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The Public Value of Child-Friendly Space: Re-Conceptualising the Playground

Purpose: The playground is a commonly advised means to integrate children into the public realm of ‘child-friendly cities’, yet research has tended not to examine it in relation to adjacent public space. This paper aims to understand the extent to which the playground – a socio-spatial phenomenon – facilitates children’s integration into the public realm, enabling critical examination of the ‘child-friendly space’ concept.

Methodology: An ethnographic study was carried out across three sites in Athens, Greece, where typical neighbourhood playgrounds replicate features common across the global north. Methods combined observation (167 hours; morning, afternoon, evening), visual-mapping and 61 semi-structured interviews with 112 playground users (including adults and children from the playgrounds and surroundings). Rigorous qualitative thematic analysis, involving an iterative post-coding process, allowed identification of spatial patterns and emergent themes.

Findings: Findings reveal perceptions surrounding the protective and age-specific aspects of child-friendly design, limit the playgrounds’ Public Value. However, a paradox emerges whereby the playgrounds’ adjacency to public spaces designed without child-friendly principles, affords children’s engagement with the public realm.

Originality: This original finding is enabled by the novel approach to studying the playground in relation to adjacent public realm. The study also offers the first empirical examination of child-friendly city principles – participation in social life and urban play – in a Greek context, addressing a geographical gap in literature on children’s everyday spaces.

Significance: Reconceptualisation of the ‘child-friendly playground’ is proposed, embracing interdependence with public space – highly significant for child-friendly urban design theory and practice globally. Future researchers are encouraged to compare findings in other geographical contexts.

Keywords: Playground; Child-Friendly City; Athens; Ethnography; Public Value; Public Realm

The Child-Friendly Playground

The concept of the child-friendly city (CFC) emerged from the child-rights agenda (NIUA, 2016; UN, 1996; UNICEF, 2017, 2004, 1989). What exactly constitutes a child-friendly city is under debate. As van Vliet and Karsten (2015) argue: ‘The Child-Friendly City (CFC) label means different things to different people, influenced by their professional interests’ (p.1). Fuelled by the intention to integrate children as participating actors in society, child-friendly principles have nevertheless informed design indicators (Broberg et al., 2013; IRC/CERG, 2016; Krishnamurthy et al., 2018, NIUA, 2016; Woolcock and Steele, 2008) and guidance relevant to the design and planning of urban space and spatial interventions (Aerts, 2018; CFCI 2019; Hoogendoorn, 20012; Horelli, 2007; Krishnamurthy et al., 2018; Kyatta, 2004; McAllister, 2008). Literature variously measures child-friendliness through children’s well-being (Howard, 2006; Malone, 2015; UN, 1996), through green spaces (Dublin City Development Board, 2012; Jansson et al., 2016) or independent mobility (Cilliers and Cornelius, 2018; Malone, 2013; Nordström, 2010; Whitzman and Mizrachi, 2012). Other studies approach child-friendly space as a whole through its child-responsiveness (Aerts, 2018), comment on the advantages of undesignated outdoor play-space (Krishnamurthy et al., 2018) or discuss the qualities and relations it should foster (Horelli, 2007; Walsh, 2006; Woolcock and Steele, 2008). However, connecting the majority of these diverse studies is the intention to integrate children into public life through urban space. The playground, a segregated play area with play provisions, emerges through this literature as the commonly “advised” space through which to integrate children into public space (Aerts, 2018; Cilliers and Cornelius, 2018; Jansson, 2008; IRC/CERG, 2016; NIUA, 2016; Wessells and Kostelny, 2013; Woolcock and Steele, 2008).

Literature suggests – perhaps unsurprisingly – that it is adult perceptions of childhood that structure conceptions of the “ideal” places for children (Gülgönen and Corona, 2015; Loukaitou-Sideris, 2003; Valentine, 1996a). Space not only accommodates, but also reflects and produces social, economic and political relations (Rose, 1993; Soja, 1996). Olwig and Gulløv (2003) explain that restriction in movement and the division of space into go and no-go areas ‘mirror hierarchies and symmetries in the relations between different parts of the society’ (p.8). One of the groups affected is children. As Gallagher (2006) argues:

... recognition of children's agency is tempered by an awareness of its limits: social space is produced through relationships that, in the main, subordinate children to adults. (162)

Child-friendly spaces are, therefore, not just places that children can use, but places that construct what it is to be a child and what is “proper” and “valuable” for this population group (See: Aitken, 2001; Gagen, 2000; Gülgönen and Corona, 2015; Holloway and Valentine, 2000a; Loukaitou-Sideris, 2003; Rasmussen, 2004; Solomon, 2005; Valentine, 1996; Wilks, 2010). Led by a developmental perspective, child-friendly spaces often construct children as beings in need of special treatment (Aerts, 2018; NIUA, 2016), informing spaces designed around “children’s competencies”, safety^[1] (Lansdown, 2011; Woolcock and Steele, 2008) and security (Kyatta, 2004; McAllister, 2008), with an emphasis on scale, flexibility and segregation (Cilliers and Cornelius, 2018; Wessells and Kostelny, 2013; Wilks, 2010). The contemporary prototype of child-friendly spaces, materialising concerns about children’s safety and well-being (Cilliers and Cornelius, 2018; Howard, 2006; Wilks, 2010), is the playground. Educational, sculptural (Aaron, 1965; Dattner, 1969), intergenerational (Daniels and Hohnson, 2009; Herrington, 1999) adventure (Lady Allen of Hurtwood, 1953) or commercial (McKendrick et al., 2000), the playground space has undergone a variety of transformations (Solomon, 2005), reflecting society’s dominant perceptions about childhood and play in each era. Interestingly, the fence has been an enduring feature of the playground; rarely dispensed with and scarcely evolving over time. Even in the more radical and child-centred approaches to playground spaces (Aaron, 1965; Dattner, 1969; Solomon, 2005), the fence was often a prerequisite for their operation, acting as the boundary between children’s and adult’s space, defining the play-space itself. Cilliers and Cornelius (2018), exploring child-friendly design characteristics, argue:

Safety, for this purpose, refers to physical design elements such as fencing, lighting, and visibility. (n/a)

Despite the physical segregation of children behind the fence of the child-friendly playground, such spaces continue to be portrayed as the primary spatial means to

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engage children with public space and public life, acting as ‘entry points’ (Olwig and Gulløv, 2003, p.15); fenced islands in public space. Child-friendly design approaches often focus on the inclusion of children, suggesting age-specific spaces for children (Derr and Tarantini, 2016; McAllister, 2008; NIUA, 2016; UN, 2017); child-centred islands within the adult public. However, as Jansson (2008) argues: ‘playgrounds can be viewed as an excuse for the lack of child-friendly environments’ (89). Research on the playground has similarly tended to approach it as a play-accommodating, self-contained space, without placing it in its general (socio-historical, cultural or spatial) context and without exploring its publicness and relationship to adjacent spaces (Nasar and Holloman, 2013; Refshauge et al., 2013; Susa and Benedict, 1994). Since the playground is intended to engage children with public life, but is usually physically segregated by its design, this paper explores the publicness of the space as a quality essential to our understanding of the “child-friendly playground”.

The two main questions explored within this important context are:

What is the relationship between the “child-friendly” and publicness?

What is the playgrounds’ Public Value?

The study centres on Athens, Greece, where the typical neighbourhood play-space replicates features common across much of the global north. This allows future comparisons with other geographical contexts. The majority of playgrounds in Athens abide by the child-friendly perceptions translated to the ‘standardized playground’ model (Solomon, 2005, 89) – easy to build, not needing frequent maintenance and designed according to the safety standards (Dattner, 1969), paved with impact-absorbing materials. Intergenerational play is not foreseen by the design. It is important to note that at the time of writing there has been no plan to implement the CFC guidelines in Greece (Karagianni and Karioti, 2003). There is a gap in literature on understanding children’s lives and spaces in Greece. This study is significant as it offers the first empirical examination of the child-friendly city principles – participation in social life and urban play – in a Greek context.

Conceptual Framework

Public Space and Public Value

Public is defined through its ability to accommodate different kinds of users and uses in the same space in a constant process of negotiation and participation (Knox and Pinch, 2006; Massey, 1998; UNESCO, 2017); a ‘communal living room’ (Hertzberger, 2001, p.48). Public space is the space supporting and placing participation in the public realm and community life; an ‘open-ended’ (Fernando, 2006, 57) ‘place of encounter’ (Jiménez-Domínguez, 2006; p.106).

The term Public Value^[2] has been coined for this research in relation to the playground space, meaning the value the playground has as a public space; its publicness. It synthesizes the concepts of access and interaction (Knox and Pinch, 2006; Petrescu, 2007; UNESCO, 2017) referring to the extent to which the playground space is accessible to different age and social groups, allowing co-existence or interactions between normal users (i.e. children and adults accompanying children) and non-users (i.e. adults not accompanying children) of the space. This term was chosen to directly contrast with the extensively used term, Play Value (Woolley and Lowe, 2018), and to direct attention towards the (potentially) public qualities of the space. Public Value should not be confused with the often-used term ‘social value’ (Czalczyńska-Podolska, 2014, p.132) focusing on interactions between people of the same age group; namely children and youth (Solomon, 2005; Woolley and Lowe, 2018). Public Value shifts the focus from socialisation as a child’s development of social skills between peers, to active interaction with a variety of ages and social groups.

Children, Childhood and the Child-friendly

Drawing on UNICEF’s Child Friendly Cities (CFC) framework (UNICEF, 2017), this study is novel as it will examine how the playground’s child-friendly character informs or affects its Public Value. Informed by a rights-based approach, the CFC “movement” frames child-friendly urban space as a means to engage children with the public. Child-friendly spaces, most often in the form of playgrounds (Aerts, 2018; Cilliers and Cornelius, 2018; IRC/CERG, 2016; Jansson, 2008; NIUA, 2016; Woolcock and Steele, 2008), are dispersed in the urban landscape intending to support children’s presence in public space. Examining UNICEF’s Child-friendly Cities and Communities Initiative (CFCI, 2019, n/a), the key child-friendly

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characteristics that are relevant to playgrounds and play spaces in the city can be identified as follows:

- ‘Participate in family, cultural, city or community and social life.’ (n/a)
- ‘Meet friends and have places and spaces to play and enjoy themselves.’ (n/a)

Importantly, this study focuses on the recurring theme in the child-friendly literature: children’s ‘engagement with social life’ (CFCI, 2019, n/a). The playground is approached as the main child-friendly space located within Athenian public space and examines its ability to engage children with the public realm.

Methodology

The everyday and the mundane is of interest in this study. As ‘architecture can be found in the actions and relational practices of everyday life’ (Trojal and Petrescu, 2017, 11), this study focuses on ‘everyday geographies’ (Horton and Kraftl, 2014, p.181) and practices that inform people’s everyday lives, rather than on states of exception. Architecture is here framed as a process rather than an object (Stickells, 2011; Trojal and Petrescu, 2017), located in social-spatial interactions and occupation created through everyday use. Ethnography permitted immersion in the playground, here approached as a socio-spatial phenomenon; a space that acquires different representative identities in relation to its spatial characteristics. Three sites were chosen as cases, each comprising a public piazza which included a fenced public playground (See: Figure I-Figure III).



Figure I: Dexameni Piazza – Plan of Main Functions

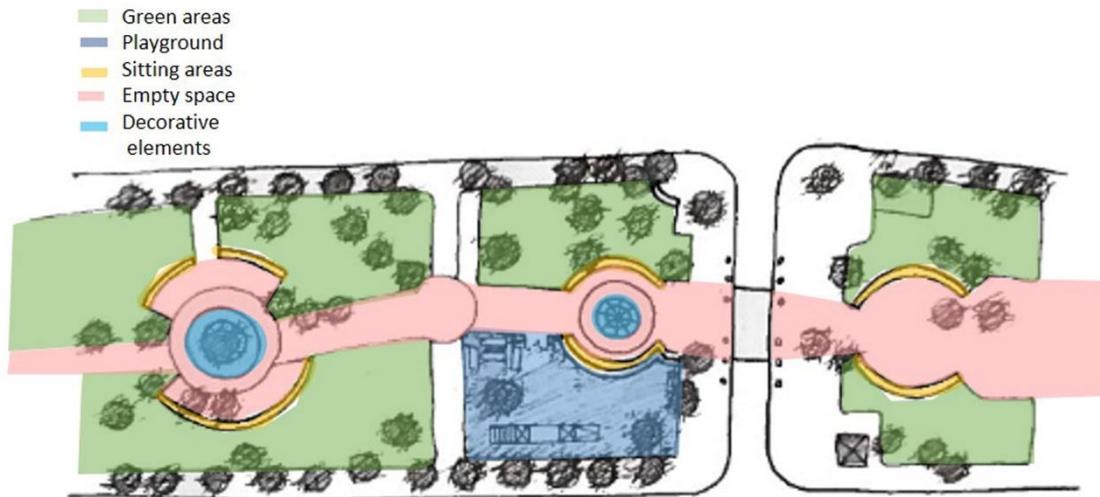


Figure II: Vyronas Piazza – Plan of Main Functions



Figure III: Ilioupolis Piazza – Plan of Main Functions

These cases were not extreme or deviant, rather they were paradigmatic (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p.79), representing the typical neighbourhood play-space in Athens, Greece. The examples were chosen in order to describe a common phenomenon – that of people’s actions in typical Athenian playgrounds and piazzas. Located in neighbourhoods with contrasting socio-economic identities^[3] the examples were also chosen in order to diversify the conditions that might have an impact upon the phenomenon observed (See: Table 1). However, there was no intent to directly compare cases or to identify any relationships to socio-economic status within the findings. All of the playgrounds were outdoor, free to access, purposely equipped, local public spaces designed for children with children’s play in mind. All were fenced, clearly defined spaces, comprising metallic play structures and seating areas, some paved with soft material (See appendices A-D for further detail and photographs).

Table 1: Outline Description of Cases

CASE	NEIGHBOURHOOD LOCATION	SOCIO-ECONOMIC IDENTITY OF NEIGHBOURHOOD ^[3]	URBAN DEVELOPMENT OF NEIGHBOURHOOD	PIAZZA AREA	PLAYGROUND AREA
1	Dexameni	Higher Income	High rise apartment blocks (average of 5 stories) High density- 11.06 people/ 0.1 ha (ELSTAT, 2011) Residential and Commercial area Loose grid and organic plan	2689m ²	700m ²
2	Vyronas	Lower Income	Medium rise apartment blocks (average of 3 stories) High density- 6,69 people per 0,1 ha (ELSTAT, 2011) Residential area Loose grid plan	2282m ²	200m ²
3	Ilioupolis	Middle Income	Medium rise apartment blocks (average of 3 stories) High density- 6,11 people per 0,1 ha (ELSTAT, 2011) Residential and Commercial area Loose grid plan	4083m ²	540m ²

The lead author engaged in intensive, short-term ethnography, employing ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) over five months during 2016 and 2017. 167 hours of observations were conducted across three playgrounds and their adjacent spaces, during morning, afternoon and evening; both weekdays and weekends. The data collection methods consisted of ethnographic observations, field notes, informal discussions and 61 semi-structured ethnographic interviews (See appendix E for interview guide) in the field (Angrosino, 2007), using ‘theoretical sampling’ (Ball, 1990, 165). While the interviews engaged 112 participants (including adults 91 and 21 children), the total number of participants observed cannot be calculated as all three playgrounds were part of a lively public space with constant flows of people. A

reflexive journal (Punch, 2012) complemented the field notes, forming a comprehensive ‘research biography’ (Ball, 1990, 170). A variety of visual mapping techniques was used to explore the physical and spatial characteristics of each space and their relationship to participants’ behaviours. ‘Descriptive diagrams’ complemented observations, capturing movement, flows and interactions, thereby placing specific observations in space and allowing the depiction of interaction between the different areas (see Appendix F). An identifying number corresponding to the fieldnotes, was given to each participant, while different symbols ascribed specific characteristics (i.e. female/male, guardian/child, and adult/unaccompanied child).

For the purpose of this study, any participant aged 5-12 years old was considered a child. However, age in this research is not understood to imply any correlation with physical and cognitive abilities. Our reasoning is positioned in the post-structuralistic new wave of childhood studies (Ray, 2012) and the post-human, new materialism approaches (Spyrou, 2018) focusing on the relational and situated status of age (Kraftl, 2013). The notion of the child-friendly is examined under the lens of this relational socio-spatial construction of one’s identity and of ways to interact with and appropriate space (Horelli, 2007), focusing interest on ‘the ways in which idea(l)s of childhood are literally and materially constructed’ through ‘local, banal, ephemeral, mundane, material practices’ (Kraftl, 2006, 488). As a result, this study’s research methods and questions were not focused solely on children, rather they were ‘user friendly’ (Aitken and Herman, 2009, p.20). Children were approached as individuals, with movement back and forth on Punch’s continuum (2012), in order to address and engage with each individual’s competencies and needs.

The findings below draw upon the qualitative thematic analysis of the full data set, which involved a iterative process of coding and reflexive interpretation (Mason, 2002). This type of analytical process is guided by the research questions, but no a priori themes are identified: instead themes emerge from the iterative process. The analysis started with the pilot study, informing the refinement of methods. By the end of the data collection the coding process was applied to the text-based field-notes and interview transcriptions, allowing identification of patterns and emergent themes. The texts were also interpreted in the context of the descriptive diagrams made during field work observations. This process produced ‘spatial patterns’ that were then mapped in ‘analytical’ diagrams (See Appendix F). The spatial patterns along with

the codes and patterns emerging from the field-notes and interviews analysis were then synthesised into broader emergent themes.

A selection of direct quotes from participant interviews and discussions and from the field notes are used to evidence the findings.

Findings

The Safe “Public”

Athens may be the largest city in Greece, but it is the least popular according to resident preferences (Maniou, 2012). The lack of public space and basic infrastructure, in combination with the high-density rates, affects residents’ everyday life. The more private spaces of home, or friends’ houses, are the basic hubs of children’s play (Kaisari, 2005). In Athens the notion of the child-friendly consolidates in the segregated, age-specific playground. The playground spaces examined in this study were created by the state as purpose-centred and clearly defined spatialities.

Findings show that the playground accommodated guardians’ fears about children being in the public. There is a vast literature exploring age as an organising principle for social control (Alanen, 2009; Alderson, 2000; Williams and Nussbaum, 2001) and spatial segregation (Horschelmann and Blerk, 2012; Kraftl, 2006; Kylin and Bodelius, 2015; Olwig and Gulløv, 2003; White, 1993) approaching children as beings and/or becomings (James et al., 1998; Qvortrup, 1994; Uprichard, 2008). Segregation and supervision emerged from fieldwork as the playground’s main design requirement from the guardian perspective, representing the two main attributes of “proper” children’s spaces (Aitken, 2001; Olwig and Gullov, 2003, 101); the fence being the physical structure that made both possible. Guardians often commented on how they felt more relaxed in the enclosed “safe” space:

Because children are more constrained that way... more secure. The fence is necessary for the children’s safety (Nanny, Dexameni).

The playground’s special design and scale, preoccupied with children’s safety and well-being, intensified the classification of the playground as “children’s space”, hindering co-existence with the wider public and reducing its Public Value. The participants (both guardians and people in the piazza) perceived it as a place for childhood providing “special equipment” for supervised “safe” and “valuable” play.

The playground's special design was observed to guide children's play (See: Zeiher, 2003):

They should play properly. So they will not get hurt. And that way, other children can play as well (Mother, Ilioupolis).

As shown in previous literature, participants' conceptions of the "ideal" places for children revealed their underpinning perceptions of childhood (Gol-Guven, 2016; Gülgönen and Corona, 2015; Horschelmann and Blerk, 2012; Kylin and Bodelius, 2015; van Vliet and Karsten, 2015): the guardians in this study characterized as "good" a playground that is safe, clean, fully paved with soft materials, containing low challenge equipment, no visual obstructions (thus allowing supervision) and adequately segregated from its surroundings. Guardians consistently referred to the need for a fenced space, with the quality of the play equipment given secondary importance. Guardians often admitted that they chose smaller playgrounds, offering fewer play opportunities, simply for the sake of perceived safety:

The other playground is new and large but it has too many doors! (Father, Vyronas).

However, as literature has previously highlighted (Jacobs, 1961; James, 1990; Valentine, 1996; Ward, 1978), this study's findings suggest discrepancies between adult and child perceptions and uses of space, revealing their contrasting understandings:

A mother walking through the piazza was negotiating with her boy:

"the other playground is bigger, better" to receive the answer from the boy "the other one is too crowded! (Field-notes: Vyronas).

While adult's answers revolved around safety, children tended to prefer spaces where their friends or other children were. They often expressed their preference for making the play infrastructure more challenging and as a result more interesting:

I would prefer it if the slide was higher (Girl, Ilioupolis).

At the same time, the playground did not take into account all the different abilities across the age span, emerging instead as an age-specific place with pre-defined ways to play and use the structures. Children have often criticised the limited potential of the typical “KFC” (kit, fence, carpet) playground designs (Malone, 2015). The structures were often too challenging for toddlers and too boring for older children, while excluding the larger adult bodies:

We don't fit in the structures! These are for babies! (Father, Dexameni).

In line with other western studies (Alderson, 2000; Cole-Hamilton and Gill, 2000; Smith, 1995), conceptions of age not only made the playground space a children's space, but also made play a child's “right”:

The play structures bias you towards child's play. He would ask me to climb the bridge but I didn't want to climb for this reason. You feel this is for the children (Father, Dexameni).

Adult play in the playground was observed only on the broken play structures, which were not in use by children.

The perceived “child-friendliness” of the playgrounds therefore constructed them as distinct spaces in which co-existence of different age groups was not supported, limiting their Public Value. People in this study did not perceive the playgrounds to be part of the public space, but rather places for children's use. Literature discusses processes of “othering” children in their use of public space (Aitken, 2001; Holloway and Valentine, 2000a; Olwig and Gulløv, 2003; Valentine, 1996; White, 1993). This study supports this argument and suggests that child-centred spaces employ similar processes of “othering” adults. Literature has addressed the subject of other people in the playground space (Weck, 2017; Wilson, 2013). Although there are studies approaching the playground as a space of children's socialisation (Bennet et al., 2012; Bunnell et al., 2012; Cole-Hamilton and Gill, 2002; Galani, 2011; Jansson, 2008), the playground's processes of “othering” adults restricted their Public Value, specialising their use. There is evidence that the tailored design of the playground, as well as the physical characteristics of the surrounding area (i.e. number of shaded or sitting areas) supported the profiling behaviours that

regulated playground access. The fence's physicality sent a clear message regarding the distinctiveness of this space:

So the children wouldn't go out... or others getting in... strange people... You know, dangerous... (Mother, Dexameni).

The suspicions that guardians had expressed about certain unaccompanied adults were, accordingly, felt by those adults who tended to avoid these children's places, considering them superfluous and "childish" (Edmiston, 2008), 'places only for children' (Blackford, 2004, 232):

No, I don't sit in the playground. There is so much space in the piazza, why should I go to the playground? (Man, Vyronas).

In this study, the physical characteristics and the number of sitting choices in the adjacent area was often mentioned by the participants as a factor that either justified or questioned the "outsiders" presence in the playground space.

The Play Public

Strong evidence emerged across the various sets of data that the playground, acting as a "play landmark", attracted and justified play outside its boundary, in the piazza. A play-island was created around the playground space where people, taking advantage of the piazzas' affordances, sustained a new play-space, distinct from the playground, but in constant relation to it. The piazza's affordances, were observed to compensate for the age-specific and prescriptive nature of the playground's infrastructure. The physicality of the fence itself (porous, allowing views) allowed games to transgress the playground boundary, while the piazzas' infrastructure (benches, statues, trees, and stairs), or the lack of it, acted as complementary to the playground's use-specific structures:

The boys play in the swings, they exit the playground, climb the statue and then run back again to the playground (Field-notes, Dexameni).

A paradox was observed, according to which the playground fence supported play outside the playground. The absence of the fence was mentioned by the guardians as potentially restricting play:

No, it's better that way. The older children got used to it and they play football [outside]. If it was open... the older children wouldn't have anywhere to play (Mother, Dexameni).

Guardians were often observed to stay outside the playground, while the children moving in and out of the playground took advantage of the piazzas' infrastructure – playing at the surrounding restaurants' tables, or in the grassy areas and benches. Crucially, it was often argued during interviews and discussions that people – despite not always intending to play within the playground's boundaries – would not visit the area if there were no playground nearby:

No, I wouldn't bother to come. I would have visited another place with a playground nearby (Father, Vyronas).

Space emerged as an “equal partner” in play, affording the co-existence of different kinds of games and interaction. In the play-island, people were observed climbing or hanging from lamps and trees while taking advantage of elements they could use as goalposts for other games. Space was continually manipulated and reinvented. In contrast with child-friendly initiatives that create time-bound play-spaces in public space on specific days through the year, this study's findings suggest that a new everyday was here created and sustained.

Play in the piazza contrasted significantly with that in the child-friendly playground, this time extending beyond children to also include adults. In the play island the playground's institutionalised play was transformed to an everyday, intergenerational, co-authored interaction in the public realm, allowing interactions between different age groups, thereby redefining the binary between adults' leisure and children's play (Rojek, 1985):

The ball goes to an old man's sitting in the red bench. The boy gets closer, the old man kicks it back. The toddler kicks the ball again toward the old man (Field-notes, Dexameni).

Different groups of users, people of various ages and backgrounds, co-existed in the same space, interacting and socialising, ascribing Public Value to the public space.

Guardians and other adults often commented on how they preferred to play in the piazza, not restricted either by the play structures or societal perceptions about "good parenting" (Allin et al., 2014; Blackford, 2004), which manifested in use-specific areas. Adults were observed to play mostly in areas without a pre-defined use, but with spatial characteristics that supported their movement abilities:

We don't play because we can't fit in the play structures [...] in the piazza we can play (Father, Ilioupolis).

I prefer playing in the piazza, they chase me, I climb the trees etc... I don't play in the playground space though. It is for the children (Father, Dexameni).

The most striking finding concerning adults' play in the island was that not only did adults feel more comfortable playing, but adult play was also tolerated. It was perceived as "normal", informing an inclusive, intergenerational realm:

And in the piazza... You play... What can you do? (Man, Ilioupolis).

This raises the question as to what constitutes a play space in the urban landscape. The findings support studies proposing that there is no connection between play infrastructure and playing outdoors (Gülgönen and Corona, 2015). Rather, the spatial affordances of infrastructure in the public space, although not designed to, emerged as factors supporting play in public, legitimised by adjacency to the playground. This study therefore moves its focus from the playground space itself and proposes an extended playful space in the city: an emplacement without defined physical space that engages with the urban landscape and allows co-existence and interaction between various age- and social-groups.

The Playground's Public Value - Reclaiming the Child-friendly

The Designed Child-Friendly

Many papers argue how essential the child-friendly approach is in order to support inclusive spaces (Aerts, 2018; Derr and Tarantini, 2016; Krishnamurthy et al., 2018; NIUA, 2016). This study framed the playground's Public Value through co-existence and interaction. When first approaching the playground space as a defined spatiality, its Public Value emerged as limited, informed by its child-friendly design and broader societal perceptions about childhood and safety. The physical element of the fence defined the playground as a space with meanings distinct from its surrounding space. The child-friendliness of the cases emerged through the notions of safety and protection rather than engagement with the public, highlighting a tension between the different dimensions of the concept. The age-specific character of the playground structures, a characteristic often discussed in the child-friendly literature as supporting children's abilities (NIUA, 2016), constructed the playground space as a "special" space. The playground emerged as a space where children could meet similar-age friends and socialise with peers, but remained segregated from social life beyond, fostering fixed conceptualisations of childhood, both as a precarious stage in human life (Olk, 2009; Olwig and Gulløv, 2003; Zeiher, 2009) and as a 'repository for hope' (Kraftl, 2008, p.82). While previous literature has argued about the 'failure' of the playground to engage children in public life (Cunningham and Jones, 1999, p.12; Jacobs, 1961) child-friendly projects and literature still consider them to be a way to integrate children into public space. Our findings question the effectiveness of this approach. It is often argued that: 'designing for children, you design for everyone in a way' (A Playful City, 2019, n/a). However, the child-friendly design of the playground deterred adults from engaging with the space, limiting its Public Value.

The Unexpected Child-Friendly

Although the playground's conceptualisation as a child-friendly, safe play-enclave limited its Public Value, the surrounding piazza accommodated extended interactions. The playground's Public Value can here be understood to extend beyond its physical limits, materialising in interactions within a play-island that occupied the adjacent piazza. What is interesting in this case is that this surrounding space did not abide by any child-friendly design intentions. Nevertheless, the spatial affordances supported children's competencies, allowing them to engage with the public realm - the

intention of child-friendly spaces - sustaining co-existence and interactions between people of diverse ages. In contrast to previous literature (Day and Wagner 2010; Valentine, 1996) the public realm in all three cases emerged as highly tolerant of children and their play; bestowing them with space and time. At the same time, while adults tended to avoid direct engagement with the child-friendly playground, the unspecified adjacent space afforded adult engagement in play, suspending normative functioning.

Reconceptualising the Child-Friendly

Child-friendly theory informed our understanding of the playground as a space for children's integration into the public space. Underpinning child-friendly spaces is an assumption that a special approach^[4] should be taken in order to include children in the public realm. This study questions this assumption as it accepts the normative framework, which perceives children as "different"^[5]. It is argued that a particular understanding of the child-friendly framework can, ironically, exclude the child as "other", not only constructing special spaces, but also using a "tokenistic" approach in participation (Hart, 1992). Despite failing to engage children in public life, the playground space sustained an inclusive public realm just beyond its boundaries. As Jansson (2008) argues:

The playground is a place in which to have fun, but at the same time it is the adult world's contribution to children's outdoor environment and not self-evidently children's own place (p.9).

The need to avoid basing children's engagement on their perceived difference becomes important, while at the same time avoiding 'making the Other into the same' (Moss, 2006, 190). Drawing on the observations in the "play-public", this study reconceptualises the child-adult dipole. Although conceptualisations of childhood and adulthood were clearly constructed in the playground space, indicating specific behaviours and structuring adult-child interactions, they became blurred when playing in the piazza. Returning to Kraftl's (2006) notion of the localized, banal constructions of childhood, in this study the notions of childhood and adulthood performed in the

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play-island were reconstructed in a mutual way, interrelating and informing each other. ‘Children, like adults are not a homogenous group’ (Lansdown, 2001, 14); thus child-friendly does not suffice as a self-evident approach when discussing children. Despite being understood as a child-friendly space, the playground did not directly allow for children’s engagement with public life. Drawing on the post-humanist, new-materialism turn of childhood studies (Spyrou, 2018) this study argues that the discussion about children’s participation should not revolve only around children’s voices, but rather children’s actions in space and the specific conditions situating the childhood experience in the everyday (Kraftl, 2006, 2013). We perceive participation and engagement the same way that we perceive childhood: as situated and relational (See: Prout and Tisdall, 2006). Noting that the ‘Dionysian’ child, (Holloway and Valentine, 2000, p.2) is seen with suspicion because she wanders outside child-friendly spaces, this study highlights that it is not only exclusion, but also the ways in which inclusion is constructed that create ‘particular conceptualisations, identities and ways of being for children and adults’ (Prout and Tisdall, 2006, 237).

Conclusion

This paper has investigated the extent to which the playground – as a socio-spatial phenomenon – facilitates the integration of children into the public realm. It transcends previous research as it has broken through the boundary of the “child-friendly playground” as a self-contained space, and has considered its relationship to the wider public and adjacent spaces. It enables a critical examination of the “child-friendly space” concept. Two key questions have guided the study: What is the Public Value of the playground? and What is the relationship between the ‘child-friendly’ and publicness?

Original findings reveal that perceptions surrounding the protective and age-specific aspects of child-friendly design, limit the playgrounds’ Public Value. The playground, the main “advised” way to engage children with the public life in child-friendly cities literature (Aerts, 2018; Cilliers and Cornelius, 2018; IRC/CERG, 2016; Jansson, 2008; NIUA, 2016; Woolcock and Steele, 2008), emerged as an inadequate space in these terms. Despite the playground appearing to physically be part of public space (physically accessible to all users) it was not socio-culturally perceived as public. Rather it was designed as a distinct space, classified as “children’s”. However, while the playground’s Public Value was limited inside its physical boundary, it

afforded children's engagement with public life in the surrounding space. This interesting twist allows us to reconsider the notion of the child-friendly, its intentions and means of implementation.

It is vital to state that this study does not argue for the abolishment of child-friendly spaces. The playground – through its very presence and identity, as well as the physicality of its fence – emerged as a necessary catalyst for the play island. Rather, through undertaking a novel approach, the study proposes a re-conceptualisation of the definition and orderings of the child-friendly playground. Approaching the city as a 'concretion of certain channels of social relationship' (Biggs and Carr, 2015, 99) the paradox emerging from this study^[6] highlights the playground as an organic and indispensable part of the cityscape, engaging in public life, informing play and intergenerational interaction in public space, while simultaneously being a self-centred, secluded enclave. Building on this study therefore, the question is raised as to how to make child-friendly spaces "adult-friendly"; how to give the word "childish" positive connotations and "de-criminalise" adults' presence in these spaces, strengthening their Public Value.

The findings have significant implications for child-friendly urban design theory and practice globally, reconceptualising "the child-friendly playground" to embrace interdependence with public space. Future work could build upon the principles established here to provide practitioners and urban designers with an associated set of design guidelines.

The paper prompts reflection on play, age and space as an assimilation rather than distinct elements interacting with each other. The findings suggest child-friendly could be seen as an approach to space, which refers not exclusively to children, but also other population groups (Biggs and Carr, 2015), reinforcing interactions and co-existence. Child-friendly design would therefore move away from proposing prescribed age-specific spaces and instead facilitate the creation of "children's spaces" instead of "spaces for children" (Rasmussen, 2004) as well as undesignated play spaces, focusing on how practitioners could create opportunities for play and engagement in the city (Krishnamurthy et al., 2018).

Notes

[1] 'Safety is defined as the state of being free from harm or danger. This could mean harm or danger from living things (e.g. criminals, dogs) or man-made things (e.g. buildings, vehicles)' (NIUA, 2016, xi).

[2] In the literature, the same term is most commonly used to refer to the value an organisation gives to society (Moore, 1995; Meynhardt, 2009); the value something has for the public (See for example Bate, 2011). Here, however, the term is re-appropriated to address and explore the interaction between the public realm and the playground space.

[3] Dexameni (upper-middle), Ilioupolis (middle) and Vyronas (lower). It is important to note that Athens is a city that does not easily allow clear-cut quantifiable distinctions between the different districts (See: Maloutas and Karadimitriou, 2001). The lower-, middle- and upper-middle identities of the three areas are associated with the everyday and historically-based perceptions of the districts, rather than a definitive economic, demographic or job-based categorisation.

[4] As evidenced by the design indicators of child-friendly cities revolving around special infrastructure and provisions (Hoogendoorn, 2012) and informed by developmental approaches to childhood (NIUA, 2016; Nordström, 2009)

[5] Often spaces created to support children's public engagement retain their character as "children's" functioning more as entry points (Olwig and Gulløv, 2003, p.15) than spaces of public engagement (See: Aerts, 2018; Jansson et al., 2016; Lansdown, 2011; Nordström, 2009) strengthening the view of children as "others", being "outside" society.

[6] According to which the playground barred others from its premises but catalysed intergenerational play in the surrounding area.

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Appendix A – Case 1: Dexameni.

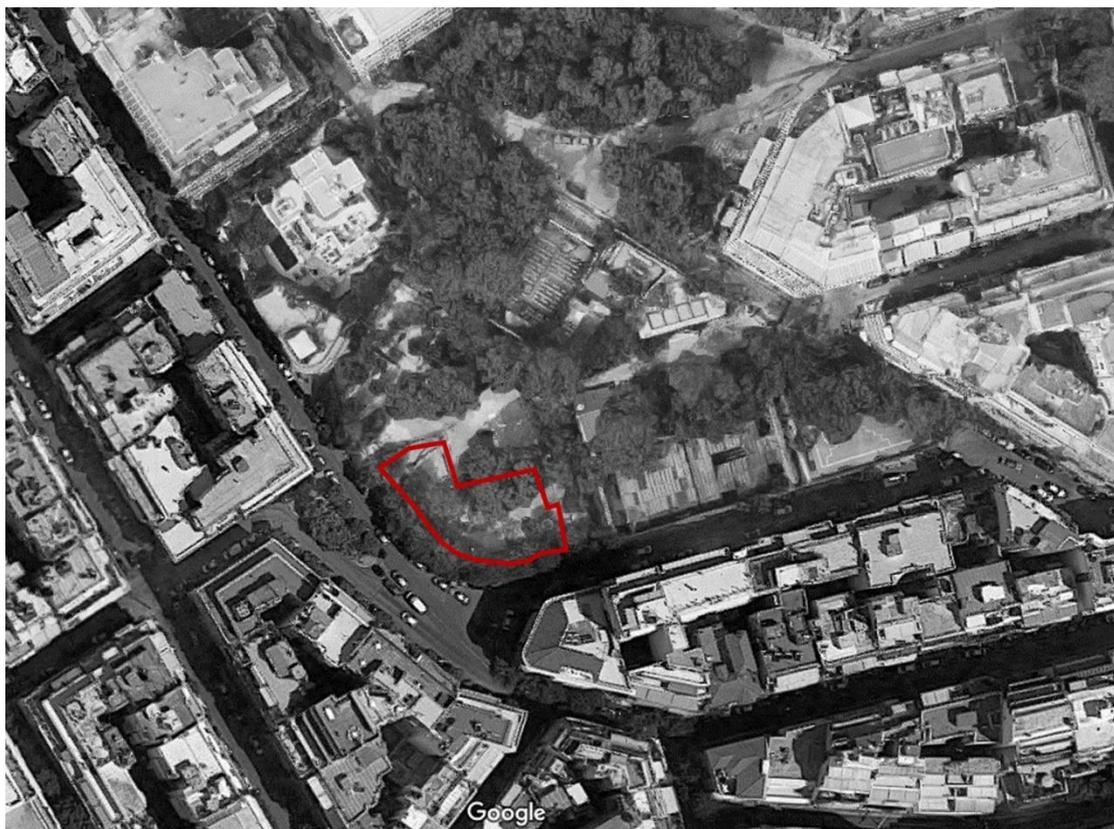


Figure IV: Dexameni Piazza in its Urban Context. The position of the playground is noted in the red circle (source: Google maps)

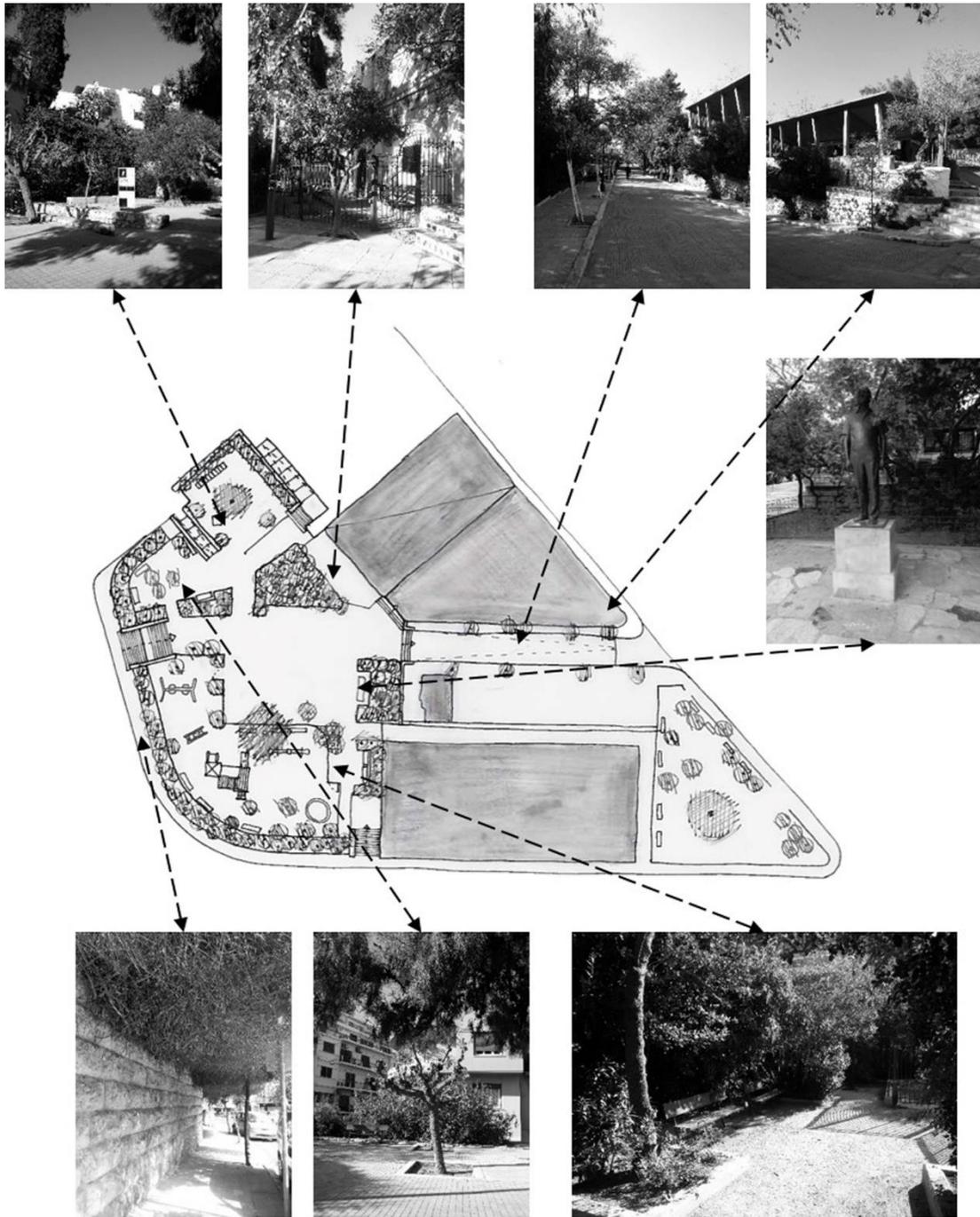


Figure V: Dexameni Piazza – Views. (Photos taken by the lead author)



Figure VI: Dexameni Playground. (Photos taken by the lead author)

Appendix B – Case 2: Vyronas.



Figure VII: Vyronas Piazza in its Urban Context. The position of the playground is noted in the red circle (source: Google maps)

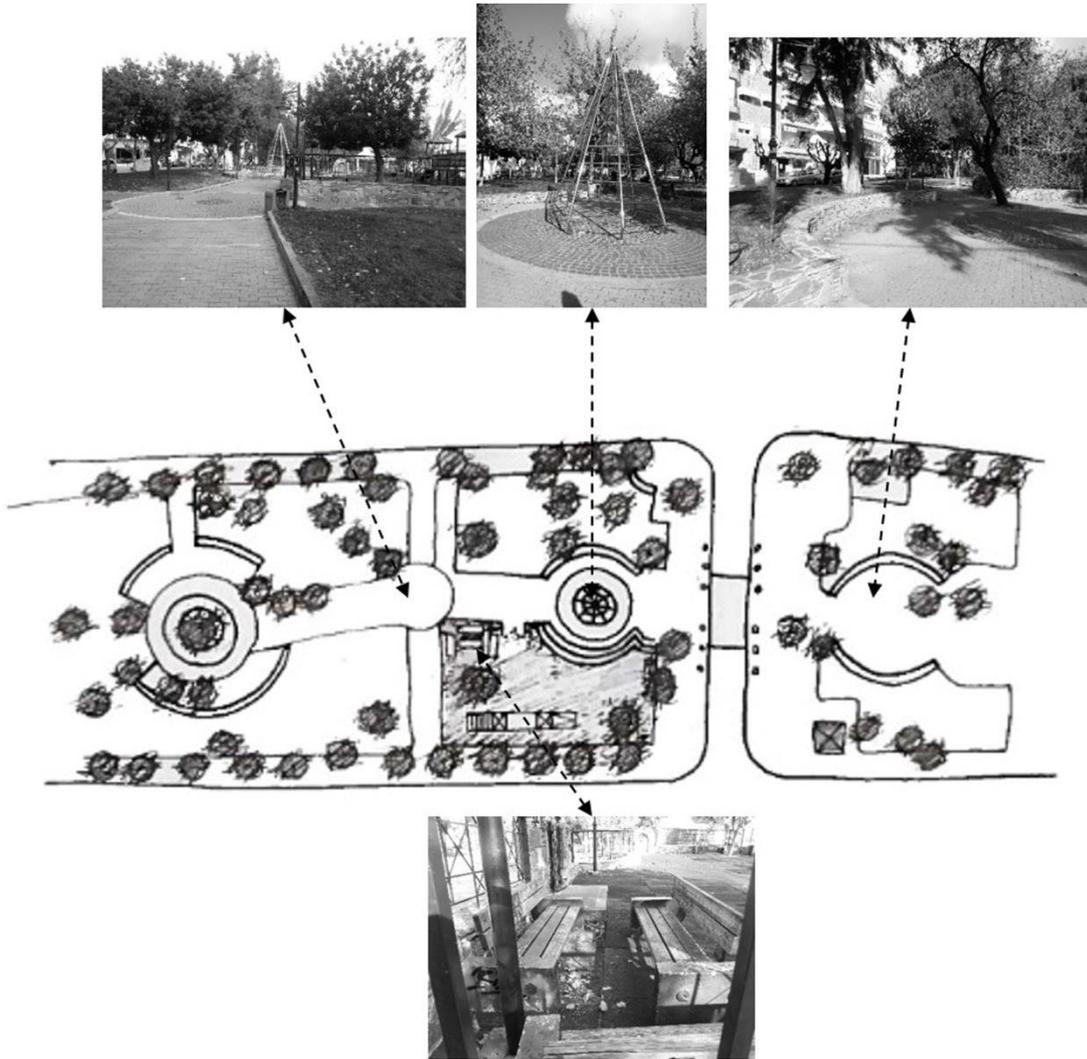


Figure VIIVIII: Vironas Piazza – Views. (Photos taken by the lead author)



Figure IIX: Vyronas Playground. (Photo taken by the lead author)

Appendix C – Case 3: Ilioupolis.



Figure X: Ilioupolis Piazza in its Urban Context. The position of the playground is noted in the red circle (source: Google maps)

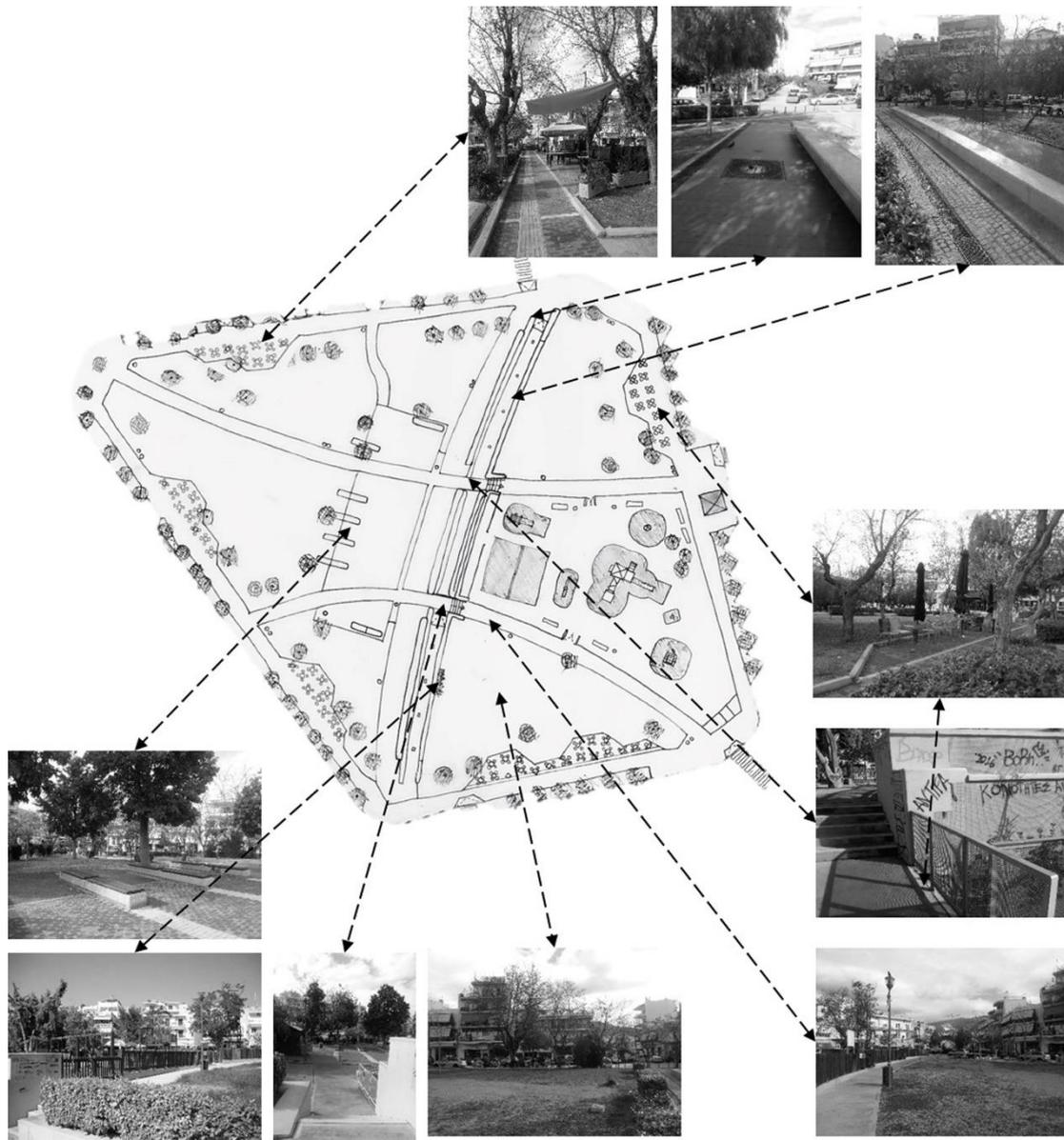


Figure XI: Ilioupolis Piazza – Views. (Photos taken by the lead author)



Figure XIII: Ilioupolis Playground. (Photo taken by the lead author)

Appendix D – Tables of Case Characteristics.

Table 2: Characteristics of the Piazzas

CASE	LAYOUT	ACCESS	INFRASTRUCTURE	ADJACENT USES
1	Island-shaped, detached from its surroundings. Divided in three main areas.	No contact with the street: segregated area. Staircases Ramps	4 benches (segregated in the two smaller areas of the piazza). Fenced flowerbeds A statue A library Cafes' tables segregated from the piazza. 'Empty space'	Café Open air cinema Water tank
2	Elongated shape (path) among two medium traffic streets. Shape facilitates flow. Resting areas.	Easy access: crossing the street	1 Circular, concrete bench outside the playground. Rest areas, promenades, water features, green areas. Small kiosks	Cafes Shops Kiosk Bus stand Main roads

3	<p>Island-shaped, surrounded by medium to high traffic street.</p> <p>Divided into two levels: the upper includes the playground and two green areas, while the lower the main piazza space and the rest green areas.</p>	<p>Difficult access: crossing the street</p>	<p>7 benches</p> <p>Long ledge-sitting area A fountain (not in use)</p> <p>Green areas</p> <p>Paths (different materials) Restaurants' tables occupying areas of the piazza</p> <p>'Empty space'</p>	<p>Cafes</p> <p>Shops</p> <p>Kiosk</p> <p>Bus stand</p> <p>Main roads</p>
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Table 2: Characteristics of the Playgrounds

CASE	PLAY – STRUCTURES	PAVING MATERIAL	INFRASTRUCTURE
1	<p>1 Bridge-monkey ropes-slide structure</p> <p>1 Baby slide</p> <p>2 Baby swings</p> <p>1 See-saw</p> <p>1 Circular ropes' structure</p>	Soil and gravel	<p>6 Benches placed peripherally by the fence</p> <p>Trees</p> <p>Lamps</p> <p>Bin</p>
2	<p>1 Bridge-slide structure</p>	Soft material	<p>4 Benches randomly placed</p> <p>Tree</p> <p>Lamps</p> <p>Bin</p> <p>Water fountain</p>
3	<p>1 Bridge-monkey ropes-slide structure</p> <p>1 Roundabout</p> <p>1 See-saw</p> <p>2 Baby swings</p> <p>2 Swings</p> <p>1 Baby slide</p> <p>1 Spring swing</p> <p>1 Rope structure</p>	<p>Soil</p> <p>Soft paving material around the structures</p>	<p>4 Benches placed peripherally by the fence and next to the doors</p> <p>Lamps</p> <p>Bin</p>

Appendix E- Interview Guide (English Translation)

(With italics are questions asked only to children)

GENERAL

- 1A. Do you come here from far away?
- 1B. Do you live in the neighbourhood?
- 2A. Do you come here often?
- 2B. How often do you come here?
- 3A. Why do you come to this playground? Is it your first choice or do you prefer it due to practical reasons?
- 3B. What do you like here?
- 4A. What do you think about this piazza and this playground?
- 4B. Why don't you go to another playground?
- 5A. Where else do you go with children to play?
- 5B. Which are your criteria for choosing a play-space?
- 6A. How long does your visit last?
- 6B. Why / when are you leaving?
7. Do you know the people here?
8. Do you make new friends / get to know other parents?
- 9A. Is the weather affecting your visit? In what ways?
- 9B. Do you plan in advance to meet your friends here?

PLAY

- 10A. Do you play? Why not? Where? When? What?
- 10B. Do you play in the square?
11. Would you play if the space were different? How do you like it to be in order for you to play?
12. What do you think about the space and the structures?
13. Are there opportunities for adults to play in Athens?
14. Do you play with the children? Where? Why?
15. *Where do/ would you like to play? Why?*
16. *Who do you play with?*
17. Did you come here before you had children?
18. *Do the adults play with you? Do you mind when this happens?*
- 19A. What do you do, while the children are playing?
- 19B. Do you intervene/ help them?
20. Where do you usually sit?
21. Why do you sit here, while the children are cycling? You could go anywhere in the square.

OUTSIDERS

22A. Do people that do not accompany any child come in the playground? Why? Why not?

22B. Why do you believe they prefer this space

22C. How do/would you react? What do you think?

Questions asked to outsiders:

23A. Do you feel welcomed in the playground? How do parents react?

23B. Why do you prefer this space and not the square?

23C. Would you come here if it wasn't for this playground?

23D. Do you play?

BOUNDARIES

24. Up to where do you let your children go inside this space? Why?

25. How does space affects this decision?

26. Do you allow the children to visit the space on their own?

27A. What do you think about the playground's fence? Is it necessary? Could it be omitted from the design?

27B. what do you think of the playground's safety? How do you define safety in the playground?

28. Would you like it if the square's and the playground's space were connected?

CRISIS

29. Do you think the crisis affects people with children and in what ways?

– How do they choose play-spaces?

– How often they visit them

– How long does each visit last?

30. Have you noticed any changes in the people visiting, the piazza or the playground before and after the crisis?

RULES

31A. What do parents usually do here?

31B. Have you seen anyone play?

32. Who do you think should be allowed to use the playground space? Why?

33. Are there any rules concerning access? Should people close the door upon entering? If they don't?

34. Do children play differently here than they do in the house? In what ways?

SPACE

35. What do you think of the fact that the playground is in the public square? Do you consider it a positive or a negative relation and why?

36. *Where do you like it more? In the playground or the square? Why?*

37. *Describe the ideal playground*

Appendix F- Diagrams

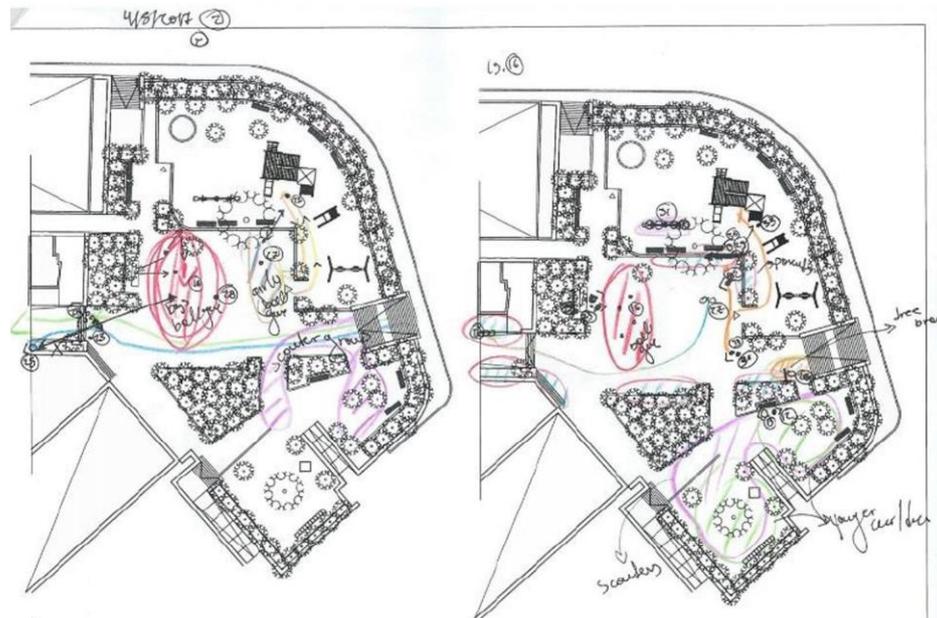


Figure XIII: Example of a Descriptive Diagram- Depicting flows of games.



Figure XIV: Example of an Analytical Diagram – Drawing connections between children's play and adults' positions.