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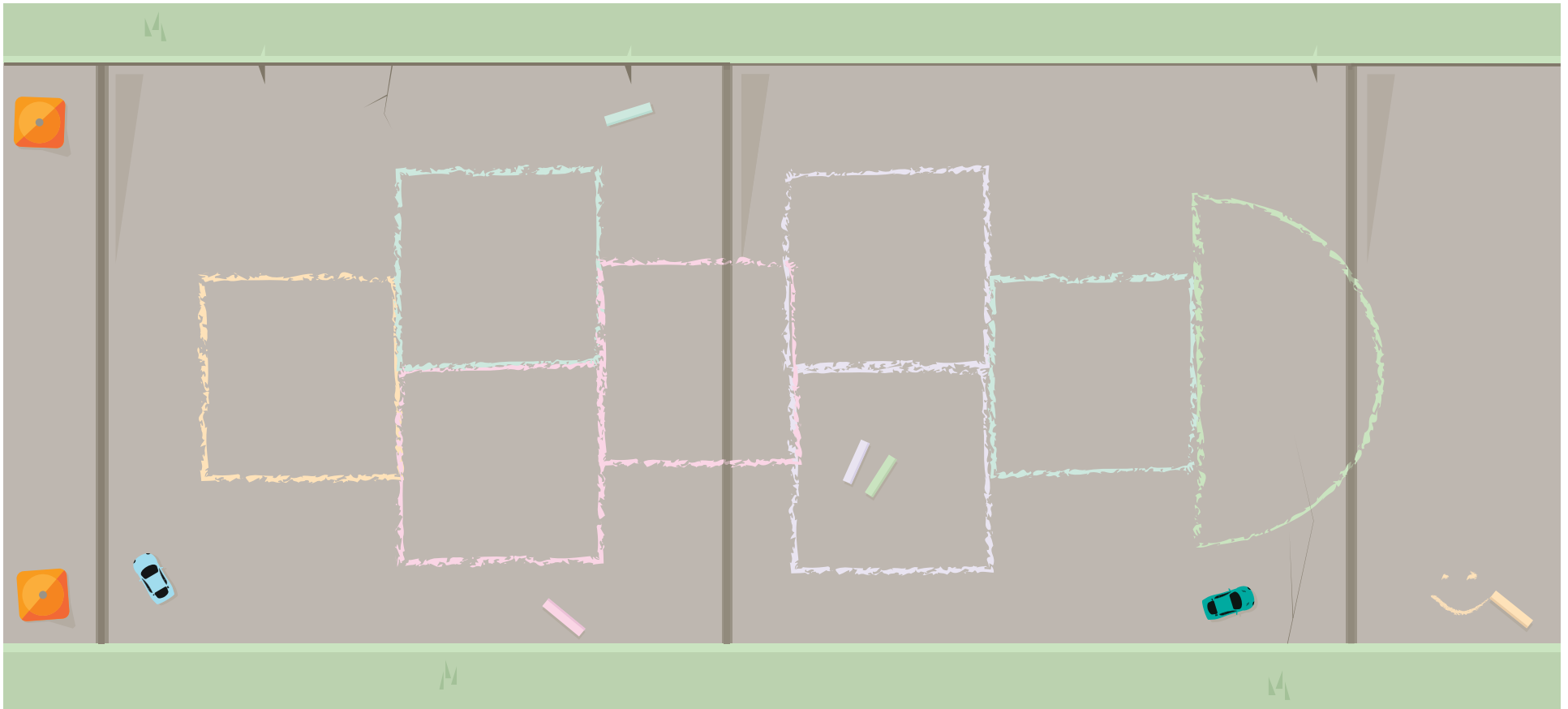
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PATHWAYS TO PLAY

OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE CITY OF LOS ANGELES



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CLIENT: LOS ANGELES MAYOR'S OFFICE OF CITY SERVICES
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Disclaimer

This report was prepared in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master in Urban and Regional Planning degree in the Department of Urban Planning at the University of California, Los Angeles. It was prepared at the direction of the Department and of Los Angeles Mayor's Office of City Services as a planning client. The views expressed herein are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Department, the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, UCLA as a whole, or the client.



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Young Angelenos explore pathways to play during a street closure event; Source: Kounkuey Design Initiative

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On a cloudy afternoon in January, students at Kester Avenue Elementary School in Sherman Oaks watched as a diverse group of artists sketched colorful paper drawings on the sidewalk just outside of the school. The artwork depicted animated images of animals roaring, children racing, vegetables dancing, and phrases like "Do the Bunny Hop", "Follow the Leader", and "Fly like a Bird." Two weeks later, Kester Elementary Parents Association volunteers fastened the artwork to the fence surrounding the school facing outwards into the neighborhood. As the recess bell sounded, kids bounded to the banners and began to play, dance, and do the hokey pokey with each other. That weekend, other families in the neighborhood walked to Kester Avenue Elementary to engage with the artwork and play. Now, in partnership with the Los Angeles Unified School District, Parents Association volunteers are paying their idea forward by sharing the banners with other local elementary schools. Meanwhile, the number of kids inspired by the artwork continues to grow.



A child engaged in Play at Kester Avenue Elementary School; Source: Ryan Kurtzman

Play moments like these at Kester Avenue Elementary are enabled by the City of Los Angeles's dedication to free play – that is, play in unexpected and everyday places with no end goal of winning. In a City where kids have easy access to smartphones, where cars speed down neighborhood streets, and where parents struggle to find time in their day to take their children to the park, the City must continue its investment in free play. This project investigates how the Los Angeles Mayor's Office can incorporate community-led placemaking principles to provide access to play for all kids. With the 2028 Olympic Games generating a windfall of City funding from the International Olympic Committee, Los Angeles must innovate to continue its success

in providing all Angelenos with the opportunity to improve their neighborhoods and empower healthy lifestyles. This begins with our youth. To combat negative public health outcomes associated with reduced opportunities for play, support resilient neighborhoods, and heed the Mayor's call for inclusivity, innovation, and long-term excellence in public service, the City must operationalize community and youth-led ideas for play. Using a mix of semi-structured interviews and case studies, this project identifies several policy recommendations for the Mayor to empower creative opportunities for play in Los Angeles. Recommendations specifically focus on:

1. promoting play in the public right-of-way,
2. optimizing community and youth engagement,
3. improving outreach and public awareness, and
4. scalability and resiliency.

To move forward in promoting play, the Los Angeles Mayor's Office must initiate and sustain a dialogue among City Departments, community-based organizations, and neighborhood residents. Play in the public realm has benefits beyond promoting positive health outcomes. It brings families together, encourages kids to know their neighborhoods,

and enhances a communities' sense of place. My semi-structured interviews reveal several barriers standing in the way of these outcomes. Future play programs must address parents' concerns about neighborhood safety, consider existing behaviors of residents and businesses, and include both children and parents in the planning process. Play should be designed by kids, not for them. The 2028 Olympic Games provide an ideal narrative for the City to turn the free play vision into a reality. The Mayor has committed to making Los Angeles the healthiest City in the United States, and play in the public realm can be a key component of this change. To begin, the Mayor's Office should commission a play needs assessment to understand the communities that stand to benefit the most from regularization of neighborhood play. Next, the Mayor should convene all City Departments with ownership over the public right-of-way to determine a path forward for revamping the street closure permit process. The new process must be multi-lingual and consider contextual factors such as ability-to-pay and need for play. There is significant opportunity to leverage existing momentum behind the City's Let's Play Everywhere LA and Play Streets pilot programs. Finally, the Mayor's Office must create a legacy of play inspired by but lasting beyond the Olympic Games. Staff should develop a 10-year plan to nurture community-led play concepts and solicit



play investments from private and philanthropic partners. To effectively invest in our youth, the Mayor can, and must, be a champion for play in the public realm.

INTRODUCTION

For generations, residential streets functioned as informal playspaces for children. We have all heard stories from our grandparents that as kids, they would play in their front yards and on the street. But with the rise of the automobile, upticks in perceived and real violent crime, and disinvestment in public spaces, this is no longer the reality in Los Angeles. Coupled with demanding parent work schedules and smartphones, kids today experience unprecedented levels of play deprivation. They lack safe, accessible spaces to play, particularly in underserved neighborhoods with low household incomes and high levels of concentrated poverty (Wolch et al., 2013). Unsurprisingly, low access to



A young girl enjoys a Play Street event on Fickett St in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles; Source: New York Times

recreation contributes to poor health outcomes among kids. Among Angeleno youth aged 6 to 17 years, only 29% meet the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services guidelines for 60 minutes of daily physical activity (County of Los Angeles Public Health, 2015). In the City today, 9.8% of Angelenos have diabetes, and 23.5% are obese (compared with 6.6% and 13.6%, respectively, in 1997) (County of Los Angeles Public Health, 2015).

Fortunately, the City of Los Angeles can change these outcomes now. Through the leadership of Mayor Eric Garcetti, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) awarded Los Angeles with the 2028 Summer Olympic Games and Paralympic Games. The IOC has also provided Los Angeles with \$160 million over 10

years that is earmarked for local investment youth sports. This windfall means the City can now make meaningful progress on improving health outcomes and addressing play deprivation. The \$160 million will catalyze many times that in external investment in our youth, all of which has the opportunity to leave a lasting legacy of health and youth development on our City. We saw something similar following the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles. The first Games in history to turn a profit, the City used the surplus to create the LA84 foundation, a nationally-recognized leader in youth sports that supports positive youth development through public education, grant making, and training for coaches (LA84 Foundation, n.d.).



Kids play on a roadway in Mexico City; Source: The Urban Humanities Initiative

The 2028 Olympics will bring Los Angeles and its residents into the limelight. While we must invest in existing play areas, such as parks and schools, many Angelenos lack equal access to these community assets. Given the dearth of available parcels for park acquisition and high associated costs, policymakers must identify creative strategies for promoting opportunities for play in neighborhoods that need them the most (Wolch et al, 2013). The public realm offers one solution. Los Angeles has 7,500 centerline-miles of streets, equivalent to 15 percent of its total land area (Great Streets Challenge, n.d.). Buffering these streets are sidewalks and public plazas, many of which are underutilized or neglected. These spaces are ripe public assets that simultaneously form and reflect the character of the City's neighborhoods and people. They can and *must* be creatively marshalled by policymakers as spaces of play for youth, with an emphasis on first serving communities that suffer the worst health outcomes associated with play deprivation.

But before we retrofit our sidewalks with slides and seesaws, it is worth considering the barriers standing in the way. Parents face many behavioral bottlenecks to play. Many caregivers do not even consider outdoor play, and instead give their child a cellphone or turn on the TV. Play can also seem like an impossible task for parents. Due to financial

KEY DEFINITIONS

Throughout this document, I use two terms frequently, 'right-of-way' and 'playspace.' These are defined below:

RIGHT-OF-WAY: A technical term used to refer to the public realm, or any land that is not privately owned. This typically begins as soon as you exit a building or your front yard onto the sidewalk. It varies by city, but typically includes elements such as the street, sidewalks, and public plazas. The public right-of-way is owned and maintained by several public agencies in Los Angeles including the Department of Transportation (roadway), the Department of Public Works (sidewalk), and the Urban Forestry Division (tree canopy). The right-of-way includes spaces that are *physically* accessible to the public. Legally, it also refers to a type of easement granted or reserved over the land for transportation purposes. It is reserved for the purposes of maintenance or expansion of existing infrastructural services.

PLAYSPACE: A self-authored compound word that indicates a space designated for, used for, or inspiring play. It refers to an investment in the physical built environment that supports opportunities for play and recreational activity. Playspaces can be either temporary or permanent, depending on the project and its intent.

constraints, poor physical access, or perceived safety risks, parents may not elect to enroll their child in a recreation program or take them to the park. A study by the University of Chicago revealed that income and park safety are the primary reasons why young Angelenos are not getting enough exercise (Urban Labs Health Lab, 2017). Gender is also a factor: if parents perceive safety issues in the park or on the way there, they are more willing to send their sons than their daughters (Urban Labs Health Lab, 2017).

The path forward is to make play easy, appealing, visible, and inclusive for parents and children. It should fit into day-to-day schedules and neighborhood infrastructure. Consider an analogy borrowed from KaBOOM! on the difference between supermarkets and corner convenience stores (Tantia et al., n.d.). You typically purchase groceries every week or two at the supermarket, but you may stop by the convenience store around the corner every few days to pick up something quick. When it comes to play, "the equivalent of the supermarket might be a big playground in the nice part of town, with sprinklers and facilities. For low-income families, visiting that playspace is exciting and useful—but it takes a lot of effort" (Tantia et al., n.d.). **What we need instead are "convenience stores" for play** – small, flexible, and dispersed play destinations that make play more accessible to parents and kids.

These could be built in underused spaces or key destinations that are part of daily life. By creatively repurposing our public realm, we can forge pathways to play in Los Angeles.



To determine how Los Angeles can best support play in the public right-of-way, it is helpful to consult both academic literature and best practices from other cities.

LITERATURE REVIEW - PLACEMAKING

A review of placemaking literature sheds light on the value that a sense of place has on building and representing cohesive, inclusive communities in Los Angeles. The Project for Public Spaces (PPS) defines placemaking as "a collaborative process by which we can shape our public realm in order to maximize shared value" (Project for Public Spaces, 2009). Paying "close attention to the myriad ways in





A sidewalk on Crenshaw Blvd in Los Angeles; Source: Warren Wells

which the physical, social, ecological, cultural, and even spiritual qualities of a place are intimately intertwined," placemaking incorporates community-based visions and empowers a sense of belonging and connection to one's neighborhood (Project for Public Spaces, 2009; Kruger, 2010).

A useful distinction can be made between standard

PPS placemaking and tactical placemaking - both of which may be applicable to this project. A standard approach makes the most sense when "communities are not effectively using public spaces to create vital. . . communities that people want to live, work, play, and learn in," while tactical placemaking allows for the testing of temporary "low-cost proxies to gauge effectiveness and public support" (Wyckoff, 2013, p. 8). Tactical placemaking typically employs temporary or pop-up methods, while standard placemaking may or may not. Wolch et al. (2014) and Lydon and Garcia (2015) support a low-cost, tactical approach. For placemaking projects in open spaces, small-scale 'just green enough' approaches explicitly informed by community needs can protect low-income neighborhoods from displacement induced by public investment that may begin with good intentions (Wolch et al., 2014). Wolch et al. argue that scattered micro projects more evenly distribute access to recreation or open space rather than creating a focal node for property development (Wolch et al., 2014).

Another question to consider is how city governments can measure the success of placemaking initiatives. In their guide to tactical placemaking, Lydon and Garcia (2015) advocate for a 'build-test-measure' approach with actionable metrics to test and plan for, while also communicating what is learned.

This approach unbundles the city's risk of altering the status quo and makes placemaking more politically tenable. Markusen (2013) suggests an iterative approach to measurement which excludes 'fuzzy' and disconnected data about place, such as vibrancy and/or vitality, and instead suggests that communities propose their own placemaking success metrics and report on them at specified times. Governments may then use this data to disperse future funding and provide feedback to grantees on expectations, achievements, and goals (Markusen, 2013).

Lessons from outside and within Los Angeles also offer valuable placemaking insights. Pulling from research in the United States, Canada, Japan, and China, Friedmann (2010) builds on standard PPS placemaking theory and argues that we need to directly engage with neighborhoods in a way that de novo acknowledges their right to be there. Two essential placemaking principles are revealed through his findings: (1) that government has a critical role in kick-starting local initiatives, and (2) that community organizations must have strategies to build voices, foster community benefit, develop confidence, and arbitrate disputes (Friedmann, 2010). A case study by Main et al. (2014) about placemaking among Latinx immigrants in the LA's MacArthur Park neighborhood corroborates

Friedmann's second principle. They find a link between place identity and local action: residents that established a sense of place in MacArthur Park, one that reflects past places of significance, succeeded in fostering belonging, identity, and agency (Main et al., 2014). Thus, placemaking for play in Los Angeles must be everyone's job - local residents as well as City government officials.

LITERATURE REVIEW - CHILDREN AND PLAY

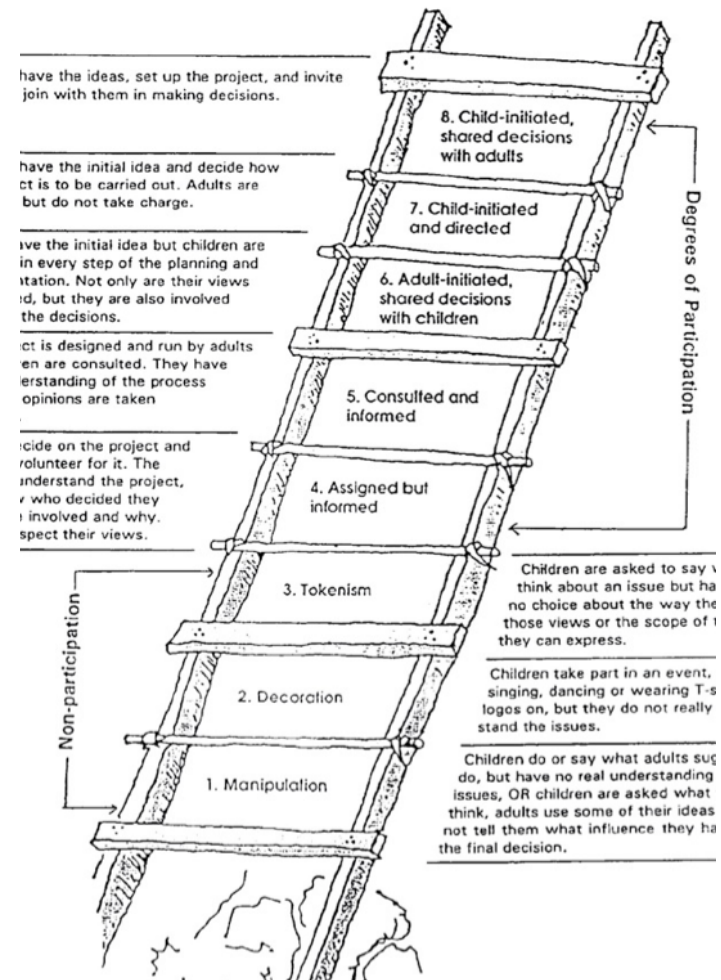
Play, and particularly free play, is critical to the mental and physical health of children. It is the way in which children "(1) develop intrinsic interests and competencies; (2) learn how to make decisions, solve problems, exert self-control, and follow rules; (3) learn to regulate their emotions; (4) make friends and learn to get along with others as equals; and (5) experience joy" (Gray, 2011, p. 443). While play should be a right of every child, children's time for free play has declined sharply (Gray, 2011; Ginsburg, 2007). Thus there is considerable opportunity and imperative for city governments to provide public spaces for play. Recreational opportunities also set the stage for placemaking, allowing for shared community experiences and meanings (Kruger, 2010).



In designing places for play, children must be strategically involved in the community participation process. Borrowing from Arnstein's 1969 'Ladder of Citizen Participation' schema, Hart proposes a similar model (see [Figure 1](#)) for young people's participation in projects. While a metaphor, this model can help governments rethink how they work with young people and involve them in program development (Hart, 2008). Collaboration between children and adults, in which adults actually listen to children, is critical to planning of environments for children (Iltus & Hart, 1995). Potential methods for engaging and empowering children include design charrettes, conceptual drawings, tactile modeling, and observations (Sutton & Kemp, 2002; Bosco & Joassart-Marcelli, 2005; Malone, 1999). Community meetings on the other hand tend to lead to silence or disinterest among teens (Malone, 1999), maintenance of problematic "hierarchical expert/novice power relationships" (Sutton & Kemp, 2002, p. 186), or lead to emotional manipulation or re-interpretation by adults (Bosco & Joassart-Marcelli, 2005).

A broader literature also emerges about how children connect with their urban environments. Traditional city playgrounds and the emergence of private games tend to separate children from their communities and limit informal participation with

Figure 1: Children's Ladder of Participation (Hart, 1995)



adults (Hart, 2008; Hart, 2002). This can hinder or stunt childhood development, and limit children's creative freedom in building their communities (Hart, 2002; Noschis, 1992). Isolated, designated play areas limit children's ability to interact with their environment; rather, children should have greater access to their neighborhoods, perhaps through "integration of the playground into the make-up of the neighborhood" (Noschis, 1992, p. 9). Recent findings confirm the importance of playspace incorporation. The journey to, and entrance to playspaces is just as important as the space itself is to encouraging play; planners must carefully consider travel time and physical barriers that children or families may face (Javad et al., 2015; Stafford, 2017).

This begs the question of how government can expand play areas beyond formal parks or playgrounds to better integrate provision of play with urban design. While utilizing city infrastructure such as streets or sidewalks establishes conditions for children to explore their own forms of play (Hart, 2002), consideration must be given to safety, both physical and social (Vietch et al, 2006). Partial vehicular street closures that mimic cul-de-sacs promote children's free-play autonomy while also promoting walking among adults (Vietch et al, 2006). City governments thus play a large role in mediating children's growth through planning of

the urban environment. They must seriously solicit and represent children's ideas on what constitutes a valuable playspace to ensure that children can learn through play in natural or informal spaces (Hart, 2008; Freeman, 1995). To better adapt playspaces to children's use and perspectives, specific youth feedback on challenges, manipulation, and placemaking should be integrated into planning processes (Jansson, 2015).

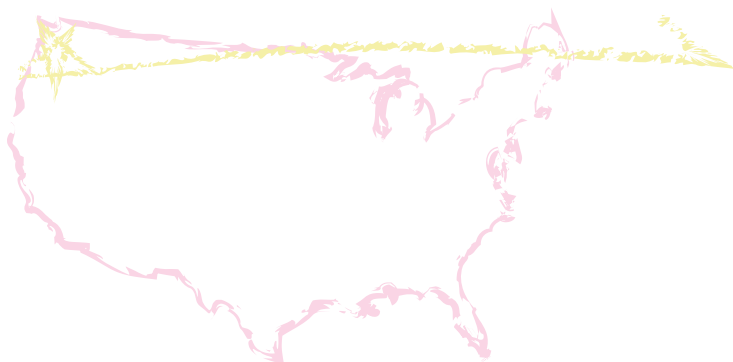
CONCLUSIONS FROM LITERATURE

The reviewed literature provides a robust conceptual policy framework for the City of Los Angeles to empower both play and placemaking in support of the Mayor's push for universal access to play. Placemaking through playspaces should be the imperative of governments wishing to empower a sense of community belonging and support childhood development into engaged, active adults. Placemaking initiatives, whether 'tactical' or not, must engage and reflect communities' needs (including children), and have a strategic plan for informed measurement and public communication. Strategies for incorporating youth feedback on playspace creation must turn the tables and treat children as the experts on play. Finally, placemaking programs that support play should look outside



of traditional spaces like parks and playgrounds and consider how a neighborhood's entire built environment can be used to support creative freedom and actively contribute to its sense of place.

PLAY PROGRAM PRECEDENTS



To inform the final recommendations for the Mayor's Office, and in lieu of live observations excluded from the project scope due to time limitations, I evaluated existing play programs in five cities across the United States. These precedents offer valuable best practices for implementation and are useful in identifying the appropriate program guidelines for a streamlined play program in LA. I selected five public play programs based out of New York, Chicago, San

Francisco, Seattle, and LA for review. I selected these programs because they take place in mid-size to large cities with complex bureaucratic hurdles. Program administrators for two of these programs (Seattle's People Street and LA's Play Streets) have commissioned program evaluations, which I analyze below to inform this study's final recommendations. The five play programs are summarized in [Table 1](#).

CASE STUDY: SEATTLE – PEOPLE STREET

In 2015, the City of Seattle tested the concept of pedestrian-only street closures by closing city blocks to automobiles and opening them for



A People Street closure in Seattle; Source: Seattle Department of Transportation

Table 1 : Summary of Play Programs

	New York	Seattle	San Francisco	Chicago	Los Angeles
<i>Program Name</i>	Play Streets (Summer Play Streets and School Play Streets)	People Street	Play Streets	PlayStreets Chicago	Play Streets Pilot
<i>Program Type</i>	Street closure event	Street closure event	Street closure event	Street closure event	Street closure event
<i>Owned by</i>	Department of Health	Department of Transportation	Municipal Transportation Agency, Planning Dept, and Dept of Public Health	Dept of Public Health	LADOT
<i>Administered through</i>	No fee play street permit (modeled from block party permit)	No fee play street permit	RFP process and NGOs / CBOs to implement permit, and close street	RFP process and NGOs /CBOs to implement permit, and close street	Play street permit (based on block party permit)
<i>City role</i>	Approves permit	Approves permit	Determines street eligibility	Funds RFP, supervises recipients, issues permits	Approves permit
<i>Community role</i>	Chooses street, deploys event. Both communities and schools may apply.	Chooses street, applies for permit, deploys event	Assists in student workshops, deploys event	Chooses street, deploys event	Chooses street based on need, applies for permit, outreach, deploys event
<i>Program costs</i>	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Grant from Chicago Dept of Public Health	Total permit costs for pilot ~\$7,000; Other costs unknown

Sources: (Agency, S.F.M.T., 2013; City and County of San Francisco, 2017; City of Chicago, 2017; New York City Department of Health, 2016; PlayStreets Chicago, 2012; Seattle Department of Transportation, 2016; Kounkuey Design Initiative, 2016)

greater pedestrian access, business engagement, and community activation. After testing a variety of configurations with community members in 2015 and 2016, in 2017 the City sought to develop

a consistent program in response to previously gathered feedback. The City instituted a data collection plan to evaluate the effectiveness of the program in meeting its goals. The goals of the 2017

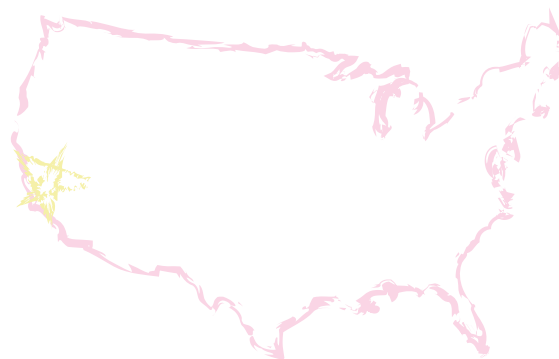


program were to (1) provide a safe, comfortable, accessible, and responsive pedestrian environment, (2) enliven the street through community and business-led activities, and (3) balance pedestrian mobility with vehicle access and street activities (Seattle Department of Transportation, 2018).

To meet these goals, the City closed off approximately three blocks of its downtown on 10 occasions over the summer of 2017. The City held eight events on Saturday evenings and two on Thursday evenings. From in-person interviews, surveys, and direct conversations, the City identified four primary conclusions. First, strong community partners are essential to the success of a street closure program. Second, extensive outreach to businesses and nearby residents is a key component to the program. Third, scheduling an event in tandem with a community event can leverage existing public interest. Finally, the City found that gathering feedback and surveys was a critical step in the program (Seattle Department of Transportation, 2018). In response to this feedback and to ensure community ownership, the City altered People Street in 2018 to invite community groups to apply for their own street closure permits (Seattle Department of Transportation, 2018).

CASE STUDY: LOS ANGELES – PLAY STREETS PILOT

From August 2015 to August 2016, the Kounkuey Design Initiative (KDI) worked with the Los Angeles Department of Transportation (LADOT) and Mayor Eric Garcetti's Great Streets Initiative to implement a one-year pilot program to help Los Angeles residents temporarily transform their neighborhood streets into safe spaces for learning, play, and fun for all ages. For the pilot, program organizers selected streets in park-poor neighborhoods of



South Los Angeles, Boyle Heights, Watts, Pacoima, and Koreatown (Kounkuey Design Initiative, 2016). Program organizers had three goals going in: (1) to create immediate access to safe public space in the neediest parts of the city, (2) to engage residents to create culturally and contextually appropriate

events, and (3) to create a cost-effective, streamlined program that builds off existing City infrastructure and processes (Kounkuey Design Initiative, 2016).

KDI utilized a multi-phased approach in the pilot, which included comprehensive research, data collection, engagement, design, and deployment of street closure events. Feedback from community engagement taught KDI staff what play meant to each community, and how the Play Streets events could best support program goals. Engagement strategies included participatory mapping, design workshops, door knocking, distributing flyers, interviews, surveys at events, and neighborhood summits. Safety emerged as a top concern in two of the neighborhoods. KDI also developed a kit-of-parts for each event, which included test elements to "ignite activity and play for all age groups" (Kounkuey Design Initiative, 2016). The kit included custom furniture and shade, bins, boxes of chalk, a bag toss, modular building sticks, instruction cards, and signage.

The Play Streets pilot program yielded several key takeaways. First, there is broad demand among Los Angeles communities for street closure events. Second, KDI recommends that a Play Streets program, if fully implemented in Los Angeles, should be rooted in a public-private partnership. The City should



Young Angelenos enjoy a Play Streets street closure event; Source: Kounkuey Design Initiative

"own" the program, provide funding, and administer the application process while community-based organizations (CBOs) and residents should share responsibilities for implementation (Kounkuey Design Initiative, 2016). Based on their experience and resident feedback, KDI believes the City should also create a streamlined street closure process with an equitable fee structure, fewer redundancies, and a permit lifespan that extends up to 12 months. The program should have strong brand recognition,

and may utilize a scalable kit-of-parts that is accessible to residents and cost-efficient (Kounkuey Design Initiative, 2016). Finally, the program should allow for community ownership to be as broad as residents' capacity for it, with a clearly defined set of community expectations that is based on substantive engagement.

OTHER PUBLIC REALM PROGRAMS IN LA

LA offers several other public space transformation programs to residents. Though these programs do not directly enable play, their effectiveness and uptake should be considered in the context of this

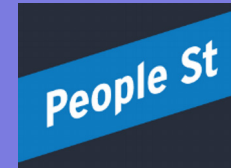
project's recommendations. There is potential to share resources, funding, and permitting/regulatory processes to inform how the City can support opportunities for play in the public realm. These three programs - the Great Streets Challenge, People St, and Adopt-a-Median - open up possibilities for play by reclaiming public spaces traditionally designated for other purposes. Through continued participation in these programs, Los Angeles residents have expressed an interest in engaging with streets as public spaces. Normalizing the idea that the public realm is for people to enjoy, not just to move, will pave the way for additional spaces that support play and placemaking.

GREAT STREETS CHALLENGE: Originating from Mayor Eric Garcetti's first executive directive, the Great Streets Challenge launched in 2015. The challenge invites communities across the City to demonstrate how their streets could be redesigned into safe public spaces. The Great Streets team provides grants, technical assistance, and outreach support to community partners. Partners are tasked with engaging their communities to envision streetscape improvements that will enhance safety, quality of life, and economic vitality along the selected neighborhood commercial corridors. By generating community buy-in from the start, the implemented improvements are likely to be embraced by residents, long-term, context-sensitive, and resilient. The Great Streets Challenge awarded eight grants in 2015 and seven in 2016 ("Great Streets Challenge", n.d.).



Source: Great
Streets Challenge

PEOPLE ST: Housed within LADOT, People St is a program that transforms streets into innovative pedestrian plazas and parklets. It is an application-based program. Interested community members identify an appropriate site, conduct research, fundraise for materials and street furniture, and provide long-term maintenance and operation of the new space. LADOT provides the road space, a kit-of-parts (including signage, paint, and other treatments), and completes the permitting and construction. People St projects facilitate walking and cycling, enable opportunities for community gathering, and support nearby businesses by offering space for eating and sitting (Los Angeles Department of Transportation, n.d.).



Source: LADOT

ADOPT-A-MEDIAN: The Adopt-a-Median program is managed by the Los Angeles Board of Public Works' Office of Community Beautification. Created in 1988, the program allows community groups to adopt the public right-of-way with the goal of beautifying and maintaining public space, promoting community ownership, and infusing the Los Angeles landscape with color and creativity (Los Angeles Department of Public Works, 2018). The program is traditionally leveraged by communities to landscape street medians, but may be deployed to develop improvements on neighborhood sidewalks and other elements of the public right-of-way. The Office of Community Beautification serves as a customer-friendly conduit between other City entities to permit and approve public realm projects. There is no fee to applicants, though they must submit design plans and proof of community support.



Source: LA Board of Public Works



RESEARCH METHODS

This project employs a mix of research methods to better understand how children in Los Angeles play and how the built environment can be used to support creative freedom and actively contribute to a neighborhood's sense of place.

DATA SOURCES

There are two primary data sources for this project: (1) The City of Los Angeles's Let's Play Everywhere LA (LPELA) program, and (2) Phase 2 of the Play Streets program led by LADOT and KDI.



Source: KaBOOM!



Source: Kounkuey Design Initiative

A partnership between the Los Angeles Mayor's Office, KaBOOM!, and Dr. Pepper Snapple, LPELA

awards \$200,000 in grants to 10 community partners to fund creative play solutions in non-traditional public spaces, such as sidewalks, transit shelters, streets, and plazas. The goal of each project is to support play in unexpected and everyday spaces, a concept that KaBOOM! refers to as "playability" (KaBOOM!, n.d.). The 10 LPELA playspace projects are located throughout the City, and will provide space for over 11,000 Angeleno kids to learn, play, explore, and thrive. Some of these playspaces are *temporary* while others are *permanent*. The LPELA community partners will have completed their playspace projects by fall 2018. After the completion of LPELA, KaBOOM! plans to expand the same "playability" grantmaking concept to four other cities in the United States: Houston, Atlanta, Dallas, and Miami.

The Play Streets program allows communities in park-poor neighborhoods of Los Angeles to temporarily transform a street block into a place for play, learning, and fun for kids and their families. This is the second iteration of the program. The first pilot phase of Play Streets launched several street closure events in five park-poor neighborhoods across the City in 2015 (see [Case Study: Los Angeles](#), above). This round, Phase 2, focuses on just two communities – Boyle Heights and Koreatown. The goal of the program is to transform the streets of Los Angeles into places for play and learning for



Kids at the Fickett St Play Streets event play with the 'wobble,' a free play device designed by the Kounkuey Design Initiative; Source: The New York Times

all ages. It is also to establish a proof of concept of the 'Play Streets' model to enable the City to launch an official program in the future (Kounkuey Design Initiative, n.d.). To meet this goal KDI has conducted

over 15 community design workshops to understand neighbors' capacity for street closure events and interests in play. They have also developed a kit-of-parts to deploy at each play event. KDI completed

Play Streets Phase 2 street closure events in spring 2018.

More information on the 10 LPELA projects and the Play Streets events can be found in [Table 2](#).

Table 2: Let's Play Everywhere LA and Play Streets Playspace Projects

Playspace	Address	Neighborhood	Permanence	Primary Public Space Type	Secondary Public Space Type
<i>El Camino de Juegos</i>	1201 Valencia Street Los Angeles, CA 90015	Pico Union	Permanent (>1 year)	Sidewalk	N/A
<i>LA Watts Play Space</i>	10205 Compton Avenue Los Angeles, CA 90002 (Watts Branch Library)	Watts	Permanent (>1 year)	Public plaza	N/A
<i>Let's Play N Learn</i>	1782 W Gage Ave Los Angeles, CA 90047	South LA	Permanent (>1 year)	Sidewalk	Transit stop adjacent
<i>Little Tokyo Open</i>	244 S. San Pedro St. Los Angeles, California 90012	Little Tokyo	Temporary (1 month)	Public plaza	N/A
<i>Pico Play Plaza</i>	1407 Hauser Blvd. Los Angeles, CA 90019	Mid City	Permanent (>1 year)	Sidewalk	N/A
<i>Playful Pathways</i>	135 N Mission Rd. Los Angeles, CA 90033	Boyle Heights	Permanent (>1 year)	Sidewalk	Community center adjacent
<i>Plaza de la Musica</i>	2800 W. Pico Blvd. Los Angeles, CA 90006	Mid City	Permanent (>1 year)	Public plaza	Sidewalk
<i>Rosemont Rec Stop</i>	421 Rosemont Avenue Los Angeles, CA 90026	Historic Filipinotown	Permanent (>1 year)	Sidewalk	School adjacent
<i>Tracks to Learning</i>	5200 Zoo Drive Los Angeles, CA 90027 (Travel Town Museum)	Griffith Park	Permanent (>1 year)	Private	N/A
<i>Walk the K!</i>	5353 Kester Ave Sherman Oaks, CA 91411	Sherman Oaks	Temporary (2 weeks)	Sidewalk	School adjacent
<i>Play Streets</i>	Gramercy Rd; Fickett St	Koreatown, Boyle Heights	Temporary (1 day)	Street Closure	N/A

El Camino de Juegos - Existing Conditions and Concept

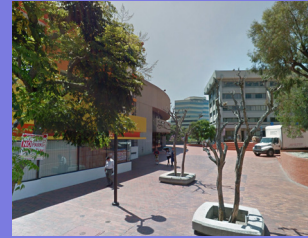


Source: Google Maps



Source: KaBOOM!

Little Tokyo Open - Prior Conditions and Event Photos



Source: Google Maps



Source: Rafu Shimpo

LA Watts Playspace - Existing Conditions and Concept



Source: Google Maps

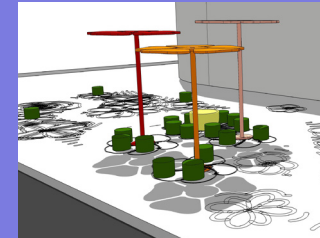


Source: KDI

Pico Play Plaza - Existing Conditions and Concept



Source: Google Maps

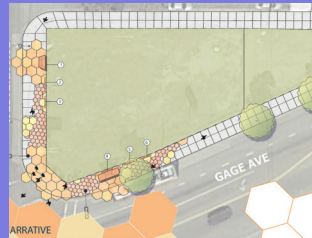


Source: June Street Architecture

Let's Play N Learn - Existing Conditions and Concept



Source: Google Maps

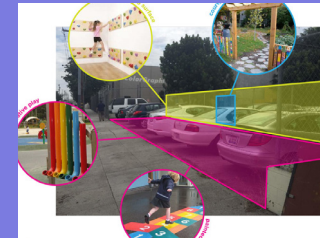


Source: Duane Border Design

Playful Pathways - Existing Conditions and Concept



Source: Google Maps



Source: KaBOOM!

Plaza de la Musica - Existing Conditions and Concept



Source: Google Maps



Source: KaBOOM!

Rosemont Rec Stop - Existing Conditions and Concept



Source: Google Maps



Source: KaBOOM!

Tracks to Learning - Prior Conditions and Event Photos



Source: Google Maps



Source: Jessica Kellogg

Walk the K! - Prior Conditions and Event Photos



Source: Google Maps



Source: Ron Gordon

Play Streets (Fickett St) - Prior Conditions and Event Photos



Source: Google Maps



Source: The New York Times

PLAYSPACE TYPOLOGIES

A variety of public spaces can support play. Below, I conduct an inventory of these different space *typologies* to assist policymakers seeking to promote play but with few resources to acquire new land. The inventory will also help key stakeholders reimagine what play means and where it can take place. By limiting notions of play to traditional spaces like parks, schools, or indoors, we ignore the immense network of public resources that support play, youth development, and neighborhood placemaking. These playspace typologies, many of which are used by LPELA and Play Streets program participants, are described below:

Sidewalk, transit stop-adjacent:

Playspaces on public sidewalks at or adjacent to transit stops and bus shelters. Sidewalks are an ideal space for play because of their abundance and grade separation from the street.

Playspaces at transit stops creatively use existing infrastructure and are attractive to families that take public transit often.



Sidewalk, school-adjacent: Playspaces on public

sidewalks adjacent to schools. Locating a playspace near a community resource traditionally associated with play allows for play to spill out beyond the confines of the blacktop and into the community. These playspaces also serve as a resource to all families in the neighborhood, not just those with children enrolled in the school.

Sidewalk, community-center adjacent: Playspaces on public sidewalks adjacent to community centers that offer services to the neighborhood. Similar to playspaces near schools, these spaces are located at key destinations that capture families traveling to and from. They can also increase awareness of the community center among neighborhood residents.



Turn lane closure: At many intersections in Los Angeles, drivers turn right in a travel lane that is separated from the intersection by a pedestrian island. Closing off these

turn lanes opens up public space on the median and roadway that can support play. Additionally, this makes crossings safer for pedestrians by forcing cars to come to a full stop before turning.

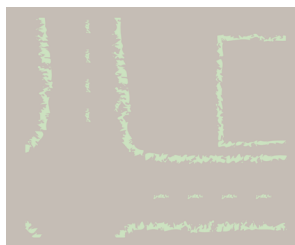
Private: Playspaces on privately owned, but publicly



accessible land. For example, one LPELA project is located at the Travel Town Museum in Griffith Park, a railway museum and recreation center. Though the land is privately owned, families enjoy the adjacent playspace during the museum's hours of operation.

Street closure: Playspaces on neighborhood streets that are closed to vehicular traffic, either temporarily or permanently. The closed streets can host events that bring community members together, with a focus on children's games and play.

Public plaza: Public plazas can support play by hosting temporary play events or permanent installations. Plazas are typically buffered from vehicular traffic and bring community members together for games, meetings, and a variety of other activities. Plazas with seating are ideal for parents looking for a place to sit while watching their children play.



DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Using LPELA and Play Streets as the primary data sources, this project employs mixed qualitative

methods. The primary descriptive research method is semi-structured interviews. Interviews with local CBOs and parents provide context on each neighborhood playscape and local *perceptions* of play in the public right-of-way. I asked participants several overarching questions related to youth play, including perceived barriers (physical and safety-related), activity patterns, and public engagement preferences. Semi-structured interviews are complemented by a review of several play program case studies (see [Play Program Precedents](#) section, above) from comparable cities in the United States. Case studies are sampled from play programs with robust analytical evaluations of playspace effectiveness informed by local data collection and community engagement. In lieu of naturalistic observations of LPELA and Play Streets events, the case studies provide insight on actual play *behaviors* observed in the public realm.

Play and place mean different things to different communities. A qualitative approach allows for in-depth investigation of several LPELA and Play Streets projects while also generating critical feedback on youth play from the perspective of playspace program organizers and neighborhood parents. It also accounts for the innate multi-use flexibility of neighborhood playspaces and of the informality of play itself. Through the above qualitative research

methods, this project seeks to capture community perceptions and behaviors in response to newly designed spaces for play in the public right-of-way.

Table 3 provides an in-depth review of each qualitative method used in this project:

Table 3: Summary of Qualitative Methods

Process	Case studies	Semi-structured interviews
Sampling	Case studies sample from other cities in the United States that have instituted public realm play programs and have completed ex-post program evaluations. These five cities and programs are listed in in the Play Program Precedents section above.	Interviews sample from the 10 LPELA and Play Streets projects in Table 1 to build a representative sample of playspace geographies and typologies, yielding 10 total interviewees. These participants represent several levels of interest and involvement with the playspace projects.
Procedure	I reviewed each case study program evaluation and identify the lessons learned and best practices. For each program I also identify the program owner, the administrator, the role of the City, the role of the community, and program cost if available. This is done to create points of comparison between programs and to a potential program in Los Angeles. Findings from each program are weighted equally.	I contacted representatives from CBOs and neighborhoods for semi-structured interviews. Interviews lasted between 20 and 45 minutes. I asked six core questions that opened up other areas to explore. Questions covered topics such as: perceived barriers to play, activity patterns, public engagement, placemaking, and resiliency. The sample interview guide can be found in the Appendix. Prior to the first question, I assured interviewees of ethical principles. I conducted interviews with the aid of an interview guide and recorded the audio of each interview using my phone.
Measurement	To allow for interpretation of program evaluation data in relation to the project research question, a coding framework is outlined below.	
Coding	Analysis is based on pre-set and emergent codes. Pre-set codes include the following words and phrases: <i>Safety (Crime, gang, drugs), Unsafe, Traffic (Cars, Drive fast), Health, Community (Neighborhood), Parks, Recreation Programs, Permitting, Businesses, Feedback, Walk (Use sidewalks), Resiliency, Scalability, Outreach, Awareness</i> Emergent codes originated from review of case study evaluations and interview transcripts. They capture additional concepts and relationships related to the research question.	
Analysis	I evaluated case study and interview data on content. Depending on the word, phrase, or concept, I analyzed each code based either on its existence or frequency. Analysis of code existence and/or frequency within interview data, along with consultation of margin notes for context, provides a framework for understanding the data in relation to the research question and informs the resultant policy recommendations of this study.	



STUDY STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

This project's research approach has several strengths. First, it takes into account the variance in perceptions among individuals and communities on the meaning of play and the role of the neighborhood in promoting play. Semi-structured interviews allow for complex exploration of these questions, which may be sensitive because they are closely tied to health, income, and parenting. Review of case studies complements the interviews by providing concrete data on playspace use and behaviors. Together, these methods allow for a detailed understanding of several playspace typologies from both the perspective of parents and community members charged with transforming the public right-of-way into a catalytic place for play. These research methods also foster an exploratory approach to the research question, which is helpful in informing how the City provides future opportunities for play in the public right-of-way.

There are also several limitations to this approach. First, the project sample size is limited. Though I capture a range of geographies and typologies, any resultant conclusions are not completely generalizable to playspaces of similar typologies and geographies in Los Angeles. There are myriad factors that influence use and perceptions of a playspace,

and this project does not and cannot capture them all. Additionally, I did not speak to any children in Los Angeles as part of this study, as is advised by existing literature on the subject. Children are the experts on play. By omitting their voices, this study lacks the perspective of the playspace's end user. There are also many variables at play (no pun intended) that may affect the viability of a playspace. This study does not and cannot attempt to isolate these variables and assume any causal relationships. My approach is also time-intensive. Semi-structured interviews require setup, travel time, and ample time for transcription and coding. Finally, as semi-structured interviews rely on respondents' ability to recall information, interviewee biases may alter responses and reflect discrete social conventions rather than overarching perceptions relating to the research question. The interview guide attempts to eliminate possible biases.

FINDINGS

To determine how the City of Los Angeles can support opportunities for play in the public right-of-way, I conducted semi-structured interviews and reviewed case studies of play programs in other cities. Key takeaways from the case studies can be found in the [Play Program Precedents](#) section above. Interviews were intended to assess play *perceptions* among LPELA and Play Streets program organizers and participants. I asked interviewees questions about pre-existing perceptions of play, how the programs may impact those perceptions, and perceived successes and drawbacks of the programs.

I selected interviewees based on their affiliation to either the LPELA or Play Streets programs. I contacted KaBOOM! and KDI for the contact information of project organizers. This strategy yielded eight interviewees, all of which are part of the team implementing the play event or installation in their neighborhood. I found the remaining two interviewees through personal references provided by the initial seven interviewees. The 10 total interviewees represent a

mix of CBO leaders/members and parents. These perspectives allowed for diverse findings on the role communities play in providing play, and how parents interact with play events and installations. To understand play perceptions, I asked interviewees questions on several issues including barriers to play, community engagement strategies, benefits of play, and thoughts about City purview of the public realm. The full semi-structured interview form can be found in the [Appendix](#). Descriptive data on each interviewee is identified in [Table 4](#) below.

Table 4: Interviewees

	Neighborhood	Role	CBO Name	Program Affiliation?
1	South LA	CBO / Parent	California Green-works	Yes
2	Baldwin Hills	Landscape Architect	N/A	Yes
3	Park Mesa Heights	Neighborhood Council / Parent	N/A	No
4	Historic Filipinotown	CBO	Youth Policy Institute	Yes
5	Sherman Oaks	CBO / Parent	Kester Ave Elem. Magnet Parents Assn	Yes

6	Hollywood	CBO	Kounkuey Design Initiative	Yes
7	Boyle Heights	Parent	N/A	Yes
8	Boyle Heights	CBO / Parent	Proyecto Pastoral	Yes
9	Watts	CBO	Watts Re:imagined!	Yes
10	Pico Union	CBO / Parent	New Economics for Women	No

Based on the 10 completed semi-structured interviews, I found several commonalities and conflicts between responses. I have organized the 10 findings below by key themes to best inform the recommendations in this report. Findings are clustered around community engagement, barriers to play, benefits to play, and programmatic considerations. These themes are corroborated by a review of literature and case studies from other cities. Academic literature suggests myriad benefits of play in the public right-of-way and that there is a role for City officials in nurturing and empowering communities to create neighborhoods with a strong sense of place. Similarly, case studies from Seattle and Los Angeles stress that political support, a streamlined permitting process, and meaningful

program engagement are imperative to program success.

COMMUNITY AND YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Finding 1.1: Community Input from Parents Matters

All interviewees highlighted the critical importance of community engagement early on in the creation and design of playspaces, citing that communities know themselves and their neighbors better than the City. Communities are also better equipped to understand site-specific safety concerns, preferences, and community resources already present in each neighborhood. Community-led design also may allow residents to take ownership over playspaces, thus nourishing effective programming and improvements. There was some debate about borrowing precedents from other cities or neighborhoods. One interviewee culled playspace ideas from past successes while another noted that "we can look at precedents all day, but at the end of the day we have to ask people what works for their neighborhood."

Participants noted that parents must be involved in playspace design, as they will likely be in charge of facilitating play. One interviewee stressed that



A young girl skips rope during a street closure event in Mexico City;
Source: The Urban Humanities Initiative

community members and parents can decide what they think is best for kids and their future, not only in terms of design but also in making decisions about the types and location of facilities. They emphasized that communities are capable of making these decisions and should be able to reach consensus with the City. The complication of this approach is that many community members cannot attend planning meetings because of busy schedules.

All interviewees mentioned that they would like to involve children in the design and planning phases for playspaces, but only some have explicitly done so. They suggested youth engagement strategies including outreach to local elementary schools, simple design charrettes, involving entire families in community meetings, and providing kids with sidewalk chalk so they can contribute actively to the playspaces. The Play Streets program held workshops with kids ages 5 and up, and engaged them with visually-oriented activities that posed questions like "what do you want to play with?"

BARRIERS TO PLAY

Finding 2.1: Neighborhood context matters

Neighborhood safety indicators, such as crime,



drugs, public drinking, and homelessness, play a large role in parents' perceived willingness to let their kids play in the public right-of-way. In Boyle Heights for instance, a parent cited both streets and parks as unsafe spaces for youth because of gang activity and violence. However there are differences in play perceptions even within neighborhoods, as a CBO leader in Boyle Heights mentioned that they witnessed kids playing while waiting for transit and walking on the sidewalk. Similar to the first Boyle Heights interview, the interviewee in Watts was concerned that physical play infrastructure would invite unwanted vandalism, theft, and homelessness. Conversely, interviewees from Sherman Oaks and Hollywood noted that youth often play in front of neighborhood homes on yards and sidewalks.

In addition to vandalism, interviewees noted the lack of time and the segmentation of children's schedules as an immediate barrier to play in some communities. Interviewees mentioned vehicular traffic as a major deterrent to play in nearly all interviews. One interviewee said that *"we can't just throw our kids out there on the street and other spaces with cars."* Speaking about streets in Boyle Heights, one interviewee noted that:



*"They're really high traffic areas and so one of our worries is that if we're encouraging kids to be jumping around on the sidewalk, how do we help parents feel comfortable in letting them do that? because, you know, there aren't any barriers between them and the cars. You know, the way that kids are where they try to be funny and push each other in the street. . . That's definitely a fear. In Boyle Heights that would be dangerous because **cars don't really respect pedestrians.** The idea that you would let go of your kid's hand and let them hop in the crosswalk, people I don't think would feel comfortable."*



Finally, three interviewees mentioned fear of gentrification in the long-term. They felt that added neighborhood amenities could be problematic if existing youth and parents do not benefit. A parent in Boyle Heights involved in a local Play Streets event worried that physical play investments might exacerbate the existing displacement of businesses and residents. This sentiment may indicate a level of distrust between communities and scheduled, City-based planning projects. One participant noted that temporary play projects offer a solution, in

that they may not facilitate displacement while still supporting active play. This is because temporary projects, such as play streets events, do not outwardly suggest long-term City-led investment that is typically associated with gentrification.

Finding 2.2: Disinvestment in play has adverse effects on other populations

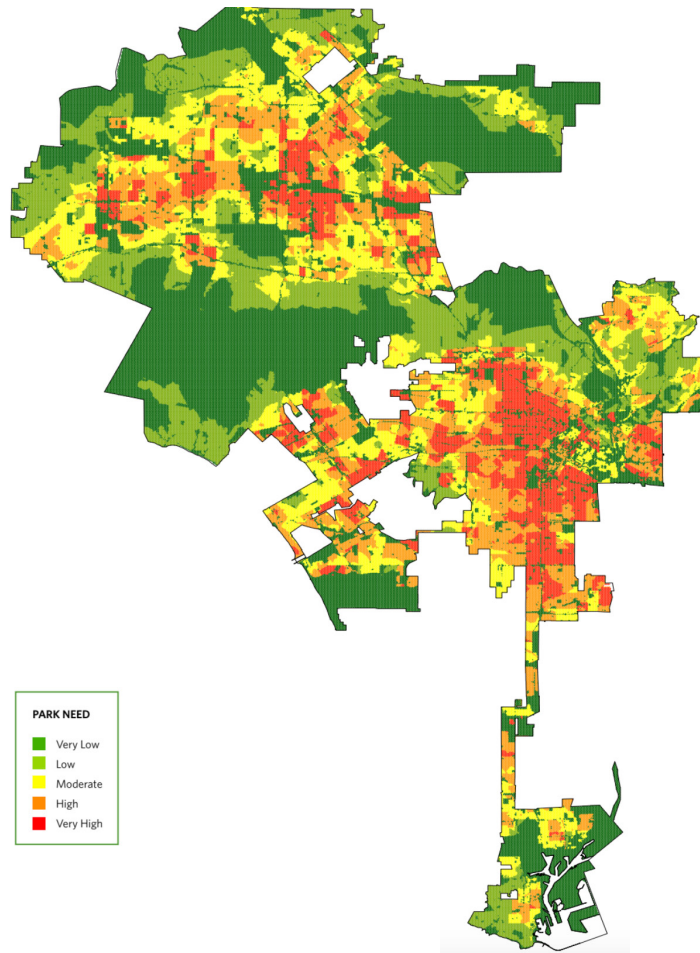
The same barriers to play that affect youth may also affect women's perceived neighborhood safety and willingness to walk outside at certain times or in certain areas. This suggests that programs specifically targeting crime and gang violence may not only make neighborhoods safer for children, but for women and other vulnerable populations as well. The interviewee in Pico Union noted that:

"There's a lot of gang and drug activity. We have several liquor stores that allow people to hang out in the front of the store that are drinking or drunk. So a lot of the kids and women don't feel safe to be outside at night or in the afternoon."

Several interviewees said that play should and does target people other than youth. For instance, the goal of the Play Streets program is to broadly define play so as to encompass and inspire people of all ages. The 2015 Play Streets street closure event in Boyle Heights for instance, drew the attention of gang members in a positive way. They brought their kids to the event, which contributed to a sense of safety in the neighborhood that day. Similarly, the CBO leader in Boyle Heights expects the future playspace at Proyecto Pastoral to be subdivided into several different spaces to be used by seniors, homeless individuals seeking services, and youth. The interviewee from Sherman Oaks also noted that play brings parents together and creates a neighborhood gathering space with "safety in numbers."

Finding 2.3: Playspaces in the public realm may be both a substitute and complement to traditional playspaces

Most youth do not currently play in neighborhood public rights-of-way, though one interviewee in Boyle Heights noted that kids play while waiting with their parents for the bus or on the way back from school. Several interviewees also noted that traditional spaces for play, such as parks and after-school programs, could compete with play in the public right-of-way in their neighborhoods (including Sherman Oaks and South LA), although this depends

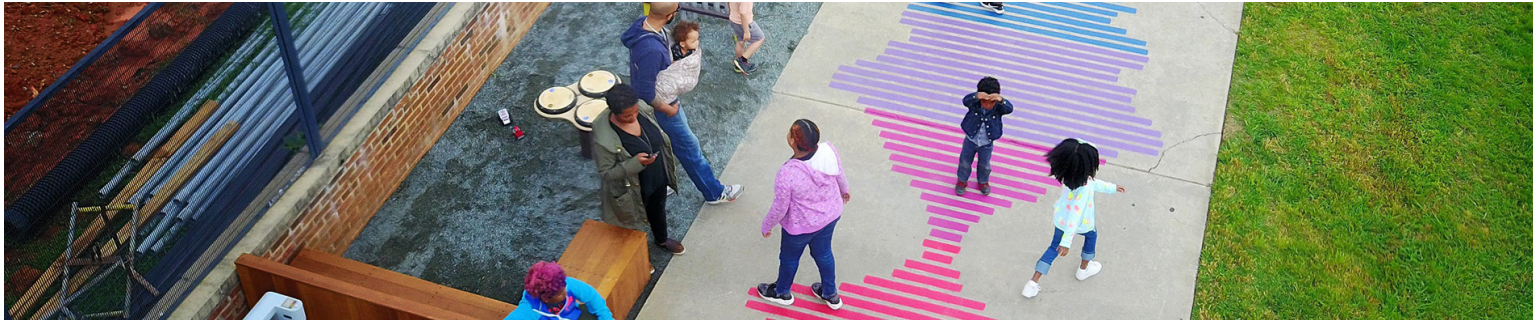


A spatial representation of park need in Los Angeles. Red indicates neighborhoods with the highest need; Source: Los Angeles County Parks and Recreation

on park distance and park conditions. They argued that since existing recreation opportunities are safe and effective, play in the public realm would not be necessary. Interviewees from Boyle Heights and Pico Union, however, cited their neighborhood public parks as unsafe and too scattered. One of the Boyle Heights interviewees noted that participating in traditional recreation programs is cost-prohibitive to some families lacking the resources to pay enrollment fees, and that alternative play could offer a solution. Supervised play in the public realm would provide more frequent and safer opportunities for play for younger children than in local City parks that are hotbeds for gang activity and alcohol consumption.

Finding 2.4: Collaboration with the City is an opportunity and challenge

Among barriers to play in the public right-of-way, interviewees cited City permitting time and costs as a challenge, in addition to difficulty getting buy-in from City Council offices and other City departments. One interviewee expressed frustration in how to get the proper approvals, which City departments would review the project, and which departments would need to issue final approvals. The same interviewee was also concerned with maintenance and upkeep of permanent playspace



Parents watch children at play; Source: KaBOOM!

infrastructure. Another interviewee discussed the challenges in collaborating with LAUSD on a project outside of a school, claiming that "people give up and get frustrated." Another noted that the Bureau of Street Services just "wants to do the very minimum." Interviewees often mentioned other government entities, such as Metro, the Los Angeles Department of Transportation, and the Department of Recreation and Parks, as potential partners and resources in supporting play and building relationships within communities.

A few interviewees expressed optimism about the role of the City. One participant who worked with the Play Streets program in the past noted that the City should support the community so they can do the things they want to do. She stated that the City

has the budget to subsidize street closure permits and encourage more Play Streets events. Another interviewee noted that the street closure permit process is challenging, expensive, and monolingual - all of which pose barriers to access and uptake, but which can be changed.

PLAY IN THE PUBLIC RIGHT-OF-WAY

Finding 3.1: Play means different things to different people

Interviewees included the following phrases when describing play, occasionally drawing on their own experiences of play as a kid: "moving around and dancing with each other"; "interacting with structures"; "being playful with each other, walking,

running, chasing"; "imagination." These phrases likely refer to the interviewees' personal preconceptions of play and its formality or lack thereof. The Play Streets program for instance, is structured around the concept of 'free play': that "play itself is the goal; there is no end goal of winning." One participant echoed this thought and connected principles of play, creativity and, curiosity.

Play may also dovetail with education, and can be used to instigate learning opportunities about healthy living and active lifestyles. For instance, in a conversation about constructing a playspace in front of the Watts Branch Library, one interviewee mentioned that "play is part of children's literacy." The interviewee in Historic Filipinotown noted synergy between education and play:

"As resources for different schools are getting more limited, having these opportunities to do these kind of neat ideas for us to explore; we can have, you know, most of our workshops outside and actually use the built environment to promote all of our education and physical activity workshops. So it is a more holistic approach. We want to involve not only students but their mom or their dad or their grandmother."

Finding 3.2: Playspaces support placemaking principles

Several interviewees noted that play supports a sense of community by providing a gathering place, and reinforcing a community's "connection to place." For instance, prior to a Play Streets event, one community member felt that she did not know her neighbors and did not talk to anyone on her block. The event created a forum, where community members, including gang members, could come together to talk and support one another. One interviewee in Park Mesa Heights noted that:

"When kids have a place to play, 9 out of 10 times adults come with them. Adults come monitor, and it gets to the point where they watch each others' kids. It builds community camaraderie."

Three interviewees noted that more permanent playspaces in the public-right-of-way can improve and "beautify" the aesthetics of the built environment in any community. One interviewee in particular praised how playspaces can serve as a clever point of interest in the neighborhood where other people go. Moreover, if given an interactive quality, they can have aesthetic and fun appeal:



"The nature of being able to walk down a street and turn a corner and see something you didn't expect that has a playful or artistic element has great value in it because it also **expands the way we think**. You think 'well someone created this, maybe this is something I want to create.' I always remember seeing things like that in my life, seeing something I didn't expect to see, and **how wonderful that was.**"



Finding 3.3: Play can combat negative health effects of sedentary lifestyles

Many interviewees mentioned health and wellness as one of the benefits of play. They frequently commented on kids' increasing screen-time as a symptom of play deprivation. Having more frequent and less regimented opportunities for play can encourage kids to get outside and put down their video games. Interviewees believed that play in the public realm could improve personal health and fitness, and could be marshaled as a way for parents to get their kids back outside to engage with the environment: "Kids are always on the phone, playing computer games and Xbox, and it's important to have outside stimulants help youngsters play more than sitting inside." The interviewee in Pico Union noted that:



"You know I think it's very important; children need the opportunity to have a healthy lifestyle and not be secluded in their apartments, you know the area where there's a lot of apartment buildings. Most of the kids don't have any open space to have activities to run, to play, you know to ride bicycles to do different activities instead of sitting in front of a TV. **Or on their cell phones.**"



AWARENESS, FEASIBILITY, AND SCALABILITY

Finding 4.1: Playspace organizers should consider strategic locations and collaborations with other community institutions

Interviewees reached broad consensus about the intersection of play and the schedules of residents' daily lives. Outreach and programming appears critical to the use of playspaces. For instance, the interviewee in Sherman Oaks noted that the playspace near a local school did not see as much engagement as desired - perhaps due to its hidden location or lack of organized programming around the space. In retrospect, they felt that they could have scheduled community events in the space to increase awareness and use. Other interviewees anticipated that programming would be a necessary step. The interviewee in Watts for instance was





Kids at the Fickett St Play Streets event stack blocks; Source: The New York Times

intentional about pairing play with dedicated library programming, such as an outdoor story time for kids. Furthermore, the temporary Play Streets events helped to draw families in because communities

invested time in promoting event visibility and outreach.

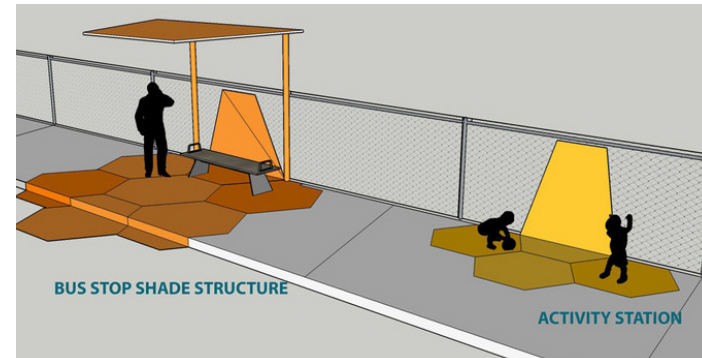
Several interviewees mentioned that play in the

public right-of-way can connect the public realm to community institutions like parks, schools, and community centers, allowing for "spilling in and spilling out" effects and a broader awareness of neighborhood services. An interviewee in Boyle Heights suggested that playspaces should be strategically located near existing amenities and key destinations, like transit stops and parks:

*"I think like having those elements more **sprinkled around** would be helpful because there is a real challenge with safety in the park . . . So having more stations or play respite areas would be really welcome to folks, you know, especially if you're on public transit and you're taking your kids from place to place I just feel like from my experience if you had a landmark, like 'Ok we have to walk 3 more blocks and then we're going to get to the such and such spot and we can stop there and play for a couple minutes,' **it would make moving about from place to place easier.**"*

Finding 4.2: Bottom-up play programs can be scaled up

Many interviewees expressed interest in using their playspace projects as proofs of concept in hopes of



Concept art for 'Let's Play N Learn' ; Source: Duane Border Design

replicating them in other public, "leftover," spaces across the City. This notion confirms the finding from Davidson et al. in their study of the Los Angeles Play Streets program that pilot programs are a viable method in testing effectiveness and getting stakeholders to buy in (Davidson et al., 2016). One interviewee, working on a project in South LA noted that:

*"I look at the concept we have, that we've developed, **how universal it could be** if you just got one of them out there and in front of the right people. This is stuff I think could take off, not just in LA but in the United States. [We] have to . . . think of ways to duplicate it."*

Corroborating this impulse of scalability, two of the interviewees not affiliated with City playspace projects were excited about the other play installations and events going on around the City through Let's Play Everywhere LA and Play Streets. They both asked that I follow up with information about the success of these other playspaces and thoughts about how they could be introduced and duplicated in their neighborhoods. They also happily suggested vacant lots and underutilized spaces in their own communities with untapped potential for play.

Finally, other interviewees stressed that City officials and communities must think beyond one-time, small-scale projects and instead focus on creating a play legacy. The interviewee in Sherman Oaks noted that developing a process to streamline play opportunities is just as important as a discrete playspace project. Another interviewee highlighted this scalable aspect of the Play Streets program. She felt that even though we should always be looking to move towards permanency and long-term impacts, specifically in underserved neighborhoods, temporary pilot programs are also valuable in creating recommendations, assessing capacity, and developing long-term strategies.



*"It's important to look beyond the initial installation and see how a. it can be brought to other places to inspire them or b. be repeated. I think that just the creative thought of creating some kind of beneficial process, just that process, could be documented and repeated. . . **Expandability and being able to send it out in the world** can have a much bigger impact that you ever thought of."*



IMPLICATIONS FOR PLANNING AND POLICY

The above findings have major implications for citywide policy efforts to improve access to youth sports and engender positive public health outcomes. With the upcoming 2028 Olympic Games coming to Los Angeles and the IOC's gift of \$160M, the City has an unprecedented opportunity to reinvest in its sports and recreation programs. To do so, policymakers must embrace our built environment and account for stakeholder voices. These include community-based organizations, neighborhood residents, and parents like those that I interviewed in this project. If the City is to employ an equity-based approach by prioritizing park-poor neighborhoods for investment, special attention must be paid to existing neighborhood contexts

and attitudes towards play, as well as the day-to-day lives and schedules of residents that live in the targeted neighborhoods.

The recommendations below attempt to capture these on-the-ground sentiments of community stakeholders and translate them into actionable tasks tailored toward policymakers in the Los Angeles Mayor's Office. The Mayor and his staff have a unique set of policymaking capabilities. Though the Mayor cannot directly pass legislation like City Council, he can pass Executive Directives with requests for City Departments, convene different stakeholders across sectors, and dictate the City's policy agenda.



Below are several recommendations for the City of Los Angeles and the Mayor's Office of City Services intended to identify and support long-lasting, creative opportunities for play. I organized

recommendations around four categories:

1. promoting play in the public right-of-way,
2. optimizing community and youth engagement,
3. improving outreach and public awareness, and
4. scalability and resiliency.

1. PLAY IN THE PUBLIC RIGHT-OF-WAY

To advance opportunities for play in the public right-of-way, policymakers should be especially cognizant of existing neighborhood factors, such as crime, homelessness, health outcomes, traffic, high vehicle speeds, and existing neighborhood amenities. Lack of safety from vehicles, in particular, must be regarded as a primary impediment to play.

Permanent, one-size-fits-all play installations are likely to be met with different responses in different neighborhoods. Each Los Angeles neighborhood faces unique barriers to play, and playspace solutions should be tailored towards the particular characteristics of each neighborhood. For instance, a temporary play structure may be better suited for neighborhoods that experience high rates of crime, so as not to encourage vandalism or tagging.



Temporary play structures may also combat perceived or actual gentrification, as investment in physical infrastructure is typically associated with newer, wealthier residents. This tactical approach aligns with the small-scale 'just green enough' approaches described by Wolch et al. (2014) and Lydon and Garcia (2015) that have seen short-term success in communities across the country.

Special attention should be paid to neighborhoods' existing spaces for play and recreation, such as parks, libraries, recreation centers, places of worship, and schools. Policymakers should make an effort to collaborate with these institutions so as not to compete with these more traditional, compartmentalized playspaces, but rather use play in the public-right-of-way as a complementary activity. Playspaces should be located at existing neighborhood amenities or en-route to these amenities to ensure that they attract the largest number of potential users.

Policymakers should also expand their play vocabulary. Play means many things to many people and extends beyond children and teenagers. Playspace organizers should strive to create intersectional spaces that promote interaction and safety for communities of all ages, sexes, etc. By fostering inclusive spaces, policymakers can create



A child enjoys a painted hopscotch treatment; Source: KaBOOM!

neighborhood gathering spaces for residents to talk, play, and support one another. Recommendations

for promoting play in the public right-of-way are below in [Table 5](#).

Table 5: Policy Recommendations to Promote Play in the Public Right-of-way

#	Recommendation	Task Lead	Task Support	Timeframe
1.1	Conduct a play needs assessment based on factors such as crime, homelessness, health outcomes, traffic, high vehicle speeds, patterns of neighborhood change, and existing neighborhood amenities - such as parks, libraries, transit stops, schools, places of worship, and recreation centers.	Mayor's Office	Department of Recreation and Parks (RAP), LADOT, LA County Department of Public Health, research partners	Within 1 year
1.2	In play-poor communities, conduct a feasibility analysis of implementing physical streetscape improvements that mimic cul-de-sacs by reducing vehicle throughput and speeds.	LADOT	Mayor's Office, Board of Public Works	Within 5 years
1.3	In play-poor communities, conduct a feasibility analysis of temporarily or permanently leasing City or privately owned parking lots to support play through implementation of basketball hoops, skate equipment, and other low-cost improvements.	LA Department of City Planning (DCP)	Mayor's Office	Within 5 years
1.4	Collaborate with RAP, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA), and the Los Angeles Public Library (LAPL) to assess how play in the public right-of-way can complement existing neighborhood services.	Mayor's Office	RAP, LAUSD, DCA, LAPL	Within 5 years
1.5	Convene a task force to brainstorm intersectionality of play with Citywide initiatives such as gender equity, gang reduction and youth development (GRYD), arts education, health education, children's literacy, aging in place, the 2028 Olympics, Great Streets, and homelessness solutions.	Mayor's Office of City Services	Mayor's Office of Public Engagement (MOPE), Mayor's Office of Public Safety (MOPS), RAP, LADOT	Within 1 year



2. COMMUNITY AND YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Playspace programs should strive to engage both parents and children. The City must develop programs and processes that engage communities as early as possible in the playspace planning and design phases. This will not only ensure requisite buy-in from residents and local Council District offices, but will maximize the community's awareness, use, uptake, and level of investment in the project. Adults must listen to children and consider their own unique forms of play. Programs should consider creative youth engagement strategies for engaging and empowering children, such as design charrettes, conceptual drawings, tactile modeling, and observations (Sutton & Kemp, 2002; Bosco & Joassart-Marcelli, 2005; Malone, 1999). [Table 6](#) contains recommendations intended to encourage youth and community engagement.

[Table 6: Policy Recommendations for Engagement](#)

#	Recommendation	Task Lead	Task Support	Time-frame
2.1	Create a planning and outreach process for playspace programs that incorporates community, parental, and youth feedback as a critical path step.	DCP	LADOT, Mayor's Office, RAP	Within 1 year

3. OUTREACH AND PUBLIC AWARENESS

There is ample opportunity for the City to reinvent its permitting process in order to facilitate play in the public right-of-way. Currently, communities must navigate numerous departments, fees, and approvals in order to secure a temporary street closure permit or to construct a physical play structure on the public right-of-way. Policymakers should attempt to streamline both temporary and permanent play installation processes for communities by working with City departments and/or private partners. They can draw from play programs and policies in other cities, such as Seattle, Chicago, and San Francisco, and from existing City of Los Angeles programs such as Great Streets, Play Streets, People St, and the Adopt-a-Median program (see [Other Public Realm Programs in LA](#) section). The City should also seek partnerships with private entities (sports teams or the fitness industry, for instance) and nonprofits that support play either directly or through philanthropy such as ESPN or KaBOOM!

To fully activate playspaces, policymakers should work with CBOs and City Departments to host dedicated events at playspaces or incorporate playspaces into existing events and programs. As I mention above, playspaces in the public right-of-

way are more attractive to residents when paired with existing neighborhood amenities or events. Though unstructured free play has benefits for children's development and understanding of their built environment (Hart, 2002; Noschis, 1992), playspaces that are programmed around events and

residents' daily schedules are likely to elicit greater community interest. Additional press can also highlight the City's investment in universal access to sports and public health that aligns with the 2028 Olympic Games. [Table 7](#) describes recommendations to improve outreach and public awareness.

Table 7: Policy Recommendations to Improve Awareness and Engagement in Play Programs

#	Recommendation	Task Lead	Task Support	Timeframe
3.1	Convene all City Departments with ownership over the public right-of-way to create a one-stop, streamlined permitting, fee, construction, and maintenance process and/or program to support both temporary, recurring, and permanent play opportunities. The program should be no-or low-cost to residents, reduce the burden placed on community members to procure general liability, and include multi-lingual materials.	Mayor's Office	Bureau of Street Services (BSS), Board of Public Works (BPW), Bureau of Engineering (BOE), DCA	Within 1 year
3.2	After creating the above process and/or program, create a multi-lingual do-it-yourself toolkit targeted at play-poor communities that promotes existing City programs and opportunities for play in the public right-of-way..	Play permit program lead department (determined during 3.1)	Mayor's Office	After completion of 3.1
3.3	Develop a playspace outreach strategy to celebrate neighborhood playspaces in the public-right-of-way, increase community awareness of existing playspaces, optimize awareness of future playspace programs, and drive desired utilization and health outcomes.	Play permit program lead department (determined during 3.1)	Mayor's Office, DCP, private sector partners	After completion of 3.1
3.4	Celebrate and build public support for the Let's Play Everywhere LA and Play Streets Phase 2 projects. Construct a narrative around play in the public realm, and encourage the Mayor to promote the success and replicability of these play programs.	Mayor's Office	N/A	Within 6 months





Kids inspired to play by a creative playspace on the sidewalk and adjacent fence ; Source: KaBOOM!

4. SCALABILITY AND RESILIENCY

By embracing and nurturing play in the public right-of-way, the City has an opportunity to leave a lasting physical mark on neighborhoods in Los Angeles. Though pilot projects are an effective way of clearing bureaucratic hurdles, testing proofs of concept, and dampening gentrification effects associated with investment in infrastructure, they are ephemeral in nature and do not always lead to long-term institutional change. The Mayor and other policymakers should encourage replication and scaling-up of successful play in the public right-of-way concepts, installations, and programs. They also must work to incubate these programs within City Departments and institutions that will outlast the existing Mayor and extend well beyond the 2028 Olympics. Policy recommendations to ensure play programs are scalable and resilient can be found in [Table 8](#) on the following page.

Table 8: Policy Recommendations for Play Programs' Scalability and Resiliency

#	Recommendation	Task Lead	Task Support	Timeframe
4.1	Conduct a Citywide assessment of City-owned and private underutilized lots and public spaces that can support play in the public right-of-way. Establish a physical typology of these spaces (see Playspace Typologies section above for a starting point) and a basic menu of feasible playspace solutions that could be applied, notwithstanding community and youth engagement.	Mayor's Office	General Services Division, DCP	Within 3 years
4.2	Convene a forum comprised of private entities, nonprofits (including KaBOOM!), and local technology enterprises to brainstorm scalable play in the public right-of-way solutions.	Mayor's Office	N/A	Within 1 year
4.3	Develop a long-term plan to incubate play programs/processes within City Departments. Leverage arguments that permanent playspaces will promote catalytic investments in neighborhoods.	Mayor's Office	RAP, LADOT, DCP, DCA, BPW	Within 3 years
4.4	Collaborate with LA2028 (the Los Angeles organizing committee for the 2028 Olympic and Paralympic Games) to develop a 10-year plan to leverage play in the public right-of-way concepts and programs in physical and institutional investments leading up to the Olympic Games.	Mayor's Office	LA2028	Within 1 year



The City of Los Angeles ; Source: KaBOOM!



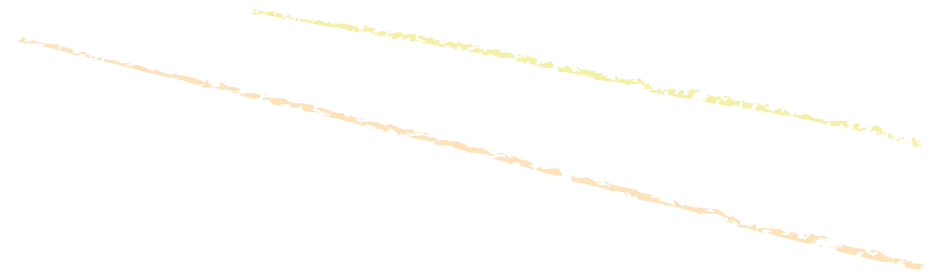
Investing in play means investing in our youth. The above recommendations attempt to create long-lasting funding sources and programs that improve outcomes at the individual and neighborhood scales. It is imperative that the Mayor's Office thinks beyond pilot programs and work towards an embedded sea change in how we conceive of play. By compartmentalizing play into parks and schools, we risk disinvestment in public spaces. But if we incorporate play into parents' day-to-day schedules in unexpected and inviting ways, we will motivate children towards healthy lifestyles and engaged learning.

For better or worse, the 2028 Olympics will apply pressure on Los Angeles government officials to deliver on their promises. With \$160M from the IOC earmarked for youth recreation, Measure A funds that will be funneled towards new open spaces, and Measure M dollars providing investment in active transportation and public transit, the Los Angeles of 2028 will be remarkably different from the Los

Angeles of today. These revenue streams will assist the Mayor in meeting his goal to "make Los Angeles the healthiest city in America" (LACityview35, 2017).

This document is another resource in that fight. The tangible action items herein form a roadmap for the City to incubate play in the public realm. Initiating a dialog about play in the public right-of-way will not be an easy task. Entities at all levels will need to be on board with breaking the status quo and accepting that play is the responsibility of everyone – not just parents, recreation center staff, or school teachers. Play champions must be solutions-oriented, and work with communities to respond to perceived barriers to play in the public realm.

Finally, the City must acknowledge that the public realm is not static. It is instead an oasis for our youth, a place for discovery, inspiration, and growth, and above all, a **pathway to play**.





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SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Date:

Time:

Location:

Neighborhood:

1. Do you see kids playing in the public spaces of your neighborhood?

1a. If yes, where, when, and how?

1b. If no, what prevents youth from playing in your neighborhood?

2. The City through its public agencies usually builds parks, recreation centers, and schools. Is there a role that community members have in the creation and design of playspaces for youth?

3. Did you incorporate youth input into your Let's Play Everywhere LA/Play Streets playspace design?

4. What have been the challenges of the Let's Play Everywhere LA/Play Streets program? Successes?

5. Do you think it is important for youth to play in non-traditional play-spaces such as plazas or sidewalks?

5a. If yes, why?

5b. If no, why?

6. How might additional neighborhood playspaces affect the entire community? In the short-term? In the long-term?

