For three months, 60 eight-year-olds researched model neighborhoods for density and walkability and identified child friendly design recommendations for the City of Boulder, Colorado. In a culminating event, city staff and officials visited their school to hear children’s visions for housing design, increased inclusivity and sustainability, and ways to integrate flood protection with opportunities for play. During a discussion period, one of the city leaders asked students to identify their favorite aspects of the project. Dozens of hands shot into the air. In different ways, students shared their excitement about exchanging information and ideas with professional designers to inform the project. After one girl described her high points in this community-based design process, she concluded, “Doing this was heaven! I want to keep doing this all my life!”

In Johannesburg, South Africa, children in a downtown squatter camp collaborated with the mayor’s office to document their lives and identify ways to improve living conditions for children in informal settlements like theirs. At first, as they made drawings and shared stories about their homes and daily routines, they did not want their names on any of their work for fear that people in the city would discover their marginal status. But when the day arrived for them to present their recommendations in a workshop for staff from the city, nonprofit organizations, and aid agencies, they had elected representatives from their group who spoke for them, and they had hung their pictures around the room with their names included. As the workshop unfolded, one of the boys later confided, “I felt so proud for all of us.”

This book presents programs and methods that are intended to offer young people experiences like these and embed child and youth participation in the culture of urban decision-making. It provides an introduction to the history and principles of participation, a framework for developing projects, and useful tools and approaches to engaging children and youth, ages 2–18, from project conception to completion and celebration. Case studies come from cities in both developed and developing countries and illustrate both small and large


6. This book uses “children” as the term is defined by the United Nations to include all people under 18. The term “young people” is used synonymously. “Youth” includes older teens in addition to young adults.
scale projects, using a variety of methods that range from those that require very few resources to those that incorporate the latest technological innovations.

You can use this manual to help you plan a single project, such as involving students in renovating a park or improving pedestrian safety in their city. Even if you have ambitions to do more, a commitment to a single project can be a good way to begin, to try out new ways of working and identify partners who also believe in the value of young people's ideas. If you want to go further, this book invites you to pursue the larger aim of creating an institutionalized program for participatory design and planning that can include a variety of individual projects over time and make young people's contributions to city decision-making a distinctive part of your city's identity and culture.

While this book draws from a wide range of projects and practices throughout the world, it is rooted in the authors' experiences of coordinating participatory programs with young people, through UNESCO's Growing Up in Cities work internationally and the Growing Up Boulder partnership based in Boulder, Colorado, USA. Together, we bring to our writing more than 50 years of combined experience in participatory practices with children and youth.

A theme that runs through all the methods described in this book is the importance of young people's voices—in expressing their lived experiences, their playfulness and imagination, and their practical solutions for realizing sustainability within cities. In a recent resilience planning project with children in Boulder and Mexico City, a partner teacher asked students what they saw in common between the children in both cities. We were not surprised when one eight-year-old said, “We are all trying to make the world a better place.” It has been our collective experience that young people have much to offer to the fields of urban planning and design and to our society at large: they creatively solve problems and inspire positive solutions, consider the needs of diverse people as well as animals and ecosystems, and want to actively contribute to making their communities better places in which to live.

Participation cultivates a sense of hope and possibility. Not only are children's perspectives important in their own right, but their positive outlook is infectious for adults as well as an inspiration for intergenerational action. No one knows what the future is going to bring, but it is certain that we will have to live more sustainably. Toward this end, everyone's wisdom and skills matter. As part of this transformation, we can choose to move toward a world that reveals a spirit of community and shared resourcefulness. And we can create openings for children and youth to be part of these efforts, to be part of strong democracies.

An International Framework for Children’s Participation

In the 1960s, in reaction to massive postwar urban renewal in Europe and North America, some urban planners and designers concluded that vital and inclusive cities could never be achieved by distant top-down decision-making: urban professionals need to work with communities, understand residents' perspectives, give them a voice and speak for them in planning and design processes. These “advocacy planners” improvised new participatory methods to engage with adult groups.

In 1970, in response to the cresting wave of the environmental movement, UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) convened a group of environmental professionals to discuss people-centered solutions to environmental problems. They believed that people could form positive
relations with the environment if they were supported in the pursuit of beauty in their surroundings and dignity in human relationships. One member of this group was Kevin Lynch, who had pioneered the use of walks, interviews, and map-making to understand how adults experience urban districts and how places function for them. Wanting to understand how people’s relations with their cities develop over time, he proposed a new UNESCO program, Growing Up in Cities, to apply similar methods with small groups of children in early adolescence in low-income urban areas faced with rapid change.

Lynch succeeded in assembling teams of geographers, social researchers, architects, urban planners, and designers in Mexico, Argentina, Poland, and Australia. Children shared how they used local places, resources they valued, their constraints, and fears. They had thoughtful suggestions for how to make their localities better places for all ages. But in the 1970s, Lynch discovered, city officials showed no interest in young people’s ideas. He published his team’s methods and findings and went on to other ventures.

In 1989, the United Nations’ adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) created new conditions for young people’s participation. The most rapidly accepted human rights document in history, it has been ratified by all member nations of the United Nations with the current exception of the United States. It contains 41 articles that are designed to ensure children’s protection from harm, provision of basic needs, and participation in decisions that affect their lives, followed by 13 articles related to implementation. Ratifying nations commit to submitting regular five-year reports to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child to document the progress they have made toward realizing children’s rights, and these reports attract scrutiny by the media and child advocacy organizations. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has ruled that children’s rights to participation include a voice in decisions that shape their environments.

This principle was extended by Agenda 21, the framework for action that was generated at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the Earth Summit) in 1992. It includes a chapter on children and youth as a major group whose protection and health need to be central to goals for sustainable development, and who need to be included in participatory processes to improve the environment. The Habitat Agenda, the plan of action from the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements in 1996 (Habitat II) specifically addressed the importance of participatory processes with children and youth to create better conditions in cities and towns and “to make use of their insight, creativity and thoughts on the environment.” Habitat III, which brought urban actors together from across the globe in 2016, affirmed the principles of sustainable development and the inclusion of people of all ages, genders, ethnicities, and income levels in urban decision-making.

In response to the United Nations adoption of the CRC, UNESCO revived the Growing Up in Cities program in 1995, with an initial focus on submitting regular five-year reports to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child to document the progress they have made toward realizing children’s rights, and these reports attract scrutiny by the media and child advocacy organizations. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has ruled that children’s rights to participation include a voice in decisions that shape their environments.

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in eight countries, and UNICEF (the United Nations Children's Fund) launched its Child Friendly Cities Initiative in 1996. This initiative provides a template to help governments integrate children's rights into policies and programs across sectors. In countries that have ratified the CRC, governments at every level have a responsibility to make efforts in good faith to support children's rights, and this has inspired the funding and implementation of many participatory projects. In the United States, progressive cities can independently choose to advance children's rights. This is one of the motives behind the establishment of Growing Up Boulder, one of the main programs that this book features.

In Europe, initiatives to involve young people in urban planning and design are shared by the European Network of Child Friendly Cities through blogs and biennial conferences. In the United States, the Children, Youth and Environment Network of the Environmental Design Research Association organizes a strand of sessions on child and youth participation at annual conferences. Currently there is a dynamic global field of practice in participatory urban design and planning with children and youth. This book draws on this international network for case studies that illustrate effective methods and approaches to participation.

Changing Contexts of Urban Planning

Sustainability, resilience and climate adaptation have come to the forefront of social and environmental issues that urban planning needs to address. Planning for sustainability seeks to balance the Three E’s—environmental quality, economic development, and social equity and vibrancy. Cities seek to achieve these goals through a wide range of means, including cleaner, more efficient energy usage; compact and connected development; sustainable modes of transportation; integration of nature into the urban fabric; and an inclusive city, with opportunities for people to actively shape the places where they live through placemaking and participatory governance.

Increasingly, humanity lives in cities, and therefore cities are prime sites for the search for a sustainable balance between human needs and the planet’s finite resources. In 1975, when participatory research with children was emerging, 37% of the world’s population lived in cities. In 2014, this figure was 54%. The United Nations projects that 66% of the world’s population will be urban dwellers by 2050. In 1975, the majority of urban residents lived in China, Europe and North America. By 2014, more than half of all urban residents lived in Asian cities. Whereas approximately half of the world’s population lived in “less developed” countries in 1975, this number has grown to 75% of the world’s population in 2015. These population shifts are projected to continue, with the highest rates of urban growth anticipated in Asia and Africa, especially in lower resourced countries.

As a result of growing population pressures, rising resource consumption, and climate change due to increasing atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases, the world is also facing unprecedented environmental change. Cities have

18. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
a large ecological footprint as they draw resources from all over the planet to meet urban dwellers’ basic needs as well as the many desires of a global consumer culture. Yet cities also offer efficiencies such as public transportation and dense housing near accessible services. Financial and human capital are concentrated in cities, with many creative and educated people who can work together to move society in more sustainable directions.23

Environmental degradation affects human settlement patterns, as rural families move to cities to escape drought and declining soil quality, and families leave coastal regions threatened by rising sea levels. Political instability adds to these population shifts, as families flee violence in Central America, the Middle East, Africa, and other regions of the world. Families also disperse across cities and nations as they seek employment in a globalized economy. With urban migration comes the imperative to understand the shifting terrain of cities from the perspective of all citizens who live and work, struggle and play there.

Since the 1970s, we have also seen the increasingly inequitable distribution of resources, from growing concentrations of wealth in the hands of a few, to government disinvestment in public services.24 While many urban shifts can be seen and assessed at large scales, inequities are directly felt at local levels, in the “finely grained differentiations” experienced in informal settlements, slums, “ghettos,” and public housing sites.25 Scholars who consider the city a site for social transformation, where people can be active agents of change, call for participatory processes as an important aspect of urban governance. Through this means, decision-makers can seek out the perspectives of marginalized, immigrant, and lower income residents within a city, who may be geographically and politically isolated.

Resilience planning seeks to prepare for natural disasters, such as flooding or earthquakes, but also examines chronic stresses that impact the everyday lives of people in cities, such as poverty, unemployment, and inequality. It is compatible with other urban planning initiatives, including the development of green infrastructure, which increases a city’s wildlife habitat and flood protection while providing cleaner air and water and lowering summer temperatures. Mounting evidence demonstrates that urban green spaces benefit human health and wellbeing in many ways, for all ages and across all social classes.26 For children in particular, regardless of family income, vegetation around homes and schools and nearby parks is associated with better concentration and impulse control; better academic achievement; better coping with challenges; reduced stress, depression and aggression; greater physical activity; more imaginative and socially cooperative play; and a stronger sense of connection and care for nature.27 Resilience as an emerging field in planning recognizes that a city’s people are the best source of resilience, and so understanding and planning for resilience involves understanding people’s strengths and resourcefulness as well as their concerns and vulnerabilities. Resilience planning is thus a natural arena for participatory practices with young people.28

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25. Ibid., 2
Child Friendly Cities

Concurrent with these new contexts of city life, children’s experience of cities has changed since participatory research with young people emerged in the 1970s. Children in many developed and developing cities spend less time on the street and more time in structured activities, less time outside roaming independently with friends and more time indoors with technology. The cities in which children live can be more dense, with fewer and more manicured parks, or more sprawling, with greater distances to amenities. At the same time, parents’ fears of strangers, traffic and crime have increased. The loss of free movement outdoors to meet friends and explore the local environment can have negative impacts on the health and wellbeing of urban children and youth.²⁹

How young people communicate with each other has also shifted dramatically in the past 30 years. Social media, internet resources, and cell phones have enabled many young people to connect virtually and share their lives with their friends and peers. These media allow young people much greater access to communication and information, but these same technology users may never have taken a civics course or participated in meaningful dialogue about their cities. Some youth, nevertheless, are more politically active through digital media, and digital media are a critical aspect of political mobilization.³⁰ For better or worse, technology and media communications are a part of young people’s lives. They can hold young people captive in front of screens indoors, but they can also connect friends and families, and play a positive role in participatory practices. Many participatory projects now integrate technology in a range of ways, including the production of graphic renderings to illustrate potential designs, design alternatives experienced through three-dimensional virtual environments, and digital voting in participatory budgeting.

While many large-scale, systemic factors are changing the nature of urban planning and children’s lives, children’s visions for good places in which to grow up have remained relatively consistent over time, and they align with the goals of a sustainable city. In many countries, from affluent to less resourced, young people have expressed a desire for cities that include:

- Peer gathering spaces
- Places where they feel socially integrated and accepted
- Varied, interesting activity settings
- Freedom of movement and feelings of safety
- Community identity
- Green spaces for informal play, sports, and nature exploration
- The ability to contribute to their community, through participatory processes, volunteer actions, and stewardship
- For older youth, opportunities for employment.³¹

Already in the 1970s, Kevin Lynch noticed “some human constants in the way children use

their world” when he compared findings across Growing Up in Cities sites.32 Decades of work to understand child friendly cities reveal basic needs for healthy child and youth development that cities can serve.33 Although young people across time and space may assess city features in similar ways, how resources can be provided varies site to site, and participatory collaborations to improve local environments have intrinsic value in themselves.34

Methods of Participation

When Kevin Lynch and his colleagues initiated Growing Up in Cities in the 1970s, they applied a core set of methods: observations, mapping, drawings, photography, interviews with young people, interviews with adult community members and decision-makers, and guided tours led by young people.35 When the program was revived in the 1990s, these methods were supplemented with surveys and questionnaires, focus groups, workshops and other community events, and greater use of the arts.36 Since that time, many people have tested, adapted, and developed new methods and approaches to participation. Some of these innovations have included new forms of technology, such as the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS), graphic design programs, and interactive media. Other innovations have embraced low technology methods. For example, the City as Play method, pioneered by James Rojas in East Los Angeles, uses found objects to “scramble the brain and awaken creativity” with people who otherwise do not interact with urban planning processes.37 His use of everyday objects, such as hair curlers and salvaged toys, has opened the door for participation with marginalized people, providing opportunities for storytelling and visioning.38

In recent years, when we shared our work with Growing Up Boulder at conferences and in meetings with representatives from other cities, people repeatedly told us that they wished we would produce a book that would cover methodological innovations as well as lessons learned in developing effective approaches that sustain participatory practice over time. We present this book to you with the hope that it will serve this purpose. What child and youth advocates have known since Growing Up in Cities was introduced in the 1970s, and what we know now, is that young people are valuable contributors. Effective participation provides opportunities for young people to share their perspectives as experts on their own lived experiences, to deepen their understanding of cities and the processes that shape them, and to contribute their creative thinking to broader planning processes. We know that effective, sustained participation has to be bottom up and grassroots, but also top-down (Figure 1.1), with people from all levels of the city working together—from city agencies, to university programs, to youth organizations, to environmental and cultural organizations, to teachers in classrooms—all of us working with young people.

34. Victoria Derr and Emily Tarantini. “‘Because We Are All People:’ Outcomes and Reflections from Young People’s Participation in the Planning and Design of Child-Friendly Public Spaces.” Local Environment: International Journal of Justice and Sustainability 21, no. 12 (2016): 1534–1556.
Why it Matters

Regardless of the issues to be explored, from planning a small playground, to introducing policies for greater equity, to filmmaking for climate adaptation, young people have an important role to play in shaping the development of cities. Many support the idea that young people should participate in urban planning and design because they will inherit the outcomes. However, many children's rights advocates, including ourselves, believe that children and youth are not just in the process of becoming adults: they are a unique group that already has much to contribute to society, just as they are. This principle underlies the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Agenda 21, the Habitat Agenda and other international agreements to advance cities and sustainable development.

Young people themselves want to be seen as valued contributors, and to be included in urban decision-making and public places within their communities. Social inclusion is particularly significant in the context of adolescent development. Our research with Growing Up Boulder has shown that at the beginning of projects, young teens aged 11–16 frequently state that they do not feel that their government cares about their ideas. While we have seen teen perceptions shift during processes of engagement, without widespread mechanisms for participation, many teens will continue to feel excluded from society. When teenagers are separated from society, they express greater feelings of social exclusion, indifference, and antagonism.39

Social inclusion matters not only in participatory realms, but also in public spaces. Some in urban planning have expressed concern that public spaces are becoming less inclusive, with less mixing across ages, income levels, and ethnic groups.40 Teen girls, in particular, are isolated from public spaces in many parts of the world.41 While many assume that teens want to be separated from other ages, child friendly cities research has not found this to be true. Participatory processes reveal that teens want to be integrated into public spaces, and they want spaces to be well designed and developed for people of all ages, abilities, ethnicities, and interests.42

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42. Jackie Bourke, “‘No messing allowed’: The enactment of childhood in urban public space from the perspective of the child.” *Children Youth and Environments* 24, no. 1
For all of us working with Growing Up Boulder, “seeing is believing.” Many adults and city staff were initially skeptical that young people could positively contribute to planning processes until they heard young people’s thoughtful considerations. They learned that plans for physical improvements, policies, regulations, education, and programming could be more effective when they included young people’s recommendations. As a result, city staff have become advocates for greater inclusivity in planning processes. For example, a city staff person recently concluded her presentation about youth contributions to open space planning with a slide that asked, “What did we learn about engaging Junior Rangers in planning? . . . They care; they think expansively; they can dialogue well . . . we want to engage them more often!” The results not only impact city staff, but also higher levels of leadership, from advisory board members for city departments to city councilors, who now hold staff accountable for integrating young people’s ideas into their final plans.

Finally, participation matters because it can significantly contribute to the sustainability of cities. Education for sustainability calls for holistic thinking that invites children and youth to play an active role in conceiving a sustainable future. Through their creativity and genuine concern for creating better places to live, young people readily consider issues of sustainability—from desirable modes of transportation, to renewable energy production, to city greening, to the integration of diverse residents into the urban fabric. Participatory processes with young people cultivate citizens who know how to work collaboratively to create a more sustainable future.

