

The Relation Between Spatial Urban Planning and the Creation of Child-Friendly Cities: A Case for the Repurposing of Vacant School Buildings in Chicago

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Abstract

In the history of urban planning, children's agency has been neglected in two persistent gaps: insufficient political attentiveness to how children interact with their environments and scarce opportunities for civic involvement. In response, UNICEF launched the Child Friendly Cities Initiative, outlining a framework to support healthy childhood development through four core elements: safety, green space, access, and integration. The present study aims to investigate how the repurposing of 21 vacant school buildings in Chicago, many closed in 2013, can reclaim schools as cornerstones of neighborhood empowerment and organization, as well as tools to advance the Child Friendly Cities' agenda. The analysis draws on a review of scholarly literature and international organization reports to assess the developmental and civic impacts of child-friendly environments. Findings suggest that repurposing vacant schools into community centers can strengthen Chicago's commitment to child-friendly cities by providing safe, accessible, and integrative spaces in the community. In doing so, it not only safeguards children's rights but also fosters academic success, civic engagement, and community resilience.

