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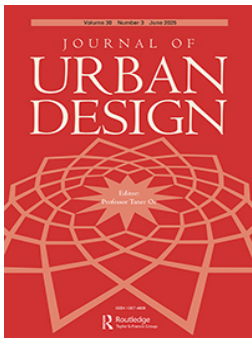
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Pandemic play spaces: interim innovations, creative placemaking and *lasting change* for children in cities

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ABSTRACT

Internationally, multiple cities introduced temporary solutions to provide safe opportunities for children to play during the COVID-19 crisis. This article unpacks the politics encountered by place-based actors involved in the creative reuse of urban spaces for children during the pandemic in four cities internationally. Focusing on the longer-term influence of interim solutions for urban play, findings demonstrate temporary play projects afford children to be involved in placemaking in novel and inventive ways bolstering their right to the city. However, they also show projects for urban play were vulnerable to protest and dislocation as crisis conditions abated, impacting children's spatial justice.

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Introduction

A surge of innovative temporary uses emerged in cities around the world during the global pandemic, stimulating new thinking about how and when to deploy short-term uses of urban space (Andres, Bryson, and Moawad 2021; Deas, Martin, and Hincks 2021; Stevens et al. 2024). Of particular significance are the range of experimental examples which speak directly to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and play. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's play was both severe and affirmative – producing regionally disproportionate damages as well as productive urban outcomes and narratives (Cortés-Morales et al. 2022; Russell and Stenning 2023).

Internationally, multiple cities introduced novel short-term solutions to provide safe opportunities for children to play during the COVID-19 crisis. A burgeoning literature on pandemic play has emerged since March 2020, which showed urban play as a catalyst for social wellbeing post-pandemic (Black et al. 2025; Innocent and Stevens 2021). Collectively, scholars (Brownell 2023; Casey and McKendrick 2023; Cortés-Morales et al. 2022) called COVID-19 a critical moment to propose urban futures for play, showcasing the emancipatory potential of streets and spaces for children (Jensen, Martin, and Löchtefeld 2021).

While investigations into the role, function and types of urban play during COVID-19 are now emerging, research on interim urban uses for children during COVID-19 have not been a central focus of existing research. Critically, our understanding of 'lasting change'

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for children's right to the city remains limited. As defined by Law, Azzali, and Connejos (2021, 72) 'lasting change requires attentiveness to the multi-stage governance arrangements surrounding temporary uses [...] to generate support for lasting permanent change'.

Overall, little is known about the longer-term impacts of innovative adaptations for urban play to emerge during a health crisis, the politics temporary projects encountered and broader outcomes for children's spatial justice. Despite a well-developed research literature on the temporary urbanism in cities around the world (Bishop and Williams 2012; Madanipour 2018; Martin, Deas, and Hincks 2019), research centred on temporary urban spaces for children is rare (McGlone 2016). Moreover, empirical investigations of temporary uses in response to a public health crisis remain limited (Deas, Martin, and Hincks 2021).

Against this backdrop and in addressing these gaps, this paper explores how urban spaces have been appropriated and adapted to promote the needs of children internationally during the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, it attempts to capture the politics encountered by temporary play projects, considering three key aspects: (1) the opportunities temporary innovations offer for child-friendly placemaking, (2) the potential for conflict to materialize through the promotion of children and play in cities and (3) the transferrable lessons of temporary innovations for children's right to play in the longer-term. The study contributes to calls to broaden the research agenda on temporary urbanism through new lenses on adaptability and flexibility in the production of spaces that are liveable and resilient (Andres and Zhang 2020) and to the wider theoretical debate on children's democratic right to the city (Carroll et al. 2019; Martin, Jelić, and Tvedebrink 2023).

Through comparative case studies that promote children's place use, the research examines four exceptional interim urban uses for play during COVID-19 in Australia (Sydney), Europe (Milan, Paris) and the UK (Belfast). The study involved 16 semi-structured interviews undertaken in 2022 with key policy actors, community stakeholders, community groups and play advisors. Following Martin, Hincks, and Deas (2020, 3384) and in support of Russell and Stenning (2023) a comparative case study research design in four locations enabled exploration of 'extraordinary' temporary urban projects which capture important narratives of affirmative and productive accounts of children's right to play in the pandemic.

The remainder of the paper documents experiences in the four case study projects to understand the ways in which the different experimental uses for children materialized and evolved. The subsequent section unpacks the conceptual debates, before drawing upon the methodology and finally interview data on the longer-term opportunities, challenges and legacies of temporary play spaces.

Temporary uses and children's creative placemaking in a pandemic

There is a sustained research literature on temporary changes to infrastructure, land and buildings in response to crises (Andres 2013; Martin, Deas, and Hincks 2019). However, considerations of how temporary uses can promote children's right to the city during these events and the politics they encounter remain limited.

Amidst COVID-19, a 'new' moment of urban crisis emerged and with it a wave of unprecedented practices of interim use (Herman and Drozda 2021). Research by Herman and Drozda (2021), Andres, Bryson, and Moawad (2021), Brail et al. (2021), Corazza et al. (2021) and Law, Azzali, and Connejos (2021), documented the range of ways in which tactical, temporary uses in response to COVID-19 radically transformed structures, processes, social relations and even regimes of economic and spatial production both positively and negatively.

Of interest to this paper are the range of interim uses to emerge in cities across the pandemic that focused on promoting temporary spaces for children and affordances for play. Worldwide, children's mental/physical health and wellbeing were inextricably affected by the lockdown approaches imposed in virtually every country (UNICEF 2023; Dau et al. 2025). A dominant narrative around the impact of COVID-19 on children has focused on 'children being the pandemic's biggest victims', exposing and exacerbating already existing inequalities (Mondragon, Ozamiz-Etxebarria, and Santamaria 2023; Russell and Stenning 2023, 680). However, while an understanding of damage is of vital importance, a fixation on the constraints of lockdown limit alternative, productive accounts to emerge on the opportunities for children and play that materialized via COVID-19 (Russell and Stenning 2023). A growing body of work has begun to document the unique possibilities for children and play that emerged despite the global health crisis.

A range of child-led practices of temporary, creative and informal placemaking occurred throughout COVID-19 (Brownell 2023). In their study of Aotearoa, New Zealand, Smith et al. (2023) uncovered how restrictions on household mobility led to more opportunities for children to be mobile in their immediate neighbourhoods. Here, communities – and in particular children – informally reclaimed streets and spaces for walking and wheeling, drew games on footpaths and pavements and supported social cohesion by writing messages of encouragement and support. Similarly, Brownell (2023, 102), exposed how children's outdoor play in an urban neighbourhood in Toronto 'lingered [...] for others not just to see but also to play with', extending playtimes and supporting play with 'anonymous others' in the ward. Russell and Stenning (2023, 687), in their account of play during the pandemic in northern England, reveal how children enacted a playful and prefigurative politics of space in the context of the crisis. Space close to home 'was no longer limited to the meagre sidewalk, the pavement became a space to walk, run, bike, have conversations and actively play'.

These examples demonstrate how the pandemic brought 'profound alterations' to children's spatialities and, through temporary appropriations of space, bolstered children's right to the city. Children and their play disrupted the existing – marginalized – order of streets and spaces, which typically limit children's spatial agency, as new everyday places for play (Cortés-Morales et al. 2022; Russell and Stenning 2023).

In multiple contexts, children's practices of informal placemaking were subsequently formalized – outside of lockdown – through dedicated interim use projects. Formal temporary uses to support children and their play materialized in several ways, from street closures and pop-up infrastructure to the creation of play zones and new public spaces (see also Stevens et al. 2024).

Collectively, these accounts reveal the positive impact of COVID-19 in promoting civic access for children – providing temporary opportunities for play in urban spaces and new

engagements with their immediate built environment (Carroll et al. 2019; Innocent and Stevens 2021; Martin, Jelić, and Tvedebrink 2023).

Yet, understandings of longer-term impacts of temporary play spaces, the politics encountered and outcomes for children's play remain rare. Lessons from previous crises highlight how inherent tensions and conflict impacted upon temporary uses/users in the longer-term, often diluting their innovative and progressive use of space (Harris 2015; Martin, Hincks, and Deas 2020; Martin, Deas and Hincks 2021). With some similarity, a sustained body of research has demonstrated how attempts to reimagine streets, squares and city spaces as sites for children can result in clashes – pitting children against dominant adult hegemonies of management and control – often at the expense of the children's rights (Carroll et al. 2019; Woolley 2017).

This paper seeks to extend existing research on children's democratic right to the city through an exploration of the affirmative, productive, and playful placemaking to emerge for children across COVID-19 (Russell and Stenning 2023). Focusing on interim innovations for children and play in the pandemic in the longer-term, it attempts to advance the theorization of cities for children with new knowledge on the implications of promoting children's spatial justice in response to crisis and the politics they encounter.

Capturing affirmative projects for children and play

Building on Martin, Hincks, and Deas (2020) and Russell and Stenning (2023, 6), an 'exemplary' method which draws on the singularity of specific international examples was prioritized. This approach enabled new revelations on the role of interim solutions for play in the context and aftermath of crisis and their broader implications for children's civic access in cities. Canvassing for cases involved the collation of multiple news and social media sources between March 2020 – August 2021.

A macro priority was the selection of case studies that promoted children's right to the city in different national contexts to capture a range of approaches to innovative placemaking for children in the pandemic. After which additional selection criteria were engaged based on: an emphasis on play; governance/implementation (between top-down, bottom-up and hybrid initiatives); the scale of children's involvement; type of urban space; and type of interim use project.

Multiple exemplary projects for children were recorded which focused on active travel e.g., pop-up cycling lanes. Projects of this type (which were the most common, $n = 27$) were excluded due to a lack of emphasis on a spectrum of play opportunities in urban spaces for children (Martin, Jelić, and Tvedebrink 2023). The sample of over 40 cases was reduced to 13 following an initial relevance assessment, a subsequent relevance assessment reduced the sample to a final four valid case studies.

A programme of 16 semi-structured interviews were undertaken in 2022 to record the perspectives of different institutional, organizational and community stakeholders associated with exemplary temporary use practices that promoted children and their right to play across COVID-19, including with decision/policy makers, regeneration agents/planners, play advisors, community groups/representatives and users (either a specific organization or caregivers/residents). Interviews were structured around eight thematic headings: facilitating play in a pandemic;

value of urban play; scale of children's involvement; function/type of urban space; governance/partnership working; complexities/barriers; project legacy; and urban futures for children. The purpose was to explore the interplay and politics between different 'place-based actors' (Leffers and Wekerle 2020) involved in the creative use of urban spaces for children during COVID-19.

Exemplary projects for play in the pandemic – between Australia, Europe and the UK

The selected cases (Table 1) comprise a pop-up pedal park in a prominent seafront car park in Clovelly Beach, Randwick (Sydney); a temporary play street (Rue'golotte) in the 3rd district of central Paris¹; a pop-up play space on a disused public square adjacent to St. Anne's Cathedral in Belfast; and a tactical urbanism open piazza (square) in a private car park associated with a local school in the north of Milan. With similarity to Stevens et al. (2024), the selected interim projects for play in the pandemic were testing grounds for exploring if/how children and caregivers might be encouraged to stop, stay and be present in their streets/public spaces after the trauma of extensive periods of lockdown.

Three projects start simply as low-cost installations or closures and grow organically (with the exception of Belfast). Emphasising the critical role of informal and tactical placemaking in visions for play in cities (Lydon and Garcia 2015). In Randwick, for example, water filled barriers were initially used to close the car park to enable biking, blading and scooting.

An analysis of the general characteristics of the four projects shows where similarities and differences exist (Table 2). Three of four projects crystallize their activities in 2020, whereas, in the case of Rue'golotte, prior experience was recorded since 2017. Two projects are initiated and implemented by city council actors, whereas two are driven by parent associations and financially supported through municipal budgets. Here, we see the role of both publicly and privately owned spaces operating as testing grounds for interim projects for play.

Despite recorded differences in the scale of involvement and cost of implementation, all four projects created innovative interim opportunities for play. Across the four projects, play is considered as a spectrum of opportunities (in support of Martin, Jelić, and Tvedebrink 2023; Zosh et al. 2018). Whether directly or indirectly, free play, guided play (e.g., games), play with objects and pretend play were facilitated. Thus, demonstrating the ability of temporary projects – during crisis – to provide dynamic urban play opportunities which address and consider developmental, social and cognitive skills (Jelić et al. 2020). Consideration of project legacies and futures presented contrasting results. The subsequent discussion explores project outcomes in detail. It outlines the politics encountered by the temporary promotion of children and play in each context, unpacking the opportunities and tensions presented alongside the impact on the spaces, people and activities in the longer-term.

Table 1. Pandemic play space case studies (Randwick city council; Rue'golotte; Parkhood Ltd.; Milan municipality).





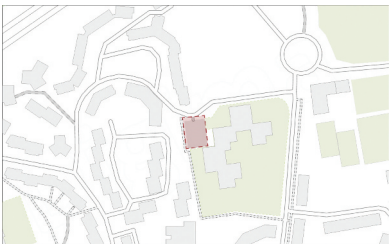

Project	Site/scale	Type of activation/programming
Clovelly Beach 'Pop-up Pedal Park' (Randwick, Sydney)	Coastal suburban public car park (0.6 ha) 	Closure of car park – installation of temporary jumps/ramps and pump track 
Rue'golotte 'Play Street' (Paris)	Urban street in 3 rd District of Paris (0.05 ha) 	Closure of street to traffic – installation of unique games/play equipment which change per event 
Cathedral Gardens Pop- up Play Space (Belfast, NI)	Public square in city centre (0.4 ha) – 'Buoys Park' 	Installation of temporary play equipment, colourful wayfinding and playful street furniture 
Via Val Lagarina 'Open Piazza' (Milan)	Suburban neighbourhood – private car park associated with a local school (0.08 ha) 	Open square initiative via tactical urbanism colourful 'quadra' grid design, planters, and growing beds 

Table 2. Pandemic play project profiles.

	Clovelly Beach Pop-up Pedal Park (Randwick, Sydney)	Rue'golotte Play Street (Paris)	Cathedral Gardens Pop-up Play Space (Belfast, NI)	Via Val Lagarina Open Piazza (Milan)
Year:	2020/2021	2020*	2020	2020
		*(with previous experience since 2017)		
COVID-19 response type:	Temporary restrictions on land use to provide space for communities after lockdown	Temporary restrictions on land use to provide space for communities after lockdown	Appropriation of public space to enable safe play/provide space for communities	Appropriation of private space to enable safe play/provide space for communities
Play emphasis/type:	Free play, physical play, play with objects	Guided play, games with rules, co-created play, play with objects, free play	Free play, physical play, play with objects, pretend play	Free play/physical play, games, pretend play
Governance:	Top-down – applied by local government	Hybrid (bottom-up/top-down) – volunteers with support from municipality (regulatory/financial – via Participatory Budget)	Top-down – applied by local government	Hybrid (bottom-up/top-down) – volunteers with support from municipality (regulatory/financial – via Piazze Aperte [Open Square] programme)
Organisations/partners:	Randwick City Council and Youth Services Australia	Rue'golotte, A l'Adresse du Jeu Games Library, Paris Municipality	Belfast City Council, Department for Communities NI, Park Hood Design	Agency for Mobility, Environment and Territory (AMAT), City of Milan, Serena Confalonieri, Elementary school 'Via Val Lagarina', Vill@perta, WAU! Milano
Socio-economic context:	Affluent community	Affluent community	Deprived area of city	Deprived community
Scale of children's involvement:	Children not involved in project development or implementation	Children as curators – able to pick the games, free to customize play elements and follow their own vision	Children as design generators involved in generation of design ideas/working with professionals	Children designing in space – involved in the implementation of the space guided by the artist
Cost:	\$24,000 AUS (£14,200)	€500 EUR (£422) per event	£350,000	€50,000 EUR (£42,250)
Legacy/future:	Winter only installation – return to parking in summer	Fridays only – emphasis on replication/transference of concept elsewhere in Paris and internationally (e.g., Madrid/Montréal)	To be dismantled – replaced by capital public realm project Urban Forest (with limited emphasis on play)	To be determined – decision to make project capital works (permanent) or temporary only not yet confirmed

Politics of temporary play spaces: opportunities, protests and tensions

Opportunities

Regardless of either top-down or bottom-up governance structures, the temporary projects for play investigated here are shown to have developed new and innovative models for playful-placemaking as well as establishing novel partnerships for child-friendly endeavours.

Creative – crisis – placemaking for children

All four projects showcase how temporary solutions during a public health crisis may invite children to be involved in placemaking in new and creative ways, changing mind-sets about what is possible in urban locations. Collectively, and in support of Stevens et al. (2024, 14), the examples ‘serve as a platform for new modes of social and spatial play on city streets’. The interactive nature of temporary spaces provided children with a variety of socio-spatial opportunities for unstructured creative play, enabling new connections with their community, supporting relaxation and fun in a time of strife (McGlone 2016). As one practitioner commented:

I would never forget this, I was in town the night before the launch [...] and I could hear people and children playing at the Cathedral Gardens. People were immediately drawn to the space. The city can change, we can repopulate the city and make good things happen.

(Interviewee A, senior council officer)

Play projects were a powerful statement from place-based actors to promote children and caregivers, recognizing the impact of the pandemic on children and the importance of their lifeworld (Smith et al. 2023). Here, temporary installations for play increased children’s capacity for playfulness during the pandemic and enabled them to enact their democratic right to the city (Carroll et al. 2019; Russell and Stenning 2023). Going beyond dedicated environments for children (Bishop and Corkery 2017; Brindley et al. 2025) transmitted positive narratives ‘that citizenship does not only belong to adults’ (Interviewee B, children’s association). Multiple stakeholders mentioned the significance of temporary activation to bolster the civic access of underrepresented users of urban spaces (Martin, Jelić, and Tvedebrink 2023) helping ‘women and children to become actors of the public space’ (Interviewee C, social enterprise) as well as ‘creating inter-generational encounters’ (Interviewee D, social enterprise). As one interviewee explained, these projects:

Foster a new sense of community [...] people were surprised and happy to be able to take their grandchild down there [to the pedal park] and connect with others [parents, caregivers, neighbours, residents] in a whole different setting.

(Interviewee E, council officer)

The four projects demonstrate the role of time-limited adaptations in addressing broader social justice issues for children and young people, among other stakeholders including caregivers. Here, interim uses realized opportunities for children to gain rather than lose, in what Carroll et al. (2019, 294) term, the ‘spatial justice stakes’ of planning and design in the built environment. The innovative models for play developed prefigured new possibilities in the public domain – beyond playgrounds – for a more equal, child-friendly and

playful city (Brindley et al. 2025; Carroll et al. 2019). The findings support previous research on the short-term, flexible, and interactive nature of temporary projects as an effective vehicle to maximize children's engagement and enjoyment of urban life (McGlone 2016). Nonetheless, they also unpack the role of interim play spaces for children in response to the conditions of an unprecedented crisis.

Innovative governance and partnerships to promote play

The pandemic crisis (and recovery) enabled opportunities for urban play to exist and materialize quickly, cutting red-tape and normal procurement and procedural requirements. Several interviewees commented that 'in the spontaneous context of a pandemic, and the flexibility that we had to do something that we wouldn't normally do. [...] the pop-up has been a relatively easy exercise that hasn't been bungled down in bureaucracy' (Interviewee E, council officer). For municipal stakeholders, 'the crisis actually made it easier' (Interviewee F, council officer).

Public health orders facilitated innovation both in terms of power structures for placemaking and processes of decision making. As one interviewee reflected 'all of a sudden we [the city council] had strong powers, we were able to close areas down and make decisions quickly about delivery' (Interviewee G, senior council officer). Here stakeholders were able to develop partnerships quickly, as one social enterprise that partnered with a local authority highlighted 'there was no tender process [...] they choose us and said, "Come in and do this, when can you start?"' (Interviewee H, social enterprise). Similar scenarios in other contexts meant that projects were completed almost instantly.

Regardless of project inception, whether it was driven by local government or promoted by community endeavour, the context of the pandemic supported unique partnerships for play (Martin, Jelić, and Tvedebrink 2023). As one local authority officer explained: 'it was a good way of testing relationships and working practices coming from completely opposed areas of economy, planning and development psychology – the learning from different departments to work together to deliver something was incredible' (Interviewee I, council officer).

There was genuine surprise among public sector actors of the 'demonstrative potential to people' (Interviewee J, senior council officer) in how spaces could be transformed, how children can be engaged in project delivery, the new ways of working that were unlocked, and the unique partnerships developed. In Milan, community stakeholders reflected on the shock of 'what was all made with leftovers [...] to see that simple things made with people and children can be successful, not just the high-level, high-budget things' (Interviewee K, independent practitioner).

New models of practice have subsequently emerged in each context, 'creating a vision on how to transform urban space for/with children' (Interviewee F, municipal officer). Here interim innovations have been transferred to other similar locations (e.g., Randwick), requested by other communities (e.g., Paris), defined as international best-practice (e.g., Belfast) and inspired new municipal placemaking partnerships with schools (e.g., Milan).

The findings demonstrate new policy and practice lenses for temporary urban solutions, which contrary to previous literature, did not valorize economic recovery or the role of policy intervention to restore market or infrastructure functionality (Martin, Deas, and Hincks 2019; Martin, Hincks, and Deas 2020). Rather, place-based actors were afforded a freedom to incentivize, through customized decision-making, contracting and

partnerships that served as a way of encouraging new progressive uses of space for communities with children at their core.

Yet, despite consistent testimony on the benefits, interim play projects in each city were also exposed to significant contestation, impacting children's spatial justice. The subsequent sections reflect on the conflicts identified.

Protests and tensions

Overall, temporary projects for play were vulnerable to protest and dislocation. Tension materialized in all four contexts, however, sophisticated contestation occurred in Randwick, Paris and Belfast. In Milan, tensions surfaced from residents and volunteers. However, these related to concerns around displacement and gentrification, the burden placed on volunteers' time, and the lack of a clear future plan. By comparison, in Randwick, Paris and Belfast, stakeholders actively targeted children in an attempt to sabotage their opportunities for play. The subsequent sections showcase the politics children, and their play, encountered at different stages of each project.

Elderly naysayers – Clovelly Beach, randwick

The politics of elderly car users and their needs in Clovelly Beach consistently impacted on the pop-up pedal park and children's democratic use of space (Martin, Jelić, and Tvedebrink 2023). Over time, the amount of space for scooting, biking, blading, etc. was reduced 'we closed off three aisles [of parking], and then we pulled it back to two aisles, now, [. . .] we've got the one aisle' (Interviewee E, council officer).

Children were exposed to what one interviewee highlighted as 'well-heeled naysayers' (Interviewee G, senior council officer). Here, older citizens who knew how to quickly escalate their concerns to the council would:

Ring the mayor, or they'll ring their local councillors, they'll send the right emails in, and they could send in petitions and that type of thing. They know which buttons to press quite quickly because they are that older age group.

(Interviewee G, senior council officer)

A disconnect between articulate higher socio-economic groups and children and their caregivers became apparent. Older users of the car park – for swimming in the public lido, coastal walks or more commonly to enjoy the sea view – felt that children could go elsewhere. Using distracting arguments and local news media, citizens who did not support the pedal park were able to encourage local councillors to demand amendments, reducing the total amount of space for play.

On whether the pop-up pedal park at Clovelly Beach could remain beyond winter, interview data showed a heightened awareness by the council that this wouldn't be accepted internally or publicly. One interviewee commented 'when it comes to summer – it's cars over kids' (Interviewee H, social enterprise), which was upheld by local officials, who felt 'there are repercussions [to keeping the car park closed]. People won't like that' (Interviewee L, local official).

Ultimately, children's play and play in recovery from the pandemic were deemed to be acceptable during the car parks 'low season' only. The Clovelly Beach case demonstrates the spatial restrictions placed on children and how challenging the positions and

identities conferred on them by adults and professionals force children to engage in the 'politics of childhood' or ultimately lose out (Carroll et al. 2019; Kallio and Hakli 2011).

Killing our businesses – Rue'golotte, Paris

Rue'golotte experienced sophisticated aggravations in response to their temporary play street prior to the pandemic but less so after lockdown. The original intention of the Rue'golotte project had been to close the street to car traffic from 16.30 to 18.00, for four days per week, during twelve weeks a year, however, conflicts reduced this to 12–14 occasions per annum.

Prior to the pandemic, local businesses were exasperated by the presence of children and the associated street closure (on Fridays only) to facilitate the play project. Situated adjacent to the Picasso Museum, Rue des Coutures Saint-Gervais, offered a distinct retailing profile with a clustering of galleries and bespoke art dealerships. These businesses feared losing their refined identity and clientele because of the play street project.

We had some problems with local gallery shops. The retailers were afraid that the project would turn away their customers.

(Interviewee C, social enterprise)

Collectively, galleries threatened the play street initiators, and staged a protest by installing signage to voice their views 'We got threatened and [. . .], all the galleries had black signs with spray painting saying "Rue'golotte kills local shops"' (Interviewee M, parent's association).

Rue des Coutures Saint-Gervais contained no parking spaces and no underground parking access. The combination 'made the street easily closable, with a museum on one end and a public square on the other' (Interviewee M, parent's association). The conflict with businesses related directly to a discomfort with the presence of children on the street rather than the loss or removal of specific infrastructure.

This mindset on limiting children's civic access was purported by other stakeholders including multiple local councillors. One local councillor 'said that children playing in the street should be fined' (Interviewee D, social enterprise). Residents were also upset by the children's presence linked with issues of noise, 'people were constantly complaining [. . .]. One day, the same local resident called the police four times to complain about the kids making noise. The police would come, because they had to, and apologize to us' (Interviewee D, social enterprise).

Despite a fundamental right to the city and a protected right to play (UNCRC), children's play in the context of recovery from COVID-19 was not viewed as a legitimate use of the streetscape by some adult stakeholders. However, the tenacious approach taken by Rue'golotte over a sustained period of time, meant that in the aftermath of COVID-19, tensions and conflicts were reduced to a much smaller sample of two or three disgruntled actors.

Rue'golotte showcases how narrow mindsets at different tiers of influence refute children as genuine citizens and stakeholders of the city, supporting existing literature (Woolley 2015). However, it also demonstrates the role of prolonged citizen engagement with local streets over time – by volunteers and caregivers – as a key factor to bolster children's civic access and encourage their presence in urban spaces (see also Alexander 2024).

Youth-led arson – Cathedral Gardens, Belfast

In developing and implementing their vision for the Cathedral Gardens play space, public/private sector interviewees were sensitive to and weary of ‘encouraging’ anti-social behaviour through urban play. As emphasized by the city council, ‘by encouraging flexible play facilities to try to reduce antisocial behaviour, there was also a fear of attracting young people, and generating more antisocial behaviour. Play’s always been a bit of a double-edged sword’ (Interviewee J, senior council officer).

In response, design decisions were made to implement integrated lighting columns and to prioritize highly resistant play equipment and furniture to discourage criminal damage. Additionally, to discourage unlawful uses, spaces for youth were developed into the project, including a space for parkour ‘so if any youth wanted to use it, they weren’t interfering with the kids’ (Interviewee N, private practitioner). Collectively, stakeholders went into the project expecting vandalism and damage, ‘this space has long suffered antisocial behaviour and [. . .] we were warned about it’ (Interviewee A, senior council officer). Yet a desire to take the risk and deliver the pop-up park outweighed these concerns.

Belfast, due to sustained austerity politics, represented a local public sector lacking the land resources available to it before the onset of austerity (Tonkiss 2013). In wanting to achieve their goal, the City Council had to rely on limited land holdings, as one interviewee highlighted, ‘it’s a poor location, not suitable really, but it’s council land – we owned it’ (Interviewee J, senior council officer). A lack of publicly owned space impacted the City Council’s ability to consider uses and users and the feasibility of this location as a play space.

Extensive collaborative design consultations took place with toddlers, young children and the youth forum, however, existing users of the space were overlooked. The site included a semi-permanent homeless population with alcohol and substance abuse issues, and, in addition, it formed a principal gathering space for local teenagers for hanging out, skateboarding, graffiti, and alcohol consumption. Over time, local teenagers in conjunction with rough sleepers resented the presence of the pop-up play space:

They’ve set fire to it [. . .] they are constantly setting fires, in a huge way and causing criminal damage.

(Interviewee A, senior council officer)

By Summer 2022, much of the park had been destroyed, including a central light box feature that had been ripped apart, the custom rainbow flooring burned, and a large variety of the play elements smashed or burned (Figure 1). Reflections from council actors, demonstrated shock at the scale of the ‘horrendous’ destruction (Interviewee I, council officer). However, there were also realizations of possible mistakes made around engagement with existing users:

Maybe there could’ve been more engagement, [. . .] If they felt more ownership of it, maybe there’d be less likelihood of that kind of behaviour.

(Interviewee J, senior council officer)

The project featured an emphasis on younger children, and a lack of engagement with adolescents and youth – a finding documented elsewhere in the literature on opportunities for urban play (Martin, Jelić, and Tvedebrink 2023). The Cathedral Gardens case reveals that a protocol to long-term success for interim play projects is to recognize children outside the discourse, and include adaptations to consultation, methods and



Figure 1. Destruction of Cathedral Gardens pop-up play space, Belfast (Author's own).

timelines to capture variations across age spans to better represent the viewpoints of youth stakeholders (Ergler et al. 2015).

Across the four projects, outcomes demonstrate the politics children were exposed to by way of different aggressions from adults, including their own teenage peers, resulting in distinct spatial justice issues (Carroll et al. 2019). These findings reflect broader international scholarship on how social, legal and physical controls – by more powerful stakeholders – seek to restrict children's use of streets and public spaces (Martin, Jelić, and Tvedebrink 2023; Woolley 2015). The subsequent section turns to considerations of longer-term lasting change for children and play.

Playful futures: lasting change for children and play

The multifaceted nature of the politics encountered had direct impacts on the longer-term futures of each project and their ability to support children's right to the city (see Table 2). Tracking the projects through the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent years, three different scenarios for the legacy of these cases were recorded between: seasonal installations, pending transition to permanence and demolition.

Of the four projects, two are to remain seasonal including a winter only installation of the pop-up pedal park at Clovelly Beach and Rue'golottee will remain a seasonal Friday afternoon activity. By comparison, the longer-term future of Via Val Lagarina, Milan remains undecided. As the paint and other tactical details continue to erode, the significance of the space as a hub for urban play and a critical point of contact for children and caregivers may diminish, risking tactical 'placemaking failings' (Lydon and Garcia 2015).

In contrast to the uncertainties of other cases, the future of Belfast's Cathedral Gardens was predetermined. From the outset the project was to be dismantled, replaced by a capital project, dubbed Urban Forest. Communities and one local councillor had called

for the pop-up play park to be made permanent, but as the level of criminal damage escalated these calls fell away. Multiple public sector interviewees expressed disappointment on the lack of an appropriate legacy for the pop-up play park ‘what we were doing, the new offer for families visiting the city centre, they’re not a feature at all [in the new permanent design]’ (Interviewee I, council officer).

Regardless of the top-down or bottom-up nature of each endeavour, the ‘temporari-ness’ of projects for urban play were not appropriately determined. With a similarity to Martin, Deas, and Hincks (2019), a lack of consideration for temporary use projects’ longer-term legacies were registered across discussions with place-based actors. Interview data showed that ‘transferability’ was more commonly cited as a principal legacy effect than sustaining or future-proofing projects in the contexts they originally materialized.

In analysing the multi-stage governance arrangements and prospects for lasting permanent change (Law, Azzali, and Connejos 2021), two factors were determined to hamper the long-term effectiveness of interim play projects: (i) policy mechanisms for urban play and ii) overreliance on volunteers. Here, the dynamic between top-down and bottom-up projects raised distinctive long-term challenges.

For projects initiated via public sector actors in Sydney and Belfast appropriate mechanisms within policy for urban play were a significant constraint. Ultimately, embedding children and play within mainstream policy proved challenging in the longer-term. In Sydney, interviewees highlighted a need to brand the pop-up project activity ‘as active mobility and movement rather than play’ (Interviewee E, council officer) to support implementation. A similar policy gap was defined in Belfast. Testimony from interviewees argued that play was ‘missing’ and ‘wasn’t named’ in some of the more critical city strategies associated with design and urban regeneration:

We wanted to pull together people across the council, and across the city, [...] but to free people up from their day jobs, it would need to be a council priority, and at the moment it [play] isn’t.

(Interviewee J, senior council officer)

Findings highlight the need for foresight in strategic policy making, particularly design and regeneration-led policy, for children’s right to play (Black et al. 2025). Public sector actors were unable to effectively evidence through policy why urban play is a strategic priority to direct resources to it accordingly.

By comparison, for community projects initiated via residents and neighbours in Milan and Paris, an unsustainable pressure was placed on volunteers to ensure prolonged success. For Milan, longer-term disappointment materialized due to a lack of forward thinking to ensure maintenance was delivered as agreed. As one interviewee flagged ‘it risks becoming another thing for the neighbourhood, that just makes it ugly’ (Interviewee K, independent practitioner). Stakeholders highlighted the need for something more permanent, stable and curated which goes beyond what is possible for a community of volunteers to deliver.

In Paris, parent organizers found the operationalization of the project in the longer-term exhausting. Multiple interviewees mentioned they were reaching capacity to volunteer even just one day a week, emphasizing the need for new volunteers to be enlisted, ‘we need new people to take part, it’s our big challenge for the future, as it is for any community association [...] we need people to care’ (Interviewee M, parent’s association).

These accounts emphasize the important role of activists and collaborative community partnerships to sustain longer-term lasting change for interim projects promoting children's right to the city. Findings uncover the pressure 'participatory' models for urban play place on citizens, and the challenge to sustaining innovative resident-led approaches for play in the city as key risks to long-term success (Lydon and Garcia 2015).

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to add to the understanding on the role of temporary uses of space in response to a health crisis and the opportunities interim uses for play offer to bolster children's democratic access and right to the city. In response to the conclusions of, *inter alia*, Deas, Martin, and Hincks (2021), McGlone (2016), Martin, Jelić, and Tvedebrink (2023) and Russell and Stenning (2023), it has tried to extend existing research by documenting – through a focus on 'affirmative narratives' (Russell and Stenning 2023) and 'lasting change' (Law, Azzali, and Connejos 2021) how urban spaces have been appropriated and adapted to promote the needs of children internationally during the COVID-19 pandemic. It contributes new knowledge by capturing the politics encountered by temporary play projects and the resulting impacts on children's spatial justice, demonstrating the opportunities afforded, arising conflict and transferable lessons for children's right to play in the longer-term.

Findings from the four cases studied demonstrate that temporary solutions during crisis may afford and invite children to be involved in placemaking in new and creative ways, engendering new opportunities for child-friendly innovation in cities (see also McGlone 2016). The outcomes demonstrate new policy and practice lenses for temporary urban solutions, which contrary to previous literature, do not valorize economic recovery or the role of policy intervention to restore market or infrastructure functionality (Madanipour 2018; Martin, Hincks, and Deas 2020).

Rather, the results showcase the role of time-limited adaptations in addressing broader social and spatial justice issues for children and young people, among other stakeholders e.g., caregivers (Brindley et al. 2025; Carroll et al. 2019). The innovative models for play developed show how place-based actors can prefigure new possibilities in the public domain for more equal, child-friendly and playful cities (Carroll et al. 2019; McGlone 2016).

The second main contribution of the paper is to add to our understanding on the longer-term perspective playful approaches to urbanism during COVID-19 had in supporting children's wellbeing (Stevens et al. 2024). The findings revealed how projects for play changed practices and mindsets of all place-based actors interviewed. However, in unpacking the 'legacies' of pandemic play spaces and their potential to stimulate 'lasting change' for children's rights, a range of barriers were recorded, including protests and governance challenges (Law, Azzali, and Connejos 2021). Here, children were subjected to 'power games' by more powerful stakeholders leading to restrictions being placed on (and the destruction of) their play spaces.

Ultimately, children's play and play in recovery from the pandemic were deemed to be acceptable as temporary initiatives at certain moments but not more permanently. The findings nuance emerging literature on pandemic play by highlighting the contests experienced by children and their play and the blame-shifting rationalities and subjugation they

were exposed to (by adults) – transferrable with broader international scholarship on children’s spatial justice issues (Martin, Jelić, and Tvedebrink 2023; Woolley 2015).

Aligned with existing research on temporary uses in response to previous crises (Martin, Deas, and Hincks 2019), findings on temporary projects for urban play show these practices were also vulnerable to dislocation as crisis conditions surrounding the global pandemic declined and normalcy resumed (Deas, Martin, and Hincks 2021). Alongside contestation, empirical evidence from interview data revealed how the governance of top-down or bottom-up projects provoked problems for each endeavour over time. Appropriate mechanisms within policy for urban play in Randwick and Belfast were recorded as an important constraint. Equally, the overreliance on a small group of volunteers placed play projects in Paris and Milan at risk.

A lack of consideration for the longer-term legacies of temporary placemaking were registered across discussions with place-based actors (Madanipour 2018). Findings highlight the need for foresight in strategic policy making, particularly design and regeneration-led policy, for children and their right to play. Likewise, better recognition of the demands ‘participatory’ models of urban play place on citizens and their role as agents of change for children’s civic access is required in future practice. Future research could suitably augment the findings presented in this paper by expanding on the range of cases of temporary land uses for children in cities. Supplementary empirical cases of longer-term experiences of interim play projects would help corroborate the elaborations made in this research and highlight contrast or liminality to further advance the theorization of cities for children.

Overall, the evidence presented in this paper raises important questions on the entanglements and politics of interim innovations and creative placemaking for children during crisis. Insights on innovative solutions for play, the challenges faced and their legacy enable a more robust commentary to emerge on: i) the role and function of temporary placemaking for urban play in recovery from crisis; ii) the possibilities interim uses of space offer to bolster children’s democratic right to the city and iii) the transferable lessons for place-based actors in future placemaking, policy and practice endeavours on child-friendly urban spaces.

Note

1. Despite materializing in 2017, Rue’golotte is defined as a pandemic play space recognizing the role the temporary play street provided for children to access unique play opportunities during the pandemic – outside of lockdown – when other spaces for play remained unavailable.

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Ethical declaration

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