

**Child leisure and public space occupation, mental health support tools amid
the COVID-19 pandemic and possibilities
for the city of São Paulo**

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SUMMARY

Social distancing was considered the main strategy found to contain the spread of the Sars-Cov-2 virus around the world in 2020 and 2021. Much has been discussed regarding how this strategy directly impacted the routines, school performance and mental health of children. In this context, the purpose of this paper is to look at how public spaces offering temporary recreational uses in the city of São Paulo can contribute to the sociability of a generation of children which endured the quarantines prompted by the pandemic, as well as in any future periods in which social distancing may occur. The methodology consists of documental and programmatic analysis of a case study as per UN-HABITAT's guidance regarding a COVID-19 urban response system. The "Paulista Aberta" program has been selected and reviewed, seeing as it saw the authorization of use of Paulista Avenue, one of São Paulo's main avenues, as a temporary leisure space, even amid the easing of restriction measures. The relevant contribution of transitory leisure spaces to children's routines was verified, in line with the existing adoption of temporary leisure uses of the spaces involved in the day-to-day of São Paulo's population. Those results led us to conclude that temporary public spaces such as Paulista Avenue proved to be a child leisure facilitation tool as social distancing measures eased, seeing as such spaces amount to previously established temporary leisure hubs in the face of the spread of the Sars-Cov-2 virus.

KEYWORDS: Public spaces; Child leisure; COVID -19.

1. INTRODUCTION

The socio-spatial restrictions wrought by social distancing in the past two years have posed a challenge to the developmental dimensions that permeate children's lives, namely the development of motor, social, and communication skills. Lima (1989) notes that public leisure spaces in cities are elements which contribute and support those processes. Piaget (1967), in turn, established that those dimensions come about by means of transitions across four stages of development, all of which are equally important to child development. Thus, child development comprises a first, second and third stage. Childhood is an extremely delicate period characterized by high receptiveness to external elements, particularly those relating to diet, emotional support, education, and environmental stimuli. This logic means that positive stimuli are crucial to child development (PAPALIA; OLDS; FELDMAN, 2013).

Child development is intrinsically tied to the development of spatial perception. Children naturally need to spend time at leisure-oriented spaces if they are to make progress in their cognitive and social development processes. Leisure is recognized as activity conducive to educational development, the socialization process, and the cognitive and psychosocial growth of children (LOPES, 2008).

On the other hand, the spread of the Sars-Cov-2 virus in the years of 2020 and 2021 triggered an unprecedented shift around the globe. Daily routines and habits changed, and most impactfully so as pertains to children living in large cities such as São Paulo. Thus, social distancing was the first and most effective strategy found by science to curb the spread of the Sars-Cov-2 virus across all population clusters (SANTOS, 2021).

In addition to directly impacting human health in a number of ways, the Sars-Cov-2 virus has the potential to indirectly impact human life. It has been proved that children's lives were affected by restrictions in access to spaces of sociability. There was a surge in mental disorders such as depression, anxiety, panic etc. Sociability shifted towards a more restricted, intimate experience and perception of urban space. Leisure activities formerly taking place at different public and private open spaces became reclusive or circumscribed to the domestic space. The limited spatial perception brought about by the pandemic, in observance of the social

distancing mandates in effect, showed that even spaces formerly recognized for their strong recreational value, were either shut down or placed under restrictions due to their characteristics, which favored physical and social interaction. The reclusive children turned to intensely experiencing the spatiality of the household, evidencing that not many indoor spaces were designed with the child experience in mind. Bedrooms, living rooms and dining rooms became refuges which enabled child games and play.

Much has been discussed regarding the potential impact of social distancing upon the routines, school performance and mental health of children in the medium and long term. Research conducted during the peak of adherence to social distancing has shown high rates of child mental health problems stemming from the uncertainty wrought by the pandemic context. Behavioral modifications such as anxiety, depression, obesity and other disorders were prevalent (SINGH, 2020). To Almeida et al (2021:):

Thus, the physical and mental health of children and adolescents warrant attention, seeing as they are part of a vulnerable population. The uncertainty stemming from COVID-19 can lead to anger, depression and anxiety as a result of loss of contact with other people and the distance, illness or death of family and friends. Since the changes wrought by COVID-19 are sudden and encompass multiple aspects of our daily lives, these adverse reactions tend to worsen, hampering human thinking. (ALMEIDA et al., 2021, p.2).

From a different perspective, amid the pandemic context, UN-HABITAT (2021) stressed the need for maintaining recreational activities in outdoor areas and open spaces, bridging the gap between private and public spaces, as an alternative approach to the novel global reality. The alternative and temporary use of city roads for recreational purposes can help bring children together, favoring the upkeep of mental health and supporting the processes pertaining to different dimensions of child development through the provision of immediate access to leisure. More than ever, the much-touted vitality of streets, which has been demonstrated by Jane Jacobs (2011), is regarded as an effective and immediate child mental health support tool, enabling collective leisure within the bounds of social distancing.

As a global megalopolis, the city of São Paulo shows great promise as pertains to child permanence in public spaces by imparting transitory recreational purposes to its major roads, in keeping with the recommendations of the World Health Organization – WHO and UN-HABITAT regarding safe activities in open spaces. Outdoor, open, free and leisure areas serve as child leisure support tools, enabling this demographic to make use of immediate spaces near their areas of residence, while primarily relying on flexible spaces newly repurposed for family leisure.

2. OBJECTIVES

With that in mind, the purpose of this paper is to look at the contribution of temporary leisure spaces in the city of São Paulo to the social integration process and the benefits thereof to the maintenance of child mental health. This problem warrants deeper investigation to determine how São Paulo's municipal administration could foster child occupation and permanence in different public leisure spaces, whether it be by ensuring temporary availability during socially restrictive events or as an alternative to the scarcity of leisure spaces in certain

areas of the city. Strategies must be identified (DE CERTEAU, 1998) to encourage the creation of spaces of sociability to ensure child leisure without the need for greater investment in physical facilities, thereby fostering integration between authorities and the community.

This research was conducted amid the pandemic event, in 2021, and it set out to investigate the potential of such temporary leisure spaces among children as social distancing eased. Presently, as vaccination progresses, social distancing measures are lifted and social activities resume, multiple specialists in Biomedical Sciences, Child Psychology, and Education are discussing the medium- and long-term effects of the confinement period upon children (MARGEVIČA-GRINBERGA; LAGANOVSKA, 2022).

3. METHODOLOGY

The methodological tools for this research include bibliographical and documentary reviews and the analysis of a widely used space in São Paulo during the pandemic. Bibliographical analysis has revealed concepts such as perception and experience, by Jacobs (2011) and Montaner (2017), and child landscapes, by Lopes (2008), which corroborate the relevance of public leisure spaces as tools to support child mental health and development. The correlation of those concepts supports the programmatic analysis of the case study through the conversion of the UN-HABITAT's COVID-19 urban response guidelines (2020) into an evaluation system. Those are as follows: (i) temporary use of existing public spaces, (ii) connections with other public spaces and the main streets of neighborhoods, (iii) expansion of public spaces, including streets, (iv) the fostering of multiple flexible activities, (v) provision of essential services, (vi) the fostering of economic activity by small businesses, and (vii) the use of these spaces as educational platforms. These suggestions have been organized in such a way as to spark inquiries into how public space is being put to transitory use, and into how these suggestions are conducive to child sociability.

4. CHILD LEISURE AS A MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT TOOL

Child recreation is permeated by an interdependent relationship with the built spaces available in the cities. Children directly benefit from these interactions throughout the entire experience and development of childhood, as attested by their strong connection with the physical, environmental and social qualities relayed by each setting. Leisure significantly contributes to the structuring of children's lives, since it can help with the upkeep of mental health as well as support aspects of cognitive, social, motor, and communicational development.

The child leisure enabled by built space availability may be regarded as a supportive element to the development of perception, identity, and the consolidation of the child's place in society. This becomes all the clearer as we determine that leisure allows a touchpoint between built space, and human senses, as much as it supports the building of socioemotional connections. This can be viewed through a different prism. As we consider child leisure spaces in cities, we verify that they play a key role towards child permanence in spaces of collectivity and sociability, thereby directly contributing to behavioral processes and the development of children's skills.

As per Mello, Vogel and Mollica (2017) and Cardoso (2012), one can argue that child sociability is facilitated by the practice of leisure, and that the contact of children with collective built spaces takes place in the democratic realm of the streets. Winnicot (1975) considers leisure as an activity conducive to cultural experience among children. Games and play in collective spaces serve the purpose of sociability. Likewise, the importance of leisure is not restricted solely to the environmental quality of controlled and purposely designed recreational settings. He further notes the importance of the contours of child spatiality, identified by the different scales of built space and considering spaces not designed for leisure, such as households, to the expansion of connections with the outside world, the public world, the world of diversity.

The universe of children is unimpeded from attaining the playful purpose of their games (LUZ, 2013). To Winnicot (1975), play helps children with the process of enjoyment of their creative freedom as they explore the settings that surround them. It allows them they create avenues to shape their perception and the limitations of their psyche (CRUZ, 2008). Meloni (2018) argues that children's activities are limitless and unqualifiable, and that the role of built settings is to provide better structures to accommodate the development apprehended in the other social spaces that children are inserted into.

In light of that, the organization of child leisure spaces supports the autonomous, imaginative, socializing, and commonplace actions of children. However, such spaces must focus on assisting and stimulating the practice and experience of play, so that through reflection they may contribute to the child development process (LIMA, 1989).

Planned out built spaces in their various modalities, whether temporary or definitive, play a key role in spatial organization and are all the richer wherever they unify spontaneous play, involving the stimulus to playful practices while possessing the ability to support the movement of the basic dimensions of child development. Therefore, games and play can take place at the different urban scales found in cities, whether in programmed settings with delimited functions, referred to in this study as programmed settings, or in free settings with no usage delimitation, welcoming children in a way that is flexible, intuitive, and adaptable to their imaginative abilities (LIMA, 1989).

The child is regarded as a subject apt to classify the qualities of a given collective or private space (SERPA, 2013). Tuan (1983) warns that the child, being a human being in the making, may encounter difficulties as pertains to orientation and the full identification of surrounding spaces. Therefore, children rely on all their senses to orient themselves geographically and to involve themselves with nearby objects.

To Piaget (1967), the child's perception of built space indicates a close relationship of proximity with the surroundings. Built space is interpreted as an object on an entirely equal footing with the perspective of the child's ego, i.e., objects are interpreted as per the same category as that in which the child sees themselves – built space is there because the child regards themselves as the center thereof. That is why objects are initially recognized as living beings, akin to oneself.

5. TRANSITORY LEISURE SPACE INCENTIVE PROGRAMS

5.1. THE “RUAS DE LAZER”¹ PROGRAM

Ever since the 1970s, and more precisely since 1976, leisure incentive programs have been in place in quieter streets across São Paulo. The then-unprecedented “Ruas de Lazer” program made it possible for several streets across the capital to be shut down to automobiles and made available only to pedestrians, especially children. This enabled a resignification of streets from dangerous places into safe places for leisure. Thus, the possibility came about for activities conducive to social integration, leisure, and a sense of community. As such, this program is viewed as a programmatic embryo for other temporary leisure projects in São Paulo, a case in point being Paulista Aberta².

Costa & Sampaio (2015) stresses the relevance of the “Ruas de Lazer” program as one of the most significant projects up until then:

The “Ruas de Lazer” program was one of the first activities involving the Sports and Leisure department of São Paulo’s Municipal Secretariat for Sports, Leisure and Recreation (SEME) in the 1970s. Events included the “I Passeio Ciclístico da Primavera,”³ in 1975, which can be considered the first official leisure initiative ever sponsored by the São Paulo City Hall. The following year, 1976, saw the first Leisure Street implemented in the city. This was the pioneering Leisure and Recreation program which remains in place until this day. (COSTA; SAMPAIO, 2015, p. 47).

At one point, the “Ruas de Lazer” program comprised over 1,000 streets across the city. Over the decades, that number decreased. Currently, there are 58 active leisure streets (PREFEITURA MUNICIPAL DE SÃO PAULO, 2021). The decrease was a result of urban infrastructure expansion, favoring the proliferation of the road-based model, which leaned even further towards automobiles rather than pedestrians. Again, Costa & Sampaio (2015) relates that the lack of government incentive, coupled with a dated urban infrastructure program, helped bring about this mismatch. This program was crucially important to the structuring of other similar programs which emerged as a result of popular demand for democratic, accessible leisure. To LABMOB (2019):

In 1976, a Municipal Secretariat for Sports project saw the development of the “Ruas de Lazer” program, in tandem with neighborhood associations, community centers and parish communities, consisting of closing down neighborhood streets to cars on Sundays to allow children and adolescents to play freely. The surrounding communities themselves were tasked with sponsoring the activities, while City Hall was charged with providing Jersey barriers to limit vehicle traffic, volleyball nets and different types of sports balls. (LABMOB et al., 2019, p. 12).

As we look at this Program and at other temporary leisure spaces that emerge, we could argue that such temporary spaces, as well as permanent facilities, require closer coordination between architects, urban planners, and users in order to integrate design, furnishing, and the needs of children. Lima (1989) argues that architecture and furnishing design for children should aim to foster initiative and curiosity. As mentioned earlier, throughout his

¹ Streets of leisure.

² The Open Paulista Avenue initiative.

³ The I Springtime Bicycle Ride.

works, Pallasmaa (2011) demonstrated the need to explore all our senses during architectural conception as opposed to favoring the more easily captured ones, as is the case with the widespread exploration of sight nowadays (TUAN, 1983; PALLASMAA, 2011). This is utterly feasible through investment in temporary furnishing conducive to child leisure practices in these spaces, all the more so when it comes to the use and resignification of objects such as cones, used tires, playful signaling on asphalt and other tactics. Architecture's natural mission is to conflate the human senses without favoring any – and this is extremely important to the child's experience. Gehl (2013), in turn, notes that these premises must be endowed with some breadth rather than subsist solely at a primary level. It must reach the core of any city that may present itself; it must turn to mobility and the human senses.

5.2. THE “PAULISTA ABERTA” PROGRAM

The year of 2015 was marked by the urban resignification of the city of São Paulo. The emergence of social movements such as “Minha Sampa,” “SampaPé” and “Cidade Ativa”⁴ galvanized part of the population, building on the consolidation of the “Paulista Aberta” program. This Program proved controversial from the start, yet it enabled greater integration between the multiple existing uses of the Avenue and its surroundings, and it endowed the city with a new tourist attraction. In 2019, the Sustainable Mobility Laboratory of the Graduate Program in Urbanism at UFRJ - LABMOB produced a study that evaluated the impacts of the “Paulista Aberta” Program on urban vitality, where it described:

The key motivations of the groups involved in the mobilization were based on the importance of appropriating public spaces in the city and valuing streets as spaces of leisure and physical exercise. The purpose of this project was to broaden the right to leisure and the appropriation of the city, while also encouraging local economic and social activity. Likewise, a trend was in place to reoccupy public spaces across the city that would eventually build momentum with as emblematic an area as Paulista Avenue being allocated exclusively to pedestrians and cyclists on Sundays and holidays. (LABMOB et al., 2019, p. 13).

Known as one of São Paulo's premier business and culture hubs, Paulista Avenue has come to be regarded and recognized as a new, nationally relevant leisure hub, directly impacting the mental health and sociability of residents in the neighborhood and its adjacencies. In a way, there is an opposition in place between the facilitation of leisure practices, pedestrian use and enhanced contact with public spaces versus the priority imparted to automobile traffic.

This holds true of multiple main roads across São Paulo, due to their closer proximity with the realms of housing and recreation. The previously mentioned “Ruas de Lazer” program inspired the “Paulista Aberta” program with the possibility of streets, mostly residential ones, becoming leisure spots on weekends and holidays. This is a widespread practice employed at multiple public spaces around the world. Tactical urbanism has come up as an activity which transforms consolidated public spaces into democratic spaces geared towards the human realm, facilitating leisure, albeit temporarily, and converting those spaces into platforms which connect

⁴ My São Paulo, São Paulo On Foot, and Active City.

the city and its residents. LABMOB (2019) points a number of groups directly benefited by the program, including area residents, local merchants and outside visitors.

Through temporary recreational uses, Paulista Avenue enables a greater connection between existing public and private leisure spaces along the thoroughfare, such as museums, malls, parks, and street businesses, and it allows longer walks, games and play and sociability. By shutting down to vehicles, Paulista Avenue fosters democratic leisure and culture activities, enabling shared child games and play in a setting of cultural diversity throughout its length, and equally allowing for the use of toys brought from home by the children, as well as for physical and social activities. Another key point is that the program facilitates the work of small-scale entrepreneurs and street artists. The benefits of the program had been established prior to the pandemic, making it possible to ratify the qualification of these spaces.

The São Paulo City Hall continually reinforces the educational portion of this Program in a tandem effort with the private sector, supporting road safety education programs and fostering improved coexistence between pedestrians, cyclists and vehicles.

Picture 1 – A child plays on Paulista Avenue.



Source: <https://passeioskids.com>. Accessed Oct. 30, 2022.

The Paulista Aberta Program proves fully aligned with the COVID-19 urban response system outlined by UN-HABITAT in 2020. The Program is based on enhancing the connection of São Paulo citizens with outdoor public spaces and cultural facilities. Nevertheless, a tactical structure devoted to child leisure has not been fully put in place, since the entire temporary mobilization is focused on bicycle lane signage and pedestrian circulation, relying on the physical structure of the road rather than integrating equipment or child play-oriented programs into its core, even if temporarily so. The programmatic basis for “Paulista Aberta” shows that appropriation by children should take place through activities that do not depend on the delimiting of child play-oriented goals, and ones that work in tandem with other equipment such as bicycles, skateboards etc. Likewise, the use of Paulista Avenue’s structure proves oriented as per its cultural axis, which interconnects the city’s primary leisure equipment.

During the worst of the Novel Coronavirus pandemic, the Program was put on hold. Its potential for temporary leisure was brought to a standstill. By the time the “Paulista Aberta” program was cleared to resume, new stimulus practices had been incorporated, and protective uses had been consolidated to prevent the spread of the Sars-Cov-2 virus, including flyer and

protective equipment distribution, vaccinations against the virus, and the use of disinfectants such as hand sanitizer.

Table 1 – Summary of “Paulista Aberta” Program analysis as per UN-HABITAT guidance

Questions	Answers
Is the public space being put to temporary use?	Yes, Paulista Avenue is
Does the public space in question favor connections with other public leisure spaces and road connections to residential areas?	Yes, Paulista Avenue is a multipurpose hub within the city of São Paulo
Are leisure and culture activities being fostered?	Yes, multiple leisure, health and culture activities are taking place
Are essential services being facilitated?	Yes, there is easy access to bathrooms, food and other essential needs.
Is economic activity by small-scale entrepreneurs being fostered?	Yes, the City Hall provides specific areas on the sidewalks that small entrepreneurs can market their services and goods. Through the municipal licensing process.
Is a platform in place regarding road safety education and Sars-Cov-2 virus protection methods?	Yes, a temporary vaccination site was created and protective equipment was made available

Source: The author, based on UN-HABITAT (2020)

6. RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

One notes that over the years, the São Paulo City Hall has created and maintains a number of programs designed to foster collective leisure, providing a necessary methodological basis for determining how, through the administration and use of available urban tools, a megacity can help enable and offer alternative leisure spaces to children, especially right now, amid the ongoing pandemic, as well as establish new urban leisure hubs. As previously noted, we are looking into how the implementation of recreational uses in key roads across São Paulo can provide children with access to leisure and social interaction activities, thereby contributing to improved mental health.

The entire research and writing for this paper took place during the pandemic period in Brazil, which made field work unfeasible. The initial hypothesis had been that the ability to rely on temporary leisure spaces at a time when physical contact, longer travel, and spending time indoors were ill-advised might help ease the socioemotional impacts of social distancing. However, at that point in time, the São Paulo City and State administrations failed to envision this possibility. Specialists currently mention research work conducted in communities plagued by natural disasters to argue that the effects of such experiences aren't always lasting, unless work is done towards recognizing and addressing obstacles to child development. Despite the absence of child play practices and child-oriented temporary furnishing under the Paulista Aberta Program, this program points to the potential of public space usage in reactivating socio-spatial interaction among children and mitigating the impact of confinement upon this demographic.

The results obtained demonstrate that the São Paulo City Hall can achieve success by utilizing the urban design tools included in its Strategic Master Plan, in urban law, and in the collective and participative administration of public spaces enabled by the temporary recreational use of key roads across the city. There presently are 65 active leisure streets

registered under São Paulo's "Ruas de Lazer" Program through July 2022 and functioning as temporary leisure hubs, including Paulista Avenue and smaller streets in residential neighborhoods. It has been shown that in creating temporary leisure hubs across all city neighborhoods, City Hall is able to provide children with collective leisure amid emergency situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic, while equally contributing to the creation of collective child interaction and leisure spaces in the city.

The results show that temporary recreational uses were adopted at multiple public spaces in São Paulo, and hence said spaces were ready for use as tools to facilitate and value outdoor spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of restrictions, these spaces were underused at the peak of the pandemic. The conclusions of authors such as Piaget (1967) and Montessori (1961) regarding the adoption of recreational activities as facilitators of child mental health maintenance can be verified during major events such as the Sars-Cov-2 pandemic, seeing as it has been proven that social distancing had a negative impact upon child sociability. Moreover, we have explored two public space occupation initiatives in São Paulo, the "Ruas Abertas" and "Ruas de Lazer" programs respectively put in place by laws 16,607/16 and 12,264/96. These two laws allow residents to petition for Sunday street closures from City Hall for purposes of collective leisure. This is a way to democratize urban space as relates to facilitating access to leisure spaces, and even more so during socially restrictive periods.

In turn, Marcellino (1996) stresses that as long as specific leisure spaces and equipment remains associated with the more affluent demographics in cities and dependent upon the expenditure of large sums of money, tactical urbanism will remain able to democratize access to child leisure, evidencing the need for improved structuring of public programs in order to encourage the use of temporary leisure mechanisms.

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