

Young People in Place: A Participatory Transnational Civis Open Lab

D. Poveda¹, S. Hennig², H. Rodríguez-Navarro³, Q. Mabasso⁴, S.-M. Cotorbai⁵ and P. Issari⁶

¹Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain

²University of Salzburg, Austria

³Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

⁴Eduardo Mondlane University, Mozambique

⁵University of Bucharest, Romania

⁶National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

Abstract

This paper presents the conceptual and methodological framing, as well as very initial findings, of a project on young people's participation and mobilities in urban settings. It builds on three case studies that draw on different participatory methodologies. In Salzburg (Austria), with online mapping and crowdsourced mapping, the key places and sites for young people in Salzburg were documented. In Madrid (Spain), through arts-based workshops, the experiences of children and youth in a gentrified/touristified section of the city were documented. In Maputo (Mozambique) interviews, focus groups and video-recordings were used to examine how local youth use the university campus as a liminal space between sectors of the city. We draw from these cases to argue in favor of geospatially-based approaches to socio-educational interventions centered on young people's participation in the city. More generally, the project serves as a pilot for an Open Lab transnational research structure within a university alliance that is both sensitive to the local realities of each context and can build on shared expertise on participatory research across disciplines.

1. Introduction and Research Questions

The living conditions of young people (i.e., children and the youth) in cities, have deteriorated significantly in recent years, and at the same time there is an increasing lack of age-appropriate urban green spaces (McMillan, 2013; UN-Habitat, 2004). Simultaneously, urban development policies and patterns in the housing market have increased processes of urban stratification and exclusion in Europe and beyond, particularly through increased gentrification and touristification trends (Sequera, 2020).

Young people are directly affected by these dynamics and have little visible voice in debates and actions in response to the neoliberal re-organization of urban life (Perez-del Pulgar, Anguelovski, & Connolly, 2024). Participation is framed as a social right within the call of child-friendly cities and a children's rights framework (UNICEF, 2022, 2019): promoting young people's place in and engagement with urban life, making cities more "child-friendly" is understood as a socially inclusive, equitable and sustainable effort within urban policies and planning. Furthermore, the involvement of young people in urban planning processes has gained importance.

Participatory research with young people is a strategy to confront these challenges, helping young people develop a voice in relevant

contexts (e.g., Fine & Torre, 2021). It is also an area of rich transdisciplinary work that gathers, around the interest in the lives of children and young people, researchers across the social sciences (e.g. Developmental Psychology, Education, Anthropology, Sociology, History, etc.). Geography has played a prominent role in the shaping of these debates and has developed for over two decades a focused interest in the spatial dimension of young people's lives (e.g., Holloway & Valentine, 2000; Wall, 2022). In this paper we build on these traditions and approach participatory methods as an experimental collaborative process (Kullman, 2013) aimed at creating research devices (Sánchez-Criado & Estalella, 2024) that facilitate young people's documentation and critical reflection on their local urban contexts, as well as supporting ways in which young people can intervene over these contexts (Veale, 2005).

Urban planning and related research are inherently spatial, as people's experiences, practices, and meanings are embedded in specific places and spatial relations. Participatory approaches employing spatially explicit methods that enable the articulation and visualization of situated knowledge, everyday experiences, and place-based preferences within their geographic context are of central importance. Here, crowdsourcing-based mapping methods – such as map-based surveys, Public Participation Geographic Information



System (PPGIS), Participatory GIS (PGIS) and SoftGIS, as well as questionnaires with spatially related questions – have proven valuable in capturing and analyzing spatially anchored perspectives (e.g., Brown & Kyttä, 2014; Kahila & Kyttä, 2009; Mattijssen et al., 2024). In addition to the mentioned tools, ground and participatory photo mapping as well as narrative interviewing refer to methods that engage participants in documenting and (visually) representing their experiences and perceptions of place using diverse media such as photographs, drawings, spatial markers, and narratives to produce spatially informed representations of lived experience. These approaches integrate spatial and other visual, audio and tactical elements to capture qualitative aspects of spatial experience (see e.g., Dennis, Gaulocher, Carpiano, & Brown, 2009; International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), 2009; Schauplenhner, Eder, Höglhammer, & Muhar, 2014).

These practices can be placed within the broader theoretical frameworks of critical geography including counter-mapping (Crompton & Krygier, 2006; Kim, 2015). Counter-mapping builds on these aspects by actively challenging dominant cartographic representations. It refers to mapping practices that incorporate knowledge and experience from local, and often marginalized people (immigrants, people of foreign origin, queer people, the poor, people with disabilities, and partly youth, etc.) to challenge official or state-produced maps and cartographic products. By democratizing the production process of spatial knowledge, counter-mapping attempts to make visible alternative territorial claims, everyday practices and socio-spatial injustices and exclusions that are otherwise omitted from formal spatial and urban planning discourses (Peluso, 1995; Wood, 2020).

The CIVIS Contemporary Childhoods/Youths Open Lab (CON-CHY OL) was established in 2025 through a first empirical project focused on three transnational case studies that explore young people's participation in three very different urban settings and build on various methodological approaches (see below). The CON-CHY OL involves researchers from Madrid, Bucharest, Salzburg, Athens and Maputo and has launched participatory studies that attempt to answer three questions: How do young people engage with urban public spaces?; How do mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion affect young people's participation in urban spaces, at the local and city level?; How do participatory methodologies allow young people to reflect on and intervene on their experiences in the city?.

In this short article we present the methodological framing and the fieldwork implementation of the research devices of each case study at the time of writing (Sánchez-Criado & Estalella, 2024). Some very preliminary data is also introduced to illustrate the affordances of the methodological approach and transnational collaborative structure. We close the paper discussing emergent psychosocial and socio-educational implications of the project relevant to geography and beyond.

2. Methods and Cases

This transnational project builds on a horizontal dialogue and comparison between three unique case studies (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017) that use different place-based participatory methodologies and specific research questions (Table 1). The Madrid study centers on

work with a community NGO in Malasaña, a neighborhood in central Madrid greatly affected by gentrification and touristification dynamics. The Salzburg study built on a collaborative network between IDEAS:Lab and secondary schools in Salzburg and focused on the identified need to better understand and specify youth-centered urban infrastructure/design as previously underlined in the context of the u3Green project (e.g., Hennig, Vogler, & Schötz, 2024). The Maputo study draws on the collaboration between academics at Eduardo Mondlane University and a local NGO and examines the use of the university campus by local young people, as the campus emerges as a border space between two districts in the city that stand at opposite ends of the socio-economic spectrum of Maputo.

Table 1: Case Studies – Background and Methods.

Case Study – Context	Research Questions & Methods
Madrid <i>Young people at social risk in a gentrified neighborhood</i>	(Arts-based workshops) Research questions: How do young people at social risk participate in their neighborhood? What meanings are attached to significant places in the community? What emplaced interventions do participating young people imagine for their community? Young people between 11–17 years of age participated in six collaborative workshops in a community organization (October 2025–January 2026), collected neighborhood soundscapes and completed walking interviews. The project will be completed with performative interventions in the neighborhood (June 2026).
Salzburg <i>Young people's places and spaces in the city</i>	(Online Mapping; Crowdsourced Mapping) Research goal: To specify young people's perspectives and requirements regarding urban infrastructure that support the development of child-friendly cities and their broader inclusion in city life. Participatory design with five internship high school students (16–19 years of age). They contributed to the development of an online survey using ESRI's Survey 123 for ArcGIS online targeting Salzburg youth (i.e. between 12–22 years of age in secondary education). Participating high school students implemented an ArcGIS Story Map and an ArcGIS Dashboard to document and share the contributed data/information.

Maputo <i>Youth in a public university campus</i>	(Focus Groups & Interviews) Research question: How do different groups of young people from economically disadvantaged neighborhoods make use of and take ownership of the UEM campus? Young people between 15–18 years of age completed three focus groups and individual interviews. Participants also collected and shared video-recordings of the university campus surroundings.
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3. The (Ongoing) Approach of Each Case Study

3.1. Case Study Madrid

The Madrid team has worked with around 15 pre-adolescents and adolescents at social-risk who participate in the community and after-school activities of an organization that has worked in this section of the city for over 30 years. Malasaña is a sector in the historical quarter of Madrid and a center of subcultural and leisure life of the city over the past 40 years. Intense gentrification and touristification puts high pressure on lower-income families of the neighborhood and shapes the commercial, leisure and public spaces of the community. The goal was to explore how lower-income (often migrant origin) children and youth navigate these potentially exclusionary dynamics. We draw on sensorial and arts-based methodologies (Mendoza & Morgade, 2018) and have implemented a series of workshops in which young people were invited to document and evoke their relationship with the neighborhood through different media (sound and talk, walking, drawing and modelling or performance). This work in progress was aggregated in a large multimodal imagined map of Malasaña where participants captured their perceived and lived limits of the neighborhood and significant places for them. In turn, this collective effort results in an installation-like presentation of the map and project (ongoing at the time of writing).



Figure 1: Work on Imagined Map of Malasaña (Photograph taken by the research team, 8 November 2025)

3.2. Case Study Maputo

Universidade Eduardo Mondlane (UEM) is located in Maputo, a city experiencing rapid growth and urban development. These processes are reshaping neighborhood boundaries and bringing new

challenges related to how emerging spaces and services are accessed and used by young people. This study seeks to understand how different groups of young people from economically disadvantaged neighborhoods make use of and take ownership of the UEM campus as a border space between distinct socioeconomic realities in Maputo.

This is a cross-sectional design with a qualitative approach at the EMU main campus in Maputo city- Mozambique, using interviews (Dursun, 2023) and focus groups (Gilton, 2002) with young people from the Polana Caniço neighborhood. In the first phase of data collection, focus groups were used. The research team visited Polana Caniço, where they met with groups of adolescents who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. A total of 8 adolescents participated, including 4 boys and 2 girls, aged between 15 and 18 years old. The team sought to understand how these adolescents related to the campus and the tensions arising from this relationship. In the second phase, the adolescents were asked to document, through their own narratives, their relationship with the campus using videos and photographs. This phase provided a clear picture of the dynamics of exclusion or invisibility experienced by the adolescents, particularly regarding pathways, infrastructure, and services. In the third phase, the adolescents were invited to attend classes as if they were university students. It was the first day of classes at the university, which enabled them to blend in with other adolescents who were also experiencing a university classroom for the first time. After the classes, individual interviews were conducted. In the final phase, the adolescents were invited to participate in an activity organized by the Rector. The activity included a lecture, tree planting, a football match, and music. At the end, the adolescents had the opportunity to take photographs with the Rector and members of the academic community.



Figure 2: Photography of one of the holes in the campus wall (taken by Faira Jivane, student and research assistant, 18 September, 2025)

3.3. Case Study Salzburg

In the Salzburg case study, a multi-stage process was used that combines different levels of participation. These relate to informative user involvement (questionnaire initiative), and participatory user involvement (participation in the implementation of the

questionnaire, story map and dashboard). Young people contribute their knowledge, needs, and preferences directly to the context of all work (Hennig et al., 2024). This ensures that the questionnaire, in terms of structure and content, actually and comprehensively addresses young people. This helps to counteract biases in the questionnaire responses (Tourangeau & Yan, 2007). While the questionnaire, with its 24 open and closed questions, allows young people to communicate their use and needs in relation to urban space, the Story Map provides a general overview of the case study, and the dashboard provides insights into the questionnaire responses provided by participants (Table 2).

Table 2: Elements Developed by High School Students

Element	URL
Online Survey	https://survey123.arcgis.com/share/d7a80b3ea7b84ee4b28b2833995144a8
Story Map	https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/ec076b73f824412d8d1408d6d7ce8ecb
Dashboard	https://zgis.maps.arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/5f87a9f25114482082a37fb4fe39f959

The questionnaire, conceived and developed by the target group, identifies the aspects they consider essential regarding their stay and mobility in the urban environment, and which may therefore be responsible for a feeling of inclusion or exclusion. An overview on the questions is given in Table 3.

Table 3: Questionnaire Overview

Questions	Description
age	open, number
gender	single choice (boy, girl, diverse)
place of residence/region	open, string
activity	single choice (school, studying, apprentice, working, other)
preferred place	map-based question
Name of the place	open, string
use intensity	single choice (very often, often, rarely)
activity carried	open, string
categorization (e.g. urban green, mall, pedestrian zone)	open, string
infrastructure supply	single choice
infrastructure supply	single choice
aesthetics	single choice (none unkempt/damaged present, uninviting present, appealing)

WLAN	single choice (yes, no, unknown)
lighting	single choice (yes, no, unknown)
toilets	single choice (none unkempt, uninviting, appealing)
drinking water	satisfaction; ranking 1–5
trash can	satisfaction; ranking 1–5
access	ranking 1–5
sidewalk, bicycle rack, public transport	single choice (yes, no, unknown)
favorite component	open, string
improvement suggestions	open, string

The survey is still active and therefore no results are yet available. However, the questions and topics covered already provide an insight into the usage patterns and demands of young people. This refers to the relevance of infrastructure, such as footpaths, bicycle racks and public transport, which underlines the need to consider the means of transport available and usable for young people. Besides this, infrastructure that allows for sport activities and/or to meet with friends (seating) are considered. Further, aesthetics, cleanliness (trash cans) and safety issues (lightning) as well as drinking water, toilets and Wlan are taken into account.

3.4. Some Preliminary Findings

The preliminary findings from the CON-CHY Open Lab reinforce a growing body of research demonstrating that urban space is not merely a physical backdrop to childhood but an active psychosocial developmental context. Young people build emplaced knowledge (Christensen, 2003) of their local context that include the socio-cultural, economic and ideological conditions that shape the interactions between their particular identities and social positions and the urban setting in which they participate. Although the study has not yet entered the formal data analysis phase, our preliminary examination of the materials points to three possible themes.

First, concerns with safety and access. In Maputo, the construction of the university wall symbolized institutional boundary-making, producing both physical restriction and perceived illegitimacy of presence of non-university youth from the local community in the public university campus. Similarly, in Madrid, gentrification and touristification restructured public space in ways that altered young people's everyday mobility. In Salzburg, infrastructural variables (lighting, sidewalks, transport access) were foregrounded as determinants of inclusion.

Second, the importance of green and friendly social spaces. Although the cases cover a broad socioeconomic spectrum, participants consistently underscored the value of accessible, socially vibrant, and aesthetically appealing environments. The Salzburg survey design mirrors evidence that green and play spaces are robust predictors of child mental health and cognitive functioning (Vanaken & Danckaerts, 2018; McCormick, 2017).

Third, a focus on the developmental implications of stigma and psychological marginalization (Shortt & Ross, 2021). In the Maputo context in particular, restricted safety and limited access generated strong emotions and even social withdrawal from the campus. The Madrid case study also started with a question about exclusion from local spaces but the work also showed how children

and youth carved out their own social spaces and sense of belonging in the neighborhood.

4. Conclusions and Outlook

A distinctive contribution of the CON-CHY Open Lab lies in its methodological design and in offering three complementary perspectives from different contexts on the same-arching theme: young people in place (Cresswell, 2009). Participatory mapping, arts-based workshops, focus groups, and GIS storytelling did not simply capture perceptions; they created structured opportunities for voice, reflection, and collective agency.

Preliminary findings from the three case-studies in Madrid, Maipo and Salzburg indicated that the use of inclusive participatory methodologies successfully engaged young people in reflecting on their experiences, interests and preferences, emotions, concerns and challenges related to urban public places. Moreover, place-based participatory methods and designs encouraged voicing and documentation of local youth perspectives, narratives, values and priorities related to specific urban environments. Participants and marginalized youth especially highlighted inclusion or exclusion and discriminatory practices and discourses related to urban stratification or city transformation through increased gentrification.

Further analysis of the project findings will extend the existing literature and provide new insights into youth's experiences, perspectives and challenges related to urban life and transformation. This includes the impact upon young people's physical, psychosocial and educational well-being (Anderson et al., 2024; Green et al., 2023; Song & Levine, 2025), as well as difficulties and opportunities to intervene on their experiences in the city or to participate in urban planning and policy in their communities (Mansfield, Batagol, & Raven, 2021). At the same time, expanding this line of research to additional cultural and urban contexts -within this CIVIS Open Lab project, sites in Bucharest and Athens stand as the following research cases- could yield important insights into how young people interpret and experience their environments, as well as how policy frameworks shape their engagement with public space and outdoor life.

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