

Spatial justice –fair provision of places to play

How do we provide for our right to play?

Changing urban design and increasing housing density¹ are compromising urban neighbourhoods. Access to private and public play spaces is declining.

Changing built environments

“Along with good social policy, the built environment can have a profound effect on the health, wellbeing, and happiness of our youngest citizens...” (Natalia Krysiak, Architect, Cities for Play)²

Increased urban density, the impact of poverty or poorly resourced areas means that many of us live without access to play spaces. For our health and wellbeing, people need access to play places within a 10 minute walk. There are considerable [social, emotional, and physical benefits](#) of play and its positive impact on our wellbeing and children’s development.

Well-planned housing developments that involve communities can lead to [planned spaces](#) for creative play, walkable cities and green spaces.

But often the need for play is overlooked.

“There’s still a gap in our knowledge about [the optimal housing density](#) in diverse Aotearoa (sub)urban settings to guarantee positive health outcomes for residents. [we need to] align urban transformations with the genuine needs of residents, fostering flexibility, innovation, and inclusivity in our urban planning approaches” Miriam Schindler, Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington³

The [Hamilton City Council](#) is aiming for 80% of all households to have access to a park or open space within 500 metres of their home.

Leisure Rights

Everyone, whether adult or child, has the right to adequate time for rest and for the pursuit of leisure activity.

[World Leisure Charter](#), Article 1 endorsed by the United Nations.



Figure 1 Playstreets

Spatial justice

[Spatial justice](#) assesses who gets what, and is based on “the fair and equitable distribution in space of socially valued resources and opportunities to use them.”⁴

There are high levels of deprivation, poor health and isolation in much of our social housing. Almost [one third of NZ children live in poverty](#) and Māori, Pacific and disabled children are much more likely to be doing it tough. Equity of access is an imperative for providers of space and the opportunity to play.

Understanding space

The planning and provision of space is a highly political process, and often prioritises the needs of some groups over others. Putting this in context, [space has multiple dimensions](#):

- **what it is designed for** – eg bus stops enable commuting)
- **what we believe the spaces are for** – eg waiting, shelter
- **how the spaces are used** – eg book exchange, mural, social places to hang out.

When people are using spaces in ways that don’t conform with expectations, some people find that threatening.

“[People] are welcome in the places we designate for them; they’re only welcome elsewhere if they play by our rules.” [Wendy Russell](#)

Is the provision and use of space fair?

- **How is space provided?**
- **Who decides how spaces should be used?**
- **How can we increase the range of uses for spaces?**
- **Whose voices are heard?**

Case Study 1: Changing the rules to enable play

Play streets have been happening informally since 2019⁵ and in 2021 Waka Kotahi piloted 20 [play streets](#) programmes across seven Councils.

Play Streets allow communities to open quiet local streets for a few hours at a time for neighbours to spend time together and for children to play. Community organisers can apply to councils to temporarily restrict traffic to make these events possible and safe.

[Regulatory changes](#) announced in July 2023 gave councils the ability to support Play Streets through a provision called Community Streets. [Play Street Guidelines can be found on the NZTA website.](#) Watch [SportNZ Play Street Lower Hutt](#) to see streets full of children playing.

“The [Play Streets pilot](#) showed us the benefits of empowering residents to use their local street spaces as play spaces. These resident-led events also helped neighbours get to know each other, creating stronger community ties.” Ali Filipaina, Chair, Parks, Arts, Community and Events Committee Auckland City

Case Study 2: Wynyard Quarter Auckland

The re-development of [Wynyard Quarter](#) on Auckland’s waterfront transformed an industrial service area to a medium density, mixed use zone (retail, business, hospitality, housing) that [benefits everyone](#). One goal was to enable recreation.⁶ [Key elements](#) include:

- [Play elements](#) built into the environment – balancing, water play, swimming, playgrounds, basketball courts,
- Rain garden network including native plants and green spaces
- Limited vehicle access and no curbs enabling a shared space approach.



Figure 2 Source: <https://www.yourwaterfront.co.nz/news-feed/2019/3/22/water-water-everywhere>

Insights into Action

Principle	Action
Having a vision	Weave play into all public spaces – from design to management.
Integrated planning	Work collaboratively with different stakeholders – urban design, housing developers, traffic engineers, parks planners, play advocates
Create space close to where people live	Prioritise play space for those in high density housing as a foundation for healthy and happy communities
Every space is a play space	Include a range of different play types in space development – water, movement, sound, green, artistic, observational, individual, group, bats and balls Allow a wide variety of places to be used for play
Consider a child’s perspective	Use play advocates to facilitate engagement with tamariki and rangatahi Value the way that children already use space

Further reading on play

[Insights #8](#) Child’s Play

[Insights #12](#) Equity and Leisure

[Insights #22](#) Wild Play

[Kids in the City](#)

[Urban play trail Ōtautahi](#)

References

¹ New Zealand: Urbanization from 2012 to 2022, accessed from <https://www.stataista.com/statistics/455899/urbanization-in-new-zealand>

² Migliani, A. (March 2020) Where Will the Children Play? How to Design Stimulating and Safe Cities for Childhood. accessed from <https://www.archdaily.com/934599/cities-for-play-how-to-design-stimulating-and-safe-cities-for-children>

³ Schindler, M. (22 January 2024) The problem with large-scale housing developments. Newsroom. Accessed from <https://newsroom.co.nz/2024/01/22/the-problem-with-large-scale-housing-developments/>

⁴ Soja, E. (2009) The city and spatial justice. *Spatial justice*, no. 01 September 2009, <http://www.jssi.org>.

⁵ Waka Kotahi and Sport New Zealand, alongside councils, regional sports trusts, Healthy Families NZ, and other organisations, have been working together since 2019 to support Play Streets in Aotearoa.

⁶ Case Study Jellicoe Street Auckland. Accessed from <https://globaldesigningcities.org/publication/global-street-design-guide/streets/special-conditions/post-industrial-revitalization/case-study-jellicoe-st-auckland-new-zealand/>