

Creating Child-Friendly Cities: The Case of Denver¹

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Abstract

Referencing the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child as the basis to make cities more supportive of children's needs, this paper discusses the emergence and characteristics of child-friendly cities. It then reviews the development of an initiative in Denver, Colorado, to become the Number One child-friendly city in the USA, and describes Learning Landscapes and Safe Routes to School as examples of community-based efforts currently underway. The conclusion draws lessons from the experience so far.

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Introduction

The planning and development of contemporary cities support first and foremost the production and consumption of goods and services. A further goal is efficient operation of auxiliary systems such as transportation, communication, and utility infrastructure. The primary beneficiaries are the chief producers and consumers: paid adult workers and the organizations that employ them. The needs of other groups take a back seat. This is especially so in market-based societies where access to goods and services is based on ability to pay a price that guarantees suppliers a profit. Those who cannot translate their needs into a market demand are largely left out. They include people with low disposable incomes (“the urban poor”), people with disabilities, many elders, and children. Among these disadvantaged groups, children deserve special attention because they, more than others, lack political and economic power.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted by the General Assembly in 1989,² created a basis to address this lack of representation. It spells out many rights of children, including the right “to have their voices heard in all matters affecting them.” State governments have a mandate to support implementation of CRC principles at the local level. Although most city governments have been slow to establish participatory processes with children and youth, there is a growing interest in many countries to promote “child-friendly cities” (CFCs). Following the Habitat II Summit in Istanbul in 1996, UNICEF established a CFC Secretariat as part of its Innocenti Research Centre in Florence, Italy. Although its operations were discontinued in December 2005 owing to a re-prioritization of funding, its web site remains and a CFC network in Europe now organizes an annual conference. Similar networks exist in Canada and Australia. Recent years have seen CFC declarations and aspirations from London to San Salvador and from St. Petersburg to Amman, and exciting CFC initiatives and programs are underway in many Latin American, African, and Asian countries.

As ever larger numbers of children live in cities worldwide, there is increasing acknowledgement that urban environments *per se* are not just sources of pollution and crime and generally undesirable places for growing up, but also provide opportunities for positive childhood experiences (Fischer 1984) and can be made into “nests” for healthy development (Pollowy 1977).³ The next section briefly discusses the importance of engineering in this regard.

Engineering and Child-Friendly Cities

Public health and quality of life are well recognized goals of municipal engineering, but there is rarely recognition that engineering decisions often impact children in different, more serious and longer-lasting ways than adults. Municipal engineers’ areas of responsibility are vital to children’s health, happiness, long-term development, and even survival: the provision of clean water, sanitation, drainage, waste collection and clean air; the types of energy used for cooking, heating and lighting; transportation planning; the siting of parks and open space; and human

² See: <http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm>.

³ For recent work on child-friendly city initiatives, see, for example, Bridgman (2004) and a special issue of *Children, Youth and Environments* on “Children and Local Governance” (2005), available on www.colorado.edu/journals/cye.

settlement upgrading. One of the goals of a CFC is to integrate awareness of young people's special needs into these areas of planning and practice.

The books *Cities for Children* (Bartlett et al. 1999) and *The Environment for Children* (Satterthwaite et al. 1996), commissioned by UNICEF, and *Children's Rights and the Physical Environment* (Bartlett 2002), commissioned by Save the Children Sweden, discuss these aspects of children's lives in detail, and how even the most cash-strapped municipal governments can orient their decision-making to better meet young people's needs. In the developing world, prioritizing the provision of adequate sanitation and clean water at affordable costs for all users will contribute to the survival and health of children in particular. Unsafe water and the lack of basic sanitation and hygiene contribute to the leading killers of children under five, including diarrhoeal diseases, pneumonia and undernutrition, with diarrhea alone claiming the lives of over 1.5 million young children a year (UNICEF 2006). In areas without indoor plumbing, constructing child-sized latrines close to housing improves health conditions for all ages, as young children cannot control themselves long enough to relieve themselves in a distant field or latrine, and they often fear using adult latrines. While the importance of clean, uncontaminated water for drinking is well understood, it is often less appreciated that the quantity of water available is as vital for households with children as its quality. Unless water is piped indoors or close to homes, mothers are unable to keep food, utensils, cooking surfaces, floors, diapers or children clean or easily cook fresh meals.

Research with older children indicates that the benefits of these provisions extend beyond physical health. When school-aged children and adolescents around the world talk about their environments, they view uncollected garbage, dilapidated streets and housing, and inadequate sanitation and water as reflections of their societies' lack of care for their own worth as well as for the place where they live, and they struggle to maintain personal cleanliness under even the most difficult conditions as a sign of self-respect (Chawla 2002). In addition, bringing piped water close to homes saves girls and boys hours of time fetching water from distant sources—time better spent in schoolwork, rest or recreation.

An area of municipal engineering that cuts across all income levels is transportation planning. When cities are planned for cars instead of people, children and youth are among the groups that are disadvantaged, along with the poor, the elderly, and the disabled. Like the other groups, they lose access to needed services and resources, or become dependent on their parents to drive them everywhere. In addition, they lose their historical freedom to use streets and sidewalks as their playground where they could meet friends, exercise, observe adult roles, and participate in the life of their community (Karsten and van Vliet 2006). Given young children's inability to judge the speed of moving vehicles and older children's risk taking and drive to explore as widely as possible, traffic accidents are the most serious cause of injury among children (Bartlett 2002). Parents may try to compensate by going outside with their children, but a Swiss study found that five-year-olds who were unable to play outside unaccompanied were less competent in their interactions with other children and more anxiously dependent on their mothers than others their age who could play outside freely, and their mothers were more nervous and overprotective (Hüttenmoser 1995). These are some of the reasons why Enrique Peñalosa, former mayor of Bogota, argues that the measure of a good city is that a child on a bicycle can go anywhere safely.

These examples from transportation and sanitation illustrate the importance of engineering to the safety, health and wellbeing of children growing up in cities. However, the role of engineering in the creation of CFCs must be seen in the context of other factors. This broader framework is captured by a provisional set of criteria, proposed to evaluate how well cities meet children's needs and to inform CFC policies and programs.⁴ According to these criteria, a CFC includes:

- A. *Physical environments* that respond to the particular needs and concerns of children – for instance, safe crossing zones on the way to school; safe play spaces; toilets that are child-friendly. Aspects of hospitals, schools, transport systems, traffic management, parks, common space, water supply, waste removal, and the like, that help to make cities more child friendly.
- B. *Information, communication and social mobilisation* to promote the concept of CFCs and raise awareness of children's requirements with regard to the physical environment.
- C. *Methods to involve children* in assessing and improving their own neighbourhoods and give them a voice in local decision-making processes.
- D. *Plans of action* with and without the participation of children that aim at improving children's physical environments
- E. *Training packages/ methodologies* for different target groups (decision makers, planners, schoolteachers, parents, children, etc) focused on making improvements of children's physical environments
- F. *Laws, rules, regulations and planning norms* that take children's needs and views into account.
- G. *Municipal-level institutions* focused on children's rights (a special child unit or person within a municipality such as a children's ombudsman).
- H. *Monitoring systems* to assess the quality of the environment for children
- I. *Planning and impact indicators* to evaluate impacts of municipal or community actions on children.

These criteria are broadly derived from rights articulated in the CRC. The United States is one of only two countries not to have ratified this convention.⁵ However, nothing prevents city governments from implementing its principles at the local level. The remainder of this paper describes an initiative to do this in the City of Denver, Colorado.

Denver's Child & Youth Friendly City Initiative (CYFC)

In January 2006, the Children, Youth and Environments Center at the University of Colorado proposed to the Mayor's Office for Education and Children to make Denver the number one CFC in the country (see photo 1).

Photo 1: Denver, #1 Child-Friendly City

⁴ Unpublished document, 2003, Eliana Riggio Chaudhuri and Eva Clarhäll, Rädna Barnen/CFC Secretariat, Innocenti Research Centre, UNICEF, Florence, Italy.

⁵ The other country is Somalia, which lacks an officially recognized government capable of treaty ratification.



The proposal was met with an enthusiastic response from the executive director of the Mayor's Office for Education and Children, who suggested bringing in Assets for Colorado Youth (ACY), a nonprofit organization focused on positive youth development, based on creating opportunities for developing strengths (rather than accentuating negatives like substance abuse and delinquency). A series of preparatory meetings led up to the launch of Denver's Child & Youth Friendly City Initiative⁶ on June 13, 2006, with presentations by the mayor, the superintendent of schools, and the university chancellor, among others, and leaders from more than 60 organizations present.

With major stakeholders aboard, the orientation of the Initiative shifted from persuasion to implementation, based on the following principles:

- Developing an inclusive, participatory process that is representative of all stakeholders
- Supporting meaningful participation by children and youth
- Leveraging and building upon existing resources
- Aiming for a change of culture and systems
- Creating a city full of child and youth friendly places
- Focusing on the specific needs of children and youth based on the continuum of healthy development

⁶ The term Child & Youth Friendly City (CYFC) was chosen to reflect a concern with the needs of a wider age group, roughly the first two decades of life.

Next, stakeholders developed an organizational structure for implementation of the Initiative.

Structure of CYFC. The organizational structure of Denver’s CYFC Initiative aims to harness the potential of the city on behalf of children and youth by providing an integrated response and mobilizing resources to meet those needs. A critical component of CFCs is the opportunity for children and youth to participate in decision-making processes on matters that affect their lives. Therefore, the CYFC organizational structure was designed to include young people’s voices as a driving force for the Initiative, while at the same time accommodating the key support roles of adults in effective adult-youth partnerships.

The Initiative recognized early on that adult-youth partnerships require extensive training and reflection processes to be effective. Involving youth meaningfully takes time, and early merging of adults and youth into one entity was not in the best interest of the Initiative during its initial phases. To begin, no youth were aware of CYFC, and it took time and resources to mobilize them and build their capacities for participation. Second, while many adults involved in the Initiative represent youth organizations or entities interested in youth issues, not all of them were adequately prepared to support youth participation.

Therefore, the organizational structure for Denver’s CYFC Initiative includes a parallel combination of adult and youth groups that work to develop the unique skills and capacities they need. The resulting structure comprises:

- 1) an Executive Committee;
- 2) an Adult Steering Committee;
- 3) a Youth Steering Committee;
- 4) Subcommittees; and
- 5) the CYFC Coalition.

The Executive Committee includes representatives from the three founding organizations: the Mayor’s Office for Education and Children, Assets for Colorado Youth, and the Children, Youth and Environments Center at the University of Colorado. Its seven members include public officials, youth development specialists and academics. The Executive Committee began the CYFC Initiative and mobilized key stakeholders early on. It helps to coordinate and conceptualize the overall Initiative, recruits stakeholders, and addresses matters that require a timely response. It will soon involve representation from the Youth Steering Committee. The main decision-making bodies for the Initiative are the CYFC Adult Steering Committee and the CYFC Youth Steering Committee. Each Steering Committee meets separately. Adult leaders facilitate communication and coordination between the two groups and ensure that input from the Youth Steering Committee is critical in directing the Initiative. After further training in adult-youth partnerships, both groups will merge into one.

The Adult Steering Committees consist of 30 members, including the Executive Committee, Chairs of the CYFC Subcommittees, and representatives from key stakeholder organizations within the City of Denver (e.g., Denver business community, City Planning Department, and Denver Public Schools). Through monthly meetings the Adult Steering Committee guides and

supports the Initiative by linking it to human and financial resources, representing the CYFC Subcommittees, and providing new insights and opportunities for the Initiative.

The Youth Steering Committee consists of 20 members aged 9 to 19, recruited from youth organizations, schools and CYFC stakeholder networks. It meets weekly and is the primary youth decision-making entity, voice and leadership for the Initiative. It provides a vision for the Initiative grounded in the real lives of the young people.

The CYFC Subcommittees meet bi-monthly and focus on specific themes and tangible projects. There are four adult- and youth-led subcommittees that focus on a parallel topic or theme, and two adult-led subcommittees that do not yet have a youth equivalent. Chairs and Co-Chairs report to and participate in the Adult and Youth Steering Committees. The youth-led subcommittees also receive technical assistance and training in skills.

Finally, to keep all stakeholders involved in and informed about the CYFC Initiative, as well as to recruit additional stakeholders, the Initiative hosts quarterly coalition meetings during non-school hours that are open to the public.

Child-Friendly Change, Example 1: Learning Landscapes. Denver's Learning Landscapes provide an excellent model for creating city-wide child/youth friendly outdoor play environments. Since 1998, the Learning Landscape Initiative has transformed 46 neglected Denver elementary school yards into attractive and safe multi-use resources that are tailored to the needs and desires of local communities. These school yards serve more than 18,000 low-income children (of whom over 50% qualify for free and reduced-cost lunch programs). The Learning Landscapes, which represent an investment of more than \$20 million, have been sponsored by a broad-based public-private partnership and directed by faculty and students from the Department of Landscape Architecture at the University of Colorado. With a budget of approximately \$450,000 per school yard, the University works with school officials, teachers, students and community members to design new school yards that respond to the culture and aesthetic tastes of neighborhood residents and the developmental needs of children. In 2003, Denver city voters passed a \$10 million bond to continue funding the Learning Landscapes. Plans for renovating the remaining Denver school yards are underway.

Prior to the Learning Landscape Initiative, school yards within the Denver Public School (DPS) system were on average 50 years old and suffered neglect for many years. In 2000, 75 of the DPS elementary school yards were identified as requiring moderate to extensive renovation to meet standards. Those most in disrepair were in inner-city, high poverty areas. They consisted of hard play surfaces such as gravel or concrete, were devoid of plant life, and had limited play equipment. School yards at these schools were considered "one-size-fits-all," with younger children often using equipment intended for older children.

The Learning Landscapes transform these rundown school yards by implementing three complementary goals. First, they support children's healthy development, encourage outdoor play and learning, offer socialization tools, and improve opportunities for physical activity. Second, they create multi-generational spaces for outdoor use by all members of the community. Learning Landscapes are designed to support different activities for users of all ages. They are

also open to the community for public use before and after school, and on weekends. Third, Learning Landscapes form aesthetically pleasing focal points for the community by creating places that reflect the uniqueness of their location and users. More broadly, Learning Landscapes reconnect schools to their communities by facilitating community use and thus sense of ownership of the school yards. Each Learning Landscape includes the following design elements:

- Community gateways
- Shady places
- Common areas for gathering
- Natural, wild and cultivated gardens
- Outdoor art
- Improved multi-purpose fields
- Improved hard surface games and educational elements
- Developmentally appropriate play equipment with improved accessibility and safety
- Creative play elements

Photos 2 to 4 show the dramatic changes in an elementary school ground before, during and after modification.

Photo 2: A view of the pre-existing condition at Columbian elementary



Photo 3: A view of the water harvest garden at Columbian elementary before a volunteer planting – 2003



Photo 4: A view of garden now – 2006



Child-Friendly Change, Example 2: Safe Routes to School. For children to be able to access and use well-designed public play spaces, such as the Learning Landscapes, they must be able to travel safely within their neighborhood. Consistent with trends in other countries, the percentage of children walking or biking to school in the US has declined dramatically in recent decades, from 42% in 1969 to 13% today (5-15 age group; see also Osborne 2005). In response to the need for safe routes to walk and bike to school and to improve overall neighborhood safety, the Children, Youth and Environments Center (CYE) is designing and implementing a “safe routes to school” program for the City of Denver. It aims (1) to provide children, parents, and other community stakeholders with a process for communicating neighborhood safety concerns; and (2) to address these concerns through a community-based approach tailored to the needs of specific neighborhoods.

Using a web- and interview-based audit method, CYE is conducting comprehensive safe routes assessments in Denver neighborhoods. The approach helps parents, law enforcement personnel, city planners, parks managers, school administrators and others to evaluate and address risks identified by children themselves. Research shows that children can articulate their concerns about their local environment if provided with the appropriate tools and techniques (Boyden and Ennew 1997; Corey 1953; Dallape and Gilbert 1994; Hart 1997). The Denver approach for creating safe routes to school integrates children’s neighborhood concerns into a broader framework of data and analysis about the physical and social character of the routes to and from school. A Safe Routes Planning Team, representative of neighborhood stakeholders, will assist in implementing educational, engineering, and enforcement changes based on the priorities identified by children and other stakeholders.

Lessons Learned

Critical self-reflection is an important element in Denver’s Child & Youth Friendly City Initiative. Meetings routinely include time to assess actions undertaken since the last meeting. These assessments offer opportunities to learn from experience. Things that went well and other things that did not go well both offer lessons that are used to inform and guide future work. Some of these lessons are specific to Denver, but others are more general and may hold value for child-friendly efforts in other cities, including:

- *Building partnerships was critical* for the Initiative to even begin. Reorienting municipal decisions to make children’s health and well-being a priority takes broad-based collaboration, including leadership from the top, from the mayor’s office down; nonprofit organizations; research networks; community-based organizations; youth-oriented organizations; the business community, and the like. Developing a citywide coalition helps develop political support and increases access to funding. Consistent with this spirit of partnership, the Initiative is different from a *youth-driven* or *youth-led*

approach, and has adopted as its slogan: "A City that is Friendly to Children and Youth is a City that is Friendly to All."

- *The process is as important as the product.* Adults involved in the Initiative often have a wealth of experience and expertise. They may be tempted to apply these assets efficiently to attain agreed-upon goals. Although outcomes are important to youth as well, it is *also* important for them to be able to engage with the Initiative in meaningful ways. Their involvement in the process makes them feel more invested in the results, provides important experiences with local democratic practices, and promotes retention of youth participants.
- *The process takes time.* Working with children and youth makes urban development and planning more complex and time consuming. Developing and honing skills in problem identification, gathering information, and presenting at public meetings all take time and create a process that is different for youth and adults. Operating on parallel but separate tracks potentially engenders misunderstandings, accentuating the need for training of adults and youth in partnership work.

To maintain the momentum of Denver's Child & Youth Friendly City Initiative, it will become increasingly important to establish and operationalize clear benchmarks that can demonstrate progress towards the overall goal of making Denver the Number One Child-Friendly City in the United States. Although any such claim will necessarily be political and contestable, it helps mobilize city resources for children and youth in more strategic ways that are more targeted and better coordinated than ad hoc programs and projects.

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