

# Street Children and the Right to Public Space

## Towards an Inclusive Urban Design and Planning

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*“The fact is that the phenomenon of street children is global and escalating. Poverty, family disintegration due to health or death, neglect, abuse or abandonment and social unrest are all common triggers for a child’s life on the streets.” (Boer-Buquicchio, 2007)*

*“First, and most importantly, it should be emphasized that street children are, in fact, children! Child behaviors like playing with toys, crying, and sucking of thumbs, for example, are likely to go unnoticed amongst routine “adult” activities ...” (Kilbride, et al 2001)*

## Introduction

This paper explores the lives of children residing and working on the streets, and draws from in-depth studies of street children from several countries revealing valuable information about their perceptions and experiences of their urban environment. Child poverty is no longer confined to international geographical boundaries, as the situation of street children evidently demonstrates. Street children are a global phenomenon, common to most cities of the world - even the most affluent cities of developed countries. According to United Nations’ estimates, there are currently more than 150 million street children worldwide and their numbers are increasing at an astounding pace (Boer-Buquicchio, 2007). Table 1 shows the approximate breakdown in Africa, America, Asia, and Europe. It is therefore not surprising that street children are becoming increasingly noticeable in cities and in public spaces. The United Nations has defined the term “street children” to include “any boy or girl ... for whom the street in the widest sense of the word ... has become his or her habitual abode and/or source of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected, supervised, or directed by responsible adults” (Inter-NGO Forum, 1985).

F.1

Estimates of  
population of street  
children

Region	Population (million)	Street Children (million)
Africa	973	32
Asia	4,054	30
Europe	732	25
North America*	443	4
Latin America	577	50

Note: Estimates based on reports by WHO, UNICEF, UNEP, and Casa Alianza in 2008.

\*North America includes United States, Canada, and Mexico

What are the factors that force children to live and work in streets? Many kinds of explanations can be offered for this complex phenomenon: structural, such as poverty and parental unemployment; social, such as large families and lack of support from family or state; economic, such as migration from rural to urban areas; or psychological, such as parental abuse and neglect, family conflict, or children's reaction to unstable and broken families (Consortium for Street Children, 2004). Street children live in obscure open spaces, parks, abandoned and empty buildings, or buildings under construction. Many street children stay in touch with their families and work on the streets to augment their household income, while others have run away from home in response to psychological or physical abuse. The majority is male, but the number of females is increasing steadily (UNICEF, 2005). Although girls on the street face a different set of problems, this paper will not examine gender differences. What is crucial is that once on the street, children become susceptible to different kinds of exploitation, mostly by adults, including law enforcement agencies and other authorities.

Street children are frequent victims of human rights violations and they are invariably marginalized and abused. Traditionally, Human Rights Watch has stressed compliance with civil and political rights but not specifically with economic and social rights, which include the right to basic education, shelter, and healthcare (UNICEF, 2005). Due to this shortcoming, street children have not been able to fully benefit from the enforcement of civil and political rights.

In today's global economy, street children represent an international phenomenon; many similarities exist between street children in various countries and cultures. Although their presence is readily visible, as street children live and work on the streets and public spaces of cities around the world, they are paradoxically "invisible" as they are deprived of vital services, such as education and health care, and are the most difficult to protect (UNICEF, 2005).

Given the seriousness of this issue, a human rights-based approach is the only way to address the predicament of street children. The Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989 and endorsed by 192 countries. This convention unequivocally stressed that street children's protection, development, and access to basic necessities for survival can no longer be regarded merely as altruistic concerns, but rather as essential issues of legal, ethical, and moral obligation (UNICEF, 2005).

This UNICEF perspective is revealing as far as children and public space are concerned. Children in general are not always welcome in the public spaces of contemporary cities. Street children in particular are often demonized and regarded as a potential threat to the sanitized urban environment, and ultimately find themselves completely excluded from essential services and protection.

## The Privatization of Public Space

We are currently witnessing an erosion of public space, which is a direct and predictable outcome of the commercialization of the public realm—a manifestation of the growing tendency to commodify everyday life. The privatization of public space for commercial profit-making is the major motivating force for the increasing exclusion of children and youth (Giroux, 1998). As a result, time-honored public spaces, such as squares, alleys, and streets, are becoming inaccessible or inhospitable to children. These places have succumbed to growing commercial pressures and are being transformed with little or no thought given to the community's need for gathering and cultural exchange.

Mitchell (2003) has likened this trend to a conscious "annihilation of space by law," as "anti-homeless laws and the shrinking landscape of rights" in the United States and many other countries where there is little concern for the economically deprived population. The commercialization and privatization of social life have profound consequences for children, and undermine the current

generation's sense of ownership of public spaces and their commitment to contribute to the public realm. Street children have a few more strikes against them. Not only are they excluded from public space because they are predominantly minors, they are also marginalized because they are homeless and exhibit so-called "deviant behavior" (Young, 2003). Without an inclusive strategy for the design, planning, and management of public space, the problems these children face will grow rather than diminish.

Public space, by definition, is inclusive, democratic and inviting; and these central principles must be extended to include street children. In fact, cities should be consciously planned to be inclusive and responsive to street children as a social group, and should recognize them as responsible individuals who belong to a productive community (Christensen and O'Brien, 2003). Furthermore, the design, development and management of public space must be based on free dialogue about its use or adaptability to various public functions; methodologies for encouraging the active participation of street children based on an understanding of the childhood domain are an indispensable part of this process (Ataöv and Haider, 2006).

Despite the recent surge of concern about children's poverty throughout the world, the childhood domain is demonstrably missing in the study of the built environment and public sphere and street children continue to be ignored in the planning of public places. The design and planning disciplines have yet to recognize childhood as a distinct and critical phase of life and it is not surprising that street children are either overlooked or are conspicuously absent in critical scholarship regarding architecture, planning and the environment. Another reason for the ignoring of street children is the increasing commodification of social life, which is undermining or substantially reducing childhood as a distinctive phase, since children are consistently expected, if not coerced, to behave like adults (Valentine, 2003). Given the complex nature of their problems, an investigation of the relationships street children have as social actors with the street context and their work based on everyday interactions with space, place and nature - could yield productive results.

## The Global City

Street children are commonly regarded as a separate and socially discrete group, but this description is an oversimplification of the street children phenomenon. A comprehensive study of street children in Kenya by Kilbride, Suda and Njeru (2001) reinforced the

notion that street children depend on institutions, cultural beliefs, work habits, and family dynamics similar to those of the urban poor. This finding does not indicate that street children do not manifest distinctive characteristics, but that their exclusion from public space is not unlike that of other socially deprived urban groups.

Notwithstanding its advanced economic development, the United States has its share of poverty and homelessness and what is particularly disturbing is that a majority of the poor and homeless are teenagers and children who live and/or work on the street; moreover, one in four homeless persons in the United States is a child (The National Center on Family Homelessness, 2002). Despite these alarming and disconcerting statistics, street children remain undetectable to society. In fact, new laws against the presence of the homeless in public space continue to be enacted (Mitchell, 2003).

In Europe, every city has street children, and recently they have become much more conspicuous. However, little dependable demographic information exists on street children--making it difficult to fully understand the enormity of the problem and developing effective policies to help them (Council of Europe, 2010). There is also a general tendency to ignore these children despite their visible presence on the streets because it is easier to blame street children for the ills they face, rather than view them as a policy or societal failure. In 2008, one of the Plenary Sessions of The Child in the City Congress called for the social reintegration of street children and emphasized the fact that they are a critical part of the challenge of building child-friendly cities (Council of Europe, 2008). It goes without saying that the design of public space is crucial to the concept of child-friendly cities. At the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the European Federation of Street Children (EFSC) underscored several issues pertaining to street children. The EFSC (2009) emphasized the need for education and healthcare and defense from human trafficking, prostitution, drugs, and crime as critical issues and made an impassioned plea "for the protection from criminalization of street children." In addition, the EFSC emphasized the need for a viable partnership of public and private effort to effectively address the issue of street children.

Worldwide, new policies and laws are based on the premise that the homeless are a threat to public life; but the reality is that the presence of street children challenges the established artificial hierarchy of the public domain. As Hecht (1998) states in a study of Brazilian street children: "Brazil's street children challenge the hierarchical worlds of home and school and threaten the commercialized 'public' space

such as stores and shopping centers.” This attitude applies to all kinds of public spaces, including urban squares and streets. Historically, streets have contributed to the public realm by providing engaging play spaces for all ages. Valentine (2004) has argued persuasively that the current tendency to withdraw from the street has negative consequences for children because it reinforces the idea that streets are exclusively designed for adults, while children are not welcome if they are unaccompanied by adults. This notion severely limits children’s mobility in public space and has a devastating impact on street children who depend on the street for their survival.

Young (2003) has examined street children’s imaginative use of the urban environment in Kampala, Uganda, and believes that their relationship to the street is an intrinsic aspect of their identity. Focusing on these interactions is critical in understanding how street children create unique socio-spatial relationships and determine viable survival strategies. Thus street children have a lot to contribute to our understanding of children’s spatial mobility; empowering them and enabling them to participate in discussions of public space can accomplish a great deal by creating more responsive planning and design strategies.

Based on her research on street children in Delhi, India, O’Kane (2003) argues that participation empowers children and encourages them to voice their feelings on their unique street experiences, thereby becoming advocates for their own rights and challenging the current state of affairs. The participation of children in the decision-making process can also stimulate adults in the community to become involved and sensitize them to the plight of street children. O’Kane suggests that while the childhood domain is influenced by the social, political, and cultural context, childhood should be recognized as a “social construction,” with children as active agents in the resolution and construction of their own lives. Thus street children’s views and perspectives are crucial in understanding their problems, as well as their interactions in public space.

The United Nations study, “Play experiences of children living and working on the streets,” focused on a group of four hundred children working and living on the streets in six Turkish metropolitan cities (Tas et al, 2001). Figure 2 graphically shows the cities included in this study. The phenomenon of street children in Turkish cities is not new and efforts to “resolve” the problem date back to the 1940s. However, street children have received more attention in the last decade due to negative publicity and growing public awareness. In the

recent past, street children have gained further notoriety because they have been identified as a “social threat.” The appalling condition of these children has drawn some national and international institutions to study the children’s experiences on the streets and find solutions to their problems. The study was critical of the government’s policy of protecting the residents of the community rather than the children. This attitude manifested itself in new urban revitalization strategies that were singularly designed to keep street children out of certain neighborhoods. For example, in the Cihangir historic residential area in Istanbul, gated communities were proposed to prevent access of the “undesirables,” which explicitly include street children. In addition to the lack of basic needs, such as personal hygiene and education, “play” or lack thereof was identified as one of the significant issues of the street experience. More than seventy-five percent of the working children could not play due to lack of time.

**CHILDREN WORKING ON THE STREET**

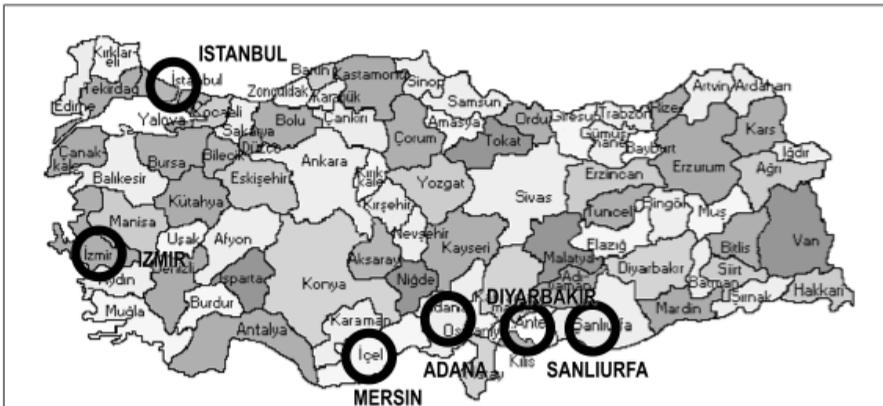
Children who contribute to the household income, who gradually receive little or no support from their families or adults, and who return home at the end of the day (Ennew, 1998)

**CHILDREN LIVING ON THE STREET**

Children who live away from their families, who actually live on streets (vacant land, buildings, etc.) and who do not receive any supervision, protection, and guidance from responsible adults (Ennew, 1998)

F. 2

Map showing six Turkish cities involved in the UN study



These studies highlight the negative effects of excluding children from urban space and ignoring their unique needs. For the urban designer, this finding should accentuate the importance of empowering street children in the design and planning of public space, in conjunction with the involvement of the community, to understand and respond to their needs. This can only be achieved by the children’s active and organized participation in the decision-making process

through participatory methodologies that focus on engaging street children beyond pure tokenism.

## Street Children In Lahore

Once a thriving Mughal capital, the historic city of Lahore was radically changed by the British to a modern metropolis adjacent to the old Walled City in response to the new emerging needs for governance. In his book *Making Lahore Modern* (2008), William J. Glover argues that the colonial history of the city brings up the question of cultural difference. His assertion that colonial urbanism was not simply imposed, but was instead an outcome of co-operation between the locals and the colonizer is questionable. However, the legacy of the collaboration between the local elite and the British certainly continues to affect urbanism even today. It continues to guide Lahore's overall planning and urban design approach of denying the universal right to public space. The plight of street children should be viewed in conjunction with the exclusion of most major groups of locals from public spaces and amenities in the colonial city. In addition to the many excruciating problems confronted by street children in many other parts of the world, Pakistan's colonial legacy also colors the way we treat street children. The notion that all citizens have certain rights --including the right to the city and its public spaces -- is completely trumped by illiteracy, greed, rampant privatization, and profit motives.

Aggravating this accumulation by dispossession thrust upon the least well-off is the voracity that seeks to colonize space for the affluent (Harvey 2008). In this urban milieu, it is astonishing, if not utterly absurd, to consistently see bad copies of mega-urban structures found in Abu-Dhabi, Dubai and elsewhere in the Middle East, as well as in the Western World. Alraouf (2006) describes "Dubaiization" as a process whereby cities in the Middle East lose their original identity and character. He argues, most cogently, that Dubai represents a model based essentially on branded images and icons that are not sustainable even in presently rich Middle Eastern countries (Alraouf 2011). The ever-growing world of shopping malls, fast food diners, parking lots, backyards, multiplex theaters, and amusement parks represents the most socially unjust and wasteful development in Lahore and in other Pakistani cities. Ironically, these new developments do not provide adequate or suitable employment to the most needy segments of society, including street children. Meanwhile, the number of street children in Lahore -- children who live on the street to beg, work, or hangout -- is increasing rapidly and urban areas lack the necessary infrastructure to support the increasing population.

Estimates of street children in Pakistan are non-existent and the issue is further compounded because many children who use streets live or operate from off street locations where they are subject to gross maltreatment and abuse by authorities or police. The majority are boys, but a significant number are girls, who face even worse conditions. These children engage in a wide range of occupations such as selling newspapers or flowers, picking garbage, shoe shining, begging, soliciting customers for sex, in the form of bonded labor, living in abandoned buildings, wastelands, obscure sidewalks, and alleys. While issues of health and disease among street children is beyond the scope of this paper, a study conducted by The Azad Foundation in Pakistan titled, "Street Children In Pakistan: A group at risk for HIV/AIDS", reveals extremely disturbing facts about the sexual behavior of street children that requires urgent attention -- it is a ticking time bomb that can potentially play havoc with the entire population. Iqbal (2008) discusses the reasons for leaving home identified by street children in Lahore, which include broken homes, domestic violence, extreme poverty, parental remarriage, and drug abuse by parents. It is worthwhile to note that the more street children are alienated from their families, the more likely they are to take risks and engage in antisocial behavior. The nature of neighborhood and public spaces, as well as contextual social issues such as poverty, unemployment, inadequate law and order and corruption have a profound effect on street children (Benitez 2007).

Over the years, a few small organizations have focused on the rehabilitation of street children in Lahore. Some NGO's (such as Insaan Foundation Trust and The Azad Foundation) offer limited assistance to street children during the day, but not during the night, when these children are most susceptible to dangerous situations and abuse (Zia 2006). Given the scale of the problem, which is likely to grow exponentially in the future, it is surprising that the authorities have completely ignored street children. It is even more surprising that this problem is not even acknowledged by various professionals, including engineers, architects, and planners who deal with public space. It is indeed appalling that professional educational institutions that consistently deal with the design, planning, and management of the environment, remain ignorant of the plight of street children and their right to public places. Educational institutions can play a pivotal role in creating necessary awareness by addressing the concerns of street children through service projects or courses in architecture or planning schools.

A concerted effort is required at both national and city levels to

develop viable strategies to address critical issues street children face on a daily basis. These strategies must recognize the right and need of street children to occupy public space for their survival. Establishing shelters that provide basic health and education and are easily accessible from streets or public spaces where street children seek their livelihood is crucial to pull these children out of the dangerously exploitative and sometimes criminal world in which they have become entangled (Zia 2006). Why is it necessary to focus our attention on street children in Lahore? Of course, compassion for these innocent children who have involuntarily lost their childhood and dwell in subhuman conditions comes to mind. It needs to be said, however, that the hefty price the city and the society at large will eventually pay by ignoring this problem is undeniably consequential and could affect each and every one in the community in profound ways.

### Street Life and Public Policy

The foregoing studies, especially the Turkish and Pakistani studies, clearly indicate that the dilemma of street children cannot be isolated from its setting - that is, the street. Ataöv and Haider (2006) have

F.3  
Reflections based on  
UN studies



used the Turkish study sponsored by the United Nations to critically examine the participation and empowerment of street children in the context of urban space. The study aimed at empowering the children

to articulate their problems and seek solutions for themselves. Like many other studies worldwide, this study highlighted the risks - crime, drug use, physical and sexual abuse, beating, robbery, rape, trading in children, and theft - that children who live and work on the streets consistently encounter. These risks increase exponentially when children have to spend the night on the street. In response, their instinct for survival compels them to use public space in deliberately specific ways, as they confine themselves to crowded areas, such as sidewalks and squares, and try to stick together.

According to the studies, the key aspects of the street experience that appealed to children living and working there related to environmental elements that had meaning in their everyday lives. Three quarters of the children's responses to a targeted survey in the Turkish study revolved around people in their lives (adults, police officers, guards in the police station, and other children), natural elements and animals (forests, trees, natural settings, and dogs), and physical elements (living spaces, such as hollow trees, vacant houses, construction sites, working spaces, other reference points such as police stations, and vehicles, including cars and ambulances). The study concluded that these findings allow insights into social policy and have substantial implications for the design, planning, and management of public space.

The policy of most governments is to treat street children in the same way as foster children, and excessive emphasis is placed on returning the street children to their original families. Consequently, these children are forced to or choose to live and work on the streets, as they have either run away from their families due to an abusive or dysfunctional home environment or find street life rewarding in itself because it potentially enhances their independence, self-confidence, and identity in the community.

## Conclusion

The commonality of issues confronted by street children in various cultures offers valuable insights into their plight and bolsters the need to reclaim the public realm for all children. Despite socio-cultural differences among the various examples cited in this paper, there are universal lessons to be learned that can help us focus on the critical needs of street children, vis-à-vis public space and generate viable design, planning, and management guidelines.

Admittedly, the phenomenon of street children is extremely

complex and needs to be addressed at the policy level; however, a substantive study of street children's lives and experiences also has concrete and practical implications for planning and management strategies of public space. The problem of street children cannot be isolated from its context -- that is, the street -- and while it is worthwhile to encourage families to act upon their responsibilities for their children, the holistic wellbeing and the future of street children are of paramount importance. Providing public or private educational opportunities for street children would help them become integrated into their communities. In addition to helping street children lead a healthy and drug-free lifestyle, they should be considered important social actors in the planning of public space and urban recreational activities.

These studies unequivocally indicate that policy-makers must acknowledge children who make their lives on the urban street. Planning and design of public spaces must accept this cardinal reality as a point of departure. Organizations interested in child poverty and street children's issues need to develop perceptive strategies that encourage communication and the active participation of street children in design and planning processes. Successful methodologies for children's participation must go beyond tokenism and engage street children by genuinely empowering them as independent social actors who have human rights. Without a significant change in our attitude, inclusive planning and design strategies could remain an elusive dream.

The consequences of this plan for street children are substantial and transformative, but the agenda that emerges is by no means modest. Such a comprehensive and democratic framework would begin to sensitize the community, including law enforcement agencies, to the sad plight of street children and to society's responsibility to accept them as productive citizens. This framework could subsequently lead to insightful strategies for public space and become a catalyst for developing a new genre of socio-spatial concepts to cater to the growing number of street children in modern cities throughout the world, including Lahore. Finally, this inclusive approach could trigger a humane and imaginative way of thinking about the dilemma of street children - so that a new kind of policy formation and implementation strategy emerges in the foreseeable future.

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