



**A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH DEVELOPED IN
SOUTHERN EUROPE.**
Measuring children's right to the city through urban design.

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ABSTRACT

Today public spaces have become fragile environments highlighting socio-spatial inequalities. This PhD research intends to investigate whether it is possible to define more inclusive urban programs, considering children as determinants of inclusive urban design. It will do so by measuring children's right to the city and systematising an urban toolkit as a child participation assessment tool to make knowledge reproducible and adaptable.

PAR - participatory action research - is the selected methodology. It was developed through implementing urban diagnostic workshops in two social housing neighbourhoods in Porto, Portugal, and through analysing three successful international policy programs that share common values and guidelines in Southern Europe. The research's scientific merit is to understand how to promote equitable, inclusive and caring neighbourhoods through urban and participatory design that enables residents to co-create alternatives targeted to children in contexts of social exclusion. In doing so, making it inclusive to all.

Keywords: participatory action research, children's rights, public spaces, urban policies.

Thematic clusters: 1. City and project **Topic:** 2. Urban design and public space

Introduction

This paper is part of the PhD research developed by Elena Parnisari at the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Porto (FAUP) since 2020: “*Searching for equitable, inclusive and caring urban neighbourhoods: measuring children’s right to the city through urban design. An urban laboratory in Contumil and Lagarteiro social housing.*” The research intends to study and apply the results of three successful international policy programs to two selected social housing neighbourhoods of Porto, Portugal: Contumil and Lagarteiro. It will do so by making visible the urban policies and the physical conditions of these built environments that have generated social exclusion and diminished the resilience of their communities.

The study focuses on three equal aspects. First, the work emphasises urban poverty from a geographic layout; second, on school-age children within the sociology study; and third, participation as the methodology for pulling all the data together. The action-research scientific merit is to understand how to promote equitable, inclusive and caring neighbourhoods through urban and participatory design that enables residents to co-create alternatives targeted to children in contexts of social exclusion. In doing so, making it inclusive to all.

The general objective of this research is to contribute to the scarce literature by exploring theoretical and practical articulations. Examining interventions that explore the youth’s inclusion in urban policies’ elaboration and urban design solutions as a possibility to promote inclusive and resilient urban practices in neighbourhoods. Focusing on solutions that prevent and respond to situations of greater vulnerability through coordinated efforts from municipality sectors, public-private entities, educational infrastructures and families.

The primary support of the research relies on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), established in 1989, by which children are granted inviolable rights just as adults are. We must consider children as individuals with their rights (UNICEF) and not human beings whose decisions are made only by their parents. The thesis, thus, has a scientific and political foundation above all.

Another keystone is the European Sustainable Development Goals 2030 (SDGs), established in 2015. It aimed to eradicate poverty, find sustainable and inclusive development solutions, and ensure everyone’s human rights, where the research finds its goals in sustainability and inclusion. The European Agenda 2030 can only be achieved with the realisation of child rights as the leaders of tomorrow (UNICEF).

The two programmes are thus interconnected, and the implementation of actions at the European level reflects globally with common objectives. Also, within the European 2030 agenda, many programmes focus on co-creation, working with and involving project addressees. This is one of the possibilities that the research attempts to follow to carry out a diagnostic together with those concerned to plan ideas and proposals created together.

Starting from Lefebvre’s right to the city (1968) and approaching the EU 2030 Agenda, the thesis aims to revisit inspiring theories to understand what rights we claim in today’s cities. Indeed, the right to the city involves the right to participation and the right to the appropriation of the inhabitants playing a central role in any decision that contributes to the production of urban space, as well as its physical access and use (Purcell, 2002).

1. Participation of children as their urban right

This research aims to observe interventions that explore the youth’s inclusion in urban policies’ elaboration and urban design solutions as a possibility to promote inclusive and resilient urban practices in neighbourhoods. This empirically based action-research is conceived to be carried out in close association with understanding a collective problem in which participants representing the situation are co-involved.

In the first place, the study intends to prove the absence of inclusivity in urban agendas and fight stigma and prejudice. In the second place, promote trust networks at a neighbourhood level, reclaiming public spaces and emphasizing the importance of neighbourly cooperation. In third place, plan a qualitative assessment understanding the absence of inclusive urban policies and design and how it has transformed public spaces

into areas of transit between one institutionalized activity and another depriving its users of their freedom. Furthermore, finally, to develop a case study focused on two social housing neighbourhoods cocreating a change in urban agenda and co-designing a caring and resilient evolution of these units.

The research interrogates the spatial presence of youth (Almeida, 2009), considering geography and cultural factors (Ndlovu, 2020), but also the design and the architectural characteristics of shared spaces, aiming at strengthening the sense of community through co-responsibility actions.

Public spaces can improve inclusion by acting as places for intercultural dialogue and exchange (inclusive urban planning), allowing civic participation, recreation, and a sense of belonging (UNESCO, 2017). This dimension is measured in this research through children. Therefore, those traditionally considered as the project's target population will be its co-authors, translating children's and young people's visions about their communities into effective urban action plans.

2. Inclusivity of children through urban planning agenda co-creation

This research aims to make visible the problem of social inequality and urban segregation, confirming the importance of children in the city scenario conformation. Indeed, without community, a place cannot be defined as public or collective, and children's community represents the primary and inclusive element at the basis of this thought.

How has urban planning developed up to now? First, it is necessary to work inside spaces through spatial experiences, to study which group is there, and to rethink what a space for children is. It is also primary to get to know the children of today and their parents (reach the families through their children), the experiences of the ones marginalized, growing up in poor and challenging urban environments. Finally, it is urgent to recognize children and young people as vulnerable groups and emphasize policies and actions for them to thrive in a safe environment.

The theoretical output of the research and its dissemination represents the construction of a tool, of an investigation method developed through the critical study of consolidated methodological experiences, and through the in-depth analysis and action of these activities in a specific context, which can function as a pilot project that can be politicized.

Public spaces have become fragile risk environments unable to deal with emergencies. However, proximity can still be found inside the neighbourhood unit and made visible through children's actions. Is it then possible to plan more inclusive urban policies, starting from co-responsibility's exploration in critical neighbourhoods, assuming children as indicators of urban inequality and determinants for inclusive urban design?

If urban policies would embrace children's rights (Ezquiaga, 1997) and other excluded groups among traditional actors - administration, neighbourhood associations, owners and builders - would there be better quality development and usage of the urban space? Nowadays, working toward a child-friendly city with public institutions' support is necessary. As did Aldo Van Eyck, in post-war Amsterdam, planned the building of 700 playgrounds together with governmental organizations.

3. Where are the children?

This academic research represents the evolution of the academic and professional path of the author after taking part in diverse architectural, environmental, social, cultural and anthropological situations in recent years. The relevance of the research is a means for equitable urban development by engaging with local community groups, enhancing the contribution of an urban planner to equity and social justice in urban society. Moreover, it focuses on the importance of the community in planning policies, to design spaces for the people and with the people.

Elena Parnisari derives the idea for this research from past academic and work experiences spent mainly in the Global South, an analysis of which, over the years, results in an observation of the society in which we live and, thus, a critique of urban public policies.

In the Global South, it is easy to spot children in every city's street and public spaces, playing everywhere and free to go anywhere. In Southern Europe, it is not easy to find the same dynamics. Children do not exist in the street; they go from one activity container to another (from school to a sports centre or various activities) and no longer live in public spaces of cities. However, an urban dimension where children still play in the street is the dimension of the social housing neighbourhood, which is more delimited and restricted and thus where there is a feeling of security.

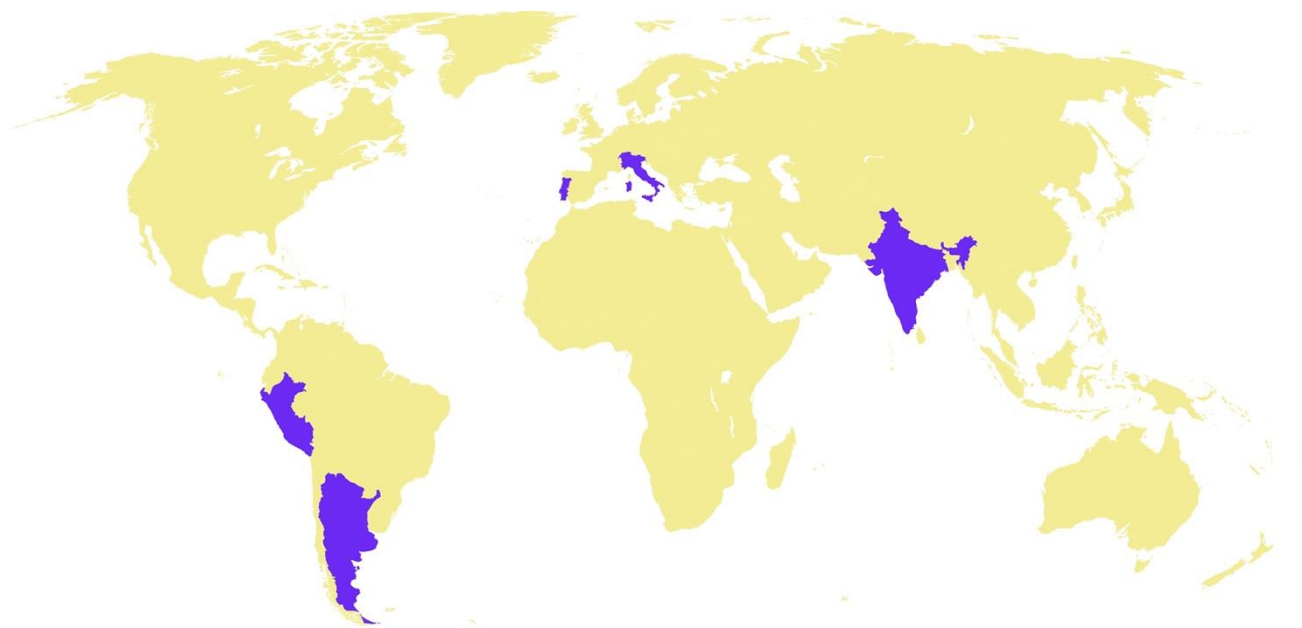


Fig.1 World map where the author had work experience related to the case study topic before starting the research.

How can we analyse children's non-use of streets and public spaces in southern European urban contexts? How can we prove that urban policies must be more inclusive towards this population segment?

Children are the indicators of this lack of inclusion, which is not only about children but for everyone living in cities. Children who are naturally inclusive beings could be the key to a more inclusive urban design: hazard-free, barrier-free, permeable and transparent public spaces.

How do children move within this space? Moreover, how do they transform objects of street furniture into elements of play? Finally, what are children's rights within urban planning and the city, and how should children's voices be considered for improving this planning and city space?

Children have lost their freedom to play in public spaces, interact with strangers, or allow themselves to be photographed. Fear is a natural feeling for self-defence; however, an excess can cause paralysis: The fear of the street originated at home, through television news, social media and virtual games (Leite et al., 2019).

4. Participatory-Action-Research

The method chosen to develop this doctoral research is PAR - Participatory Action Research. An action-research methodology attempts to justify theory through action and practical experiences. It is a style of investigation in which the individuals who are the study's focus participate as research team members in all activities (Whyte, 1989). It is an interpretative research methodology through the identification of the problem within a social context, the collection of data related to the problem, the analysis and significance of the data

collected, the identification of possible solutions and the action itself (Santos Koerich, Stein Backes, Macêdo de Sousa, Lorenzini Erdmann, & Albuquerque, 2009). It is context-specific, leading to local conditions and local knowledge (Pain, 2004). The purpose of this typology of exploration is to enable action, advocating that those being researched should be involved in the process. It is a qualitative method within a comprehensive sociology perspective, where the data, coming from rooted theory, are validated by the practical action itself (theory through practice).

It is an interdisciplinary methodology that allows the researcher to use various tools (photos, videos, cartographies, games, posters) and make them their own. It allows us to do field research through action.

The working chronology followed by the author was to create a project as a case study, experiment with it in the field and draw results from it, through which it can be possible to critique.

As Umberto Eco (2001) wrote, the topic is secondary to the working method and the experience gained from it.



Fig.2 PAR organisation defined by the author's guidelines.

As an architect and urban planner, Elena Parnisari develops this research with a holistic approach to the neighbourhoods, mediating between children's eyes and urban reading through an active volunteerism and field presence component. Gathering information from the participants, exploring childhood experiences of growing up in these social districts

To develop the case study project in Porto, it was essential to identify examples to follow in Southern Europe to understand how different institutions carry out a Child-Friendly City project. As part of the action research methodology, analysing these examples means being part of them, thus creating together with them and studying their methodology. Action research also envisages several activities and levels of research being carried out simultaneously to cross-reference information, create, and derive valid results.

The examples that were selected to support the research are:

1. Bernard Van Leer Foundation, with the Urban 95 project, is the example of Tirana, Albania.
2. La Città dei Bambini, the international research centre of the CNR in Rome, is the example of Bilbao, Spain.

3. CoCriamos, an Italian association, is the example of Bologna, Italy.

The action-research with which the investigation is developed is also reflected in the specific case study methodology.

For the project in Porto, the first approach was to establish relationships of trust with the people through observation and analysis of the social and urban context, joining the work of the local institutions present in the area, and free exploration. Mainly observation of the public spaces, of the playful dimension, of the parent-child relationship, of the child-child relationship.

Then a participated urban diagnostic was developed through a social survey of space users to identify the focus of the problem. Qualitative tools from the literature and case studies were analysed to get the necessary data to evaluate, including people's experience through urban recognition tours and participant observation (cartography, video mapping, geographical diaries). The main goal of this first recognition was to identify the day-to-day activities that children who live in the neighbourhoods use to carry out and their conditions: spaces for relationships, daily facilities, schools and public transport. Several direct and participated observations were made at different times and on different days of the week to be in the place long enough to know what was happening there and understand the social and spatial relationships.

Participatory activities were carried out to get the subjective quality of life, local spatial knowledge and community well-being assessment done by children through their talk, wishes and dreams:

- participatory mapping through sketch maps on paper or whiteboards/tablets
- three-dimensional physical models (maquette) of the ideal neighbourhood programs
- participatory videos/ photos and multi-media materials (texts, images, sounds)
- participatory planning games

Finally, urban management was operated, considering three necessary qualities: multi-scalability, interdisciplinarity and participatory. The necessary information was obtained through qualitative techniques, from interviews and participatory dynamics with people involved in management. In addition, surveys of the parent's lifestyles and children's activities were conducted through ideas, conversations and stories being told, written and recorded.

The common thread between all these participatory activities is the playful dimension of space, understood as the autonomy of movement in the urban dimension through play, where the latter takes on a political value: the exercise of freedom. The goal is thus to seek solutions that are co-designed through the culture of listening, promoting spaces of situated circumstances and highlighting the link between the play activity and the spatial project.

One of the fundamental principles of action-research is the importance of keeping an activity log: to keep a register of observations, action planning, and their development and results. Therefore, every step mentioned above was accompanied by a video-photographic register of all the activities carried out (laboratories) and, simultaneously, external observation of the natural processes within the study area. The audio-visual register is used both for academic and study purposes, to validate or not the proposed thesis, and to extract material to work on. This knowledge will be research and product at the same time. Indeed, these tools were used during the activities, constituting the final output.

The goal is to use action to justify the theory.

4.1 Urban Laboratory

Based on the theory and methodologies experimented with, the site-specific case studies the author carried out took place in Porto, in the Campanhã district, in two social housing neighbourhoods. The urban focus is the social housing neighbourhood, and the social focus is the primary school-age children (5-10/11 years old).

The case study was developed over three central moments:

1. Analysis of the urban scale - understanding how the dimension of the social housing neighbourhood fits into the urban fabric of the city, hence a local scale, always paying attention to the topic of the right to the city.
2. Analysis of the children's activities - their spontaneity in appropriating spaces with their games, and thus learning through their dynamisation of spaces.
3. Analysis of the community - the community's sense of belonging to these places and the study of collective actions to co-create together points that can one day be included in policies.

The practice section of this research involved human participants from vulnerable groups through an urban laboratory developed in the Contumil and Lagarteiro neighbourhoods in Porto. This work establishes minority groups, children and their caretakers as the most affected by socio-spatial inequalities (Ezquiaga, 1997). The cut-out of these social categories represents the variability of time and places manifested in urban policies (Sirota, 2007). This research marks the influence of such gender and social categories on cultural practices.

Before being able to start with the activities, Elena Parnisari had to carry out an observation part, spending several months from April to September 2021, going to the neighbourhoods with an analogue camera and photographing how the children live in the spaces in these neighbourhoods. This first observation phase occurred during the second lockdown in Portugal during the COVID-19 pandemic when people were forced into their homes, so it was impossible to see children playing outdoors. However, within these social housing neighbourhoods, children continued to live in public spaces under the control of their parents. Because of their dimension, they are read as a unity, with no private open space. For this reason, the existing public space becomes everyone's backyard as if they were one big family.



Fig.3 Photographic record of the children's playtime during the observation phase. Photos by Elena Parnisari, June 2021.

The urban laboratory was carried out through 19 workshops from January to September 2022 thanks to the help of local partners, mainly associations that already worked with children in the area: Associação Equipa de Rua Oriental da Norte Vida, Projeto Cercar-te no Lagarteiro-E8G Programa Escolhas, Espaço T-Associação para o Apoio à Integração Social e Comunitária, Projeto Galerias Comunitárias, Centro Social do Lagarteiro-Obra Diocesana de Promoção Social, Serviço Educativo da Casa da Arquitectura. This link with the associations was fundamental to introduce the author to the network they created and are part of - the community of children and their parents.

All the activities carried out during the workshops had a robust and playful component: drawing, observing, mapping, photographing, making models, telling the story of their daily life in the neighbourhood, walking and exploring the neighbourhood together, interviews, videos and making prototypes from the children's wishes for public spaces in the neighbourhood.

Each activity is described in a manual, explaining what elements were needed to carry out these specific workshops, how many children the workshop was carried out with, how the activities developed, what the results were, the photographic record and the material produced in each activity.

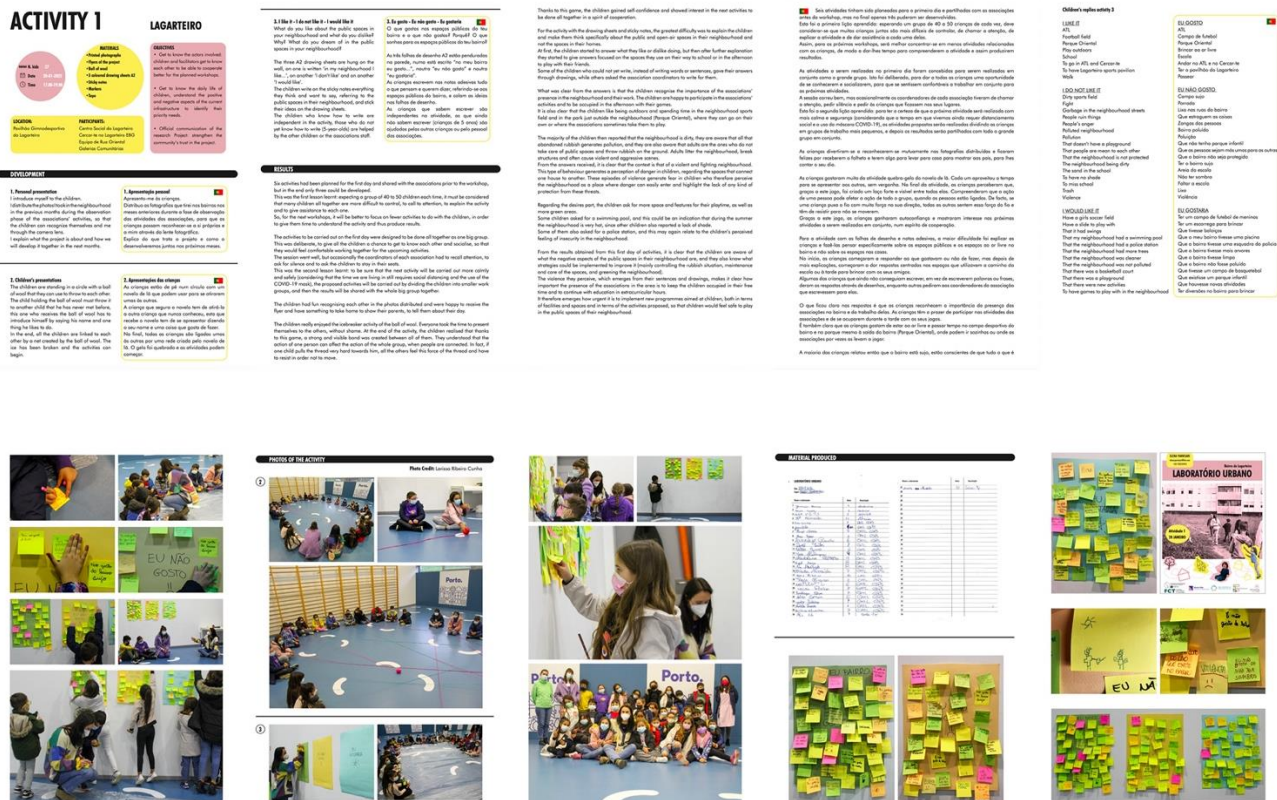


Fig.4 Small excerpt from a few pages of the manual. Photos by Larissa Ribeiro Cunha, January 2022.

At Lagarteiro social housing, the group consisted of about 50 children of different ethnicities, while at Contumil social housing, the group was about 15 children of Roma ethnicity. For the research, it was essential to carry out in parallel the analysis of how different ethnic groups use and appropriate the space and transform it into a space for play and living.

A significant component of the activities was to explore the urban fabric and the spaces that exist between one block and another, to explore the routes these children take, what public spaces they use, what they like and dislike within these public spaces, what characteristics they identify, and exploring how the neighbourhood is connected to the rest of the city in terms of infrastructure.



Fig.5 Result of the first workshop activity where the children were asked to write or draw what they like and dislike about the neighbourhood and what they would like to have.



Fig.6 Result of the second workshop: A survey was distributed to the children with questions about how they use public spaces and their feelings.



Fig.7 Result of the third workshop where an exploratory walk was carried out, and the children visited places in the neighbourhood that they use every day and places they had never been and wrote down their ideas and feelings about these spaces.



Fig.9 Activity during the last workshop where the children measured and drew with coloured chalks the spaces they would like to have in their neighbourhood, which emerged from the ideas of the first workshop. Photo by Larissa Ribeiro Cunha, August 2022.

In Contumil, thanks to the help of a filmmaker friend, we realised a short documentary by putting together interviews made with the children and their mothers and footage of daily life scenes of the children in public spaces. The documentary is called “Conto Até Mil”, which in Portuguese means I count to a thousand, echoing the name of the Contumil neighbourhood and the hide-and-seek game the children always play. This short documentary was made to have a register of images, interviews, and actions, which, put together, could create a reading of the use of public space that children do and thus be able to draw visual conclusions that can be translated both into defects in the public space and into actions to be enhanced and exalted.

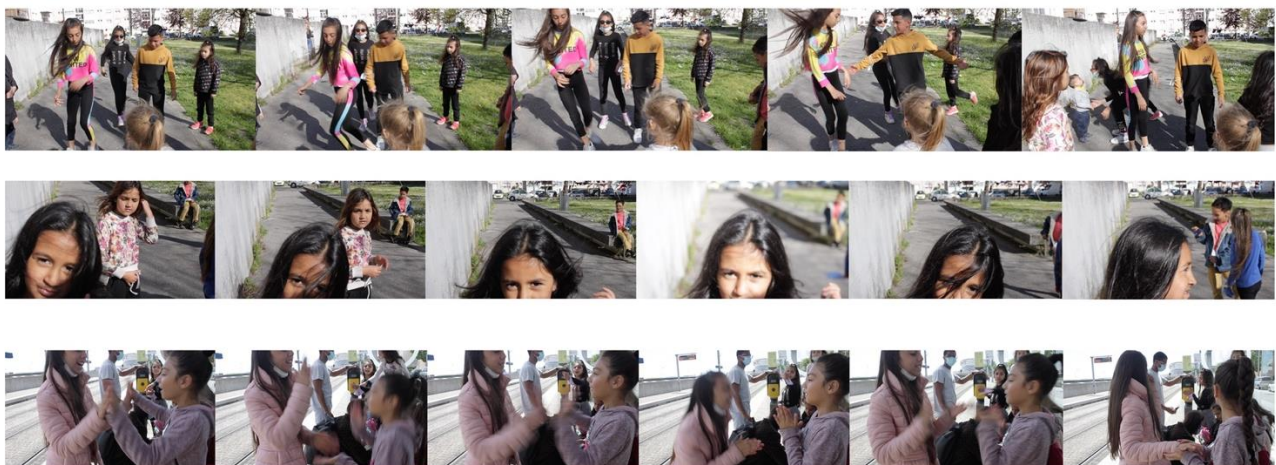


Fig.8 Some frames of the documentary where children play in the neighbourhood's public space. Film frames by Edna Vidigal, May 2022.

5. Co-creative output

One of the questions that this research often raises is: what is the role of the architect within an interdisciplinary project with a strong social component? The answer is probably to be a social connector, connecting various people and various entities (associations, institutions, museums, friends and professionals of various kinds) to collaborate on a common project. The development of an urban diagnostic to reach the determination of guidelines and components that could be considered in the design of urban policies towards more inclusive environments and programmes. The role of the author is that of presence, of being there, of relaying and translating children's will, children's looks and children's actions into a political message. The project aims to create awareness in communities, since children are the great absentees in public debate, in urban policies and projects.

Architecture and urban planning can only be a tool for social innovation if they can help people exercise their rights. To do so, it is necessary to find procedural tools that are reproducible and adaptable in different contexts, to be able to improve the ways of modifying the urban space.

Confidence with the community doesn't start at the beginning of the project, it's difficult to build this link with them and make them believe that the things we want to do on the territory are going to be real someday. The whole process is about the way to build this confidence with them. There is always a lack of confidence in people when the project is explained to them, there is always scepticism towards these types of projects because they are very new. There are countries where the participatory process is the basis of any project, especially at the public level, and countries where participation is not accepted or it is accepted but has gone wrong on previous occasions, then it is difficult to rebuild this confidence in those who go to execute these types of projects.

The research aims to obtain data for the practical work, but also to make children aware of their right to participation and the right to freedom of expression. To intermedate between the child and the project, between the parents and the project, and between the project and those who can go and read it.

The urban diagnostic of this project stands out as a message for policymakers, planners and administrators, aiming to be a tool for responding to the lack of inclusion in policies.

The research focuses on co-creating alternatives, co-creating together, designing together and doing together so that any suggestions and tools that come out of this can be useful and effective because it was done by everyone together.

The main desired output is probably to make knowledge operational, as an urban design tool, relying upon the innovation of methodology from the point of view of communication. The theoretical output of the research and its diffusion represents the construction of a tool, of an investigation method developed through the critical study of consolidated methodological experiences, and the in-depth analysis and action of these activities in a specific context.

RIGHT TO the city



LOCAL scale

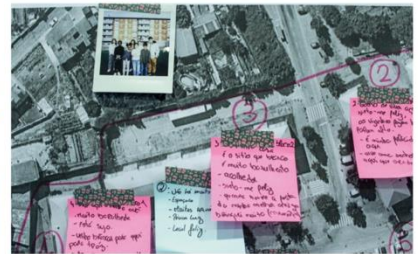


SOCIAL

HOUSING



COMMUNITY



LEARNING



COLLECTIVE ACTIONS



SPONTANEITY



BELONGING



Fig.10 Poster summarising the research, with objectives and development of activities. Photos by Catarina Silva, Elena Parrisari and Larissa Ribeiro Cunha, January-August 2022.

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