PLAYFUL CITIES

What we did

Public spaces and multiple crises

Parks, streets, squares, all our public spaces have been dramatically affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. These places were not considered safe enough and most of the countries worldwide implemented measures that restrict of forbid their usage. As a result, many of us ended up locked down in our homes in isolation or overcrowding, in situations that are very uncomfortable and unhealthy from many points of view.

> **Public spaces** are all places **publicly owned or of public use**, **accessible** and **enjoyable** by all for free and **without a profit motive.** Each public space has its own spatial, historic, environmental, social and economic features. (UN Habitat)

This has given rise to innovative interventions from the city government level but also individual citizens and community groups, in a move to make more public spaces available while allowing for social distancing. Opening up lanes or whole streets, previously used by cars, to pedestrians and cyclists has suddenly become possible in a short period, parking spaces have been transformed into pop-up gardens or café terraces, and people have transformed their street into a picnic space.

Fig 1: Signals of change: street closure in Madrid, informal appropriation of space in Milan

Our group decided to build on these developments and to look at the system of public space, in order to explore how they can make cities more resilient, especially in times of pandemic.

We wanted our system to focus on COVID-19 and multi-hazard responsive public spaces, through a number of policies and interventions, in order to achieve socially inclusive, better integrated, better connected, environmentally sustainable and safe public spaces.
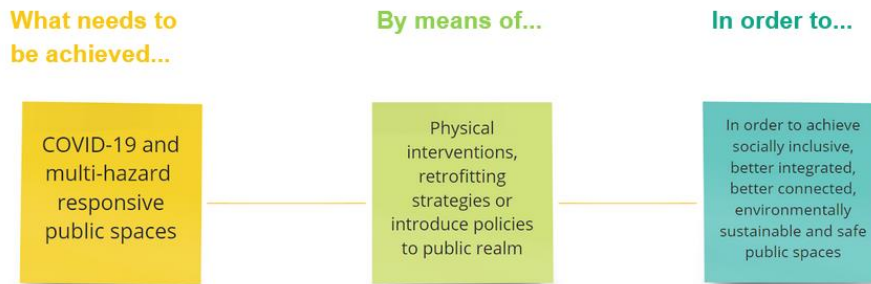
Our system statement

What needs to be achieved...	By means of...	In order to...
COVID-19 and multi-hazard responsive public spaces	Physical interventions, retrofitting strategies or introduce policies to public realm	In order to achieve socially inclusive, better integrated, better connected, environmentally sustainable and safe public spaces

Fig. 2: Our system statement

The key issues: underlying causes and lack of preparation

In many cities, public spaces are generally in short supply, unequally distributed across the city, or non-inclusive. The causes for this are manifold,and range from poor planning to lacking public finances to land pricing issues, while they all have in common that they stem from a dominance of short-term economic interest over long-term social and environmental benefits.

At the same time, it has become obvious during this crisis that neither city governments nor other decision-makers were prepared for public spaces to take on such a crucial and multi-faceted role and did not have any long-term plans or measures quick to implement ready when the COVID 19 crisis hit.


Fig.3: Multiple-cause diagram

Intervention

In order to change this, we chose to look at children and how to create good quality public spaces for them, so that all children would be able to play outdoors during a pandemic. This will ensure increased availability of space open to everyone; designed for the many; in proximity and well-connected to homes. It will also allow fast and flexible interventions in case needed.

Our goal: a city where all children can play outdoors during a pandemic

Studying our system in detail, we found out that in order to achieve our vision, we should focus on finding adequate financial resources to maintain the public realm and also enable local community to be involved in the regeneration process. For this very reason we felt most appropriate to act as the City Council who has more control over budget and planning processes.

Rather than focusing on one specific intervention, we identified a series of interlinked strategic actions that can enable the re-appropriation of public spaces in favor of kids and residents. We looked at ways to understand where to intervene, how to design and activate these places as well as how to monitor and sustain them over time financially.
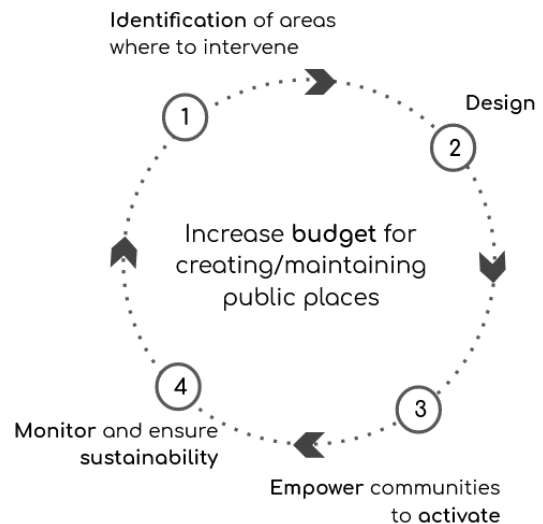
The first crucial step is **to identify areas where to intervene,** and this should be done in multiple ways: mapping of the status of the areas analyzing the demographic in their surrounding to a better understanding of how these areas are used both from a qualitative point of view (hearing the communities) and quantitative point of view (gathering real-time data).

After identifying where we are intervening, we will work on the **design of the projects**. We will combine both short-term and long-term options. During COVID, we have seen that things that in the past took long, such as creating more bike lanes have been rapidly rolled out. And so, we believe that combining tactical urbanism options with longer-term strategic interventions will support us to achieve our goal Participation is crucial to understand the needs of children. This is why we will organize workshops, children competitions and will use technology to involve kids.

We will follow an integrated approach considering green, water, energy, materials, and social elements as part of the design process.

This will not only be done in a way in which we can create spaces that will stimulate children and contribute to their well-being, but will also bring other co-benefits. For example, increasing green areas will help cooling cities down during heatwaves.

To truly place children in the heart of urban development and advocate for their rights, especially during pandemics, we need to **continuously empower the communities for participation** in all designed plans and actions. It all starts with raising awareness. All good initiatives should be first communicated to the entire community. This includes public debates on children needs during pandemics and various communication campaigns – such as information booths about freshly

established opportunities. Of course, actions should be targeted for each stakeholder group and we need to ensure strengthening connection with ALL community actors.

Local associations are ones who are advocating kids rights during pandemics, together with municipality actors, who could join forces for cross-sector initiatives during pandemics. Schools, even closed, could provide access to other services, such as wellbeing and recreation, and link with children goes through their parents who we should motivate for participation in district live.

Of course, in order to implement all this, we will need in parallel to **increase the budget available for play-friendly public spaces.**

We will do so by reorganizing the municipal budget to free up more money, raise funding from external sources, and seek contributions in kind from the community. This will allow us to have a combination of short- term and long-term funding which we will match with the appropriate measures.

To conclude, all of these interventions will allow us to work with the necessary stakeholders to achieve the child-friendly public spaces that the children in the video are dreaming of.

And in the long run, these will benefit everyone in the city, as we have seen, since these spaces will be easily accessible, everyone will be able to feel safe there and to feel ownership over these places. And importantly, they will function as a respite from a set of different hazards, not only in times of pandemic.

Key learning points

- o It is crucial to understand the big picture and the underlying causes even though it might look at first like it doesn't lead anywhere and causes some confusion. In the end, this is needed to focus on the interventions that matter and have more impact.
- o Any complex problem requires an integrated multi-disciplinary approach

Reflections from COVID 19 as a global crisis and learnings to make cities more resilient

- o just because a crisis exceeds what we can imagine, it doesn't mean it isn't going to happen- we need to prepare even for events we don't (want to) believe possible
- o crises exacerbate existing inequalities, that's why we need to account for this in our concrete resilience efforts and plans, and strive for more equal societies in general (which in turn will also be more resilient)
- o we need to learn from each other across the globe during times of global crises. Even though local contexts and cultures are different, there is a lot to learn from everyone (decision-makers in Western countries should be willing and open to learn from successful approaches in other parts of the world and not think that they know better necessarily).

Short bios

- o Lea Kleinenkuhnen is a project manager with Climate Alliance, a network of European cities working on climate change mitigation and adaptation. Based in Brussels, Belgium, Lea works with European cities and institutions in order to build capacities to adapt to climate change at the urban level.
- o Filippo Bazzoni is transport planner a Systematica, mobility engineering company based in Milan. Filippo works primarily on large master planning projects and urban regenerations, tackling issues related to walkability and cycling.