



**3rd International Conference
on Public Policy (ICPP3)
June 28-30, 2017 – Singapore**

Panel T08P09

Critical Policy Perspectives in Asia

**Neoliberalism, play and childhood: The politics over public spaces
in urban India**

Author(s)

Harsh Mittal, Navdeep Mathur, Deepak Maun

Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad,

India,

harshm@iima.ac.in

Date of presentation

Wednesday, June 28th 16:15 to 18:15 (Block B 1 - 1)

This is the first draft of paper. Please do not cite without author's permission

Neoliberalism, play and childhood: The politics over public spaces in urban India

Abstract

In this paper, we use Lefebvre's (1991) theory of 'production of urban space' to present a socio-spatial theoretical framework for examining the play practices of children. Through our observations on contestation around access to playgrounds and other open spaces, as well as children's use of space in the city of Ahmedabad, we unpack the social relations crucial to the production of play spaces. We conceptualise how neoliberal rationality acts against the diverse everyday uses of public spaces, guided by planner's '*representations of spaces*' (McCann, 1999) and thus works to kill the 'lived space' (Lefebvre, 1991) of childhood.

Keywords: Lefebvre urban space, unstructured play, neoliberal rationality

Introduction

In December 2016, residents of more than 30 residential apartments in the Bodakdev¹ area joined hands to protest against the encroachment of an open space by Nirma School, a posh school run by one of the top business houses of the state. In 2003, the school had requested the city authorities to allow usage of an adjacent open space as a playground during the school hours but slowly, this area was enclosed by building a boundary wall. In the after-school hours, the school, including the playground premises used to be locked, with security guards positioned to restrict the entry of general public. The residents of the locality mobilized themselves to fight for the

¹ Bodakdev is an upmarket residential area in the city of Ahmedabad in Western India.

playground to be made available for public use after school hours, as was mandated by the contracts signed between AUDA² and schools of the city who had made similar requests. A series of protests were organised, inviting participation of residents from neighbouring societies, which were covered in the local media. This mobilization against Nirma School was the first in a series of protests against similar practices being followed by other schools. Following protests, Public Interest Litigations (PIL) have been filed in the Gujarat High Court against few schools, among which at least two have witnessed interim judgements indicting schools of flouting the contract norms.

The news coverage of the above protests relating to access to playgrounds captured our attention, as we were already pursuing research on play practices in the city. When we inquired the matter through site-visits and interviews of the residents, we heard a concern for diminishing spaces of play for children in the city. The residents of Bodakdev cited multiple reasons for their participation and support to protest. This included the concern for diminishing open spaces for their children's play. The increasing volume of traffic on streets, in view of residents, made it unsafe for children to play or even cross the street independently. They express anxieties on vanishing open plots of land that are being converted into buildings and acts of land-grabbing such as one by Nirma School. These narratives hinted to us possible conduits of change in social construction of urban space from the perspective of its suitability to outdoor play of children.

Our research on play spaces of children was inspired by our reflections on our own past experiences. We observed the loss of spaces with which we have attached 'use value' (Lefebvre,

² Ahmedabad Urban Development Authority

1991) of play in our childhood. We find that those streets no longer have children playing while there is heavy movement of motorized vehicles. Some of those open grounds have been converted into commercial buildings and gated green parks with restriction on playing ball games. We interpret this as a shift from the 'use-value' derived by the residents from these spaces to an 'exchange-value' derived from 'beautification' and aesthetics gained by control of social activity in these spaces.

The inquiry in this paper advances our concerns, as well those expressed to us by residents of Bodakdev, through an examination of the processes of production of urban play spaces from a socio-spatial theoretical approach. We focus on the act of unstructured outdoor play of children that happens without the provision of (or requirement of) a specific kind of place for it. Unstructured play includes all play activities that children get involved in for the joy they derive from it. The act is understood as unstructured, when it takes place through a democratic participation of children without supervision and interference from adults. The structure of the game, the rules of the play, and the social interactions during the play are all initiated and designed by children themselves (Weininger, 1972). The unstructured use of space by participants is realized through diverse 'representational spaces' (Lefebvre, 1991) (the term is explained in next section) and is mediated via democratic social participation. As an ideal-type, the act is not contingent on the participants being driven by rationality of any higher order, for example, gains such as improving fitness or improving cognition etc., though these are inevitable but unconscious outcomes of these acts.

Extant literature on play has highlighted the positive aspects of unstructured play including the enjoyment it bestows onto the children (Gray, 2013) as well as its instrumentality for furthering their physical and mental development (Valentine and McKendrick, 1997). There have been instances of mobilisation for creating play spaces across the world, for example, adventure playground movement (Leichter-Saxby, 2015). Studies investigating the causes of diminishing unstructured play, attribute it to a mix of rising parental anxieties about safety of children in cities (Malone, 2007) as well as changing urban form inhabited by fast-moving vehicles in urban streets (Veitch et al, 2006). Oke et al. (1999) have documented play practices of children in the city of Mumbai and Vadodara. They suggest that play is integral to children's daily life who modify the games as a response to the restrictions imposed by the urban environment and they use spaces that "are not specifically designed for play, like building sites, pavements and pathways, staircases..." (Oke et al., 1999: p. 215).

We find that unstructured play as a social practice remains largely unexplored from a socio-spatial theoretical perspective. Towards this objective, we use Lefebvre's theory of production of space to conceptualise the children's play spaces in cities. In order to unravel the relations of domination and subjugation associated with production of play spaces, we focus on the act of unstructured play, which, at the core is a democratic social activity among children (Gray, 2013). Lefebvre (1991) marks out the unpacking of space in terms of a political task geared towards social change. It involves unravelling the social relations that produce the space, as well as the social relations that are in turn produced by the space.

Our research is similar to Eizenberg's (2012) application of the Lefebvre's conceptual framework to analyse the contestations over community gardens in New York. She cites these spaces as 'counter-hegemonic' while being "produced collectively by residents of the most neglected locales only to later become a target for capitalist development" (p.765). The other set of claims over these spaces, referred to as '*hegemonic*' by Eizenberg (2012), emerge from "Neoliberal representations ... produced by the scientific gaze of planners, engineers, and urbanists (which) revolve on the exchange-value of space - its quantifiable and commodifiable qualities" (p. 773). We argue that spaces for unstructured outdoor play, in ways similar to community gardens of New York, are produced collectively by children, and while they come under the radar of neoliberal rationality of planners and developers hinged on the exchange-value of these spaces.

There is a large body of academic literature with a political-economy approach on 'neoliberalism' and 'neoliberalism influencing urban governance' (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Peck and Tickell, 2002; Kiel, 2002). These researchers have been critical of the political economic 'restructuring' and spatial transformations at different geographical scales. Using a variety of concepts (e.g. 'urban entrepreneurialism', 'post-Fordism' and 'gentrification'), they have described the transformations in different locales in relation to global processes and have theorized the structural change being pushed for and enacted in the governance of cities.

Our use of the term 'neoliberalism' and 'neoliberal rationality', is significantly different from above body of literature. Following Ong (2007), the concept of '*neoliberalism*' (small 'n' with original emphasis) is not understood as "a hegemonic order or unified set of policies" (p. 7), but

in a poststructuralist sense of acting as a discursive mobile technology which shapes the political subjectivities. The term ‘neoliberal rationality’ is understood as a subjectivity that treats the space as an abstract one, enabling assignment of a specific productive activity to it for an optimal exchange value. When such neoliberal rationality is mapped onto urban public space, it ‘commodifies’ the everyday use in order to make it amenable to private consumption for exchange of a fee. These changes in the use of space fit the neoliberal logic of seeking a measurable monetary return from the individuals for using urban public spaces.

In the Introduction section, we have shown the contestation over use of open public spaces in the city of Ahmedabad and discussed the need to unravel the social relations guiding the production of play spaces in the cities. In the next section, we lay out the Lefebvre’s theory of production of space. In the third section, we discuss our observation on play practices in the city of Ahmedabad. In the last section, We then stitch together the insights from existing scholarly writing on play and our own observations using Lefebvre’s theory of production of space, to conceptualize the process of production of play spaces.

(Social) production of space

Lefebvre’s (1991) writings offer a post-structuralist understanding of urban spaces. He insisted on treating urban space as a social product which does not exist ‘in-itself’. It “is produced and reproduced through human intentions, even if unanticipated consequences also develop, and even as space constraints and influences those producing it” (Molotch, 1993: p. 887). He insisted on treating space as a key builder of the meaning systems that determine the everyday urban life. A space, in Lefebvrian terms, is thus “neither merely a medium nor a list of ingredients, but an

interlinkage of geographic form, built environment, symbolic meanings, and routines of life" (Molotch, 1993: p. 888).

The marxist thought in Lefebvre's writing shifts attention from '*manufactured goods*' to '*urban spaces*', in terms of analysing their 'social nature of the production'. Space in Lefebvre's understanding, could no further, "be reduced to three realms of production, consumption and exchange commonly used in marxian political economy" (Gottdiener, 1984). For Lefebvre, space has a "reality of its own, a reality clearly distinct from , yet much like, those assumed in the global process by commodities, money and capital" (p.26).

Lefebvre (1991) examines the contradiction that arises within the urban space due to "the pursuit of use versus exchange values" (Molotch, 1993: p. 990). He charges the official state planning apparatus of promoting the construction of an 'abstract' space which is distinct from the production of space "as an appropriation to serve the human needs of the people who occupy it" (Molotch 1993: 889). Through plans and regulations, neoliberal rationality sets up a specific purpose to the use of land, ruling out scope for a democratic mediation of demands by the citizens. This purpose is determined by an expert assessment that attempts to meet the well-defined needs of population, thus clearly demarcating its production activities and consumption activities. Urban space is said to be dominated when is it systematically "put to the service of such abstract purpose".

Lefebvre (1991) theorizes the production of space through "three dialectically interconnected dimensions or processes" (Schmid, 2008: p. 29). Schmid (2008) emphasizes that the triad of

dialectic is the core of Lefebvre's approach of analysing production of urban space which differentiates him from classic political-economy approach in much of the critical urban literature (e.g. Harvey, 2007; Featherstone, 2005). The dialectic "posits three moments of equal value that relate to each other in varying relationships and complex movements wherein now one, now the other prevails against the negation of one or the other (Schmid, 2008: p, 34).

The dialectic are defined in two ways. The first dialectic opens up analysis of spatial production along the three dimensions: the representations of space; the representational space, and the spatial practices. McCann (1999) explains the linkage between the three.

The '*representations of space*' is the forte of policymakers. Rather than '*lived*', it is '*conceived*' by the planners and bureaucrats. Their '*abstract*' conceptions are constructed through the dominant discourses and are visible in form of codes, maps, plans, and designs. This is the most dominant form of social space and "is central to the production of abstract space" (McCain, 1999, p.172).

The second dimension is the '*representational space*'. It is a '*lived*' space that is a product of the 'imagination of and use by' the people who inhabit these spaces. It can be accessed through the "complex symbols and images" that the inhabitants create to make meaning of the 'physical objects and forms' found in that space. For McCann, the works of creative individuals (artists, cartoonists, filmmakers, poets) bring out this meaning (as '*lived*') through use of symbolism. Their works may even create counter-discourses to allow a new thinking about these spaces which breaks the boundaries of abstract conceptions of the planners.

The final dimension, 'the spatial practices' is the link between the first two. It includes the everyday activities, routines, and experiences of the users of the space which "continually mediate between the two forms of social space, working within the bounds of the conceived abstract spaces of planners and architects while simultaneously being shaped and shaping individuals' perceptions and uses of space" (McCann, 1999, p.173). The user's 'actual' use may differ from the planner's 'designated' use depending on their needs and perceptions. For example, all streets may have been conceived as usable to the same degree, but the actual usage of some streets may be less based on user's perception of it being unsafe, untidy, or inconvenient.

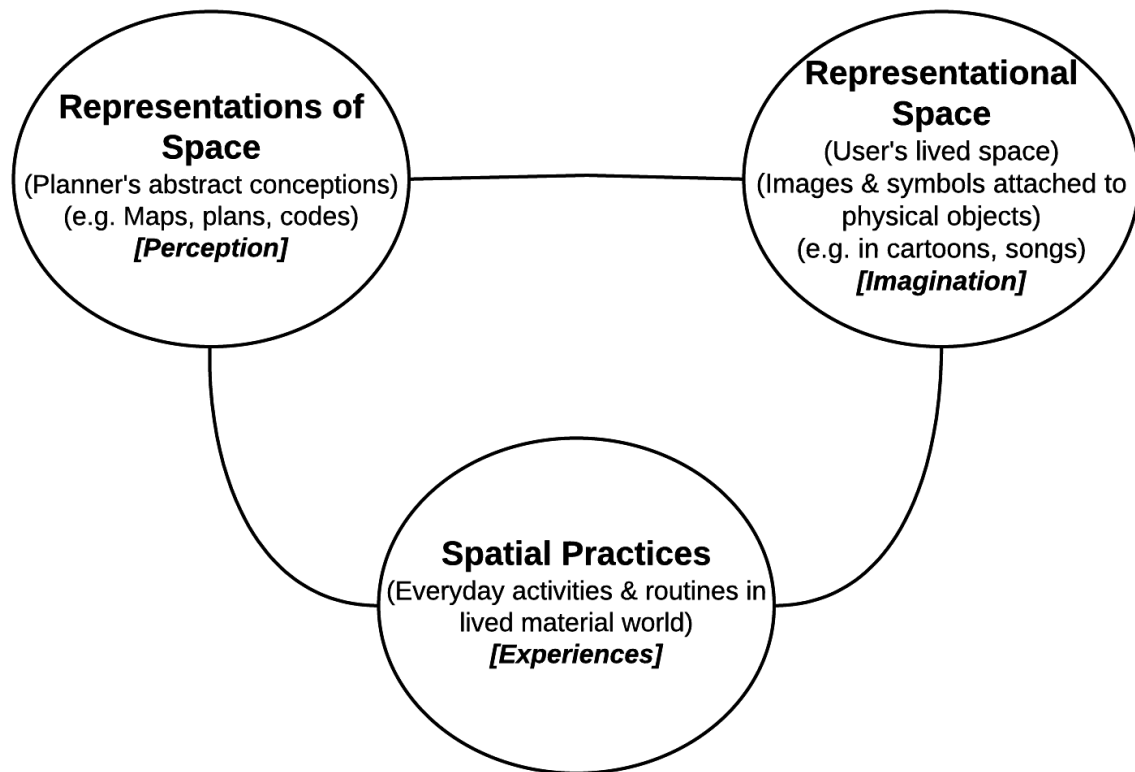


Figure 1: The three moments in production of space (adapted from McCann, 1999)

In contrast to the first dialectic which is grounded in language theory, the second dialectic is influenced from the French phenomenology: ‘the perceived’, ‘the conceived’, and ‘the lived’ (Schmid, 2008). Perceived space "comprises everything that presents itself to the senses" and it "directly relates to the materiality of elements that constitute space". Conceived Space refers to the act of linking space to the "production of knowledge" and hence thought as a whole. Lived space "denote the world as it is experienced by human beings in the practice of their everyday life". "Lived space is space as experienced through images and symbols which do not submit to quantifiable rules. It is the emotional quality that is exerted from space - emotional values and meanings which are immaterial but objective" (Eizenberg, 2012: p. 770).

Unstructured play practices in Ahmedabad

In this section, we discuss our observations on the unstructured play practices in Ahmedabad that have served as empirical basis for conceptualising the production of play spaces, including the domination of neoliberal rationality. We have used interpretive methods to generate our data on the human meaning making processes (Yanow, 2014). The philosophical presuppositions of this method are situated in post-empiricist tradition. Ontologically, it asserts the plural and socially constructed nature of reality. Language is not just a reflection of social reality but is co-constituted with it, and hence determines our understanding of reality. In this method, researchers are “concerned with understanding the lifeworld of the actor in the situation(s) being studied, but they also reflect on the problematics of (re)presenting that lifeworld and those meanings” (Yanow, 2014: p. 23).

Our method of observation has been a scouting exercise through the parts of city that are roughly within 3 km radius of our college campus, looking for presence of children in public spaces. We have also observed and interviewed residents who have participated in the contestation around playgrounds attached to schools. We probed them for their reasons of participating in the protest against school. We also had conversations with joggers, and other people who visit the parks in the morning with a focus on their experience with regards to play spaces in the locality. In few instances, we were successful in bringing people together for a group discussion on play spaces in their neighbourhood.

Despite it being summer vacation time in schools, we found very few children playing in the streets, and whenever we found them, it was either on very small arterial roads, or (in most cases) dead-ends. We found one 12-13 year old jumping into an empty, enclosed plot to pick his cricket gear. Upon inquiry, he told that they play daily in the evening in the same space. We asked him if this was a privately owned piece of land. His reply was interesting: "pta nahi, par hume kya fark padta hai. Hume to khelna hai. Aapko bhi khelna hai to kal 5 baje aa jaana" (I don't know, and we don't care. We just want to play. If you also want to play, then come at 5 pm tomorrow). The conspicuous absence of children in the neighbourhood was an antithesis to our own experiences when summer vacations meant playing out every morning and evening with friends in the neighbourhood. From these observations, we infer that the most common site for presence of unsupervised absence of children are those which are existing due to errors of planning and are largely examples of unintended construction of the spaces. These include streets which hosted dead-ends from one-side. Other examples include spaces inhabited by homeless in the city such as land under fly-over.

We observed that parents who live in middle or upper-middle class societies tend to send their young children for sports classes (swimming, skating, judo, football etc.) organized by their schools or some other institution after the school hours. An old lady, whom we met in the park, said,

“In my childhood, I used to play with other children in the society, and so did my children. Now, my granddaughter does not play in society. There is no space. Also, she is busy all day as she goes for karate and swimming classes besides tuition classes after school hours”.

People who have lived in these societies for a fairly long duration, seem to be comfortable with the absence of any open spaces in the vicinity. There are parks where adults can walk or do exercises, and very young children can use the swings installed in these parks. There are large grounds reserved for play or common use (near Sabarmati riverfront, 4-5km from the locality), but there is no provision for such spaces in the residential neighbourhoods. Sports is seen as important and considered a ‘productive’ activity necessary for all-round development, while unstructured play is seen as dispensable at best, and unnecessary at worst.

We observed that apart from parents and other elders of the family, security guards in elite societies act as crucial modes of controlling children. These guards are made responsible for ensuring that children do not enter 'prohibited' areas or get involved in 'prohibited acts' (as defined by adults) (e.g. climb a tree or run around on stairs). This is akin to constant vigilance and monitoring of children, thus significantly reducing the opportunity for unstructured free-play. Hence, while playing in societies, children are under constant vigilant eyes of the parents,

or guards, or other trusted adults. The play space within the society, especially if it is a clearly designated area, tends to be a sterile piece of land that fails to offer any novelty to the children and satiate their creativity and imagination, while adult supervision constraints their bodily action.

On a morning at HimmatLal Park³, we had invited the joggers and other visitors to park, to have discussion on play spaces in Azad Housing Society. A heated argument emerged among the residents over the conversion of an open space to gated green park by Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation. One set of people described the conversion as they cited that the current form of park does not meet the overall welfare purpose of the community for which it was intended. They argued that this land as a “common plot” was created by forcing the home-buyers to elk out parcels of their land for common-use land. Hence, they should have had voice over deciding the form of land and the regulation of use, if any over it.

The other set of people argued that there is nothing new about this practice of converting common-plot land to parks, as this has been done all over the Ahmedabad. A vocal middle age person argued that this is a vital planning strategy to create public facilities. This allows the locality to attract buyers after an initial set up, and helps in the overall welfare of the neighbourhood. That there are no open spaces left due to such conversions is something to be taken care of at a planning stage which has a horizon of 20-30 years.

³ A gated green park in Azad Housing Society

We interpreted in above discussion an assertion of neoliberal rationality and also its contestation. It holds an instance of converting open “common plot” that is made possible through contribution of residents of the neighbourhood, into a common built facility by the municipal corporation without holding any consultation. The municipal body does so resting on the rationale of building places to meet the specific and given needs of the population which it thought to be more important than the existing diverse uses of the space. The neoliberal rationality also looks at open spaces as something that ‘requires maintenance’ for ensuring appropriate ‘exchange-value’. This was the justification used by AUDA while allocating the public land parcels to the 14 schools. Our visit to these schools contradicted this assertion because beyond one school (Nirma, which had illegally converted it into a concrete parking lot), none of the grounds had anything that required maintenance.

In the next section, we discuss the existing literature on play practices and specifically unstructured play to make sense of above observations of play practices. We then stitch together the insights from existing scholarly writing on play and our own observations using Lefebvre’s theory of production of space, to conceptualize the process of production of play spaces. Within this, we focus on showing the domination of neoliberal rationality working through concerned parents and entrepreneurial state to restrict the unstructured play practices among children.

(Social) production of play spaces

Play has been argued to have a critical role in development of various faculties among children at least up to 12 years of age (Fromberg and Bergen, 2006; Gray, 2013). Specifically, unstructured ‘outdoor’ play from early to middle childhood has been flagged as necessary by child

development scholars for the physical, mental, and social development (Valentine and McKendrick, 1997; White, 2009). This 'unstructured' and 'unsupervised' nature has been considered as important especially beyond a certain age (middle childhood) when children are more likely to play outdoors and away from homes (Chatterjee, 2005; Valentine and McKendrick, 1997). Scholars argue that it is through play in these 'outdoor' spaces that children become acquainted with their physical environments (Matthews, 1992) and develop several natural skills like 'mapping' (Blaut, 1971) (as cited in Valentine and McKendrick, 1997).

As a category of human activity, unstructured play includes "all things that children do purely for the joy of it" (Stallibrass, 1989, p.12). These acts can take place at several kinds of places, which include the private spaces like homes, classrooms, as well as the public spaces such as open grounds, streets, or places just outside home or even school playground when informally used. Playgrounds are not the only outdoor places where children play, and therefore a socio-spatial inquiry into play spaces needs to go beyond these to other physical spaces in the neighbourhood. Our focus in this paper is on the public spaces that are publically co-constructed. Therefore, as a category of human activity, we focus on 'unstructured outdoor play' of children and not all play. This activity allows children to initiate and design the game (Weininger, 1972), define the objectives and rules of play (Starling, 2011). Though there are likely to be relations of domination even when only children are participating in the activity, these are not structured by adults. Thus, it is free of any 'adult-logic' based rules and usually avoids structuring of human activity as per the logics of higher order, dictated by adults.

Unstructured play requires a continuous negotiation of rules of the game, where the meaning attached to 'time and space' is continuously evolving. Thus, the spaces look very different from the eyes of children and adults. Children's tendency to make unstructured use of physical spaces (including their homes, streets, or open grounds) for play, and their capability to play autonomously, without any adult guidance or supervision, is clearly visible in the traditional games they play (Farné, 2005). Children tend to be highly resourceful and creative when left to themselves, and they use this ability to utilize whatever materials or spaces that they can access. They can find play opportunities in the mundane objects like lamp posts, curb stones, trees, parked cars, benches etc.

Children prefer playing in 'flexible' spaces (like waste grounds or open spaces) by appropriating them rather than in formally designated playsites (Valentine and McKendrick, 1997). The richness of play is positively impacted by the natural and unstructured environment (Farné, 2005). Rasmussen (2004) makes a distinction between "places for children" and "children's spaces", as he highlights the spaces that are designed by adults for use of children (former) do not necessarily attract similar meanings from the children (latter). He further, details that the construction of "children's spaces" is not performed through an '*abstract*' conception in mind as "they usually do not talk about children's places, (rather), their bodies show and tell where and what these are" (Rasmussen, 2004: p. 165).

Rasmussen (2004) uses Relph's (1976, cited in Rasmussen, 2004) distinction between 'space' and 'place' to argue that children and adults perceive the physical spaces very differently and they mean different things to them. 'Space' at a more primitive level than place stands for a

geographical area spread out in three dimensions, while 'place' refers to a "more specific and recognizable part of the space" (p.165). Children creatively attribute meaning, identity and character to 'place'. This 'place' is 'animated' and invites bodily action (Rasmussen, 2004). What is forbidden by adults (e.g. climbing a tree or jumping off a wall) is likely to be a must-do for the children. Spaces become places only when children are allowed to interact freely and physically with them. This is rarely possible when children remain under continuous adult supervision and in adult-designated and controlled spaces all day long.

Using Lefebvre's theory, we attempt to conceptualise neoliberal rationality along the dialectical dimension of '*conceived space*' as opposed to '*Lived Space*' and '*Perceived Space*'. This allows us explain reconfigured existence of children under the domination (of adult logic) by neoliberal rationality. Streets, except those ending in unplanned dead-ends, no longer get used as spaces of play. Adults in elite neighbourhoods of Ahmedabad program the schedules of their children in a way that they only engage in formal sport under strict adult supervision in the name of play activity. This activity happens in 'designated' play areas, either in schools or in sports academies. Even outside these institutional setups, children's bodily action is severely constrained by the perceived risks of parents and is reflected in the ways they are 'allowed to use' the spaces 'built' and 'controlled' by adults.

Domination of play spaces by neoliberal rationality

"As a space of 'subjects' rather than of 'calculations', as a representational space, (the lived space) has an origin, and that origin is childhood, with its hardships, its achievements, and its lacks."

(Lefebvre 1991:362).

For Lefebvre (1991), the (physical) space does not ‘exist in itself’ but derives meaning from the human intentions and actions. Children’s use of spaces through their imaginations and bodily actions (*‘spatial practices’* (Lefebvre, 1991)) acts to give meaning to them, thus converting them into ‘places’ (Rasmussen, 2004) and *‘representational spaces’* (Lefebvre, 1991). We discuss in this section how the ‘reality’ of these spaces and the presence of children are also given homogeneous representation by actors other than children. More specifically, how neoliberal rationality offers a dominant representation of space, offering parents of the children and the entrepreneurial state logic and rationale for control of body (child) and urban space.

Unstructured play includes 'risk' and this risk can come from the 'act of the play' itself or from the 'physical location' of the play. The ‘adult logic’ perceive this ‘intense risk’ in unanticipated bodily actions that may occur during unsupervised and unstructured play. The bureaucrats, then, enforce designs that reassure the adults of their children being in ‘safe’ spaces. The policymakers serve this ‘abstract purpose’ of ‘safe play’ and feel content with the achievement of their ‘mandated’ goals of providing play area for a section of society (children). In process, the scope for any democratic mediation by children is ruled out, and so is their freedom to democratically design the game and define its rules, thus annihilating the very life and blood of unstructured play.

While the avoidance of perceived risk leads to adults ‘officially’ prohibiting the children from using several spaces altogether or forcing their use only in certain pre-defined ways, the children are also ‘crowded out’ unofficially from other places. De Visscher & Bouverne-De Bie (2008)

argue that the inability of adults to control children in public spaces guides the parents to disallow them play in open public space and hence discourage the democratic socialization of their children within such spaces. De Visscher & Bouverne-De Bie (2008) use the concept of 'spatial segregation' to mark the undemocratic social relations where children spend maximum amount of time 'out of public realm' and within adult-controlled (or dominated) institutionalized settings like home, schools, or recreational institutions (p.604).

The capture of open grounds for constructing public utilities or private buildings has meant that the children are either restricted to the four walls of their residential societies under strict adult supervision, or they take part in adult-supervised play in institutional settings (schools or sports academies). Whatever open grounds remain in the vicinity have become inaccessible due to other factors. By excluding roads that need to be navigated (to reach somewhere) or used cautiously (to play), or play areas ('new' physical spaces) that need to be explored by the children, the risk that could come from these spatial factors is removed from children's lives.

A well-equipped playground has an 'exchange value', for it counts as a 'facility' available to residents and allows the land prices to escalate. Yet, the children, for whom this whole setup is designed, frequently feel disconnected from it. As early as 1939, a study by Guttenridge found that the 'modern' playgrounds do not challenge children beyond 4-5 years of age. These findings were echoed in an extensive study by Frost et al. in 2004 (Frost and Wood, 2006). The whole adventure playground movement in the west (Soloman, 2014) is an attempt to reverse this trend of commodification of children's play spaces and to allow them the 'control' over their time and space.

The public authorities that design facilities and spaces for children seek "structured and standardized solutions" (Sahnoune et al., 2007, p.102). The result is that the spaces 'designated' for use by children (e.g. playgrounds) follow the bureaucratic logic of standardization and fail to represent the needs and wants of children, as defined by them. The play spaces built, supervised, and controlled by adults are 'commodified' with standard equipment and swings. This commodification and control is total, for the equipment, by design, severely restricts the movements that children can perform. The commodification is realized through 'abstract' conception of place in the imaginaries of planners and policy-makers.

Conclusion

We have conceptualised the production of play spaces using Lefebvre's theory of production of space. We use the concept of neoliberal rationality to capture the social relations of domination within the production of play spaces. The term 'neoliberal rationality' is understood as a subjectivity that treats the space as an abstract one, enabling assignment of a specific productive activity to it for an optimal exchange value. When such neoliberal rationality is mapped onto urban public space, it 'commodifies' the everyday use in order to make it amenable to private consumption for exchange of a fee. These changes in the use of space fit the neoliberal logic of seeking a measurable monetary return from the individuals for using urban public spaces. In the process it kills the inhabited 'lived space' that facilitates the act of unstructured outdoor play.

Acknowledgements

We are thankful to Prateek Shah, Advaita Rajendra, Mitul Surana, Ankur Sarin and Katharina T Paul for providing valuable feedback and comments at different stages of the research project.

References

- Brenner, N., & Theodore, N. (2002). Cities and the geographies of “actually existing neoliberalism”. *Antipode*, 34(3), 349-379.
- Brenner, N., Peck, J., & Theodore, N. (2010). Variegated neoliberalization: geographies, modalities, pathways. *Global networks*, 10(2), 182-222.
- Hoffman, L.E. (1997). THE EFFECTS OF SUBSTITUTING STRUCTURED PLAY FOR UNSTRUCTURED PLAY ON THE ATTITUDE OF STUDENTS AND TEACHERS. Retrieved June 6, 2017 from <https://goo.gl/yBJyWp>
- Berman, L. (2007). The Power of Play - What Children Learn by Unstructured Play. [Magazine Article] Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/mYZFZz>
- Chatterjee, S. (2005). Children's friendship with place: a conceptual inquiry. *Children Youth and Environments*, 15(1), 1-26.
- De Visscher, S., & Bie, B. D. (2008). Children's Presence in the Neighbourhood: A Social- Pedagogical Perspective. *Children & society*, 22(6), 470-481.
- Eizenberg, E. (2012). Actually existing commons: Three moments of space of community gardens in New York City. *Antipode*, 44(3), 764-782.
- Farné, R. (2005). Pedagogy of play. *Topoi*, 24(2), 169-181.
- Featherstone, D. (2005). Towards the relational construction of militant particularisms: or why the geographies of past struggles matter for resistance to neoliberal globalisation. *Antipode*, 37(2), 250-271.
- Fromberg, D. P., & Bergen, D. (2006). *Play from birth to twelve: Contexts, perspectives, and meanings*. Taylor & Francis.
- Frost and Wood, 2006 In D.P. Fromberg, & Bergen, D. (2006). *Play from birth to twelve: Contexts, perspectives, and meanings*. Taylor & Francis.
- Gottdiener, M. (1984). Debate on the theory of space: toward an urban praxis. *Cities in transformation. Class, capital and the state*, Sage, London.
- Gray, P. (2013). Free to learn: Why unleashing the instinct to play will make our children happier, more self-reliant, and better students for life.
- Harvey, D. (2007). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press, USA.
- Holston, J. (1999). The modernist city and the death of the street. *Theorizing the city: The new urban anthropology reader*, 245-276.
- Keil, R. (2002). “Common–Sense” Neoliberalism: Progressive Conservative Urbanism in Toronto, Canada. *Antipode*, 34(3), 578-601.

- Leichter-Saxby, M. (2015). *The New Adventure Playground Movement: How Communities Across the USA Are Returning Risk and Freedom to Childhood*. Notebook Publishing.
- Malone, K. (2007). The bubble-wrap generation: children growing up in walled gardens. *Environmental Education Research*, 13(4), 513-527.
- Matthews, M. H. (1992). *Making sense of place: Children's understanding of large-scale environments*. Barnes & Noble Books.
- McCann, E. J. (1999). Race, protest, and public space: Contextualizing Lefebvre in the US city. *Antipode*, 31(2), 163-184.
- Molotch, H. (1993). The space of Lefebvre. *Theory and Society*, 22(6), 887-895.
- Oke, M., Khattar, A., Pant, P., & Saraswathi, T. S. (1999). A profile of children's play in urban India. *Childhood*, 6(2), 207-219.
- Ong, A. (2006). *Neoliberalism as exception: Mutations in citizenship and sovereignty*. Duke University Press
- Peck, J., & Tickell, A. (2002). Neoliberalizing space. *Antipode*, 34(3), 380-404.
- Rasmussen, K. (2004). Places for children—children's places. *Childhood*, 11(2), 155-173.
- Sahnoune, T., McGee, G., & Stewart, J. H. (1981). Play- spaces or play- places?, *Planning Outlook*, 23(3), 101-110.
- Schmid, C. (2008). Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space: Towards a three-dimensional dialectic. *Space, difference, everyday life: reading Henri Lefebvre*, 27-45.
- Solomon, S. G. (2014). *The science of play: How to build playgrounds that enhance children's development*. University Press of New England.
- Stallibrass, A. (1989). *The self-respecting child*. Thames and Hudson.
- Starling, P.E., "An Investigation of Unstructured Play in Nature and its Effect on Children's Self-Efficacy" (2011). Doctorate in Social Work (DSW) Dissertations. 15. http://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations_sp2/15
- Valentine, G., & McKendrick, J. (1997). Children's outdoor play: exploring parental concerns about children's safety and the changing nature of childhood. *Geoforum*, 28(2), 219-235.
- Veitch, J., Bagley, S., Ball, K., and Salmon, J. (2006). Where do children usually play? A qualitative study of parents' perceptions of influences on children's active free-play, *Health & Place*, 12(4), pp. 383-393.
- Weininger, O. (1972). Unstructured play as a vehicle for learning. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 4(2), 63-69.
- White, H. B. (2009). Commentary: Biochemistry De-natured—How unstructured outdoor play can support later learning. *Biochemistry and Molecular Biology Education*, 37(6), 369-370.

Yanow, D. (2014). Thinking interpretively: Philosophical presuppositions and the human sciences. In *Interpretation and method: Empirical research methods and the interpretive turn, 2nd ed.* (pp. 5-26). ME Sharpe.