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FROM ECO TO EXPLOITATION: A CASE STUDY OF THE TRANSFORMATION AND COMMERCIALIZATION OF AN URBAN PLAY SPACE AT ADA CIGANLIJA

Od eko do eksploatacije: Studija slučaja transformacije i komercijalizacije jednog urbanog prostora za igru na Adi Ciganliji

ABSTRACT: *This paper examines the spatial politics of childhood through a longitudinal case study of play space transformations at Ada Ciganlija in Belgrade between 2019 and 2025. Grounded in a socio-cultural theoretical framework, the new sociology of childhood, critical urban perspectives, and poststructuralism, this research explores how shifting urban policies, design logics translated into playground design trends, and socio-economic priorities become materialized in public play spaces and shape their pedagogical potential. The study traces three distinct phases in the play space's development, from coexistence of traditional and ecological models, through institutional investment in inclusive design, to the rise of commercialized, adult-managed entertainment structures. Using spatial and temporal analysis, supported by field observations and visual ethnography, the research questions whether public care for children and families is challenged by these transformations. Findings reveal a progressive marginalization of pedagogically valuable and participatory play environments, replaced by profit-driven interventions. The study contributes to critical childhood studies in urban context by highlighting how play spaces convey dominant societal messages and materially shape children's opportunities for autonomy, creativity, and belonging. It argues for reclaiming public play environments as pedagogically meaningful spaces, raising questions about accountability, transparency, and the right to the city in the context of childhood.*

KEYWORDS: *play spaces, right to the city, childhood, pedagogical potential of space, urban childhood policies*

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APSTRAKT: Ovaj rad razmatra prostorne politike detinjstva kroz longitudinalnu studiju transformacija prostora za igru na Adi Ciganliji, u Beogradu, u periodu 2019–2025. godine. Polazeći od sociokulturnog teorijskog okvira, nove sociologije detinjstva, kritičkih urbanih perspektiva i poststrukturalizma istražuje se kako se promenljive urbane politike, dizajnerske logike pretočene u trendove dizajniranja prostora za igru i društveno-ekonomski prioriteti materijalizuju u javnim prostorima za igru i oblikuju njihov pedagoški potencijal. Rad prati tri faze razvoja jednog dela Ade Ciganlije namenjenog dečjoj igri: od koegzistencije tradicionalnog i ekološkog modela, preko institucionalnog investiranja u inkluzivni i bezbedni dizajn, do komercijalizacije prostora kroz upravljane, zabavne sadržaje. Korišćenjem prostorne i vremenske analize, uz oslonac na terenska posmatranja i vizuelnu etnografiju, analizira se da li i kako javna briga za decu i porodice postaje (ne)vidljiva u ovim transformacijama. Nalazi ukazuju na progresivnu marginalizaciju pedagoški vrednih i participativnih prostora igre, koji bivaju zamenjeni netransparentnim, profitno vođenim intervencijama. Rad doprinosi kritičkim studijama detinjstva, vaspitanja i obrazovanja u urbanom kontekstu, ističući potrebu da se prostori igre ponovo osmisle kao demokratski, inkluzivni i pedagoški relevantni ambijenti i kao indikator društvene odgovornosti i prava na grad u kontekstu detinjstva.

KLJUČNE REČI: prostori za igru, pravo na grad, detinjstvo, pedagoški potencijal prostora, urbane politike detinjstva

Introduction

With rapid urban expansion and the increasing tendency of families to settle in cities, it was estimated that by 2025, 60% of the world's children would be growing up in urban environments (Krishnamurthy, 2019). More recent data from UNICEF (2024) estimate that three in five children (approximately 60%) are expected to live in urban settings by mid-century, reinforcing earlier projections for 2025 and beyond. These demographic shifts have made the quality of children's lives in urban contexts a pressing issue, prompting a wave of interdisciplinary research into childhood experiences in contemporary cities, often framed against the backdrop of moral anxieties, screen-saturated routines, family stress, and declining social cohesion (Woodyer, Martin and Carter, 2016). Children's everyday experiences in urban and rural settings differ markedly in terms of opportunities for play (Lefebvre, 1968; Brown, 2008; Harvey, 2013). As a result, a growing number of scholars (Christensen, 2003; Francis and Lorenzo, 2005; Freeman, 2006; Brown and Patte, 2013, Malović, 2022) have turned their attention to how urban (play) space constructs the conditions and limitations of children's play, since play is a culturally mediated co-construction between the child and their environment, one that activates children's full developmental potential, fosters relationality, and enables experiential learning through self-directed action (Krnjaja, 2012a; 2012b).

Building on Lefebvre's theory of the social production of space, Soja (1980) emphasized that the structure of organized space is neither a separate, autonomous system nor merely a reflection of social class relations. Rather, space constitutes a dialectically defined component of the general relations of production, simultaneously social and spatial. This conception challenges the idea of space as neutral or static, instead positioning it as both shaped by and shaping socio-political dynamics. Space is actively transformed by being produced, organized, and contested in ways that reflect and reinforce dominant value systems, political ideologies, and economic priorities. Urban planning, in this regard, functions as a deeply political act (Lefebvre, 1991; Petrović, 2025), and public spaces, including those designated for children's play, are key sites where the priorities of governance and the influence of capital become visible and tangible.

Play spaces and playgrounds, while seemingly benign and child-focused, are thus not exempt from these broader transformations, as they too emerge through the social production of space, shaped by the same forces of planning, regulation, and capital investment that organize the wider urban landscape. Their design, location, and function speak volumes about how a society views childhood, public space, and the rights of its youngest citizens. As observed by Malović (2022), the displacement of children's play from informal, unstructured environments into adult-designed, programmatically structured spaces marks a shift in how societies envision childhood and regulate children's presence in the city. These shifts are indicative of deeper cultural and political values: they encode assumptions about what childhood should be, what children should do, and how they should be supervised, protected, or even commercialized. In this way, play space and playgrounds serve not just as sites of play, leisure, learning or development, but as socio-material expressions of how a society governs care, learning, autonomy, safety and risk, creativity and visibility in relation to children and families.

Urban play space as a mediator of culturally situated learning

Contemporary socio-cultural theories, emphasize that human development, including children's learning and growth, is not an isolated, natural process but a historically and culturally situated one (Vygotsky, 1978; Cole, 1996; Rogoff, 2003). Within this same perspective, the new sociology of childhood highlights that childhood is not a universal biological stage, but a socially constructed phenomenon that reflects how a particular society interprets, values, and regulates the early years of life (James and Prout, 1997; Prout and James, 2005; Corsaro, 2011). While biological immaturity is an undeniable fact, how this immaturity is understood and approached is a matter of cultural interpretation (Prout and James, 2005; Miškeljin, 2022).

Within this framework, children are seen as active participants in their own development, not passive recipients of adult interventions (Pavlović-Breneselović, 2015). Through their interactions with people, materials, and symbolic systems children both shape and are shaped by the cultural environments in which they grow up (Engeström, 2001). Physical spaces, including play spaces, act not only as material backdrops to children's activity but as cultural artefacts that mediate learning and participation processes (Golubović, 1973; Lenz Taguchi, 2010).

Play spaces, therefore, are constructed spaces, embedded with cultural values, adult intentions, and implicit pedagogical messages. Their design reflects assumptions about what childhood should look like, how children should behave, and what kinds of play are valued or discouraged. As Nelson argues, children grow up within adult scripts, and urban play spaces often reflect those scripts in both explicit and implicit ways (Cole, 1996).

Moreover, these environments are shaped by broader discursive and ideological frameworks, often unconsciously. As Wertsch (1993) and Foucault (2007) noted, the tools and discourses we use in urban planning are rarely neutral, they carry with them specific socio-cultural logics and power relations. Thus, to understand how urban childhood is structured and governed, we must interrogate not only the physical spaces but also the discourses, assumptions, and values that underpin their creation.

In this study, we move away from a technocratic, efficiency-driven view of urban planning, common in neoliberal contexts, that reduces public spaces to questions of cost-effectiveness or safety compliance. Instead, we adopt a poststructuralist, socio-cultural lens that allows us to explore how play space and playgrounds function as symbolic and political texts. They are spaces where adult ideologies about childhood are spatialized, and where children are subtly taught what it means to grow up in their particular urban and cultural context (Williams, 2005; Moss, 2016).

In this paper, the concept of *pedagogical potential* refers to the "capacity" of a space to shape and support children's learning, development, and participation through its physical, symbolic, social, and discursive dimensions (Malović, 2022). Drawing on poststructural theoretical orientations this notion rejects the idea of space as a neutral container for activity. Instead, it sees playgrounds as purposefully designed environments that embed cultural meanings, normative expectations, and adult assumptions about childhood, learning and development (Lenz Taguchi, 2010).

Urban play space and playgrounds have the potential to function as more than recreational zones. When carefully designed, they can promote shared learning experiences, imaginative play, connections with nature, spatial autonomy, and meaningful participation (Cole and Engeström, 2007). Those spaces can offer opportunities for children to engage in reasonable risk-taking, explore boundaries, and co-construct their environment, all of which contribute to developing agency and a sense of self-efficacy (Malović, 2022).

In this sense, pedagogical potential is not merely a matter of equipment or compliance with developmental milestones, it is about how space enables or constrains children's ways of being, knowing, and interacting. It invites us to critically examine how playgrounds structure conditions of growing up, how they reflect particular images of the child, and what kinds of identities, behaviors, and relationships they make possible or exclude.

Urban play space as materialization of shifting urban governance logics

Whereas children in the past played freely in meadows, streets, and interstitial or undefined urban spaces, often unstructured and undesignated, today's urban childhood is increasingly shaped by designated environments with predetermined functions (e.g. sport fields, playgrounds equipped with swings and slides, or entertainment parks). These spaces are often fragmented by roads and boulevards that young children cannot safely navigate alone, making their access conditional on adult availability and willingness to accompany them (Malović, 2019; 2022).

This shift has been discussed as part of a broader process of the institutionalization of contemporary childhood (Rasmussen, 2004; Radović, 2015; Malović and Lazarević, 2017), where informal, child-defined spaces are gradually replaced by adult-designed and purpose-built environments. Here, 'institutionalization' does not refer to formal institutions, but to the spread of institutional logics (standardization, regulation, supervision, and predefined functions) into public spaces where children once acted with greater autonomy. In this sense, the *institutionalization of childhood* refers to the diffusion of institutional norms such as order, predictability, surveillance, and adult-defined purpose into everyday environments of childhood, thereby transforming public play spaces into extensions of institutional logic.

Beyond this, broader urban transformations also play a decisive role in shaping children's lived experiences. The logic of urbanization itself contributes significantly since play spaces are often allocated to the residual, leftover areas of the city that remains once all other functional zones of urban infrastructure have been planned and built (Freeman, 2006), giving play a marginal position in urban lifestyle. These spaces are a product of economic, spatial, and political priorities that typically place children's wellbeing at the margins. Furthermore, this marginalization is compounded by the growing commercialization of both childhood and urban space. Drawing on Lefebvre's (1991) theory that every society produces its own space, scholars argue that in consumer societies, the symbolic value of goods has overtaken their utilitarian function (Batarilo, 2016). Within this shift, the city itself becomes a commodity, reshaped to accommodate consumption and branding logics, often at the expense of public and social uses. This commodification process extends into the realm of

children's play: playgrounds are not only designed to be visually appealing or safe, but also to align with broader consumer trends and marketable aesthetics, so the commercialization of urban play spaces can be seen as an extension of the broader commodification of childhood itself, where play becomes an object of design, regulation, and marketing, rather than an open-ended, child-directed experience (Malović, 2019).

Urban play spaces are not simply physical arrangements designed for play and leisure, they are also deeply political landscapes. They reflect underlying ideologies about childhood, families, risk and safety, ecology and economic priorities. Public play spaces are thus part of the broader urban logic in which capital accumulation, social control, and symbolic messaging converge (Malović, 2022; Petrović, 2025). The transformation of a single urban play space in Belgrade (from ecological experimentation to inclusive/safe design to commercial redevelopment) can be read as a materialization of shifting urban governance logics and of changing societal narratives around children, families, and public space from ecologically inspired play ideals to the full exploitation of children's public space through commercialized urban redevelopment.

As such, understanding how play spaces are designed, managed, and transformed provides insight into the societal values that are spatialized, whether these values center ecology, safety, inclusivity, or profit and is there a pedagogical perspective into this matter. These physical, symbolic and discursive changes encode a politics of childhood that is rarely made explicit but is always active in the built environment.

In discussing what constitutes a good childhood, play is indispensable. Indeed, children's play is often viewed as a "barometer" of how societies treat childhood (Casey, 2017). Ensuring access to supportive play spaces that allow children to engage actively in play is increasingly recognized as a crucial societal goal (Spiegel et al., 2014), at least at the declarative level. Yet, the complex issue of declining play by reducing the diverse opportunities for play in urban context is often addressed superficially, for instance by installing new playgrounds without thoughtful consideration of their pedagogical potential. In such cases, the sheer number of playgrounds is taken as a metric of support for play, rather than their actual capacity to foster children's wellbeing (Malović, 2022). This paper raises the question of whether the lack of thoughtful consideration for the pedagogical potential of urban play spaces reflects a broader neglect within pedagogical and urban policy frameworks toward families with young children and, ultimately, a disregard for children themselves, for childhood, and for our collective future. As various authors emphasize, a society that neglects its children neglects its future (Gleeson, Sipe and Rolley, 2006).

In interpreting the observed spatial transformations, it is important to recognize broader *trends in playground design* (Malović, 2022) that frame these changes and influence both their material and symbolic configurations. Contemporary playgrounds often reflect a complex interplay between safety

regulations, ecological awareness, pedagogical theories, social inclusion agendas and commercial interests. These spaces rarely emerge from children's direct *participation* or expressed needs; rather, they are shaped by adult-driven planning, regulatory frameworks, and market logic (Gill, 2007; Brown and Patte, 2013; Cook, 2014).

One of the most dominant trends in playground design is the emphasis on *safety*. In various countries over time, playground injuries have been identified as a major concern, prompting the introduction of safety standards aimed at injury prevention. While these standards have guided the development of safer environments, they have also led to the standardization or *uniformization of playgrounds* (Malović, 2022). Less obviously, this trend reflects the logic of *commercialization*, as the establishment of standardized requirements has helped create and regulate a market for playground equipment, thereby subordinating playground planning to commercial interests and market-driven imperatives (Spiegel et al., 2014).

While *inclusive playgrounds* aim to accommodate all children regardless of their physical or cognitive abilities (Burke, 2013), there is growing critique of *quasi-inclusivity* – spaces that are technically accessible yet fail to facilitate genuine social interaction among diverse users (Wenger et al., 2021). Similarly, so-called *eco-playgrounds*, built from natural or recycled materials, have gained popularity, but their pedagogical potential diminishes without sustained maintenance and engagement (Malović, 2022). *Adventure playgrounds*, rooted in child-led creativity and healthy risk-taking, have largely been replaced or commercialized into *adventure parks* – pay-to-play spaces that simulate risk through tightly controlled and regulated experiences (Gill, 2021).

These trends underscore tensions between care and control, creativity and consumption, freedom and regulation. The evolution of the play space at Ada Ciganlija thus becomes a lens through which to examine not only spatial and aesthetic change, but also shifting pedagogical, ecological, and commercial values embedded in urban childhood policies.

Methodological framework

The aim of this research is to explore how urban policy, design rationales, and shifting societal values are materialized through changes in public play space over time. By analyzing the transformation of a specific play space on Ada Ciganlija in Belgrade between 2019 and 2025, this study seeks to identify the socio-political and urban planning logics that have shaped these changes and to critically evaluate the pedagogical potential of the resulting spatial configurations. Through spatial and temporal analysis, this study questions whether and how care for children and families is embedded, or absent, in the policies and priorities that govern the design and transformation of these spaces. More specifically, *the objectives* of this research are to:

1. *Map and describe the key changes* in the design and use of a public play space on Ada Ciganlija across three distinct phases (2019–2020, 2021–2023 and 2023–2025).
2. *Identify the implicit and explicit urban and political rationales and trends in playground design* that informed these spatial transformations, including considerations of ecology, safety, inclusivity and commercial development.
3. *Critically assess the pedagogical potential* of the evolving play environments in relation to children's agency, access, and quality of play.
4. Interrogate the presence or absence of care for children and families as a guiding principle in the processes of planning, redesign, and commodification of urban play space by identifying *shifting spatial politics of childhood*.

This research adopts a *qualitative, interpretative approach* (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018) rooted in socio-cultural theoretical framework and poststructuralist perspectives. The transformation of a selected play space on Ada Ciganlija (Belgrade) is analyzed across three temporal phases (2019–2020, 2021–2023, 2023–2025), each marked by distinct spatial configurations and design logics. This *longitudinal case study* enables a diachronic reading of urban change and the shifting narratives surrounding children, families, and public space, operationalized through a *historically sensitive, sequence-oriented analysis* (Abbott, 2001; Wodak and Meyer, 2016).

The selection of this specific site and timeframe is grounded in both empirical and theoretical considerations. The Eco Playground at Ada Ciganlija was first chosen as a field site in 2019 during the author's doctoral research on the pedagogical potential of urban play spaces, due to its distinctive nature-based design and its rarity within the Belgrade context (Malović, 2022). Initial fieldwork revealed that this play space not only offered unique affordances for children's exploratory and risk-rich play but also appeared unusually dynamic in terms of maintenance, spatial organization, and adult use. As the longitudinal doctoral research progressed, notable spatial and design shifts were observed on-site, first the decline of the Eco Playground, then the installation of a new "inclusive/safe" playground, (later) followed by the emergence of commercial play infrastructures. These changes suggested a patterned transformation that extended beyond routine maintenance and pointed to broader urban-policy and market-driven logics.

For this reason, the period 2019–2025 was selected as a meaningful analytic window: it captures three distinct and empirically observable phases of redevelopment, each corresponding to detectable shifts in design rationales, governance practices, and public use. The present study builds on the previously collected fieldnotes, visual records, and observational data from the doctoral research, supplemented by additional field visits and photographic documentation conducted in 2023–2025. This cumulative dataset allows for a

fine-grained diachronic analysis of how a single urban play space materially expresses shifting urban priorities from ecological experimentation, to safety/inclusion discourse, to overt commercialization, thereby offering a theoretically rich site for examining the politics of childhood in contemporary urban space.

The research relies on the following methods and techniques:

- *Visual Ethnography* (Pink, 2011; 2013) and *spatial and visual analysis* (Rose, 2016): Archival and field photographs and video materials, satellite imagery, and observational notes are used to trace material changes in playground structure, organization, and surrounding context. This includes identifying added, removed, or transformed elements and their intended or likely functions.

In this study, the term *visual ethnography* is used in line with Pink's (2011; 2013) definition of visual ethnography as an approach that produces and interprets visual materials not merely as illustrations, but as contextualized, situated data embedded in social practice. This aligns with the observational character of the research, which relied on longitudinal, in-situ visual documentation to trace spatial change and everyday uses of the play space across different periods. In this sense, the term refers to the ethnographic function of visual records within a sustained field engagement, rather than to a separate methodological tradition. For this reason, *visual ethnography* is retained as the most accurate descriptor of the visual component of the study.

- *Document and policy review* (Prior, 2003): Available public documents (e.g., strategic documents, rulebooks, websites content) are analyzed to deepen the understanding of dominant discourses, rationales, and urban policies driving the transformation process.
- *Thematic analysis* (Davies, 2003; MacNaughton, 2005): A critical, theory-driven reading of collected data is conducted using coding categories derived from the theoretical framework particularly from understanding urban play space as mediator of culturally situated learning and the analysis of the pedagogical potential of play spaces; and understanding play spaces as materialization of shifting urban governance logics and recognizing trends in design playgrounds.
- *Interpretative narrative construction* (Davies, 2003; MacNaughton, 2005): Each phase is interpreted as a spatial „narrative“ that embodies particular assumptions about childhood, urban development, and public responsibility. Through comparative interpretation, the study traces a trajectory of shifting priorities, from ecological experimentation to commodified multifunctionality.

Table 1*Timeline of Play space Transformation and Research Focus (2019–2025)*

| Year | Phase of Play space Development | Research Focus | Key Observations & Sources |
|-----------|---|--|---|
| 2019–2020 | Phase 1 – Coexistence of two separate playgrounds: a traditional one and an ecological one | Initial mapping and documentation of existing spaces, observation of spatial logic, values (ecology, risk) | Field notes, photographs and videos, city planning documents, spatial observation, media reports, website content |
| 2021–2023 | Phase 2 – Ecological playground remains; traditional one replaced with inclusive/safety-oriented design; installation of zip-line as risk-play element | Observation of new spatial logics, values (ecology, inclusion, risk, safety), and emerging hybridization of spaces | Media reports, website content, spatial analysis, fieldwork (repeat visits), photographic and video documentation |
| 2023–2025 | Phase 3 – Transformation into a unified multi-functional play park with visible commercial elements, loss of ecological and inclusive aspects | Analysis of commercial encroachment and its implications on childhood politics and pedagogical potential | Media reports, website content, spatial analysis, fieldwork (repeat visits), photographic and video documentation, documenting physical changes, thematic coding, critical discourse analysis |

Contextual framework

Belgrade, the capital of Serbia, is structurally positioned on the semi-periphery of the global capitalist system, which reinforces patterns of underdevelopment, spatial inequality, and diminished quality of life (Blagojević-Hjusun, 2012; Miletić-Stepanović, 2020). There is persistent dissonance between the proclaimed developmental priorities of governing structures and the city's actual capacity (or willingness) to become a genuinely child- and family-friendly environment. Unlike cities in the global North, where middle-class families tend to relocate to well-connected suburbs, families in Belgrade mostly reside in central municipalities, areas that are also the city's administrative, business, and tourist hubs, due to the city's fragmented urban planning and underdeveloped transport infrastructure (Tomanović and Petrović, 2014). In many Belgrade neighborhoods, families with young children lack opportunities for quality (understood here as unhurried, shared time in safe, stimulating, and accessible outdoor settings), outdoor (an aspect many parents prioritize) time and play making visits to city parks a common practice, particularly on weekends when parents are more available to accompany their children (Malović, 2022).

The city lacks a coherent policy framework for supporting children's play outside of institutional contexts. Strategic documents such as the *Belgrade Development Strategy* (2017) and the *Strategy for Sustainable Urban Development of the Republic of Serbia 2030* (2019) rarely mention children, play, or child-

friendly urban spaces. In the Belgrade strategy, playgrounds are the matter only in relation to pest control measures, symbolically reflecting their marginal role in city planning. Moreover, there is no coordinated or participatory approach to designing or maintaining play infrastructure (Mitranić, 2016), and the absence of action plans or targeted measures continues to limit the development of diverse, meaningful play environments in public space.

Within this policy vacuum, the 2019 *Rulebook on the Safety of Children's Playgrounds* (by Ministry of Economy, RS) has emerged as a central regulatory mechanism shaping the current landscape of public play. Introduced to align playground design with existing European safety standards, the Rulebook defines technical requirements for all new and existing playgrounds in Serbia, including mandatory shock-absorbing surfaces and equipment that focuses primarily on developing motor skills. Like most similar rulebook adopted by other countries, this rulebook reflects a technocratic and risk-averse approach that reduces play to a matter of physical safety and standard compliance, often at the expense of open-ended, imaginative, or risky play (Spiegel et al., 2014, Malović, 2022). While officially described as enhancing safety and inclusivity, such regulation tends to narrow the pedagogical, social, and cultural dimensions of play and imposes a one-size-fits-all model of public childhood infrastructure – one that is a direct consequence of the broader trend toward the unification and standardization of play spaces.

Implementation of the Rulebook has been uneven, marked by incompleteness, inconsistency, and limited transparency. Such patterns, common in the introduction of regulatory frameworks in Serbia, raise questions about whether the Rulebook genuinely prioritizes children's safety or whether it primarily advances opaque, market-driven interests. Although only two accredited bodies are authorized to issue safety certificates, inspection data show low coverage in Belgrade's public spaces, with most certified playgrounds in 2020–2021 belonging to private institutions or commercial venues (Malović, 2022). The Rulebook (2019) also requires every public outdoor playground to display an informational board specifying each play element, identifying the responsible installer, thus indicating who maintains the site and providing other legally prescribed details; however, compliance with this requirement has been inconsistent across the city.

This study situates itself within this broader urban and regulatory context by examining a concrete play site located in Ada Ciganlija, a major recreational zone in Belgrade.

Findings and discussion

The presentation of findings follows a chronological structure reflecting the transformation of the selected play space on Ada Ciganlija over a six-year period (2019–2025). The analysis is organized into three phases that correspond to distinct spatial configurations and developmental interventions: (1) the

coexistence of two separate playgrounds – one traditional, one ecological; (2) the emergence of an inclusive and safety-oriented design, incorporating controlled elements of risky play; and (3) the integration of the area into a unified, multifunctional park marked by signs of commercialization. This temporal framing enables a contextualized interpretation of spatial, political, and pedagogical shifts inscribed in the material reconfiguration of the play space.

Phase 1: Coexistence of traditional and eco playgrounds

In 2019 and 2020, Ada Ciganlija's play space featured two neighboring yet contrasting playgrounds: a Traditional Playground composed of fixed metal and wooden structures (Figure 1), and an Eco Playground made of natural materials with a more open and loosely regulated layout (Figure 1: 1a, 1b).

Figure 1

Coexistence of the Traditional and Eco Playgrounds during Phase 1 (2019–2020).



Figure 1a, 1b

Eco Playground made of natural materials with a more open and loosely regulated layout



The Traditional Playground², while not the primary focus of earlier research, was systematically documented through field visits in 2019 and 2020. There is no publicly available information, either on-site or in municipal or institutional records, about when it was built or which entity was responsible for its installations. It featured standard equipment: slides, swings, seesaws, climbing frames, and a rocket-shaped superstructure, characteristic of playgrounds built in the previous century. These elements lacked modern safety features, and the surface was primarily grass and soil, with minimal support infrastructure (there were few benches and trash cans).

In contrast, the Eco Playground was built in 2014 through a partnership between the public company Ada Ciganlija and private firms Neoplanta, Roda & Mercator, as indicated by on-site signage/board (Figure 1: 1a). It was designed and equipped by Green Decor, whose website³ confirms their full involvement and features photographs showing its original condition, including later-damaged elements like safety ropes. The playground was composed of wood and rope, with features for climbing, balancing and crawling, surfaces of grass, earth, and pebbles, and a section resembling an outdoor classroom with seating, bins for waste sorting, a writing board, and an abacus, most of which were later destroyed than removed.

Although promoted as an ecologically oriented public space, the playground also displayed early signs of commercialization: the prominent placement of corporate logos on the on-site signage reveals that even nature-based design was embedded within marketing logics that target visitors as potential consumers, signaling the initial emergence of commercial interests in this play space.

The traditional playground exemplifies the long-standing *trend of standardized design* – the so-called “four S’s”: swings, slides, see-saws, and superstructures (Frost, 2012) widespread due to the mass production of playground equipment. By contrast, the Eco Playground reflects a newer approach that uses natural materials and terrain to support varied, open-ended play experiences and the broader “*returning children to nature*” movement (McAllister, 2011).

Though adjacent, these playgrounds offered starkly different play affordances, opportunities for joint participation, and support for diverse forms of play, ranging from physical and exploratory to imaginative and cooperative. The Eco Playground was designed as an integrated whole rather than as a collection of isolated elements⁴. This coherence encouraged collective engagement, as children were not guided toward compartmentalized activities but invited to move fluidly across the space. Such a layout stimulated spatial exploration and testing of personal limits.

2 By 2021, this playground was removed and replaced by a newly installed safety-oriented structure.

3 Retrieved (7/28/2025) from: <https://greendecor.co.rs/project/eko-park-ada-ciganlija/>

4 the only later-added independent feature was the zip line.

During one field visit, three children: Kosta (4), Jovan (4), and Kalina (2) began exploring the obstacle section of the playground. Kalina followed her older brother, first observing how he maneuvered across the structures before attempting to imitate his movements. Her mother remained nearby and ready to assist, but largely refrained from intervening, allowing Kalina to try independently. After repeatedly traversing one of the routes, which involved climbing a wall with handholds, crossing an unsteady bridge, and descending a slide, Kalina gradually mastered the sequence and no longer required physical support. Still, Kosta waited for her at the end of the path, offering encouragement as she completed each attempt. (fieldwork notes, 26 September 2021)

Figure 2

Collaborative play and exploratory movement at the Eco Playground



Familiar globally, Traditional Playgrounds have been shown to quickly lose children's interest due to their limited affordances (Hee Kim, 2018; Malović, 2022). Once children master the fixed elements, they no longer present a challenge. Such environments also fail to support collaborative play or symbolic expression. Use of the space remains largely individual, similar to gym routines, with repetitive actions and minimal peer interaction. The role of parents at such playgrounds is often akin to that of referees or lifeguards, as they step into play to resolve conflicts (such as disputes over whose turn it is to use the swing) or to prevent injuries caused by pushing or the use of equipment like swings and seesaws.

By contrast, the Eco Playground supported a more fluid and dynamic experience. While the structures were fixed, their organic layout encouraged movement across the space and invited varied uses. Children could climb, balance, and explore natural textures like bark and pebbles. Although not a full adventure playground, it demonstrated a modest level of risk-friendly design, encouraging curiosity and exploration. We often observed children in this space helping one another overcome obstacles, indicating a spirit of collaboration in play, a contrast to the individualistic orientation observed at the Traditional Playground.

Field observations showed that children moved freely between the two playgrounds, integrating structured and more open-ended play. The Traditional Playground appealed to younger children and parents favoring predictability, while the Eco Playground attracted children seeking challenge and independence. Notably, adult supervision at the Eco Playground was minimal – parents tended to observe from a distance, allowing for more autonomous child-led play.

*Phase 2: The shift toward inclusive/safe design
and decline of the eco playground*

Between 2021 and 2023, the play space at Ada Ciganlija experienced a notable transformation. While the Eco Playground remained, a newly built Inclusive Playground, promoted as safe and universally accessible, became the central site of attention (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Inclusive/safety-oriented playground introduced in phase 2 (2021–2023).



Previously existing Traditional Playground was removed, and the Inclusive Playground was installed in its place. Although no publicly available records exist on the websites of accredited inspection bodies responsible for certifying playgrounds under the Rulebook on the Safety of Children's Playgrounds (2019), it is reasonable to assume that this replacement may have been part of the broader implementation of the Rulebook, which mandated the removal or reconstruction of non-compliant playgrounds across Serbia. As outlined in the contextual section of this paper, the introduction of the Rulebook initiated a large-scale standardization process, prioritizing the elimination of equipment considered unsafe and enforcing the installation of structures aligned with contemporary safety criteria. The transformation at Ada Ciganlija appears consistent with this wider regulatory trend.

Installed in 2021, this was proclaimed as the first inclusive playground at Ada, developed through a collaboration between Ada Ciganlija and UNICEF, with support from the NCR Foundation and the Basketball Federation of Serbia. It includes a swing, a playhouse, a carousel, three rockers, and two sets of outdoor

musical instruments intended for children with sensory difficulties. Designed to support the joint participation of all children, including those with developmental disabilities, the playground declaratively promotes social inclusion. The Ada Ciganlija website,⁵ from where we collected the aforementioned information also notes that in 2020, a zip line was installed next to the Eco Playground.

The new playground embodies *the trend of designing safe playgrounds* or so-called “plastic fantastic” spaces, also labeled as “KFC playgrounds” (kit, fence, carpet) (Gill, 2021). While functionally similar to traditional playgrounds, its dominant materials (rubber and concrete) reflect contemporary safety and accessibility norms. Protective flooring, clearly labeled equipment, and inclusive elements (like a carousel for wheelchair users and their peers) support structured, supervised play. However, field observations did not detect inclusive behaviors or peer collaboration (with few exceptions) beyond the material infrastructure. Caregivers were highly involved, often physically assisting children or closely monitoring play.

Although most equipment on the Inclusive Playground is standardized and familiar, one element stands out and that is the large carousel designed to enable children who use wheelchairs to spin together with children who do not. Due to its unusual size and design, rarely seen in other playgrounds, this carousel was exceptionally attractive to children. During field observations, it was also one of the few elements where collaborative play repeatedly emerged. Notably, this collaboration did not stem from its intended inclusive function, but rather from the *new meanings* children themselves ascribed to it. Instead of using the carousel primarily for wheelchair accessibility, children turned it into a dynamic shared space where they negotiated rules, coordinated movement, took turns, helped one another on and off, and collectively managed the speed and rhythm of play. In this way, the design unintentionally supported cooperation, less because of its formal inclusive purpose, and more because children creatively repurposed it to enable joint participation across ages and abilities.

Kalina (2) approaches the carousel, where an older girl (around 10) is waiting to initiate the play. Kalina takes a seat on the bench, holding on to the handrails.

Marija (researcher): “Will you be able to spin fast? Will you be able to hold on tightly?”

Kalina nods, and the older girl (joined by another girl who comes over) begins to spin the carousel quickly.

Kalina remains seated, holding on and observing the other girls who either stand on the platform or hold the railing while using one foot to push the carousel. Children of different ages join and leave the play, taking turns in different roles and positions on the carousel. Kalina does not change her position. Whenever a new child approaches, the others slow the “ride” to let them safely step on.

5 Retrieved (7/28/2025) from: <https://www.adaciganlija.rs/zabava/decija-igralista/>

Kosta (4) comes toward the carousel because his friend Jovan (4) has joined the play and is now pushing it. As Kosta attempts to step onto the moving carousel, it pushes him backward—something the other children do not notice. Kosta sits on the ground beside the carousel and watches the others. It is clear that he is thinking about what happened. After a brief moment of reflection, he stands up and walks over to me, as I am observing from the side.

Kosta: “Can they slow down?”

Marija: “You want them to slow down so you can get on?”

Kosta: “Yes!”

Marija: “Jocke, could you slow it down so Kole can get on?”

Jovan (4) slows the carousel, Kosta steps in and finds a place next to Kalina, and another younger girl—with help from her mother—joins as well. The play continues.

(derived from fieldwork notes, 26 September 2021)

It is important to note that field observations showed that more complex forms of play and peer relations (such as collaborative interaction and the co-construction of meaning) emerged when children used the equipment in ways that exceeded its intended functions (e.g. climbing on elements designed for musical play). However, the installation of an information board with explicitly prescribed rules of conduct directs parents to correct precisely those behaviors, even though such behaviors hold greater pedagogical potential by enabling children to engage in collective, creative play and to express their capacities within it. This brings us back to the argument made in the contextual section of the paper: that regulations aimed at standardizing play spaces often suppress the pedagogical potential of these environments.

Meanwhile, the Eco Playground, though still conceptually tied to autonomy and open-ended play, suffered from declining usability and continued a phase of decline, that had already begun in the previous period. Without adequate

Figure 4

Deterioration of the eco playground prior to phase two



maintenance or weather protection, many wooden elements became worn or damaged. Lack of shade and exposure to the elements accelerated material deterioration (Figure 4). Once a symbol of innovation and nature-integrated play, it became less appealing, especially to younger children and risk-averse caregivers.

Yet, the zip line addition in 2020 (Figure 5) introduced a dynamic element that stood out. It temporarily revived social interaction and collaborative play, but its success remained isolated, a late-stage intervention rather than evidence of broader renewal.

Figure 5
*Collaborative dynamics and peer coordination
during children's use of the zip line*



The zip line brought the space somewhat closer to the logic of *adventure playgrounds*. However, it cannot be classified as an adventure playground in the full sense, as it lacks core features of this type of space, such as access to loose and semi-structured materials, children's ability to freely reconfigure the environment, and the presence of trained playworkers who support risk-taking and open-ended exploration (Gill, 2007; Kozlovsky, 2008; Brussoni et al., 2012).

Despite being a standalone feature, the zip line also became a focal point for collaborative interactions, both among children and between children and adults. During periods of high attendance, this element prompted visitors to self-organize into informal queues, negotiating turn-taking and pace. In such situations, parents often assumed the role of mediators, unless an older child took on this responsibility, helping maintain order, facilitating fair participation, or assisting younger children in getting started.

The two playgrounds differed starkly in visual identity. The Inclusive Playground featured bright colors, segmented areas, and equipment signaling universal design and safety, aligning with institutional ideals. In contrast, the Eco Playground maintained neutral tones and a natural look, with minimal signage or instructions, allowing children to define their own movements and meanings. This contrast reshaped the spatial hierarchy. The Inclusive Playground, highly visible and carefully maintained, at that time, gradually overtook the Eco Playground in use and parental preference. Safety perceptions and the promise of supervision (in the placement of benches around the playground) contributed to this shift.

Field observations confirmed a divergence in use: families with young children preferred the Inclusive Playground's order and safety, while older or more autonomous children occasionally gravitated to the Eco Playground. Still, use of the Eco space declined, with shorter visits and fewer participants than in earlier years.

Phase 3: (Dis)integration and commercialization of play

The third and most recent phase of transformation at the Ada Ciganlija play space began in 2023, marked by the complete removal of the Eco Playground. What remained was an empty patch of land, scattered with construction debris, silently signaling the end of the space that once embodied nature-based, open-ended play. While the area formerly occupied by the Eco Playground fell into disuse, the surroundings of the Inclusive Playground saw a rapid influx

Figure 6
Commercialized play infrastructure introduced in Phase 3 alongside the erasure of the former Eco Playground



of commercial play infrastructure. Around the perimeter of the Inclusive Playground, the newly installed commercial attractions gradually occupied the surrounding area, effectively reorienting the meaning and use of the entire zone. Rather than functioning as a coherent child- and family-oriented public space, the site became a fragmented landscape in which the Inclusive Playground persisted merely as one element embedded within a broader, commercially driven environment.

In place of nature and autonomy, inflatable and mechanical attractions became dominant. These included a bouncy castle, an inflatable obstacle course, a large trampoline with harnessing mechanisms, and a go-kart track. These elements were available for a fee, operated by unidentified private actors. Attempts to obtain information about ownership, profit, or regulatory oversight were unsuccessful: on weekdays no staff were present on-site, while on weekends the employees responsible for charging use were unable to provide details. No relevant information was found online, including on the official Ada Ciganlija website, which contains neither documentation about these commercial elements nor about the nearby facility used for electricity supply and equipment storage. This opacity reflects what Mitranić (2016) identifies as a broader systemic issue in Serbia – the absence of a coherent, transparent, and accountable public policy toward children’s play, which leaves play spaces vulnerable to ad hoc interventions, market-driven logics, and discretionary decision-making rather than child-centered planning.

The previously accessible zip line was replaced by a new model, but unlike the original, which was continuously available, the new one was intermittently

Figure 7

Newly installed zip line positioned along the edge of the Inclusive Playground in Phase 3



functional and locked away when not in use. A newly constructed utility shed was erected nearby, disrupting the previously uninterrupted landscape of greenery and cycling paths. This structure housed power sources needed for the inflatables and karting, as well as storage for the trampoline and zip line parts when not active.

Whereas the earlier zip line operated as an open, child-led element that echoed principles of adventure playgrounds (supporting autonomy, negotiation, and reasonable risk) the new version functioned more like an adventure-park device, embedded within commercial logics, adult-controlled access, and profit-driven regulation of children’s movement and experience.

Crucially, this phase represents not only a spatial and functional shift, but also an erasure of the very values upon which the prior phase was built. The carousel, formerly emblematic of inclusive design, was no longer operational. Several elements of the Inclusive Playground showed visible signs of deterioration, including broken equipment that posed safety hazards. Nonetheless, the playground’s information board remained unchanged, failing to reflect the current state or any additions, such as the newly installed castle-slide. This lack of updates points to both a transparency gap and a broader inconsistency in adhering to safety regulations for public play spaces.

Figure 8

Signs of deterioration and unrecorded additions within the Inclusive Playground during Phase 3



The visual identity of the site, once reflecting a degree of spatial coexistence and coherence, now appeared fragmented and chaotic. Commercial structures encroached upon what was once an integrated, child-centered environment. The space no longer reflected a cohesive strategy for promoting children’s wellbeing or supporting family leisure time. Instead, the area projected an image of ad hoc decisions and absence of planning, allowing private interests to shape the space and dictate the culture established within it, ultimately undermining its pedagogical potential.

Field observations revealed stark contrasts between weekdays and weekends (July, 2024 and 2025). On weekdays, no staff were present to operate the

attractions. Inflatables were deflated, the trampoline and go-karts removed, and the zip line nonfunctional. On weekends, all elements were available for use, but no signs indicated prices or operating hours, reinforcing the sense of informality and opacity.

From a play perspective, the shift was equally significant. All opportunities for risk-based play, those not requiring adult supervision or safety equipment, had vanished. What remained were fixed, repetitive activities, devoid of creative or symbolic potential. The freedom to explore, test boundaries, or engage in cooperative challenges was lost. What had once been a landscape supporting diverse forms of play had become a tightly controlled commercial zone. In line with broader trends of commodifying children's outdoor experiences (Malović, 2019), this transformation replaced affordances for curiosity, risk-taking, and collaboration with passive consumption.

In sum, Phase 3 marked the end of nature-based and inclusive aspirations that once defined this space. In their place emerged a fragmented, market-driven environment that privileges short-term entertainment over long-term developmental value.

*Cross-phase reflections:
shifting spatial politics of childhood*

From a thematic perspective, the coexistence of two playgrounds in 2019 and 2020 exemplifies the tension between legacy and innovation in urban child-friendly spaces. The traditional playground represented continuity, safety through familiarity, and minimal engagement with contemporary pedagogical or ecological frameworks. In contrast, the Eco Playground embodied emerging concerns about nature connection, child agency, and the value of controlled risk. This phase illustrates how spatial proximity between contrasting playground models allowed children (and adults accompanied them) to navigate different play modalities, while also highlighting divergences in design philosophy, maintenance standards, and adult expectations and behavior. It marks a transitional moment in public space development – one in which multiple visions of childhood and play were visibly negotiated within a shared landscape.

Second phase underscores the evolving dynamics of public play space: how shifts in institutional investment, aesthetic logic, and public discourse can alter the lived significance of a place. The juxtaposition of a declining yet still conceptually rich Eco Playground with a highly managed, proclaimed inclusive, and visually appealing alternative reflects broader societal tensions around risk, nature, and control in urban childhood environments. It also illustrates how play spaces can become symbolic battlegrounds for competing visions of care, safety, and developmental value.

The third phase reveals a decisive shift in the spatial politics of childhood, one marked by the erasure of prior investments in inclusivity and nature-based design, and the encroachment of privatized, profit-driven play infrastructure. With the removal of the Eco Playground and the partial misuse of inclusive elements, the space no longer functioned as a site for experimenting with

alternative pedagogies or social integration. Instead, it became a fragmented terrain of commercial offerings and underused amenities, lacking coherent vision or public accountability. This phase reflects not only a retreat from the ideals of inclusive and exploratory play but also a broader failure to preserve public space as a domain of collective care, imagination, and child-centered planning.

As critical theorists have noted, contemporary urban policy often represents a compromise between neoliberal imperatives and managerial logics of governance, wherein public space becomes a strategic resource shaped by state-market alliances (Harvey, 2004; 2010; Petrović, 2025). In this context, land use is increasingly steered by investment interests, with design and development decisions reflecting broader regimes of control, security, and commodification. The findings of this case study further illustrate how such alliances, while formally justified by appeals to modernization or inclusion, often operate through opaque mechanisms in the local context. This lack of transparency not only raises concerns about accountability and mismanagement of public resources but also exposes a deeper systemic disregard for the needs of families and children in urban development agendas, suggesting that child wellbeing is at best a rhetorical device, rather than a guiding principle of urban policy.

Reconsidering the role of urban policy and pedagogical perspective

If space is socially produced, then its shaping is inseparable from the values, ideologies, and power relations that underpin social life. The case of Ada Ciganlija's play space reveals how public space, and by extension the spatial conditions of childhood, are continuously negotiated between different visions of childhood, family life and urban futures. Yet, what becomes evident in the present state is not simply a shift in spatial use, but a systematic erosion of the commons, a process that privileges commercial utility over pedagogical value.

Through the lens of Lefebvre's (1991) and Harvey's (2008) notion of the right to the city, this study brings into focus the steady withdrawal of state accountability in favor of opaque arrangements that enable private actors to dictate the material and symbolic order of public childhood spaces. The absence of transparency, participatory planning, and pedagogical foresight points not merely to administrative dysfunction, but to a deeper dispossession, one that denies children, families, and communities their right to co-shape the environments in which they live, play, and grow.

The dismantling of inclusive and ecologically engaged infrastructures, without dialogue or justification, illustrates how developmental rhetoric can be deployed to mask extractive and exclusionary urban logics. This is not merely a story of neglect, but of intentional disregard for the social and pedagogical functions of public space. What this study ultimately foregrounds is the urgent need to resist the normalization of such practices, not only by calling for regulatory transparency, but by insisting on an urban politics of care.

Reclaiming playgrounds as pedagogical, communal, and democratic spaces is not an idealistic project, but a political and ethical imperative. It means repositioning children not as passive recipients of policy but as rightful inhabitants of the city, subjects whose everyday play is entangled with the broader struggle for spatial justice. In this light, pedagogical perspectives should not be peripheral to urban policy, but central to reimagining cities as inclusive, co-owned, child- and family-friendly and generative spaces for all.

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