusive cities for everyone. To accomplish this, it is essential to integrate policy and action, overcoming the fragmentation of initiatives that often target specific sub-populations or address several various urban issues within the same population (*ibidem*). In our study, we came across numerous global and local initiatives, a positive indicator of widespread awareness and action. However, we observed a significant heterogeneity in the methods and intensity of applying similar initiatives. There is also a presence of positive initiatives that, despite their pioneering nature, remain limited to a localized dimension, lacking systematic implementation throughout the national territory. The analytical lens of children's rights allows us to evaluate experiences and identify rights that are still inadequately guaranteed. Moreover, it enables an examination of the connections between different rights, fostering a reflection that aims towards an integration between initiatives. Reimagining neighbourhoods, green spaces, and schools in a holistic manner – encompassing security, educational, and ecological objectives – becomes more than just enhancing the quality of individual parts of the city.

The experiences described in this article highlight a series of possible paths right now:

- The possibility of creating synergies between policies and actions. For instance, pandemic-related distancing measures and the revision of the Highway Code have seemingly converged

to a synergistic approach through the implementation of structural or temporary interventions in proximity to schools. The alignment of spatial planning with sustainable mobility, particularly for pedestrians and cyclists, facilitates the establishment of an extensive network connecting various city locations to create widespread movement and play spaces for children.

- The prospect of fostering collaborations among local stakeholders. The seamless integration of school spaces planning with immediately adjacent external areas, representing the intersection between school and city, necessitates a cohesive and harmonious coordination of initiatives and actions. Moreover, endeavours undertaken informally, as seen in the cases of Naples and Genoa, or through formal arrangements like the Collaboration Pacts for an inclusive and participatory school, have unequivocally proven to be instrumental in serving as a lifeline for local social relations among children and families.
- The achievement of the goal of interconnecting public and private spaces, such as enabling children to play in condominium common areas, was made possible through the collaboration of different skills and interests. Municipal technicians, condominium administrators, parents, and associations worked collectively towards the realization of an "open plan" (Doglio, 2021).
- Moving beyond the monofunctionality and sectoralisation in the urban public space, as exemplified by the availability of school spaces beyond regular school hours and days.
- The involvement of children and young people in the planning of spaces is a notable aspect, yet it is sparsely evident. As Roberts (2000, p. 238) argued «it's clear that listening to children, hearing children, and acting on what children say are three very different activities, although they are frequently elided as if they were not».

However, it is evident from the reported experiences that several rights remain inadequately assured. The rights to autonomous mobility and unrestrained, adventurous play are stifled by the prevailing design of cities and playgrounds. The pandemic has underscored the deficiency of nature in children's lives, revealing their innate need to be outdoors, connected with nature, to fulfil fundamental requirements for light, air, and movement. Furthermore, the pandemic emphasized their right to enjoy the myriad developmental benefits that nature offers, as exemplified by the renewed interest in outdoor education. Play, recreational and educational opportunities in nature should be amplified within the city in order to establish a comprehensive network of green spaces and «neighborhood nature» (Sobel, 2022) as an ecological network. This approach enables children to engage in independent and safe play and movement throughout urban spaces. As our cities expand and densify, there is a concurrent disappearance of empty and residual spaces, and the outskirts with their natural surroundings are gradually receding. Unplanned playgrounds are becoming increasingly scarce and distant. Furthermore, the rising volume of car traffic and the proliferation of parking have rendered residential streets less secure, transforming them to mere transition areas. Finally, there is a notable scarcity of initiatives involving children in the design of public spaces, despite the Convention affirming their right to participate in decisions impacting their lives. The empowering experience of contributing to the design of local environments is crucial, recognizing children as political actors with a legitimate voice on nature and contemporary environmental issues.

Regarding the rights considered in this work, they all need to be guaranteed for future similar pandemic scenarios, whether it is during a lockdown period or transition period, because they are fundamental rights inherently linked together and essential for the full development of the child. This objective can be pursued through some fundamental attitudes. The first is the awareness of the paramount interest of children in every future similar crisis, as stated in Article 3 of the Convention. This attitude requires a more conscious and attentive consideration of children's needs, which would benefit from listening to and taking into account children's perspectives. Therefore, the second important attitude is the inclusive approach of multiple voices, including those of children, in processes and practices concerning children's rights protection. Another

important attitude is a holistic, integrated, transdisciplinary, and intersectoral approach in the conception, design, and implementation of experiences, as seen, for example, in the shared resolution of conflicts between different interests in the use of common condominium spaces in the city of Bologna (*Vietato vietare di giocare*).

The pandemic has underscored the weakness in the link between theory and practice, as well as between research and interventions. Corbisiero & Berritto (2021) and Berritto & Gargiulo (2022) have highlighted the gap between public policies and scientific research in the implementation of post-pandemic social interventions for children. It is evident that examining practices that engaged in safeguarding children's rights during the pandemic proves beneficial. In this study, our objective was to recognize and analyse them during a historically sensitive period for children's rights. However, acknowledging the characteristics and social value of these experiences is not sufficient. What is still lacking is to integrate them into a broader systemic vision. The experiences examined in this article represent a valuable asset to identify potential lines of public intervention and future policies in response to the unmet needs of childhood. Public outdoor spaces in cities can serve as a lever for policymaking to imagine, build, and implement urban regeneration policies that address the needs of post-pandemic childhood. These experiences, however, are highly contextual and widely varied in their expressions. Similarly, the heterogeneous and diversified set of practices, combined with the hyper-local nature of some, remains a critical challenge for the consolidation of new policy approaches. To move beyond the episodic and experimental nature characterizing these experiences and to appreciate what has been experimented at the local level, a reflection on the dialogue between practices and policies at different levels of governance seems necessary. The goal is to explore, describe, and analyse the factors that can enable or limit their birth, development, and consolidation. Therefore, a future research objective could be to study the relations between practices and public policies and how public administrations can equip themselves to support their emergence, development, and sustainability over time. This involves transitioning from a purely institutional responsibility in designing and implementing public policies to one shared with the communities that have developed the experiences. One can envision a new policy model that starts from localities and engages with various forms of active and civic participation, including children's involvement.

## 5. Limitations of Research

Children's rights are universal and children's wellbeing is a matter of global concern. However, the guarantee and respect for these rights vary across different parts of the world. This research focuses on the urban context and presents experiences from Italian and European cities. Hence, these reflections can only be regarded as applicable to Western and urbanized contexts. Another limitation that deserves attention, perhaps for a future research proposal, is the varied spectrum of needs among different age groups of children, as well as between girls and boys, and among children with varying abilities. The inclusion of children with disabilities in outdoor urban spaces has not been addressed here, underscoring the need for a dedicated analysis in future research. The choice of the experiences recounted was subjective and driven by the urgency to witness what was happening during the pandemic. Therefore, one of the main limitations of the study is that it does not offer an exhaustive and systematic review of the initiatives.

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