

## **Play streets, potential space and social infrastructures: how play transforms residential streets**

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### **1 The potential of play streets**

Play streets are temporary, regular residential road closures which, through road signs, cones, traffic orders, and the work of residents enable children, their families and wider communities to play and meet on their doorsteps. In their current incarnation, play streets emerged out of the 'playing out' movement, initiated in Bristol in 2010 by two mothers on a single street looking to enable their children to play out as they themselves had done decades earlier. Play on streets has long been an important and widespread urban phenomenon, and most adults can recall childhood memories of street play. Yet, in recent years – largely as private car ownership has rocketed, but also in part as a result of wider socio-economic shifts, such as the rise of women's work, moral panics, and wider urban change – children's play has increasingly disappeared from urban streets and been pushed more and more into designated and privatised spaces such as parks, playgrounds, private gardens, and commercial play facilities (Dodd et al, 2021; Stenning, forthcoming).

This chapter argues that play streets create space which have the potential to nurture social infrastructure, for connection and community, but also, potentially, for organising, resisting and campaigning. In addition to narrating the experience of play streets, and how play transforms the street in the moment, this chapter also aims to centre the work involved in the creation and maintenance of spaces for play on streets and acknowledges that structural inequalities and disinvestments can themselves delimit possibilities for play streets, and, in turn, their potential power.

### **2 Play**

Play is notoriously hard to define (Sutton-Smith, 1997; Sicart 2014), taking, as it does, so many forms and often tending to ephemerality. Play is often seen as what children do, and can incorporate games, movement, imagination, performance, talking, exploring, as well as simply hanging out and doing nothing (Stenning, forthcoming). But adults also play, and play for all ages has both instrumental and intrinsic value. Play is at the heart of a range of vital social, physical and developmental processes and can enable children and adults to learn, be healthy, communicate and grow, but play is also about pleasure, fun, and moments of "ordinary magic" (Lester, 2010, 2).

One of play's magical features is its looseness and its sense of potential. Amongst many other impacts and attributes, play creates potential space, defined by paediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott as "an inviting and safe interpersonal field in which one can be spontaneously playful while at the same time connected to others" (Casement 1985, 162). This idea resonates through reflections on the political possibilities of play. Carroll et al (2019) draw attention to the relative absence of children and their play from public space, arguing that they're often seen as "out of place". They reiterate the claim that children's play is increasingly confined to designated spaces, such that the potentials of play, what play can do, can appropriate, and can imagine, is also confined to limited spaces. Citing Kallio and Häkli (2011, 100), Carroll et al (2019) argue that the spaces of children's everyday lives are

“potential fields of political action”, and that their play potentially prefigures a different kind of city.

Prefigurative politics describes the acts and embodiments that have the potential to ‘prefigure’ or enact alternative futures, enabling the discovery of more diverse possibilities, which challenge the status quo and offer alternative visions of social (and spatial) justice (Jeffrey and Dyson, 2021). Jamrozik (2021, 96) explores the potential to “engage individuals in public space through playful shared experiences”. This, in turn, enables two things: firstly, “claiming the street itself” (ibid, 99), appropriating it for purposes other than movement and circulation, and secondly, temporary moments of connection, with “the potential to, however briefly, bring people ... together”. These small transformations create space to move “from playful encounters to the potential for more serious conversations” which can open up “a way of questioning not only public space itself, but also how it gets used and occupied and by whom” (ibid, 100), with the potential to engender changes to the street, to relationships on the street, to ideas beyond the street – and to social infrastructures.

### 3 Social Infrastructures

Latham and Layton define social infrastructures as “networks of spaces, facilities, institutions, and groups that create affordances for social connection” (2019, 3) and suggest that the idea of social infrastructure represents spaces, amongst others, to gather, care, share and experience culture, play, dance, exercise, hang out, find respite, and feel safe, the “collective public life of streets and neighbourhoods” (2022, 663). Whilst there is undoubtedly a simple and important value in spaces which enable these kinds of potentially playful and convivial acts, Latham and Layton (2022) suggest that these spaces also relate to ideas of a good or just city, and to a “common political effort” to work towards these (Latham and Layton 2022, 665). Citing Erik Klinenberg, Latham and Layton (2019, 2) argue that “social infrastructures are necessary for nurturing public life, but also for addressing and preventing some of the most pressing concerns of contemporary urban life: countering social isolation, negotiating difference, and creating places for all”.

#### 3.1 Streets as social infrastructure

Though we often imagine today that streets were made for cars and that their primary, if imperfect, function is to facilitate vehicular movement, Prytherch (2022) argues that streets have always had a dual function, as both physical and social infrastructure. Despite the dominance – physically and culturally – of traffic, motor vehicles, and automobility (Norton, 2008; Knowles, 2023; Prytherch, 2022), it is not difficult to find reminders that streets act as spaces of sociality and conviviality too. Prytherch (2022, 694) draws on Norton’s *Fighting Traffic* (2008) to explore how “motorists arrived as “intruders” into streets dominated by pedestrians who viewed streets as “place to alight from a streetcar, a place to walk, a place to play” (Norton, 2008, 46)”. In the particular context of play streets, earlier incarnations of the idea<sup>1</sup> underlined the ordinary presence of play on residential streets, where children playing easily outnumbered the number of vehicles in an era before mass vehicle ownership, and enabled an everyday space of sociability, especially for women, which many “sought to defend ... against the threat of rising traffic” (Cowman, 2017, 244).

All of this attests to the potential importance of streets as social infrastructures, a perspective which incorporates not just the carriageway itself, but also the pavement (sidewalk) and other incidental grey or green spaces. Streets might be seen as archetypal grey spaces –

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<sup>1</sup> In their first incarnation in the twentieth century, an idea imported to the UK from New York allowed for residential streets to be designated play streets, or “street playgrounds”, at certain times of the day. By 1963, there were 146 play street orders designating 750 play streets nationally. These streets were largely located in major cities and in poorer neighbourhoods of those cities, where children had limited access to other safe space to play ([http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/written\\_answers/1963/jul/10/play-streets](http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/written_answers/1963/jul/10/play-streets)).

not just made of tarmac and concrete, brick and paving, but also interstitial, ambiguous and undervalued (O'Connor et al, 2023) – and herein lies their potential as loose spaces where diverse activities might flourish, albeit in diverse social, spatial and environmental contexts.

### *3.2 Spaces for play and for children as 'social infrastructure'*

Spaces for children, such as schools, nurseries, libraries, playgrounds, playing fields, parks and soft play centres, also often figure in inventories of urban social infrastructures (Latham and Layton, 2019). Erik Klinenberg identifies childcare settings as social infrastructures, seeing them not just as spaces of childcare, but also of encounter, interaction, friendship and support, especially when they are designed to enable families to “linger and play” (2018, 40).

Studies of designated playgrounds show clearly that they are not simply infrastructures for children's play – slides, swings, sandpits, zipwires – but also importantly for sociality, support, and connection, for both children and their wider families. Alkistis Pitsikali explores playgrounds as 'civic spaces' which “promote human interaction and act as centres of the local community” (2015, 45) with a particular focus on intergenerational participation and on integrating children into public space and public life and Helen Wilson describes the (school) playground as “an important and yet often overlooked site of sociality” (2013, p.625), where familiarity and support are nurtured, despite acute differences and conflicting experiences and interpretations, and which “has the potential to actively facilitate, and further nurture, an incremental politics of change” (2013, 643).

Others argue that securing and maintaining space for children and for play throughout the city enables something we might identify as social infrastructure to be more fully realised. For example, Dinah Bornat (2016, 115) argues that children's presence in the street can be seen as a generator of social space. Children playing out can draw adults out, as they watch, talk to, and care for their children; there is “enormous potential for child-centred activities such as play streets to bring people and places together” (Williams, 2017). Ongoing research and activism around play holds “that children and their play are not separate from other aspects of community life” and that “more people playing out more of the time in more places can improve community cohesion and strengthen intergenerational relationships” (Tawil, 2018).

We can also argue that space for play and for children enables future social infrastructures; Stuart Lester and Wendy Russell explain that “play is the principal way in which children participate within their own communities” (2010, x). Play is how children engage with and make sense of their everyday spaces, often within ever-increasing distances, how they develop connections with these spaces, and how they start to make a claim on those spaces. Neighbourhood play enables children to begin their journeys of participation, which have the potential to continue through youth and into adulthood. Children who grow up with a sense of connection and attachment to their neighbourhoods and environments are much likely to be “active in forging and maintaining community relations and engaging with others living or working locally” (Ross, 2007, 377).

### *3.3 Contextualising social infrastructures*

As Latham and Layton (2019, 8) note, social infrastructures don't just emerge – they have to be “designed, maintained, and planned”. For this to happen, people need to work. Horton and Penny (2023, 7) explore this issue directly, citing feminist approaches that

“point out that spaces affording encounter – playgrounds, day centres, libraries – must be brought to life by the (gendered and otherwise unevenly distributed) labour of those producing them and reproducing the services and connections that they enable” (see also, Hall, 2020; Stenning and Hall, 2018).

The uneven distribution of this labour is, moreover, reinforced by existing inequalities in the value and nature of other paid and unpaid work (Horton and Penny 2023) and by the unequal contexts of all this work. In the context of waves of social crisis – austerity, the

pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis – and of accumulating domestic and personal pressures, it is critical to recognise that the burdens of work for social infrastructures are profoundly unequal.

Social infrastructures are often seen as a way of sustaining, supporting and reproducing urban life, of enabling people and their neighbourhoods to thrive. Yet, in many contexts, there is the need to transform – not reproduce – existing spaces and relationships, in order to enable more radical and equitable forms of social and spatial justice. Social infrastructures are unevenly distributed within cities, and as Latham and Layton (2019, 8) note this “becomes a question of social justice”. In many urban neighbourhoods, many forms of social infrastructure are “under stress and risk of closure” (Latham and Layton 2019, 9), such that the struggle to defend social infrastructures – to ensure that they remain “cared for and safe” (ibid.) – becomes the dominant focus of many of the relationships and practices enabled within such spaces.

These questions frame the discussion of play streets as social infrastructures that follows, as the focus rests not only what emerges on and through play streets, but also on some of the contexts and inequalities that shape the potential for play streets to develop and to function as social infrastructures.

#### **4 The Play Streets Model**

Play streets are relatively cheap interventions, for residents and local authorities. They are proximate and potentially accessible for all ages and abilities. They don’t involve travel or expensive equipment. They create something out of the spaces on our doorsteps, by removing barriers, rather than demanding investments. In the UK, almost 100 local authorities have play streets policies in place and over 1500 residential streets have run play streets, and the model has spread internationally.<sup>2</sup>

The play streets model is about *more than* children’s play (whilst holding this very much at the centre); its work is also focused on wider social and community benefits. Play Australia, who recently launched a 1000 Play Streets scheme, described play streets as “a movement for Australians to reclaim their quiet residential streets as places for neighbours of all ages to connect and play, to create stronger and healthier communities”.<sup>3</sup> Research, pulled together by Playing Out,<sup>4</sup> increasingly documents growing evidence of the impact of play streets in a wide range of spheres – physical activity and active travel, children’s physical and mental health, stronger communities and active citizenship, and there is clear connection here to the conceptualisations of social infrastructure discussed above.

##### *4.1 On the day*

A play street session starts with the marking out of the space with Road Closed signs, most often attached to wheelie bins, an informal yet approved method of signalling that the street has changed. At its simplest, a play street is the creation of a temporary space to be filled with play. In many instances, the setting out of signs is the only structured act on a play street; everything else is optional and additional.

[image of signs]

But the act of setting out the signs works to deterritorialize and reterritorialize relations of power and space on the street (Russell and Stenning, 2023), marking a shift from a space for cars to a space for playing people, of all ages. The road is not in fact closed, but open to clambering, cycling, scooting, sitting, giggling, blowing bubbles, chalking and much more.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://playingout.net/play-streets/impact-overview/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.playaustralia.org.au/1000-play-streets>

<sup>4</sup> <https://playingout.net/play-streets/impact-overview/>

[Road Open sign]

Few things transform a play street like chalk. The mark making signals that the street is open, accessible, a canvas to be played on, and to be owned by the children and their families. From smiley faces to names and words, to hopscotches and obstacles courses, chalk is an important and recurring act of reterritorialization on play streets. As Franck and Stevens (2006, 10) note, children drawing a hopscotch on the street “went beyond the intended use of a public space ... they discovered a new set of possibilities”, opening up a sense of space that is looser and holds a range of potentials.

As the street opens and the play begins, children find each other. Maybe a new family has moved in since the last play street and this is their children’s chance to meet their neighbours. Older children might step in to help the younger ones as they toddle on the street, try to kick or catch a ball, hone their scooting or cycling skills.

Adults gather, near drinks and snacks, perched on a wall or on a chair brought from inside; some might be watching the Road Closed signs to secure the safety of the street and to let residents come and go. They chat, maybe about the children, school, holidays, their houses, jobs, or making plans for babysitting, the school run, or nights out. And, of course, they play too, kicking a ball, firing a water pistol, or exploring mini-beasts in bushes.

Different kinds of play develop, shift and foment through the two to three hours of the play street. Connections made and remade in moments of play, chat, exchange and sociality. The street shifts, it becomes something more than a thoroughfare, than a highway. It is experienced differently.

Simply it becomes a space for sociality in ways precluded by the normative presence of traffic. These emerge on the street but link backwards and forwards to other moments and spaces prefiguratively (Carroll et al, 2019), where longer term, more permanent transformations can be imagined, explored and enacted.

#### *4.2 Beyond and in between play streets<sup>5</sup>*

Although the desire to create a space for play motivates many parents looking to establish a play street, it is equally common for them to be motivated by the desire to create a space to connect and to nurture ‘community’, “a community that I want to live in - one that looks out for each other”, in the words of one respondent (Stenning, 2020). For the overwhelming majority of play streets residents who responded to 2019 survey research, these hopes were fulfilled; 95% of respondents agreed that they knew more people because of playing out, 86.7% that their street felt friendlier and safer, 71.7% that their children had made new friends, and 91.7% that they felt they belonged more on their street (Stenning, 2020).

Play streets emerge as spaces where connections and communities are multiplied and developed, for residents of all ages. These developing relationships function to nurture

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<sup>5</sup> These empirical sections are based on a series of related research projects exploring play streets, their development, and the subsequent reshaping of relationships on and with the street. These include a survey- and interview-based project with resident-activators across the UK exploring the relationship between play streets and the alleviation of loneliness (Stenning, 2020), a project, developed during the pandemic, focused on play on streets in the context of the first UK lockdown (Russell and Stenning, 2023), and ongoing evaluations (interviews and observations) of Leeds City Council’s play streets enablement project (Stenning 2023; Tawil et al 2023). This research work sits alongside activism around play streets at both a local and national scale, through running PlayMeetStreet North Tyneside (<https://playmeetstreet.wordpress.com/>) and working closely with Playing Out, including with their ongoing work focused on developing play streets in communities facing greater disadvantage (Playing Out 2023).

friendships, exchange, practical and emotional support, but also to make the street feel safer, for residents of all ages. Connections develop that are multi-stranded, tangible and intangible, intergenerational, social and supportive.

Residents became increasingly familiar with each other, and new forms of sociality and care emerge, focused not only each other but also on the street itself, as a resident-organiser in Hertfordshire described:

*“it’s become a street where it’s natural for people to say hello or wave at each other ... it’s just normal, to be expected ... so people stop being anonymous and the idea ... that people you know care about the street, erm, and that it’s a living thing, it’s not ... it’s not just a bunch of buildings and tarmac and it’s, it’s a, it’s a living community”*

These developing connections afford not only new forms of sociality, developing through the registers of sociality Layton and Latham (2022) explore, but also everyday exchanges, favours, support, and sharing that, in often banal and taken-for-granted ways, animate and enable life on the street:

*“We share lawnmowers, walk each other’s dogs, put out each other’s bins when away, check up on older residents if they haven’t been seen for a while, unscrew each other’s jam jars, lend each other tools, take in postal deliveries for each other, hand down toys and bicycles to younger children in the neighbourhood ... go down into neighbours’ basements to look at fuse boxes when they are too frightened to...”*

The development of the play streets and its associated forms of sociality and community often serve, particularly, those who at times feel isolated or in need of support, including new parents, single parents, older people, those who had recently moved to the street, or even just those whose partners worked shifts or at a distance. One resident-organiser in North Tyneside, a mother with small children, noted that the connections made were especially important to her as she was often home alone, as a result of her husband’s working patterns:

*“I like to know that if anybody needed, you know, help, you can go and call on anybody, my husband works long hours, I like to know that, you know, if we had some sort of emergency, I might just run down or across the street, give them a call.”*

Mothers are often at the heart of play streets, responsible for the majority of the work of organising and likely to be more engaged and present on the day, but the affordances of play streets extend beyond them. Some noted the particular value of play streets in enabling fathers, who tended to be less involved in other domestic and community spaces (baby and toddler groups, the school run, etc.) to connect to the street and their neighbours. One resident-organiser commented:

*“More importantly for me, my husband has got to know people in our street. He commutes to London and has little in the way of a connection to our area - he could probably live anywhere. Now he has stewarded regularly with a variety of other people and knows (and likes) people that live near us. It’s fantastic!”*

Families with primary aged children are, without doubt, the most regular participants in play streets, but not to the exclusion of others. Many recognised the barriers to participation for, for example, older people and although some gave examples of older neighbours who had been early, regular and active supporters and participants, others reflected on how hard they had worked to encourage older neighbours to join. This work included ensuring that there was somewhere to sit as children played, gently cajoling neighbours to bake, asking them to share their skills (in play and games, but also, for example, bike repair or gardening), and inviting them bring grandchildren or other young relatives or friends to the play street (for more examples of these engagements with other adults, see Stenning 2020). Play was important in all these invitations, from showing an interest in older childhood games, rhymes and skills, to creating a space in which adults felt able to play, both with and without children. The possibility of playfulness seemed to ease connections between adult neighbours, including those who were perhaps slow to join in:

*“There was one woman once who was just walking down the street, and I think, I mean, I don’t know for sure, she’s quite self-contained, but she just started skipping and I got into a chat with her and that was lovely, and she started stewarding after that. It certainly helped, just the skipping, she couldn’t resist basically, she just thought I just really want to have a go at that ... and we saw a lot more of her after that”*

Key features of the play streets model – the regularity and repetition of play streets sessions and the explicit and structured involvement of adults (both parents and potentially also those without children) – also seem particularly to enable connections and the remaking of street space (Stenning, 2020).

It is also important to note that non-participation does not necessarily mean exclusion from the emergence of play streets as social infrastructures. Residents who had not actively participated in the play street itself reported that they knew more neighbours and had experienced a more general friendliness on the street, since the play street started. One resident-organiser noted in interview that simply the act of doorknocking in the initial phase of consultation (when most councils encourage organisers to speak to every neighbour) had created connections between neighbours, even when they don’t play out:

*“so I have got to know neighbours, they might not join in in playing out necessarily but we have just by me knocking, with that first consultation we’ve, we’ve made lots of new relationships and they don’t come out for playing out”*

As one questionnaire respondent noted: “Just doing it for a while brings huge benefits to the whole street, whether everyone attends or not.”

These developing connections, for those who participate and those who don’t, are often facilitated by the presence of other social infrastructures, such as parks, allotments, halls, and greenspaces on the street. On one street, a scout hut located offered a site for parties and meetings, for example. Other streets had green spaces on or near the street which allowed for play in the interim. These physical spaces are also complemented in many instances by online spaces such as Facebook and WhatsApp groups that grew out of the organisation of play streets but expanded well beyond their initial function and beyond the families that regularly play out.

These spaces – on the street and online – also facilitate additional street and neighbourhood activities. More than a third of respondents reported that their play street had led them and their neighbours to get involved in other community activities, such as tree planting, litter picking, cake sales for charity, toy, book, plant and clothes swaps, developing parklets, forming local park groups, and connecting to wider cycling, walking and better streets campaigns (Stenning, 2020). The movement into a range of other activities not only draws in a more diverse range of neighbours but also enables on-street relationships to connect to wider urban infrastructures of community and sociality. For children, in addition to animating relationships on the street, play streets support expanding everyday connections, at school, within sports and uniformed clubs, and in their growing capacity to move within their neighbourhoods and communities without adults.

## **5 Struggles for play streets**

Nevertheless, concerns about barriers to participation still need to be thought about, in terms of the inequalities of context and labour outlined above. A number of respondents, especially in interview, stressed quite how much work was involved in setting a play street and in keeping it going; resident-organisers have to speak to all neighbours as they start to plan a play street, respond to queries, concerns, and objections, liaise with the council and/or a community group supporting play streets to process the application, find stewards to monitor the Road Closed signs, invite and encourage neighbours, and possibly deal with drivers who object to the closure – and much of this labour recurs each time a play street happens. Some had also faced considerable conflict and even personal abuse from neighbours who objected to the scheme.

In a survey in North Tyneside of all local resident-organisers,<sup>6</sup> it was clear that the responsibility for organising and running play streets often falls on the shoulders of just one or two residents who work hard to maintain their play street from month to month. As has already been suggested, the vast majority of these organisers are women, and usually mothers of young children, working as volunteers in their own time, almost always around the demands of a young family and work. The practical and emotional labour expended by the women who organise play streets needs to be acknowledged and valued, not least because of the significance of what can be achieved through play streets.

These struggles are all the more significant in communities facing greater disadvantage, where attempts to establish play streets often face many more social and structural barriers. Research in Leeds centred on an evaluation of the city council's 'play streets enablement project', which sought to explore and overcome the barriers to play streets in the city's priority neighbourhoods, identified a range of intersecting barriers (Stenning 2023). These included concerns around taking responsibility (for the required bureaucracy, for safety, for anti-social behaviour), anxieties and doubts about the 'right to play', negotiating with institutional neighbours and with neighbours in conflict, challenging social, spatial and environmental contexts (anti-social behaviour, risky environments, and socio-economic pressures), issues of language and ethnic diversity, and concerns about road violence. These reflect the numerous physical, structural, social, cultural and attitudinal barriers identified in similar work by Playing Out (2023).

In research which sought to take a step further back and identify what the barriers to even thinking about play streets might be, Tawil et al (2023) identified childcare challenges, unreliable transport infrastructures, digital exclusion and limits on phone credits and data (Hall, 2022), unpredictable commitments and plans, webs of interconnection that meant that one possible organiser failing to engage led others to struggle too, and, of course, the accumulation of other pressures and demands in everyday life. As Tawil et al (2023, 8) conclude "withdrawal ... was not about a lack of desire to be involved, rather, that desire had hit hard upon the realities of capacity and capability", and this was a process reinforced by residents' fears of taking the first steps in their neighbourhoods and putting their heads above the parapet.

These barriers highlight some of the limits to resident-led social infrastructures, placing, as they do, the burden of organisation and maintenance on the shoulders of those already tackling diverse everyday challenges. In some instances, some of these limits are overcome by collaboration with other more formalised, yet still very localised, social infrastructures, such as youth and community organisations. In Leeds, the work to enable play streets rested in part on the support of 'locally trusted organisations' (Southby and Woodward, 2022), deeply embedded within the neighbourhoods, who worked to facilitate and support local residents, by reassuring them of their right to play and to claim doorstep space, by providing necessary kit and animating play, and by taking on some responsibility for the events and their smooth running, in part shielding residents from complaint and conflict (Stenning, 2023).

The act of organising, repeatedly, a play street in this context is clearly hard work, yet the gains are also probably more significant as these communities have often not only lost space to play, but also alternative doorstep social infrastructures (Butler 2021). Play streets can also act as a means to enable other forms of social infrastructure and struggles for them. We have already seen that in many instances play streets led neighbours to get involved in other forms of neighbourhood and community activity and to initiate wider

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<sup>6</sup> <https://blogs.ncl.ac.uk/alisonstening/playmeetstreet-survey-2002/>

conversations about the shape of the neighbourhood, and we can perhaps identify a potential for this process to be still more significant.

If the act of establishing a play street highlights so starkly the barriers to doorstep play – whether these are questions of social, spatial or environmental (in)justice – this can engender a process of change. These experiences open up space for making connections and starting conversations on and about the street, whether that's about litter picking, or seed sowing, or reaching out to an isolated neighbour, as we have seen. And these conversations can develop into a recognition, bit by bit, however partial, of communities' rights to their street and their rights to claim that space for play and for themselves. For some, this might start to connect to bigger ideas about reclaiming and reimagining the street, beyond the few hours a month its open for play, and for building collective action around play, streets, public space, communities, air quality, and much more, building networks and connections to campaign around the overlapping risks and injustices identified, as well as the capacities and opportunities identified.

In Leeds' play streets, we can see some evidence of this. On one street that had experienced conflict and distrust, the play street created opportunities for neighbours to meet and prejudices to be challenged by conversations, gifts of food, or other exchanges. On a number of other streets, the play streets also enabled residents to claim doorstep spaces, whether on their streets or in other local spaces, such as green spaces, the grounds of their block of flats, or car parks. As one local activator noted “parents are taking ownership of their spaces, because they're their streets”. In some instances, this was a hard-won reclaiming with real obstacles to the residents believing they could do so, but every resident-organiser reflected on how they felt more connected to their street, and their neighbours, as a result of the play street. And, in the context of the wider enablement project, there was also evidence of a nascent cross-city network of resident-organisers who connected through the project and gathered ideas and inspiration from each other (Stenning, 2023), underlining the value of support within and between communities.

## **6 Conclusions**

In the simplest sense, play streets are temporary social infrastructures, assembled with legal, practical and communal measures, to create space for community, connection, play, gathering, and the nurturing of relationships. This is achieved first through moments of temporary playful togetherness on doorsteps that enable a looseness, a new atmosphere, to emerge, creating the possibility of new ways of being and acting on the street. But the achievements of play streets spill over in space and time, extending into other spaces of everyday life, such as the home, schools, clubs, gardens, parks and playgrounds, and into times between and beyond the temporary closures. In these extended times and spaces, the relationships nurtured are developed and deepened, to offer myriad forms of support, safety and communication between neighbours, of all ages, to expand doorstep social infrastructures. In these ways, play streets as social infrastructures can be seen to represent forms of prefigurative politics (Carroll et al, 2019), enacting, at different scales of time and space, new and reimagined versions of the street.

The barriers to establishing and sustaining play streets are nevertheless significant, especially in disadvantaged communities where even the possibility of a play street can engender pressure and anxiety, and where other doorstep social infrastructures may be worn away and disinvested. In these communities, the struggle to create play streets as infrastructure are all the more intense, and much less likely to come to fruition and be sustained, such that it is in these communities that additional infrastructures of support are necessary, facilitating the process of application, developing networks of peer support, and valuing the work that is done.

Yet, in these cases too, we can see the importance of play streets, and what they can offer communities. Part of the potential of play streets is to name experiences of social, spatial and environmental injustice, to work to counter conflict and distrust, to build alliances and connections across the city, and to create a starting point for the reclaiming of doorstep space; part of the power of play streets as social infrastructure is in their potential for the sharing of solidarity and the emergence of diverse forms of activism. Play streets emerge as potential spaces, for negotiation and for navigating conflict and adverse contexts. In these ways, play streets can perhaps be seen as nascent social infrastructures that work to challenge who urban space and social infrastructures are for, to paraphrase Horton and Penny (2023).

This emphasises the importance of acknowledging the uneven work required to produce and maintain social infrastructures (Latham and Layton 2019; Hall 2020) and the real challenges to create play streets as social infrastructures in complex contexts. Yet, as we have seen, other spaces of social infrastructure, such as community groups established and embedded within these communities, can act as important mediators, as social infrastructures that enable the emergence of new, doorstep infrastructures through their support for play streets. This, in turn, underlines, however, the critical and continuing importance of more formal infrastructures, such as local councils, to recognise the value of play streets and to support their development, vocally, organisationally and, if necessary, financially. The establishment, maintenance and development of play streets as social infrastructures sits within the complex contexts of everyday life, for residents and their communities, reflecting not only their domestic and working lives, but also the webs of local social infrastructures and the intersections with statutory services, such as local authorities and the government, and these institutions must work to facilitate play streets (Stenning, 2020; 2023).

Play streets can be rich social infrastructures, full of possibility, affording all kinds of sociality, support, connection, community, and play on doorsteps and prefiguring alternative imaginings of streets, for residents of all ages and in a range of social contexts. They are, without doubt, valuable, but recognising that value also demands a recognition that play streets are the product of considerable work and, sometimes, struggle, conflict and anxiety. Exploring play streets as social infrastructures underlines their potential, but draws attention too to the inequalities in creating and nurturing social infrastructures, highlighting the importance of questions of social, spatial and environmental justice in advocating for such infrastructures.

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