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# Children's Perspectives on Their Urban Environment and Their Appropriation of Public Spaces in Mexico City

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## Abstract
*This paper presents the information and knowledge that 84 school children aged 7 to 9 of the Coyoacán borough of Mexico City have regarding their everyday urban environment. Using techniques such as drawing, model making, photographs and story writing, we explored children's neighborhood experiences including parks, streets, and their vision of an ideal city. Key findings show that the urban context as well as the children's particular social context, including the internalization of their parents' fears about lack of safety, are some of the main elements that influence the way in which children experience the city and depict what an ideal city would be for them. Children lack independent mobility and spend little time in public spaces, and have a poor knowledge of their near surroundings and of the city at large. Most of their representations of the ideal city have to do with green spaces and natural environments.*

**Keywords**: children, children's studies, child-friendly city, Mexico City

## Introduction

Worldwide, most children live in urban areas and make up a large percentage of urban populations (UNICEF 2012), yet they are often excluded from urban planning. In fact, cities seem to be ever less adapted to the needs and interests of children (Sutton and Kemp 2002; Qvotrup 1999; Cloutier and Torres 2010; Bartlett et al. 1999). The exclusion of children from city planning is due to a variety of factors which includes not only lack of political will but also the failure of urban policies to consider children's opinions (Lynch 1977; Chawla 2002). There are, nevertheless, certain efforts, such as UNICEF's Child Friendly Cities Initiative, to include these voices and carry out programs that promote the inclusion of children in public spaces.

At an academic level, the topic of the relationship between children and the city has been gaining attention since the beginning of the millennium (Holloway and Valentine 2000; Cloutier and Torres 2009; Lehman-Frisch and Vivet 2011; Loebach and Gilliland 2010). A decrease in the presence of children in public spaces has become evident in various contexts, particularly in Europe and North America, as their lives become more institutionalized. As a result, children are becoming less autonomous and have less mobility, regardless of real dangers in their surroundings (Holloway and Valentine 2000; Christensen and O'Brien 2003; Karsten and van Vliet-- 2006; Prezza 2007).

The consideration that childhood is socially and culturally determined implies the need to take into account both the social and spatial contexts in which children live (Aitken 1994; Matthews and Limb 1999; Holloway and Valentine 2000; Lehman-Frisch and Vivet 2011). Thus far, however, the contexts in which these issues have been studied differ greatly from those of large Latin American cities. In Mexico City, this issue of children's relationship with the city has been given little consideration (Reid 2002; Gülgönen forthcoming) since the study by Lynch (1977) on the periphery of the city (Ecatepec) and the neighboring city of Toluca. Mexico City has certain unique characteristics due to its size and socio-spatial fragmentation, as well as due to its high levels of perceived danger, among other traits that may affect the relationship between children and the city.

Studies within the framework of children's geographies (Holloway and Valentine 2000; Christensen and O'Brien 2002; Holt 2011) have shown the importance of researching the relationship between children and their cities from their own perspective. In this paper we present the results of an exploratory study that we carried out with children in elementary schools in the Coyoacán borough. We explored the information and knowledge that children have regarding their everyday urban environment, as well as their experiences of their neighborhood, the streets, parks and their ideal city. How do they experience their relationship with their neighborhoods and the places they frequent? How do they conceive the urban public spaces such as streets, squares, parks and gardens? What do they consider to be friendly or hostile environments, and what are the problems they deal with when they are in public spaces? How do restrictions to their mobility and the feeling of being in danger limit their relationship with the city? On the other hand, how do they envision the ideal city? We start with a brief sketch of the

Federal District that will contribute to an understanding of the context of the experiences they reported regarding their relationship with the city.

## Context

Mexico City stretches over a territory of approximately 1500 km² and has 8,851,080 inhabitants (INEGI 2010), 26.7 percent of whom are children (REDIM 2014). Nevertheless, the city is lost in the urban sprawl that constitutes the Metropolitan Area of the Valley of Mexico, which has a surface area of 4500 km² and approximately 20 million inhabitants (Álvarez 2013).

In 2010, the city was formally recognized as "Child Friendly" by UNICEF "because it met the objectives of implementing public policies on behalf of the children and because it houses the Council for the Promotion of Children's Rights of Mexico City."[1] This Council, which is coordinated by the Institute of Social Assistance and Integration of the Federal District (IASIS), was actually created before this recognition by UNICEF and has since ceased to hold sessions. Thus far, no policies that promote the integration of children into the city in have been enacted in Mexico City (Gülgönen forthcoming).

Policies have been implemented to rescue[2] spaces for children's use (COIA 2010). Data produced at a national level by the government show that almost three-fourths of children have access near their homes to spaces where they can play and can practice sports (IFE 2012). However, these data are not broken down by cities, nor do they allow assessment of the quality of these spaces, nor do they reveal whether the spaces are actually frequented by children. In fact, these data contrast with the few instances of qualitative research carried out in Mexico City, such as the consultation of adults about children's right to play, carried out in 2010,[3] in which lack of consideration for playgrounds, green spaces, parks and gardens in urban planning was identified as one of the main reasons why children do not exercise their right to play within this context (Corona and Gülgönen 2013). This situation observed in Mexico corresponds to the general tendency observed by the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013) in many countries of the world toward the disappearance of public spaces meant for children's play.

Given its size and territorial, political and administrative division into 16 boroughs, Mexico City displays certain unique characteristics that must be taken into account. One of these is its population, which is characterized by great cultural heterogeneity and marked social inequalities (Álvarez 2013), which translate into a strong disparity between the presence and quality of urban features and equipment (Mier y Terán, Vázquez and Ziccardi 2012) and different ways of experiencing the city (Cordera, Ramírez and Ziccardi 2008). In this sense, it is not possible to speak of

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[1] Information provided by the System for the Integral Development of the Family in Mexico City (DIF-DF), in response to the 2013 INFOMEX public information request [our translation].
[2] The governmental program, Rescue of Public Spaces, proposes to give new use to some of the abandoned spaces in cities, some of which would be designated for children's play.
[3] In 2010, the International Play Association, together with the Autonomous Metropolitan University and La Jugarreta A.C., carried out a series of consultations regarding this right in Mexico City and other cities in the country as part of an international project (IPA 2010).

the relationship between children as a single social group and the public space; we must speak instead of multiple groups of children who experience and relate to the spaces of the fragmented city.

## Methodology

Among the many different types of children who dwell in urban areas, we chose to work with children who have access to urban public spaces (with parks in the neighborhood where their schools are located) in order to determine the frequency with which they make use of these places and find out what they like or dislike about them. The results presented in this article are part of a study carried out in March and April 2015 in the Coyoacán borough of Mexico City with 84 children aged 7 to 9 years within the context of two schools. Coyoacán originally was a rural area on the outskirts of the city but became part of the city's geographic center over the course of the 20th century (Ramírez Kuri 2010). The selected schools are located close to each other, in areas characterized by the offering of a wide variety of public spaces, unlike many other areas in the same borough and in the city at large (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Parks and selected schools in the Coyoacán borough**
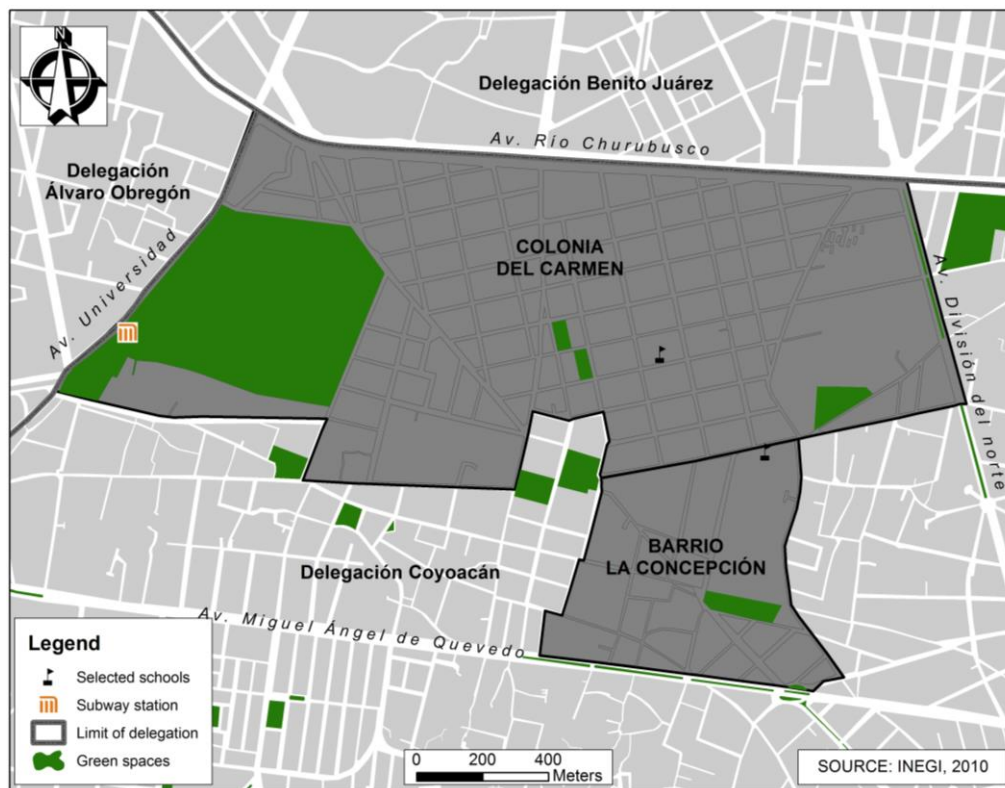


The schools are also characterized by the presence of services and shops in the vicinity and the socioeconomic variety of their population, which includes a large number of middle- and upper-class people (Ramírez Kuri 2010) and a small number of lower-class people. The choice of the two schools—one public and one

private—gave us access to children with different socioeconomic statuses since the choice of school depends largely upon the parents' income. Thus, the children in the public school belong to the lower class, while the children in the private school belong to the middle and upper classes, with a few exceptions in both schools. More than half of the children that participated in the workshops in both schools do not live in the school's neighborhood, although most of them live in the Coyoacán borough.

Our study included 54 children in the public school and 30 in the private school, with a total of 43 boys and 41 girls. In both schools, we worked with a whole class—26 second-grade children and 28 third-grade children in the public school, and 16 second-grade children and 14 third-grade children in the private school. Four researchers at the public school, and two at the private school, conducted workshops during school time in one-and-a-half hour sessions, once a week over a period of five weeks. Generally, the teacher was present in the classroom doing their own work and did not participate in the workshop.

We excluded from our research those children who do not attend school and who spend most of their time in the public spaces (e.g. street or working children), as these have been the object of specific studies (Lucchini 1998; 1999; Pérez López 2013). Our decision to carry out work at the schools allowed us to have access to children who do not have as much contact with public spaces, and provided us with the opportunity to work once a week with each group over five sessions. However, we met some challenges that are inherent to working with schools, in particular, the risk of the children mistaking the role of the researcher with that of the teacher (Lehman-Frisch and Vivet 2011). Once the parents or legal guardians of the children had given consent for their children to participate in the research, the children had the freedom to decide whether they participated in each activity.[4]

In keeping with best practices in children's studies (Holloway and Valentine 2000), we adapted our research methods to the children's ages (Christensen and O'Brien 2003; Beneker et al. 2010; Lehman-Frisch and Vivet 2011) and used techniques such as drawing, model making, photographs and story writing. In each session we offered a workshop with a different topic, corresponding to a different space or scale, followed by group discussion with the children. In the first session they were asked to draw their neighborhood, and the routes along which they move. In the second, we held a discussion based on photographs of parks and gardens located near their school, in other areas of the borough and in other cities. In the third, which had as its topic the street and the squares, the children wrote a story about an event they had witnessed on the street or about which they had been told; some of the children complemented the story with a drawing. In the course of the fourth session, children were put into small groups and made models of the ideal city in which they would like to live. In the last session, they commented on

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[4] Only three children from the public school were not allowed by their legal guardians to participate. In each of these cases, the children were from a foster care institution located in front of the school. They drew or read while their peers were doing the activities.

photographs—taken by themselves with disposable cameras—of places in their neighborhood that are important to them.[5]

## Findings

### Obstacles to Becoming Familiar with the Neighborhood and the Absence of Autonomous Mobility

We gave the children instructions to draw their neighborhoods and allowed them to choose the scale and the contents of the picture (Lehman-Frisch, Authier and Dufaux 2012). This exercise has been used in various contexts using models (Hart 1978) and drawings (Lehman-Frisch, Authier and Dufaux 2012; Fourment-Aptekman 2004; Elsley 2004). Although the area in which the schools are located has certain neighborhood characteristics, because the children did not necessarily live near the school, they did not understand the concept of their neighborhood. Therefore, we changed the instruction and asked the children to draw the places near their home. Both in the drawings and in the interviews that followed, the places that appeared most frequently were shops: small stores where they shop on an everyday basis (the bakery, the stationer's or the drugstore), large stores and supermarket chains. Other elements they included were their homes and the homes of their relatives, the school, the church and places where they perform out-of-school activities. In the drawings most of the children depicted a series of isolated elements which appeared as a collection of fragmented locations. Only one of the drawings reflected the idea of various parts forming an integrated space. Also of significance was the absence of sidewalks, traffic lights, bridges or any other element designed to facilitate pedestrian circulation. Similarly, the photographs they took of the places that are important to them in their neighborhoods showed the streets where their homes stand, the places where they perform out-of-school activities, and stores.

This way of experiencing their surroundings is intrinsically linked to the issue of children's mobility (Jansson 2008; Carver et al. 2013; Witten et al. 2013; Lynch 1977), which has two characteristics: the absence of autonomous mobility, and the way in which their adult escorts take them from one place to another. When children cannot go on foot or take public transportation to the places close to their homes, they have a fragmented experience of their neighborhood and perceive it as an archipelago, and they have difficulty depicting it in a more integrated way (Karsten and van Vliet—2006; Hart 1978).

The children in our study reported not being allowed to be by themselves on the streets of their neighborhood, unless—for a small number of them mainly from the public school—they were running an errand or buying something at a store near their homes. These data correspond with the few studies carried out in Mexico City confirming that children cannot leave their homes without being accompanied by an adult (Anzures and Bolaños 2006), and that even in a housing complex, access to the areas nearest their apartment building is restricted (Hernández and Rosas

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[5] See Appendix A for a table with the name of the workshop, the techniques used and the key findings in each.

2004). In these studies, the parents justify such restrictions because of concern for the safety of their children, both from traffic-related dangers and from strangers who represent a potential threat.

Safety in Mexico City has decreased in the last years due to a significant increase in assaults on the streets and on public transportation, as well as robberies and vehicle theft. According to the National Survey on Victimization and Perception of Public Safety, 32.4 percent of Mexican households have at least one member who was a victim of a crime in 2012 (INEGI 2012). According to the results of the National Survey on Urban Public Safety (INEGI 2014) carried out in 32 cities or urban areas with a high population density in all the states of the country, in the three months prior to the survey, fear had caused the interviewees to change their habits in relation to walking near their homes after 8 pm (50.8 percent), visiting friends or relatives (30.6 percent), and allowing their children under the age of 18 to go out (47.5 percent).[6]

Interestingly, although there are real violence-related problems in various areas of Mexico City, the argument for the restriction of public space use by children goes beyond the context of Mexico. For example, in its eight-country survey, the International Play Association found that the second-highest cause of violations to children's right to play is unsafe environments: crime, violence in the community due to civil conflicts, drugs and gangs, kidnappings and child trafficking (IPA 2010). The Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013) also identified fear of unsafe environments as one of the obstacles to the exercising of children's right to play in many parts of the world. This fear has the two-fold consequence of confining children to the private sphere and of controlling their presence in public spaces.

**The Street Is the Most Hostile Place**
The street and passing cars were a major element in the children's drawings of places close to their homes (Figures 2 and 3). Actually, both their drawings of the neighborhood and our interviews with them on the topic of the street show that they walk very little with their parents or with the adults who escort them, and that they do not identify themselves as pedestrians but as users of the vehicles in which they ride (cars, taxis or public transportation—depending on their social class) and in which they are always accompanied by adults. Several private school children expressed their annoyance at traffic, arguing that pedestrians move faster than they do in their car.

At the same time, the children spoke about the difficulties of being a pedestrian in Mexico City, which are a consequence of a policy that gives priority to cars and to speed (Pérez López 2014). In the drawings of their neighborhood, most of the participating children drew very broad streets filled with cars. In the second exercise, which asked them to indicate the routes along which they move in the area around their school, they showed that they have to jaywalk and cross the street by walking between cars.

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[6]http://www.inegi.org.mx/est/contenidos/proyectos/encuestas/hogares/regulares/ensu/defa ult.aspx.

When we explored the children's perceptions of the street and its role in the city, we found that they regard it as the most hostile place in the city. According to several children from both schools,

> *The street is a place in which to die because you can get run over by cars.*

> *The streets are for vehicles, such as cars, bicycles and skateboards; but they may cause death to the humans who walk on them.*

> *[Streets are] a place to die because cars drive at high speeds, and on certain streets the cars don't wait for you to cross, they just come at you; there was a grandmother who was run over with her grandson.*

**Figure 2. Child's drawing: My neighborhood**
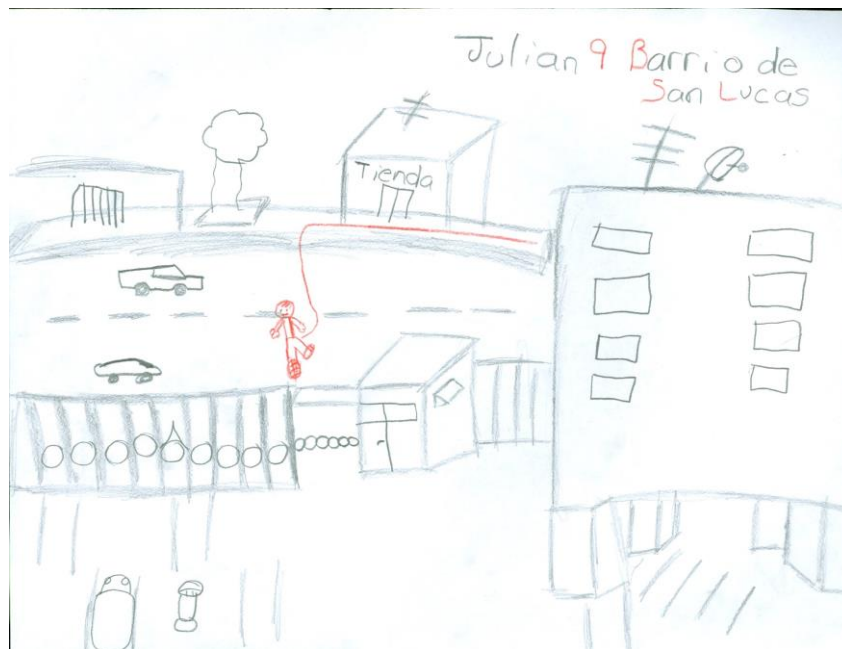


These testimonies illustrate the risk children in Mexico City run when crossing streets. At a national level, traffic accidents are the first cause of death among children aged 5 to 14 years, and the second among young people aged 15 to 29 years (CONAPRA 2013). The width of streets, the lack of compliance with traffic regulations by drivers, and, particularly with speed limit regulations and the lack of adequate zebra crossings and sidewalks, renders Mexico City a difficult, inhospitable place for pedestrians in general (Pérez López 2014), and even more so for people with different mobility, such as small children. According to a recent survey, nine out of every ten adults referred to the difficulty of walking in the city due to various circumstances ranging from the presence of physical obstacles on the sidewalks, their poor conditions, and lack of adequate lighting. 72.3 percent of interviewed adults said they feel unsafe when crossing the street, due to lack of

compliance with traffic regulations by drivers. Likewise, one out of every ten people reported having been run over on one occasion, and two out of every ten reported having been injured in a sidewalk accident (Pérez López 2014).

**Figure 3. Child's drawing:  My neighborhood**
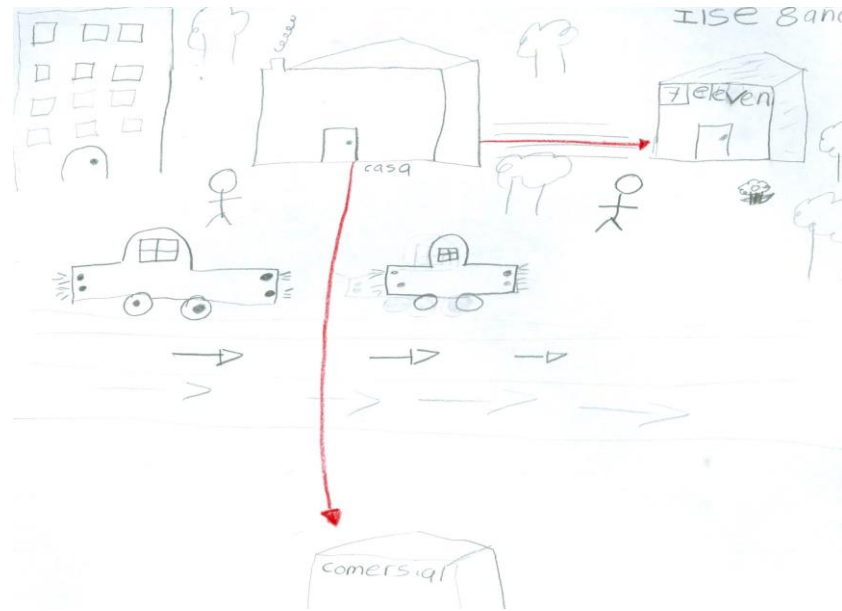


References to the riskiness of the streets can also be found in the stories written (or drawn) by participating children narrating experiences of their own or stories they had heard in relation to the street.[7] In fact, one-third of the stories dealt with traffic accidents—car crashes resulting in deaths or injuries involving hospitalization:

> *Once there was a car [whose driver] got a phone call and [he] answered it; he got distracted and he crashed against a food stand; the woman who sold the food was taken to the hospital; she couldn't get there on time, so she died.*

> *Once, on a street where they sold pizza, I saw two cars crash; when I saw this, I was very shocked, and as if this were not enough, two other cars crashed too.*

Additionally, the drawings and interviews showed that the participating children experience the street as a hostile place because they are afraid of being kidnapped or assaulted, and because they generally feel threatened by strangers (Figure 4). Girls' fears are generally associated with male figures that represent a potential risk for them (e.g., drunkards, men lying on the street). Most of the stories told by boys have to do with robberies at gunpoint and shoot-outs. One of the boys wrote: "One

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[7] Although most of the children spoke from their own experience, we were able to observe that the term "story" suggested narrating events that had an impact on them and which were therefore less habitual.

week ago, we went to the bank and saw a suspicious-looking man who had a gun, so we ran away." He adds: "We went to Superama to buy bread; we went to park the car, and a drunk hit us."

**Figure 4. Child's drawing: Story about the street**



Nevertheless, there are also certain pleasurable activities that the children associate with the streets. When asked what they like, they replied that there were parks and playgrounds on some streets and that they like to walk their dog, ride their bikes, skate, play outdoors with their siblings and cousins and go to the store to buy things.

**Parks Are the Spaces Most Highly Valued by Children**
In contrast with the hostile character of the street, both the school children consider parks their favorite places in the city, especially if they have playground equipment. However, the children's answers show that only a few of them have the opportunity to visit parks frequently. Most children reported going very seldom to parks or that they can only do so when accompanied by adults—even if there are parks near their home or their school.

During the session in which we showed photographs of the parks located in the borough where the children live, several children said that they knew very few of those parks and had never visited many of them. Some children at the private school mentioned that they go to private theme parks outside of the city. The playgrounds, which within urban contexts are the quintessential "public" spaces created for children, do not represent in this context significant spatial references for the children, either because they are not located near their homes or because children cannot access those places by themselves (Noschis 1992). Indeed, a visit to the park appears to be a family activity rather than an experience exclusive to the children. Children said that they mostly go to parks with one of their parents or

with some other family member such as a sibling or a cousin, or with a pet. Parks do not appear to be spaces for socialization with other children.

We note the absence of children's opportunities to establish significant relationships on a daily basis with other children who do not belong to their family. The answer given by a girl when she was asked with whom she played appears to be an indicator of the obstacles that children face regarding socializing with other children in their neighborhood: "I don't play with other children because my neighbors' parents don't allow them to come out to play." Another noted, "Once I played with my neighbor," recalling this as an exceptional occasion. These answers and the fact that no children reported being allowed to go to the park with their friends are disturbing, especially if we think of the importance of friendship for the proper development of children (Lester and Russell 2011; Ferrer and Fugate 2014; Zinger 2002).

A very small number of participating children mentioned that together with their families, they sometimes visited other larger parks where they like to walk, feed the squirrels and ride a bicycle or a skateboard. Many expressed their disagreement with many parks' prohibitions against skating, riding bicycles or bringing pets. Other negative aspects mentioned are that the parks are unclean due to lack of trash cans and because they are strewn with dog feces. The photographs taken by the children between workshops also showed that many are bothered by the presence of filth and trash in public spaces.

The main aspect highlighted by both groups of children is that in order for a park to be considered "good," it must have a lot of playground equipment: slides, swings, seesaws, tunnels, climbing webs, etc. Some children mentioned that they would like to have more spaces for play, including ball courts or parks, as well as fountains around which they may run and splash water on themselves. However, rather than a place for exploration of contact with nature, they appear to perceive parks as a space to play on the playground equipment. Several children expressed their dislike for dust in the parks, and a few girls mentioned that they dislike playing in parks because the dirt may soil their clothes. These reflections remind us of the tendency to standardize playground equipment observed in other contexts: since they have been created based on adult notions of what children's play ought to be like, they do not allow for free, creative play (Lynch 1977; Tonucci 2005), nor do they provide children the opportunity to integrate themselves into a public space that is undivided by age groups (Jansson 2008).

These observations on the fact that children cannot go to parks by themselves, that parks are not spaces where they can socialize with other children, and that they engage in play designed for them by adults, confirms that although the parks that the children frequent are spaces created specifically for them, they are not exclusively a "children's domain" (Risotto and Giuliani 2006; Karsten and van Vliet— 2006).

**The Ideal City**

The ideal city envisioned by the participating children contrasts substantially in certain aspects with their description of their urban environment.

In general terms, the most noticeable feature was that all the models—except for one which included fictional characters—contained many elements of nature such as trees, palm trees, grass, animals, flowers, bushes and ponds. The children decided to model animals that can be easily found in the urban landscape, e.g. dogs, cats and birds; they also represented lions and jaguars that are not locked up in a cage but that roam freely. Another constant element was the presence of bodies of water such as lakes, rivers, waterfalls and even the ocean. Likewise, they frequently included fountains in which they put fish and ducks. One of the models depicts a huge space covered with grass and a river crossing it, along with a waterfall and several fountains with water lilies, fruit trees, flowers, a cabin, and a person sitting on a rock (Figure 5). What we see in this case is that their ideal city is the *opposite of* the city. Other models also include few buildings such as houses, stores, public buildings like churches and hospitals, historic monuments, and spaces for children like ball courts and playgrounds. Notably, almost half of the models contained no streets or cars, although some models did contain such elements as traffic lights, street lights and trash cans.

**Figure 5. Ideal city**



In terms of the inhabitants, it is noteworthy that in one-third of the models there are no people, and only one of the models explicitly depicts the presence of children. Despite this idyllic construction of the city, which appears as a huge garden rather than as an urban environment, the presence of danger recurring in the previous exercises is also visible in some of the models that contain soldiers, beheaded or otherwise dead women, and a drunk shooting guns. There are only

three positive representations of characters: a man and a woman hugging each other, a man leaning against a tree while he eats an apple, and a man sitting on a rock. One of the models, created in the private school by third-grade boys, depicts a city with a completely devastated park with drunks, thieves and people engaged in killing animals. Another model by the third-grade group shows a prison, soldiers and war tanks. When we asked the boys what the soldiers were doing there, one of them replied: "They are protecting the city because the situation is very bad" and when we asked them if that was the city where they would like to live, one of them gave an affirmative answer because "then there wouldn't be so many [bad] things happening" although another one recognized that it would be good not to have so much surveillance.

**Figure 6. Children making the model**



This exercise allowed us to observe that building a model of the "ideal city" in a free environment where the children could talk about the things they wished for brought about an interesting combination between what in their opinion should ideally exist in a city (i.e., more prevalence of nature), the reality of the violence that they experience in their environment (represented mainly by the characters included in their models), and the pleasure that some of the boys take in playing "war," represented by the presence of their favorite fictional characters.

## Conclusion

Our study area in Mexico City shows the same growing tendency toward the withdrawal of children into private space that may be observed in other contexts. The answers provided by the children herein show that they seldom spend time in urban public spaces, they cannot walk or hang out on the streets by themselves,

and that they therefore have a poor knowledge of their nearby surroundings and of the city at large. As in other contexts, this tendency is a consequence of the mixture of adults' protectiveness and their desire to control the children's lives (Fotel and Thomsen 2004; Committee on the Rights of the Child 2013). However, a much higher level of violence is reflected in the interviewed children's statements than in many of the other contexts addressed by the literature on this topic, which are mostly European and North American.

The urban context and the children's particular social context, including the internalization of their parents' fear about lack of safety, are some of the main elements that influence the way in which children experience the city and their representation of what an ideal city would be for them. The main threats perceived by the children are related to people who can harm them and to the risk of being run over. The ideal city represented by the children reflects this violence; alternatively, in many cases it is the opposite of a city, rather resembling a large park.

The limited use of public spaces by children is a consequence not only of their almost complete absence of autonomous mobility but also of the habits of their parents. The difficulties of being a pedestrian in Mexico City reflected in the children's testimonies are also a factor. The distances between the places frequented by children and adults also contribute to children's limited presence in public. Even in the study area where the levels of violence are not as high as elsewhere in the city and where urban public spaces are present, few children walk on the streets—always accompanied by adults—or visit places near their homes. Restrictions to children's mobility in their surroundings are also associated with the fact that neighborhoods or public spaces are not valued as important places for their development and socialization (Reid 2002).

Our study did not indicate significant differences in children's experience of public spaces according to gender or to age. There were a few differences that may relate social class. For example, some children from the public school reported being allowed to walk alone to a shop near their house. Additionally, children from the private schools mentioned their annoyance at traffic and their frequenting of private parks outside the city, which could be related to the tendency of the middle and upper social classes to withdraw to private spaces, prevalent in many Latin American cities (Carrión 2008; Capron 2012). In this sense, the socio-spatial diversity and fragmentation of Mexico City call for further research on children's perceptions of other areas of the city.

Parks and playgrounds appear in this and other contexts as small islands where children can play in the city, though children's experiences in them reflects that parks are not really a territory that belongs to them. This lack of appropriation leads us to the distinction between "places for children" and "children's places" (Rasmussen 2004) and to the importance of "unprogrammed" places for informal play or for children to have a safe space outside the boundaries of parental control (Lynch 1977).

The exclusion of children from urban public spaces reflects to a great extent their expulsion from the community. The erosion of participation in shared spaces with other actors has an impact not only on possibilities for play, but also on their right to urban spaces and to the exercise of citizenship (Bartlett 1999; Borja 2003; Committee on the Rights of the Child 2013). For these reasons, the findings of our study highlight the importance of involving children in the life of their community and in urban planning—both in the assessment of existing spaces and in the design and construction of specific spaces for them (Lynch 1997; Bartlett 1999).

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## Appendix A. Name of the workshops, methods used and key findings

| Workshop and Scale | Methods used in the session | Key findings |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Neighborhood | Drawings of their surroundings and the routes along which they move.<br><br>Small group discussions. | • Children have a fragmented experience of their neighborhood.<br>• They represent in their drawings mainly the shops that are close to their house.<br>• Broad roads filled with cars are a predominant aspect of the neighborhood representation. There are no or few elements designed to facilitate pedestrian circulation.<br>• For the most part, children have no independent mobility. The exception to this is the children from the public school that can go to shops close to their home. |
| 2. Parks and gardens | Photographs of the parks near the schools, in Coyoacán borough and in other cities. Children identify the parks and discusses about them.<br><br>Small group discussions. | • Parks are children's outdoor favorite place. They like when there are lot of playground equipment.<br>• Several children report they don't like the dirt in the parks.<br>• Parks are not children domain because they cannot go alone to the park, it is not a place to establish relationships with other children, but rather a family activity; it is mainly a place to engage in play designed for them by adults.<br>• Some private school children go to private parks outside the city. |
| 3. Street and squares | Story writings or drawing about an event they had witnessed on the street or about which they had been told.<br>Small groups discussion. | • Children consider that streets are for cars, not for human beings. They do not identify themselves as pedestrians. Private school children identify themselves as car drivers.<br>• The street is considered by children to be a most hostile place, because of the risk of traffic accidents, and because they are afraid of being kidnapped or assaulted there. They have internalized their parents' fears about public space insecurity.<br>• Their difficulty with being on the street and particular to crossing the street reflects the difficulties of being a pedestrian in Mexico. |
| 4. The Ideal city | In small groups, children made models of the ideal city in which they would like to live. | • The ideal city contrasts substantially with their description of their urban environment. Many of the models do not represent urban spaces: they contain no buildings, streets, cars or people.<br>• The main elements are related to nature, including the important presence of bodies of water.<br>• Some of the models include representations of violent scenes. |

| 5. Places that are important for the children in their neighborhood | Between the workshops, children took photographs of the places that are important for them. They discuss in small groups why they choose those places. | • Many children depicted the parking lot of their condominium, or took pictures from their car window, showing their minimal frequentation of public spaces.<br>• Photographs reflect that places important to children are the street where their homes stand, as well as stores and places where they perform out of school activities.<br>• Children are worried about filth and trash in public spaces. |