

ARTICLES

CHALLENGING ADULT-CENTRISM: CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE URBAN PLANNING OF JUNDIAÍ, SÃO PAULO, BRAZIL

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Abstract

Considering the need to overcome the technocratic aspects of participatory urban planning, this study examines the limits and possibilities of children's participation as a means of challenging the hegemonic logics of the production of space from an adult-centric perspective. Drawing on the case of Jundiaí, in the state of São Paulo, Brazil, and its implementation of the international La Città dei Bambini [The City of Children] program, the article problematizes the relationship between children, the city, and urban planning through a methodology combining document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and field observation. The findings suggest that children's participation in urban planning has transformative potential in addressing the bureaucratic character derived from an adult-centric perspective by recognizing children as legitimate social actors. Furthermore, although not an explicit objective of the initiative, this practice has fostered childhood citizenship. However, as a process of social construction, the initiative faces challenges stemming both from the limitations of urban planning itself and from the persistence of adult-centric perceptions deeply rooted in contemporary Brazilian society.

Keywords

Urban Planning; Social Participation; Actors, Agents and Subjects; Public Policies; Citizenship; Jundiaí.

ARTIGOS

DESAFIANDO O ADULTOCENTRISMO: A PARTICIPAÇÃO DE CRIANÇAS NO PLANEJAMENTO URBANO DE JUNDIAÍ (SP)

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Resumo

Considerando a necessidade de superar os aspectos tecnocráticos do planejamento urbano participativo, este trabalho investiga os limites e as possibilidades da participação infantil como forma de desafiar as lógicas hegemônicas de produção do espaço ancoradas em uma perspectiva adultocêntrica. Tomando como referência o caso de Jundiaí (SP) e sua experiência com o programa internacional La Città dei Bambini [Cidade das Crianças], o artigo tensiona a relação entre criança, cidade e planejamento urbano a partir de uma metodologia composta por análise documental, entrevistas semiestruturadas e observação de campo. Os resultados indicam que a participação infantil no planejamento urbano possui um potencial transformador diante do caráter burocrático derivado da visão adultocêntrica ao introduzir a criança como ator social legítimo. Além disso, essa prática estimulou, ainda que de forma não intencional, a cidadania na infância. Contudo, enquanto processo de construção social, a iniciativa enfrenta desafios próprios tanto das limitações do planejamento urbano quanto da persistência de percepções adultocêntricas enraizadas na sociedade brasileira contemporânea.

Palavras-chave

Planejamento Urbano; Participação Social; Atores, Agentes e Sujeitos; Políticas Públicas; Cidadania; Jundiaí.

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Introduction

For urban planning to be equitable, effective, and emancipatory, social participation is essential. Yet participation is not an end in itself; it requires the involvement of a diverse range of social actors, both to ensure its legitimacy and to shape public policies that genuinely advance their intended goals. Against this backdrop, the present article examines children's participation in urban planning as a means of challenging the hegemonic, adult-centric logics of space production. To this end, it investigates the case of Jundiaí, in the state of São Paulo (SP), Brazil, within the framework of the international *La Città dei Bambini* (The City of Children) program, inspired by the ideas and practice of the Italian educator Francesco Tonucci (1996). The analysis is grounded in theories of urban and regional planning (Villaça, 1999; Souza, 2006; Randolph, 2019) and intersects with studies in childhood studies (Dias; Ferreira, 2015; Cavalcante, 2021).

Social participation in urban planning comes up against significant challenges, including the colonizing rationality that underpins planning (Randolph, 2007), the failure to recognize territories and territorialities as arenas of ongoing power struggles (Souza, 2006), and what has been described as the “dark side of planning” (Yiftachel, 2021). Within this context, the predominance of an adult-centric perspective on childhood contributes to the exclusion of children as active

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social actors in the present (Cavalcante, 2021). Moreover, the tension between children's rights to participation and protection and the prevailing notion that "a child's place is at school" has (re)produced asymmetrical relationships between adults and children (Brostolin, 2021), which are materially expressed in both urban space (Zeihner, 2003) and political arenas (Bertuol, 2008). From this perspective, initiatives that seek to promote children's participation confront a fundamental paradox: although cities include children, they simultaneously exclude them, producing contradictory experiences of childhood (Sarmiento, 2018).

Beyond these contradictions, efforts to promote children's participation also encounter significant theoretical and methodological challenges. The rationality that underpins urban planning (Limonad, 2015; Randolph, 2019) together with the professional practices through which planning is enacted (Matthews, 1995) often reinforce exclusionary logics that constrain the presence and agency of children in cities (Sarmiento, 2018; Mansfield; Batagol; Raven, 2021). At the same time, children's participation has the potential to challenge these logics by recognizing childhood as an active political subject in collective life, thereby positioning it as a central element in recognizing children's active citizenship (Sarmiento; Soares; Tomás, 2006; Sarmiento; Fernandes; Tomás, 2007).

From this perspective, bringing urban and regional planning theory into dialogue with childhood studies can foster planning processes with children that move beyond the technocratic impositions traditionally placed upon social actors. Participatory urban initiatives inspired by international programs and networks—such as *La Città dei Bambini*, launched in Fano in 1991 and disseminated internationally from 1996 onward; the Child Friendly Cities initiative, introduced by UNICEF in the context of the Habitat II Conference in 1996; and the Educating Cities network, established in Barcelona in 1990—have generated outcomes that "[...] express an original perspective, often unexpected and distinct from the more common concerns of adults, without thereby losing their relevance"² (Sarmiento, 2018, p. 238).

Internationally, a growing body of research has examined children's participation in public policy and urban planning processes. These studies have explored the institutional and legal conditions that enable such participation, the tensions among protection, children's right to be heard, and their decision-making power in urban spaces, and broader conceptions of childhood citizenship (Manouchehri; Burns, 2021; Ataol et al., 2022; Abellán-López; Pardo-Beneyto, 2024; 2025).

2. This and all other non-English citations hereafter have been translated by the authors.

Notwithstanding these advances, the international literature on children's participation in urban planning has identified persistent limitations in participatory processes involving children, highlighting the risks of symbolic institutionalization, consultative practices with limited influence on decision-making, and the reproduction of adult-centric rationalities within ostensibly participatory policies (Ataol et al., 2022; Abellán-López; Pardo-Beneyto, 2024; 2025). Collectively, these studies suggest that, despite the growing normative recognition of children's participation, its capacity to produce meaningful transformations in urban planning remains constrained by technical, legal, and cultural mechanisms that continue to restrict the political agency of children.

Despite the expansion of these initiatives, relatively few studies have examined the extent to which children's participation effectively challenges the technocratic and adult-centric practices that continue to shape urban planning. In Brazil, in particular, research on childhood in planning processes remains incipient and is still largely disconnected from critical theories of urban and regional planning. It is within this gap that the present article is situated. Focusing on the experience in Jundiaí, which has served as the Brazilian headquarters of the Latin American City of Children Network since 2018, this article investigates the extent to which children's participation can challenge the hegemonic logics of spatial production. To this end, it combines bibliographic and documentary research with direct field observation and semi-structured interviews conducted with institutional representatives.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. The first section discusses the contradictions of participatory planning, situating the dilemmas that underscore the need to recognize the presence of children in cities. The second examines how the logics of childhood exclusion reinforce adult-centric practices in urban planning, followed by a description of the methodological procedures adopted in the study. The article then introduces the case of Jundiaí and the City of Children program. The subsequent two sections present the empirical analysis, highlighting both the limitations and the possibilities that emerge when children's participation challenges adult-centric and technocratic practices of spatial production. The article concludes by discussing how these experiences contribute to the democratization of urban planning.

1. The contradictions of the participatory process: in search of an alternative model of planning

Urban planning emerged in response to the transformations brought about by nineteenth-century industrial urbanization. As cities expanded, the

provision of housing and transportation increasingly came under the control of private companies or the State, shaped by the interests of industrial capital (Monte-Mór, 2006a). In this context, cities “implode and explode” (Lefebvre, 2006), simultaneously intensifying internally while expanding beyond their traditional boundaries, giving rise to new sociospatial dynamics marked by increasing density and mounting negative externalities (Monte-Mór, 2006a).

The valorization of urban centers and the control of urban space became priorities for the elites, fostering the emergence of urbanism as a technical field of intervention (Villça, 1999; Monte-Mór, 2006b). Consequently, a rationalizing, technocratic approach to planning became consolidated, a process that was further reinforced by the master plans adopted during the 1950s and 1960s (Villça, 1999).

With Brazil’s return to democracy and the promulgation of the 1988 Federal Constitution, a new phase of urban planning emerged. Influenced by social movements, the urban reform agenda, and the global diffusion of strategic planning, this new phase sought to break with the previous technocratic model by promoting decentralization and the democratization of urban decision-making (Villça, 1999). Municipalities gained greater autonomy as federative entities, and participatory principles were formally incorporated into urban planning (Maricato; Santos Júnior, 2007).

Despite the democratic discourse, many participatory practices however remain confined to bureaucratic formats that are disconnected from the realities of the groups involved. The persistence of instrumental rationality, centered on technical solutions, strips participatory planning of its transformative potential, reducing it to a mechanism for legitimizing decisions that have already been made (Randolph, 2019). In this context, expanding institutional channels for listening to and engaging civil society has the potential to strengthen community-based practices and promote the exercise of collective rights. However, this potential is rarely realized. As Jacobi (2002) argues, meaningful participation depends on clear criteria for representation and on institutional arrangements that can prevent participatory processes from being captured by particular interests or manipulated by public authorities—conditions that are often absent in practice.

Thus, the adoption of participatory mechanisms alone does not guarantee meaningful transformations in planning. It is necessary to question the political projects that shape these processes and assess whether they are genuinely aligned with the interests of the populations they are intended to serve (Randolph, 1999). The challenge extends beyond creating formal spaces for participation; it also requires transforming them into effective arenas for deliberation and the recognition of diverse voices.

Within this context, the inclusion of historically marginalized groups, such as children, warrants particular attention. Their participatory experiences are often marked by silencing or symbolic co-optation (Hart, 1992; Malone; Hartung, 2010). Recognizing children as social actors requires challenging adult-centric practices and developing genuinely inclusive approaches (Sarmiento, 2018).

Randolph (2014) argued that planning itself has a colonizing character, reflected in the ambiguous manner in which it operates. It is precisely the discourse of effectiveness and efficiency, he contends, that legitimizes planning as an ideological instrument capable of extending instrumental rationality beyond economic systems and administrative bureaucracies. By subjecting spheres of social life that were not originally organized according to this logic, planning becomes one of the principal mechanisms of colonization in late capitalist societies.

Building on these reflections and drawing on Limonad (2015), this study approaches planning from the premise that it is impossible to dissociate it from the sociopolitical conditions of contemporary capitalist societies. Confronting the abstract forces that colonize everyday life requires strengthening those capable of challenging technocratic rationality and creating spaces for social autonomy.

Against this backdrop, there is an urgent need to broaden the boundaries of urban planning by incorporating historically marginalized groups not merely as beneficiaries, but as co-authors of the city. It is within this effort to reconfigure planning that the inclusion of children assumes particular importance in this study. If traditional planning has been shaped by an adult-centric, technocratic, and exclusionary rationality, then children's participation in urban planning represents not only an ethical imperative but also a subversive opportunity to challenge the hegemonic ways of thinking and producing the city. Discussing children's participation in urban planning, therefore, is more than a question of inclusion; it constitutes an exercise in decolonizing the practices and epistemologies that underpin the field.

2. Children's participation in urban planning: limits and challenges

At the outset, this study recognizes that urban planning theory has historically neglected children. As Gillespie (2013) maintained, this is no mere coincidence, as urban planning is an interdisciplinary field informed by a wide range of social and political theories. Yet children are rarely acknowledged as subjects within this body of scholarship. Even critical approaches that challenge androcentric, Eurocentric, and heterosexist biases tend to exclude or marginalize childhood, since the "other" they seek to recognize is invariably an adult (Gillespie, 2013).

This exclusion is also reflected in practice. As Sarmiento (2007) contends, childhood is often treated as a category of negation, defined by the absence of attributes associated with adulthood. The historical processes through which childhood has been constructed in terms of what it lacks reflect symbolic expressions of adult-centrism, projecting onto children an image of incompleteness.

Adult-centrism operates as a mechanism of social control by subordinating childhood to the normative framework of a Western, adult, masculine subject. In doing so, it reproduces relations of domination analogous to those that structure the center-periphery geopolitical order. Within this framework, childhood is understood not as a stage of life with intrinsic value and agency, but as an interim condition to be overcome along the path to adulthood (Alvarado; Posada; Gaviria, 2009). This perspective tends to naturalize the exclusion of children from decision-making spaces and public life. Consequently, even when urban planning adopts participatory approaches, it tends either to silence the voices of children or to engage them instrumentally, without recognizing them as legitimate subjects endowed with rights and knowledge.

This understanding is not merely circumstantial. Ariès (1981) demonstrated that the very concept of childhood is a modern social construct, emerging alongside the rise of individualism and the institutionalization of education. Schools and families gradually assumed responsibility for protecting, disciplining, and educating children, while increasingly segregating them from the broader social sphere (Sarmiento, 2007). Accordingly, the notion that children should remain outside political, civic, or urban life became normalized, diminishing recognition of the intrinsic value of childhood as a lived experience (Dias; Ferreira, 2015). This process of invisibilization has extended across multiple domains, excluding children from citizenship (Sarmiento, 2007), from public spaces and the city (Dias; Ferreira, 2015; Sarmiento, 2018), and, ultimately, from urban planning itself (Gillespie, 2013).

The absence of children from political, social, and urban life contributes to exclusionary and inequitable planning practices. Lansky (2012) identified a disconnect between planners' perceptions of urban space and the ways children experience and use it. He maintains that including children can enrich the production of urban space, provided that the relationships and power dynamics between adults and children have been carefully considered. Similarly, Bertuol (2008) observed that institutional frameworks and official discourses surrounding participation and protection often obscure children's everyday experiences. In line with Lansky (2012), Bertuol (2008) showed that children seek to assert their presence in adult affairs related to urban space, calling for meaningful opportunities to participate. However, the urban environment constrains their capacity to create

spaces of their own or to openly challenge adult-imposed norms. Even with these constraints, children negotiate opportunities for action, revealing forms of self-organization and spatial autonomy.

From this perspective, participation should be understood as a process of socialization, negotiation, and emancipation. Trevisan (2012) observed that when children engage with adults in political decision-making, they experience fundamental processes of socialization. Extending this understanding to urban planning foregrounds the value of children's lived experiences in the present and recognizes the richness of social diversity, thereby creating the conditions for meaningful child participation. Without such an approach, these practices risk reinforcing children's identity as "future adults" while neglecting their experiences in the present. This perspective aligns with the arguments advanced by Randolph (2019) and Limonad (2015), who have emphasized that it is unwise to conceive of urban planning in isolation from contemporary sociopolitical conditions. Equally, child participation cannot be understood without acknowledging the social and historical processes that shape childhood and children's relationships, including the so-called invisible barriers to children's participation (Mansfield; Batagol; Raven, 2021). A critical perspective is therefore essential—one that challenges prevailing myths, dismantles barriers, and addresses the tensions that permeate children's participation (Tomás, 2007).

In this regard, recent studies of public policy on children and adolescents have highlighted the challenges of achieving a genuine balance between protection and participation. Examining Spanish legislation and practice concerning children and adolescents, Abellán-López and Pardo-Beneyto (2024) found that although the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has exerted a strong influence on policy, participatory discourse continues to coexist with practices that remain fundamentally protectionist.

Abellán-López and Pardo-Beneyto (2024) identify protection as being central to the normative framework, a position that is also reflected in participatory mechanisms. They argue that, although the participation of multiple actors reflects the complexity of public policymaking, it may also foster an adult-centric environment in which the children's role in decision-making remains asymmetrical. The involvement of families, NGOs, and professionals, for example, may itself become an expression of adult-centrism if not properly managed, creating a protective sphere that ultimately constrains children's agency in decision-making.

Similarly, in their analysis of how urban planning legislation and practice in Turkey have incorporated supranational agreements on child participation, Ataol et al. (2022) demonstrated that the formal recognition of children's right to participate

has not been matched by the creation of institutional environments that genuinely empower them. Their study has further shown that the persistence of protectionist conceptions, together with a conditional understanding of children's citizenship, has produced participatory mechanisms that are largely symbolic, systematically underestimating children's agency and individuality.

These empirical findings reinforce critiques that children's participation may become tokenistic and merely symbolic, as argued by Tomás (2007) and Sarmento, Fernandes, and Tomás (2007). Achieving an appropriate balance between protection and participation is therefore essential to safeguarding best interests of children. This requires conceiving children's citizenship as a domain of meaningful and effective participation, recognizing children as active subjects who contribute to society while fully exercising their rights (Sarmento; Fernandes; Tomás, 2007).

3. Methodology

The study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach to broaden understanding of a phenomenon that remains underexplored. According to Gil (2008), this type of research generates new insights and expands knowledge of the subject under investigation. To address the study's central objective—investigating how children's participation can challenge the hegemonic logics of space production in urban planning in Jundiaí (SP), shaped by an adult-centric perspective—a combination of document analysis, direct observation, and semi-structured interviews was employed.

The research follows a case study design (Gil, 2008), enabling an in-depth examination of a specific context. The data were analyzed using content analysis (Bardin, 2016), specifically the thematic approach (Campos, 2004), which is well suited to the study's objectives and analytical framework. The analytical categories were informed by discussions on the social participation of children and adolescents and encompassed, in an integrated manner, the language and materials used, spatial scope of participation, the depth of decision-making, transparency, forms of facilitation, respect for the diversity of childhoods, support for vulnerable groups, and the different stages of children's involvement in participatory processes.

Jundiaí was selected due to the availability of data and its role as the host of the Brazilian Network of Cities of Children (RBCC), which has maintained continuous records since 2018. The study was conducted between April and August 2024 and included four semi-structured interviews with municipal officials from the Departments of Education, Public Finance, and Culture, all of whom were members of the Child in the City working group. The number of interviews was limited by restrictions associated with the electoral period. Field observations were

conducted between August 12 and 17, 2024, during the Second Brazilian Meeting of Cities of Children and the Second International Forum on Childhoods. Although meetings of the children's committee were not observed, data were collected through interviews, official documents, and statements made by children and adults during the events. Interviews with children were likewise not conducted because the broader research project on which this study is based—which was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee—did not permit their inclusion.

4. Jundiaí: a city of children

The municipality of Jundiaí (SP) formally joined the Latin American Network of Cities of Children through Municipal Decree No. 27,780 of 2018 (Jundiaí, 2018a). The decree aims to promote the inclusion of children in urban planning decision-making by creating the Children's Committee, a formal channel of dialogue between children and the municipal administration (Jundiaí, 2018b).

The Children's Committee was established in 2019 and initially comprised 24 children between the ages of nine and twelve, selected by lottery from among the municipality's six administrative regions. The committee meets monthly to formulate and discuss proposals, which are consolidated into an annual document submitted to the municipal government. The meeting schedule is determined collectively by the participants themselves, with the mayor attending both the opening and closing sessions. According to the municipal government, proposals put forward by the committee have informed a range of initiatives, including the installation of playground equipment in parks, the expansion of tree-covered public spaces, improvements to parks and schools, and the development of the Mundo das Crianças Park (World of Children) (Jundiaí, 2018b).

By 2024, the committee had completed six cohorts, involving a total of 144 children. That same year, a Youth Committee was established for preteens and adolescents in response to participants' requests for a dedicated space in which "older children" could remain engaged and have their voices heard.

In accordance with the international guidelines of the City of Children (CDC) program, participating municipalities are required to create a working group. In Jundiaí, this requirement was fulfilled through the interdisciplinary Child in the City Working Group, provided for under Chapter X of the Master Plan. The group brings together representatives from a wide range of municipal departments, including Urban Planning, Environment, Culture, Education, Sports, Health, Social Assistance, Mobility, Transportation, Public Services, Food Supply, Agribusiness, and Tourism (Jundiaí, 2018b). In addition, some of its members are required to

participate in training programs offered by the International Francesco Tonucci Association³ to strengthen their understanding of children's participation in urban policymaking.

5. From adult-centric and technocratic logics to the recognition of children in urban space

During the Second Brazilian Meeting of Cities of Children and the Second International Forum on Childhoods, held in Jundiaí from August 12 to 17, 2024, representatives from numerous institutions involved in the La Città dei Bambini project were present, including municipal officials and representatives of the certifying organization. The event also featured the project's founder, the Italian educational psychologist Francesco Tonucci. Several comments made by children during the opening session were especially revealing, including: "To develop our autonomy, we really need you to trust us" and "It's nice that you believe in us and let us make decisions about our daily lives". These remarks resonate with the arguments advanced by Tomás (2007) and Sarmento, Fernandes, and Tomás (2007), who contend that children's autonomy depends on intergenerational relationships that recognize children's capacities. The concept of autonomy also emerged repeatedly in interviewees and throughout the event. As Sarmento, Fernandes, and Tomás (2007) and Sarmento (2018) maintain, children's autonomy has historically been constrained by multiple factors, while urban environments simultaneously creates opportunities for and imposes limitations on its development. Against this backdrop, the following interview excerpt introduces a key issue for discussion.

(1) The moment we start thinking about children's autonomy in the city, we inevitably come up against resistance, you know? Reducing parking spaces and expanding public space for people is often seen as a loss, so whenever changes are proposed, people's reaction is, "What am I losing?" We've come to realize that, more than physical or urban design changes, the real challenge lies in changing people's behavior. (Interviewee 1)

This excerpt foregrounds the issue of autonomy while introducing one of the study's central questions: the transformation of urban planning. According to Randolph (2007; 2008; 2014; 2019), such a transformation requires subverting

3. The International Francesco Tonucci Association promotes the City of Children approach developed by the Italian educational psychologist Francesco Tonucci, which seeks to transform cities into more inclusive and democratic places by placing children's perspectives at the center of urban planning. The association advocates for children's right to play and for their meaningful participation in urban and social decision-making.

the prevailing hegemonic orders—in this case, the capitalist model of planning, centered on a productivist rationality that has characterized the urbanization process since the early twentieth century (Villaça, 1999). The challenges involved in this transformation are reflected in Interviewee 1's observation: "The moment we start thinking about children's autonomy in the city, we inevitably come up against resistance, you know?"

We concur with Veloso (2018), who contends that the very concept of autonomy must be reconsidered and dissociated from the cycle of exploitation and subordination, in which being autonomous is equated with economic independence. Without such a reconceptualization, children and other vulnerable groups will continue to be excluded. From this perspective, Excerpt (1) suggests that reflecting on children's autonomy also entails envisioning alternative ways of inhabiting the city and planning urban space. It further implies that children's participation requires questioning the capitalist system itself and critically examining how society structures opportunities for citizenship and decision-making, excluding those who are not regarded as productive according to the logic of the market (Veloso, 2018).

Consistent with Excerpt (1), the political project that prioritizes children and seeks to promote their autonomy challenges the historically institutionalized processes of disciplining childhood that permeate much of social life. According to Sarmento, Fernandes, and Tomás (2007), these processes have led to the widespread assumption that children are inherently incapable of exercising political rights. Consequently, any project that challenges this logic encounters resistance from hegemonic social structures, as society often perceives the making room for children's political agency as inevitably meaning to "lose something".

In his opening remarks at the event, Francesco Tonucci emphasized that implementing the program not only requires commitment and technical expertise but, above all, political commitment on the part of the municipal administration. This observation is consistent with Randolph's (2007) argument that planning capable of subverting hegemonic orders is inseparable from the political project to which it is subordinated.

In Jundiaí, policies aimed at children are designed to overcome these limitations by recognizing children as social actors and urban space as a site of interaction and collective construction. The following excerpts illustrate how these initiatives redefine the use and organization of urban space by articulating its physical, social, and symbolic transformations.

(2) In Jundiaí, we have the Factory of Childhoods [...]. It's located downtown [...]. The street in front of it used to have a speed limit of 60 kilometres per hour, but now it's 30. There's a bike lane, benches, and those roadways [...] I can't remember what they're actually called. I think it's tactical urbanism... Whenever we're about to open a new school, we think, "Hey, let's do something like this out front as well". (Interviewee 2)

By foregrounding the process of transformation, Excerpt (2) takes the creation of the Japy Factory of Childhoods as a concrete example. Established within part of the former Japy Textile Mill, the facility has contributed to the regeneration of an area historically associated with industrial activity, redefining its role within the urban fabric by reorienting it toward the needs of children and the broader community. This intervention transformed the space both functionally and symbolically, reinforcing the municipality's commitment to the principles of the City of Children program.

From its earliest stages, the planning of the Japy Factory of Childhoods incorporated a child-centered listening process, an approach that is also reflected in the exhibitions displayed throughout the facility, as shown in Figure 1. Members of the Children's Committee contributed to defining the project's guiding principles, particularly with regard to the design of the Parque Naturalizado (Natural Play Park), conceived as a space for free play without conventional playground equipment and composed of natural elements as part of the BrincAR LIVRE initiative⁴. Throughout the planning process, children's perspectives and aspirations informed the design of the facility, with particular emphasis on sensory experiences, contact with nature, and autonomy in play.

4. BrincAR LIVRE is a Municipal Government initiative developed as part of the Urban95 program that promotes spontaneous outdoor play by using public spaces, such as parks and public squares, to foster creativity, autonomy, and child development through play-based activities, nature exploration, and family interaction, with a particular focus on early childhood. BrincAR LIVRE is the official Portuguese name of the initiative. Its stylized capitalization emphasizes *AR* (air), creating a wordplay that links outdoor environments with the verb *brincar* (to play), thereby emphasizing *livre* (free) outdoor play in natural environments. The original name has been retained because this effect cannot be reproduced in English.

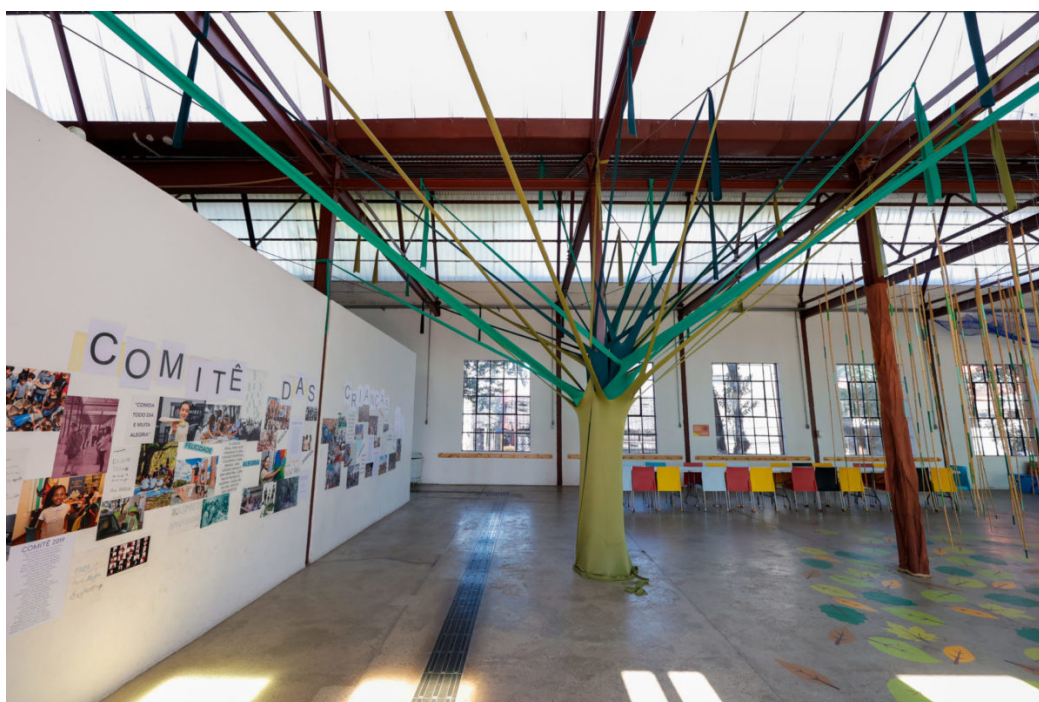


Figure 1. Inside the Factory of Childhoods

Source: Municipal Government of Jundiaí.

This participatory process was not limited to the Children's Committee. Co-creation was broadened through the involvement of students from nearby municipal schools (José Romeiro Pereira, Maria de Toledo Pontes, and Ramiro Araújo Filho Municipal Elementary Schools), who walked the routes between their respective schools and the Japy Factory of Childhoods, while sharing their perceptions of mobility and road safety. The incorporation of these listening processes suggests that, in this particular project, children's involvement in urban planning extended beyond the Children's Committee to encompass those directly affected by the ongoing spatial transformations.

The contributions emerging from these different moments of listening informed the implementation of the municipality's first Children's Area, integrating a landmark public facility, an outdoor space designed to foster contact with nature, and tactical urbanism interventions aimed at improving safety and prioritizing pedestrians and cyclists. The intervention extended beyond the building itself to reshape the immediate surroundings through the installation of road markings and urban furniture designed to encourage social interaction, active mobility, and the protection of pedestrians and cyclists (Jundiaí, 2018b), as shown in Figures 2 and 3.



Figure 2. Prior to the regeneration of the Factory of Childhoods

Source: Urban95 and Bruno Batista/WRI Brasil (2023).



Figure 3. Subsequent to the regeneration of the Factory of Childhoods

Source: Urban95 and Bruno Batista/WRI Brasil (2023).

Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the transformations in the area surrounding the Japy Factory of Childhoods. As noted in Excerpt (2), the images show tactical urbanism interventions. According to the Municipal Government of Jundiaí, the area was designed to prioritize pedestrians and cyclists through the implementation of an educational bicycle lane for children learning to ride, together with traffic-calming measures that promote active mobility and create a safer, more pedestrian-friendly environment.



Figure 4. Children's Area

Source: Bruno Batista/WRI Brasil (2023).

Figure 4 shows a sign alerting drivers that they are entering a Children's Area and should therefore reduce their speed. Children's Areas are defined as portions of the urban territory planned in response to the expressed demands of children and organized around a landmark public facility together with outdoor spaces that promote contact with nature (Jundiaí, 2018b). The municipality currently has four Children's Areas: the Japy Factory of Childhoods in the Vila Arens neighborhood; the Children's Area in the Arts Center, in the city center; and the Children's Areas in the Jardim Novo Horizonte and Jardim Santa Gertrudes neighborhoods. Together, these areas integrate cultural, educational, and social assistance facilities. The territorial distribution of the four Children's Areas is shown in Figure 5.

Figure 6 illustrates the transformations implemented in the municipality's Children's Areas (from left to right: the area surrounding the Arts Center, Jardim Novo Horizonte, and the Santa Gertrudes neighborhood).

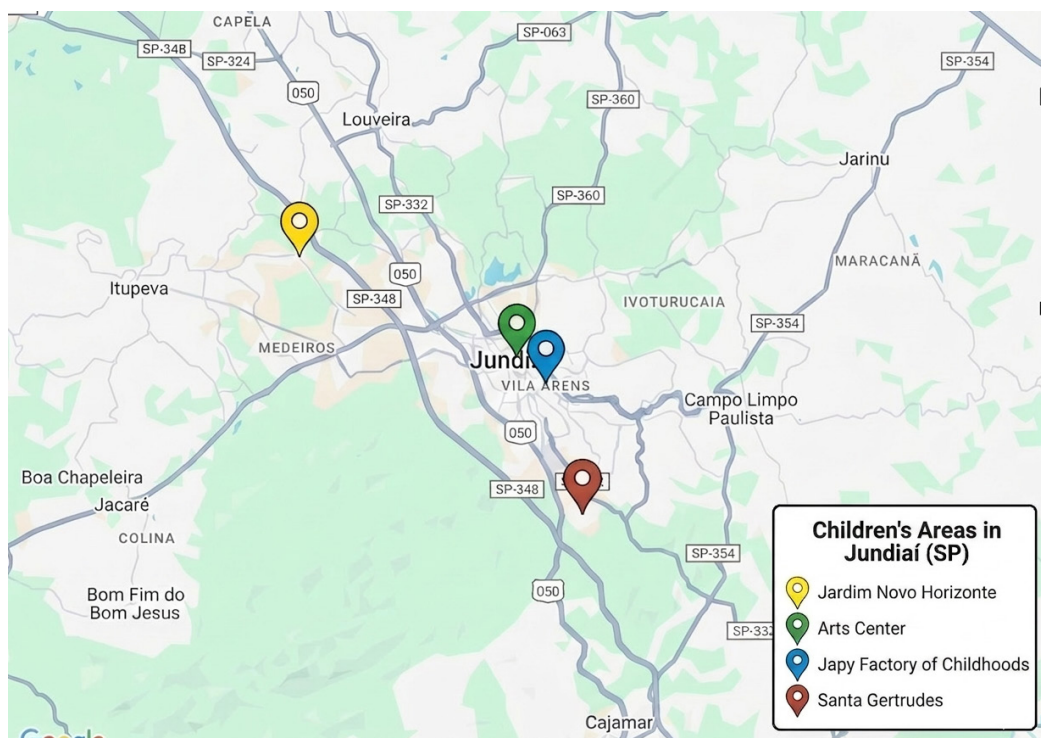


Figure 5. Spatial distribution of the Children's Areas in Jundiaí (SP)

Source: The authors.



Figure 6. Urban interventions in the Children's Areas in Jundiaí (SP)

Source: Municipal Government of Jundiaí and Urban95.

These physical transformations, exemplified by the interventions in the Children's Areas—particularly the Factory of Childhoods and its surrounding area—demonstrate that urban planning in Jundiaí has devoted considerable time and resources to incorporating children's needs into its urban projects. These interventions encourage children's autonomous mobility throughout the city (Sarmiento, 2018), a central condition for fostering their citizenship as urban actors.

The participatory methodology adopted by the Municipal Government was based on active listening practices and collaborative mapping with children, employed not only in the Factory of Childhoods project but also in other urban regeneration initiatives, such as the Between Home and School project.⁵ The findings, however, indicate that these methodologies have yet to become structured and mandatory stages of municipal urban planning, remaining instead associated with specific projects and policies aimed at children. Thus, although the evidence points to growing institutional responsiveness to children's demands, the incorporation of children's participation into urban planning remains selective and dependent on particular political contexts and policy agendas.

Planning with children invites a new rationality. Incorporating childhood into spatial policies has the potential to challenge hegemonic logics, including forms of space production centered on private motorized transportation. Hence, the case of Jundiaí demonstrates how including children in the urban planning process can reshape perceptions of social priorities while fostering stronger connections with the city's urban, cultural, and natural heritage.

(3) This early childhood policy creates opportunities to introduce policies that would normally be met with resistance [...]. If I remove a parking space to make room for almost anything else, it's going to cause one hell of a fight... But if you explain that it's part of a broader effort to improve things for children [...], people come into the discussion a little less defensive. (Interviewee 3)

(4) since joining the program [...], I feel there's been a really important change in the way I see the city and in how I think about developing public policies for it. [...] A city that's good for children is good for everyone, because I really do see that happening. It gradually transforms the city, often without us even realizing it. [...] The first intervention we carried out here was in an area where cars dominated everything. We couldn't even see the historic building because all we saw were cars... This was the first historic area where we removed cars... With these changes we weren't thinking specifically about the children; we were thinking about the concept. (Interviewee 4)

5. Between Home and School is an urban regeneration program focused on the areas surrounding municipal public schools and early childhood centers. The program is based on a process of listening to students' experiences along their routes to and from school, which informs projects tailored to different parts of the city. It builds on initiatives that began in 2017, prior to Jundiaí's adoption of the City of Children (CDC) program (Information available at: <https://jundiai.sp.gov.br/planejamento-e-meio-ambiente/programas/programa-entre-a-casa-e-a-escola/>. Accessed on: July 3, 2026).

Through the statements highlighted above, Excerpts (3) and (4) suggest that the speakers perceive children's participation as having transformative potential and that its effects extend beyond the physical space itself. Taken together, these excerpts illustrate not only the transformation of the built environment but also a broader shift in the context. In this new context, children and the diversity of their childhoods are recognized rather than rendered invisible in the city and in political and social life. As reflected in Excerpt (5), "you remember that children exist".

(5) The discussion around the City of Children opens up space to talk about things differently [...]. The Department of Public Works often used to design projects in outlying areas with no sidewalks. Now the mayor looks at those projects and asks, 'Where's the sidewalk? How is a child supposed to get through here?' ... and you remember that children exist. (Interviewee 3)

From a political perspective, a key question is whether participatory processes involving children constitute a subversive force, as discussed by Randolph (2014) and Limonad (2015). Evidence of this potential emerges both in the transformation of governance practices and in the adoption of new frames of reference that shift attention from adults to children and prioritize pedestrians over automobiles. In this sense, the approach challenges adult-centric and technocratic logics, aligning with Randolph's (2007) conception of planning as a practice that incorporates social space in its entirety, extending beyond the symbolic. Accordingly, the statements in Excerpts (4) and (5)—"we weren't thinking specifically about children; we were thinking about the concept" and "you remember that children exist"—suggest that the speakers themselves recognize a shift in the way planning is conceived, one that acknowledges children as social actors capable of directly influencing the production of urban space.

Recognizing children as rights-bearing members of society thus introduces a new urban perspective by foregrounding spaces of representation, thereby challenging the dominant representations of space that typically express the dominant ideological perspective through which society understands its social space (cf. Lefebvre, 2006; Randolph, 2007; 2014).

(6) Today, I think people place much greater value on what children have to say. In fact, I see that as one of the main purposes of the Children's Committee... to give greater visibility to the city's childhoods, you know?... Even the Municipal Government itself and its technical staff have come to value the perspectives of children much more. (Interviewee 1)

Thus, recognizing childhood as a socially, historically, and geographically constructed process provides a foundation for informing discussions and public policies that are more responsive to the specific social, historical, and geographical specificities conditions of each context.

6. Children's participation and the recognition of childhood as an urban actor

Within the context of the City of Children program, play occupies a central place. According to Tonucci (2019), play is a free expression of children's desires, needs, and characteristics, encompassing both the exercise of autonomy and the refusal of obedience. At the same time, it may also be understood as a constitutive element of children's citizenship, both in the present and in the future. Hence, Randolph (2007, 2008, 2019) argues that urban planning can shape the everyday spaces of social and spatial practices in ways that create substantial and sustainable conditions for the exercise of citizenship, including during childhood. As Dias and Ferreira (2015) contend, this requires reversing the prevailing logic by subverting the established order and placing the city, its territories, and its spaces at the service of a project of citizenship that recognizes and embraces, above all, the diversity of childhoods.

The incorporation of participatory processes into urban policies recognizes children as integral participants in debates regarding the city (Sarmiento, 2018). Programs that promote children's participation play a central role by developing methodologies and guidelines that support their engagement in urban planning. By embedding this dimension within local public policies, such initiatives help consolidate participation as a guaranteed right rather than an occasional concession.

The institutionalization of children's participation in planning offers a means of confronting their chronic invisibility, even though institutionalized spaces may themselves obscure children's everyday experiences (Bertuol, 2008). This remains an ongoing struggle because adult-centric perspectives tend to oscillate between two extremes: either by underestimating children as incapable and immature subjects or by expecting them to display the same level of rationality expected of adults.

Throughout the study, it became evident that children were calling for greater participation, as previously observed by Bertuol (2008), while also seeking opportunities to continue exercising their citizenship beyond the age of 12.

(7) Then it got to the point where the children didn't want to leave [the Committee] anymore... So, last year [2023], they went along to the mayor and said, 'We want to protest! We don't want to leave the Committee— we think you should keep listening to us'. (Interviewee 4)

Excerpt (7) refers to the establishment of the Youth Committee, conceived as an extension of the City of Children program and as a new institutional channel through which children and adolescents could continue to be heard in the municipality of Jundiaí. The committee is intended for participants who previously served on the Children's Committee and, upon reaching the upper age limit, expressed a desire to continue exercising their civic participation. The statement, "we think you should keep listening to us", makes it clear that this new institutional arrangement did not originate as a government initiative. Rather, it resulted from a demand articulated by the children themselves, who sought to ensure that they would continue to have a voice in municipal decision-making.

This development reveals children's capacity to understand and challenge the formal limits placed on their participation by mobilizing strategies of advocacy and proposing alternative institutional arrangements. In light of Sarmento, Fernandes, and Tomás (2007), it illustrates the exercise of children's agency not only through their engagement with existing participatory bodies, but also through their willingness to question their rules and advocate for new institutional formats. However, this expansion of participation remains embedded within specific institutional frameworks. Access to the Youth Committee depends on prior participation in the Children's Committee, and opportunities to influence decision-making continue to be mediated by age-based, organizational, and procedural criteria established by the public authorities. Thus, although the Youth Committee represents an important step toward ensuring the continuity of children's civic engagement, it neither overcomes existing power asymmetries nor, by itself, guarantees the full institutionalization of children's agency in municipal planning. Instead, it exposes the paradoxes inherent in participatory planning (Randolph, 2019; Souza, 2006).

In response to the Children's Committee's demand described in Excerpt (7), the City Council unanimously approved Municipal Law No. 9,907 of 2023, establishing a Play Day to be observed annually on the first Monday of October. Introduced as part of the City of Children program, the initiative aims to encourage free play, revive playful memories, and promote intergenerational interaction.

This demonstrates that when children are given meaningful opportunities to influence their own realities, they possess the political capacities required to exercise citizenship, as emphasized by Sarmento (2018), Bertuol (2008), and Tomás (2007). In the case described in Excerpt (7), the children serving on the committee recognized the importance of their role in urban planning and have actively sought to extend similar opportunities to other children. In doing so, they challenge

traditional adult-centric and technocratic approaches by advocating institutional changes that broaden children's participation, as illustrated by the establishment of Play Day.

Despite these advances, children's participation in urban planning in Jundiaí continues to face significant limitations. Their involvement remains largely mediated by adult-led structures, both in setting agendas and in defining the institutional channels through which participation occurs, thereby constraining their autonomy and capacity to influence political decision-making. Moreover, participation continues to be concentrated among specific groups of children, particularly those involved in the Children's Committee and other isolated initiatives, limiting its territorial reach and social inclusiveness. As a result, children's participation risks remaining confined to symbolic or experimental spaces rather than becoming embedded in urban planning practice, reinforcing the paradoxes identified in the critical literature on participation and urban governance (Mansfield; Batagol; Raven, 2021; Randolph, 2019; Souza, 2006).

Final remarks

This study has examined children's participation in urban planning through the Brazilian implementation of the *La Città dei Bambini* initiative, using the municipality of Jundiaí, in the state of São Paulo, as a case study. Drawing on a methodology that combined document analysis, interviews, and participant observation, the research investigated how the inclusion of children challenges the adult-centric and technocratic logics that have traditionally shaped the production of urban space. The City of Children program in Jundiaí represents an important step toward recognizing children's political capacities, particularly through the Children's Committee, although its development continues to be shaped by tensions arising from prevailing adult-centric and technocratic rationalities. The case demonstrates the subversive potential of children's participation by exposing contradictions in dominant planning practices, such as the prioritization of private motorized transport and the lack of intergenerational public spaces, while also challenging the presumed superiority of technical expertise over everyday knowledge.

Actively listening to children and incorporating their perspectives into decision-making processes encourages a critical reflection on existing power structures, demonstrating that there is no objective justification for the systematic denial of their rights as urban actors. This process challenges conventional paradigms of urban governance and highlights children's capacity to bring about tangible changes in the environments in which they live. Nevertheless, drawing on

Randolph (2019), the subversive potential of children's participation is itself subject to technocratic risks. On the one hand, children's inclusion challenges exclusionary neoliberal rationalities; on the other, it risks being appropriated and stripped of its transformative force by the very institutional structures it seeks to change. Children's participation in urban planning therefore occupies a space between the transformative potential of the lifeworld and the forces of symbolic colonization.

In conclusion, recognizing children as full rights-holders is essential to building more just and inclusive cities. The experience of Jundiaí suggests that institutionalizing mechanisms through which children can be heard strengthens the understanding of childhood as a dynamic social and political category while also contributing to the continuous improvement of the city itself. Expanding the participation of diverse social groups in urban planning challenges established power structures, and although such a vision may appear utopian, it is precisely within utopian thinking that the transformative potential to imagine and build new horizons of social justice resides.

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- c) Final text review for grammar and spelling improvement, in order to comply with formal language standards: ChatGPT.

Open Data

The article has relied exclusively on data previously published in secondary sources, including public databases.

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