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Building Blocks. A youth participatory approach to socio-spatial quality in vertical housing landscapes

Bouwblokken. Een participatieve benadering van jongeren van sociaal-ruimtelijke kwaliteit in verticale woonlandschappen

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ABSTRACT

How can we make qualitative vertical housing landscapes that are meaningful, livable and supportive for children and teenagers? And how can a socio-spatial perspective be helpful in accomplishing this, given the scarcity and unequal appropriation of space in the city? In this paper, we report on an interdisciplinary model for understanding and intervening in the socio-spatial quality of vertical housing landscapes, based on the interplay between matterscape, mindscape and powerscape. We consulted children and teenagers' own perspectives on their home environment, using a range of participatory research methods. We have involved 69 children and teenagers, aged 6–18, living in different typologies of vertical housing in Flanders, Belgium. These data resulted in a contextualised and participative set of features of socio-spatial quality for vertical housing landscapes: accessibility, vitality, ownership, distinctiveness, facilities, encounters, scale, privacy, safety and meaningful persons. The results call for a socio-spatial approach of the discussion about child-friendly spaces, and a critical examination of the specific roles and responsibilities of both social and spatial professionals.

ABSTRACT

Hoe kunnen we kwalitatieve verticale woonlandschappen maken die betekenisvol, leefbaar en ondersteunend zijn voor kinderen en tieners? En hoe kan een sociaal-ruimtelijk perspectief daarbij helpen, gezien de schaarste en ongelijke toe-eigening van ruimte in de stad? In dit artikel rapporteren we over een interdisciplinair model voor het begrijpen van en interveniëren in de sociaal-ruimtelijke kwaliteit van verticale woonlandschappen, gebaseerd op de wisselwerking tussen matterscape, mindscape en powerscape. We onderzochten de eigen perspectieven van kinderen en tieners op hun woonomgeving, met behulp van een reeks participatieve onderzoeksmethoden. We hebben 69 kinderen en tieners in de leeftijd van 6-18 jaar betrokken die in verschillende typologieën van stapelbouw in Vlaanderen, België, wonen. Deze data resulteerden in een gecontextualiseerde en participatieve set van kenmerken van sociaal-ruimtelijke kwaliteit voor verticale woonlandschappen: toegankelijkheid, vitaliteit, eigenaarschap, eigenheid, voorzieningen, ontmoetingen, schaal, privacy, veiligheid en betekenisvolle personen. De resultaten vragen om een sociaal-

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ruimtelijke benadering van de discussie over kindvriendelijke ruimtes, en een kritische beschouwing van de specifieke rollen en verantwoordelijkheden van zowel sociale als ruimtelijke professionals.

Introduction

In a rapidly urbanising world, providing for equal distribution of and access to space has become a major challenge (e.g. Arler, 2008; Egoz et al., 2011; Marcuse, 2009). In Flanders (Dutch speaking region of Belgium) the recent policy agenda on spatial planning (Vlaamse Overheid, 2018) stipulates that we will need to do more with less space, including densifying residential areas by creating more vertical housing and mixed-use buildings and outdoor spaces. Today, a significant number of Flemish families with children live in different contexts and types of vertical housing: numbers vary between 8.8% (Heylen et al., 2007) and 17.3% (Winters et al., 2015) according to different surveys. Even though this reality is more outspoken in cities, vertical housing is becoming a more commonplace typology in rural municipalities as well (Vanderstraeten et al., 2016). Despite this growing number of children and teenagers that is living in apartments in Flanders (especially in social housing), little is known about their perspective on the socio-spatial quality of vertical housing landscapes, and on how this quality can be strengthened. Architects and planners often refer to their personal childhoods or their experiences as being parents themselves, resulting in rather stereotypical statements or designs. Despite the multiple ways of participation that can be elaborated for involving the community in general and children in particular to co-produce urban space (e.g. Francis & Lorenzo, 2002; Spencer & Blades, 2006), designing child-friendly vertical housing landscapes is often still primarily approached from the angle of the particular, age-specific needs of children, resulting in a categorical child-friendly discourse. The focus of this discourse is to provide separate – often segregated – spaces for children and teenagers, promoting safety, playfulness, healthy movement, etc. (De Visscher & Bouverne - De Bie, 2008).

Within this discourse, child-friendly vertical housing tends to be framed as a *contradictio in terminis*. There's a strong belief that children and their families do not belong nor desire to live in vertical housing, and that children are missing out on opportunities to enjoy a good childhood and are lacking developmental chances in this type of context (Karsten, 2022; Krysiak, 2020). Vertical housing is suspected to have an impact on children's individual mobility (Whitzman & Mizrachi, 2009) and health (Fujiwara et al., 2014; Oda et al., 1989). Architects or developers of vertical housing projects cater primarily to the situation of young singles or couples and older people whose children have already left their home (Whitzman & Mizrachi, 2009). The affordances and opportunities for children and teenagers are often marginally considered in these planning processes.

Furthermore, the role of – and for – social work in (planning) vertical housing landscapes is often unclear. Social work often seems to be forgotten or instrumentalised in terms of organising participation or sociocultural initiatives to promote *cohesion* among residents or to make the relations between residents and the neighbourhood stronger. This limited influence does not make full use of the interesting positions in which social workers find themselves as key persons in the social life of certain neighbourhoods. Social workers are often well-informed on local social dynamics or issues and take part in local networks. This knowledge and position are too often undervalued in (the initiation of) spatial planning.

A socio-spatial approach to the discussion

There is a strong tendency to search for age-specific objective standards for intervening in space. These categorical approaches are normative in the sense that they have an implicit or explicit image of the ideal child in the ideal city (De Visscher & Sacré, 2017). But it is hard to define what

is in the best interest of the diversity of children, childhoods and neighbourhoods. The meaning of child-friendliness can be different and even contradictory for different social and cultural groups and can vary over time and space. What seems child-friendly in one context for one group of children, may very well be unfriendly and exclusive towards other groups of children or in other contexts.

Child-friendliness is increasingly being criticised for being too cute, too childish, too safe and non-committal (*cf*. Mannion & l'Anson, 2004). The concept of 'child-oriented' public space (*cf*. Vanderstede, 2007) has been introduced as an alternative. Child-orientedness is presented as going beyond the romantic image of childhood and taking in things beyond children's outdoor play opportunities when looking at neighbourhoods. Interventions in urban public space should be based on an integrated view of children's neighbourhoods (Vanderstede, 2007).

This observation calls for a more participatory approach in which children are involved in defining what spatial quality means within their particular context. We call for an approach to participation that focuses on spatial quality as a shared goal in which children and teenagers are seen as co-creators of that shared space. Not limited to informing them on how their environment will change, but seen as valuable partners in the analysis of the lived space, the defining of the right design question, and giving them a voice in the actual design process, as partners of social and spatial professionals. This alternative approach to the question of child-friendly design can be found in the emerging paradigm of socio-spatial theories, and what Spatscheck (2012) refers to as the spatial turn in social work. This spatial turn contains an attention shift away from social categories, and towards social spaces. A socio-spatial perspective focuses on the interactions and connections between inhabitants, users or passers-by of a certain place, and their social and ecological environment. It aims to contribute to the living conditions and structures of people, as well as the improvement of the inclusion and participation of all residents (Homfeldt & Reutlinger, 2009; Spatscheck, 2012). Applied to the question of child-friendly design, the socio-spatial *turn* implies less focus on the particular needs and interests *of* children, and more focus on exploring together *with* children what contributes to meaningful, livable, supportive places for all.

In this paper we will explore a socio-spatial and participatory approach to housing and neighbourhood quality according to children and teenagers. We will further illustrate this by explaining how we operationalised this approach in a research project concerning child-friendly vertical housing. The central goal of our study was to create an interdisciplinary model for understanding and promoting the socio-spatial quality of a vertical housing landscape, based on the lived experiences of children and young people who actually live in these environments.

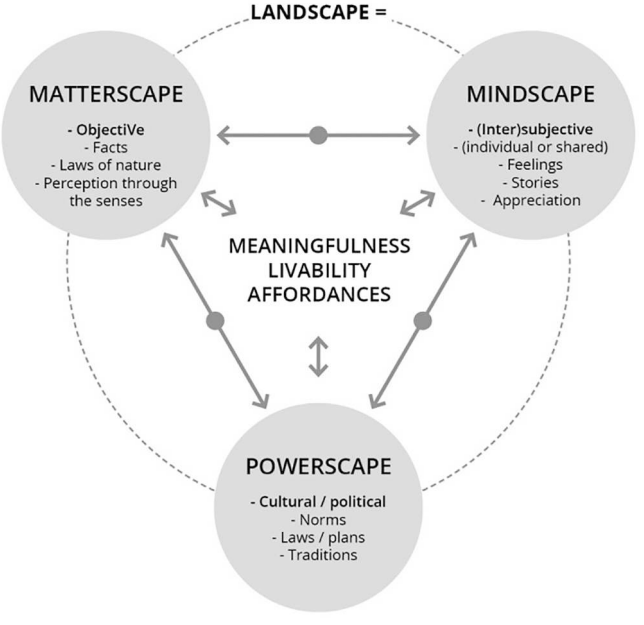
Vertical housing landscape

Our research examines children's housing conditions by considering vertical housing '*landscapes*', emphasising the interconnectedness of buildings, their surroundings, and neighbourhoods. Considering a home environment as a landscape implies that it is not considered as merely a physical space, but also a complex interplay of social, aesthetic, political, and narrative elements. By deconstructing the landscape into physical, social, and personal dimensions, we can better understand the diverse and dynamic factors that contribute to or hinder the quality of life in vertical housing.

In both social and spatial theory, landscape is considered holistic, containing physical, social, aesthetical, political, and narrative meanings. The term is hard to define (Egoz et al., 2011). Some believe that its holistic nature makes it a concept *par excellence* to think about complex matters like justice or sustainability (Benson & Roe, 2007). Landscape is seen as a continuous interaction between a multitude of voices and processes. Therefore, striving for a just landscape can only be accomplished through an inclusive democratic process (Arler, 2008; Doherty, 2011; Egoz et al., 2011).

To operationalise the layered complexity of landscape, and make interdisciplinary discussions manageable, we use a threefold ontology of landscape, based on Jacobs (2004): matterscape

(physical), powerscape (social), and mindscape (inner). One important quality of this ontology is that it derives its meanings from a specific context itself and is not dependent on pre-existing understandings of disciplinary frameworks.



Mindscape: this is the personal, individual dimension of landscape, defined by feelings, stories and personal appreciations connected to landscape. It can be seen as the (inter)subjective layer of landscape. A feeling about a landscape can be shared by more than one person, but this still remains very much an individual experience. For example: a child loves an oak tree since he can climb in it and finds it beautiful; his grandmother, however, dislikes the tree since she once slipped over its leaves and fell.

Matterscape: this is the physical dimension of landscape. It is the layer of landscape as it can be observed by the different senses, and it also contains 'factual knowledge' attached to landscape. It is in some way the objective dimension of landscape, since it exists outside of the individual and is not affected by cognitive or emotional processes. In this -scape, universal laws of nature apply. In this way this -scape is the same for everyone. For example: imagine the oak tree we previously discussed. It is 20 m tall, on a sunny day it casts a shadow, and it grows throughout time. It was planted 30 years ago. You cannot walk through the tree. All of this is true in the matterscape.

Powerscape: this is the cultural and political dimension of landscape. It is defined by rules, norms, laws, plans or traditions connected to a landscape. More than one set of rules can exist in the same landscape, since it can also be culturally bound or bound to certain groups of people. This dimension defines a lot of the behaviour in landscape, as some of these norms are explicitly written down and non-obedience can be punished. It is therefore very much connected to processes of power. For example: cutting the oak tree is illegal since there are laws protecting trees whose radius at 1 m height is bigger than 1 m. In some places you are obliged to clean up the leaves when they fall on public spaces.

When utilising the -scapes framework, we suggest to adhere to the following guidelines: (1) each space holds all three of these -scapes, (2) the -scapes are shaped by the dynamics between past and

present of a space; (3) to understand a landscape, all -scapes should be considered equally, (4) each scape directly or indirectly influences the other -scapes, (5) observations in one -scape cannot serve as a ground for conclusions in another -scape (e.g. there is a pond in which children can fall (matterscape). The solution is not necessarily to build a wall around the pond (matterscape) but can also be a story about a monster in the lake so children don't dare to come close to the pond (mindscape)).

The -scapes framework offers a method for reading landscapes where disciplinary relevance questions are secondary to site-specific characteristics. It provides insights into the layered complexity, where social, physical, and individual meanings of the landscape interact continuously, facilitating multidisciplinary discussions. While useful for understanding space, the framework faces challenges as a dialogue tool for spatial quality discussions. It is neutral about landscape quality and doesn't intrinsically inform participatory dialogue with children and teenagers. For refining specific elements of spatial quality together with children and teenagers, it is necessary to focus on liveability, meaning, and affordances.

A participatory approach to socio-spatial quality

Whereas the -scapes framework offers a way of reading and understanding a landscape as it is, it does not offer a normative baseline for judging its *quality*. For that reason, we started with a review of existing research and design guidelines in the context of vertical housing on the one hand, and theories of spatial quality on the other hand. This resulted in an initial list of 18 characteristics and qualities that relate to spatial quality. In a next step, we compared this list with empirical data that we collected with children and teenagers, based on questions about what contributes to – or hinders – the meaningfulness, liveability and affordances of their vertical housing environment. We will first briefly describe both methodologies, and then discuss what the comparison of both methods taught us.

From a theoretical model of spatial quality …

There is extensive literature on spatial quality, but it is spread across various disciplines that work with space. This dispersion makes it challenging to formulate a comprehensive multi-disciplinary definition of spatial quality (Moulaert et al., 2013). Each discipline defines space in its own way and has other ways of defining what quality is.

Our approach was to step away from a rigid definition of spatial quality, but to define specific *building blocks*: areas of attention which can be discussed in any particular context. We made a selection of literature from which we defined these initial building blocks. The literature reviewed falls into three main categories: (1) guidelines for spatial design, (2) literature that defines socio-spatial quality, and (3) literature that examines the concept of child-friendly spaces.

(1) Spatial design guidelines (e.g. Alexander et al., 1977; Coeterier, 1996; Gibson, 1977; Hall, 1988; Kaplan, 1987; Lynch, 1960; Newman, 1972; Van Damme et al., 2017) cover themes like scale, accessibility, coherence, rhythm, resilience, functionality, identity, beauty, readability, mystery, and safety. Landscape architecture literature adds ecology, air quality, soil quality, energy, and vegetation. A common critique of this literature is its paternalistic nature and the deterministic idea that physical intervention can shape behaviour. The focus is often on the matterscape, neglecting its relation to other -scapes.
(2) Literature that defines socio-spatial quality (e.g. Blokland, 2003; Gehl, 2010, 2011; Jacobs, 1961; Loopmans et al., 2011; Oosterlynck et al., 2010; Segers et al., 2013; Soenen, 2006; Whyte, 1980) take into account the critiques on the previous references, and include the influence of demographic realities, social and political context, attention to the daily life of a diversity of people, nuances in community, inclusion, participation, key persons, power relations, well-being, etc. This set of literature adds influences from mindscape and powerscape to the balance, creating

a more holistic view of what spatial quality encompasses. However, it rarely has specific attention to children or teenagers and can still be generalist or categorial in its nature.

(3) The final category of literature defines child-friendly spaces (e.g. Horelli, 2007; Karsten, 2014, 2016; Lange, 2018; Nordström, 2010; Whitzman & Mizrachi, 2009). It emphasises themes like freedom of movement, safety, growth and learning processes, risk-taking, distances, social relationships (to parents), visibility, and liveliness. Some works examine how vertical housing landscapes impact these factors. However, this literature often remains categorical, focusing on specific spatial needs for different age groups rather than the quality of space as a shared context where children are co-creators.

From this literature analysis, we identified 18 *building blocks of socio-spatial quality*. These formed a preliminary theoretical framework that was tested and validated with empirical data from the study.

… towards an empirically based model of socio-spatial quality

In order to get the most relevant responses, and considering the different age groups of the respondents, we have made use of several methods of *participatory lifeworld research*. The data for this study result from interviews with 69 children and teenagers of different age groups in several medium to high rise apartments. Methods used include mental mapping, individual interviews, group quizzes, videomaking, and others. The table below provides an overview of the research cases, the participants involved per case, and the methods employed for data collection. All of the data were collected between 2016 and 2019.

Research case	Participants	Research methods
Europark (Linkeroever, Antwerp). Modernist high-rise environment constructed between 1967 and 1979, featuring 18 social housing towers.	44 Children and teenagers aged 6–18, with the majority aged between 8 and 14.	Experience-based research including individual interviews with mental mapping, group walks, photo scavenger hunt and photo rallies, quizzes and discussions around a model.
Watersportbaan (Ghent). Modernist high-rise environment constructed between 1959 and 1965, featuring 11 social housing towers.	15 Children and teenagers aged 6–18.	Experience- and design-based research including a construction activity, discussions around a model, a photo challenge, statement-based interviews.
Lange Velden (Wondelgem, Ghent). Part of a recent (2012) residential development. Combines social rental apartments (48 units) with six private residential towers, each containing 14 apartments, either sold or rented.	6 Children aged between 4 months (with input provided by the mother) and 12 years.	Experience- and design-based research, utilising methods such as individual interviews with mental mapping, interviews with parents, participatory observations during coffee gatherings at the entrance.
Several small-scale vertical housing environments (Central East Flanders: Ghent, Lembeke, Wachtebeke and Kaprijke).	4 Children aged between 9 and 14 years.	Experience-based research, employing methods such as classroom discussions, a photo challenge, and individual interviews with mental mapping.

Informed consent was obtained from all the respondents (and their supervisors) involved in this research, confidentiality was maximised at all research stages, respondents were well informed of the purpose of the research and participation in this study was voluntary. This is according to guidelines of the Ghent University of Applied Sciences and the Arts and according to the codes of ethics for scientific research in Belgium. Each interview was transcribed and coded with the qualitative data processing programme NVIVO, using the previously defined theoretical model of spatial quality as a starting coding tree. This process eliminated some of the 18 original building blocks (such as 'beauty' and 'resilience'), added others (such as 'meaningful persons' and 'facilities'), and rephrased others again (such as 'identity', 'complexity', 'coherence', and 'readability', transforming or merging them into 'distinctiveness' and 'scale').

This resulted in the final 10 *building blocks of socio-spatial quality*, or in other words: the 10 most important themes regarding socio-spatial quality of vertical housing landscapes according to children and teenagers.

Building blocks for socio-spatial quality

These building blocks aim to guide social professionals, urban planners, and (landscape) architects on the key socio-spatial qualities of vertical housing as experienced by children and teenagers. They are not fixed design guidelines and should be adapted to the local context.

Table 1 below summarises these ten building blocks of socio-spatial quality identified in this study, with concise descriptions for each.

We reconstructed different *situational studies* to show how these building blocks interact in specific vertical housing landscapes, focusing on factors that affect socio-spatial quality for children and teenagers. Each study highlights the interplay between various building blocks. While not exhaustive, these studies offer detailed observations and insights drawn from our case studies. For this paper, we selected the following three situational studies:

(1) the importance of space for encounters in vertical housing landscapes, (2) the significance of the presence of meaningful persons, and (3) the importance of visibility and accessibility of outdoor spaces. Each of these reflects the socio-spatial nature of housing quality, indicating the interaction between aspects of mind-, matter- and powerscape.

Space for encounters in vertical housing landscapes

> Having a traditional single house is not as enjoyable because you can meet fewer people.

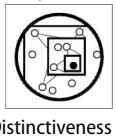
Vertical living is characterised by the close proximity of individuals, resulting in a reduction in privacy. Residents share both indoor and outdoor spaces, necessitating increased attention to interpersonal dynamics and the establishment of areas for social interaction or personal space. In high-density housing conditions, children and teenagers benefit from the opportunity to meet many new people. Reduced anonymity and increased social oversight enhance the perception of security within the environment. Additionally, this arrangement promotes a culture of tolerance, which is essential given the closeness of residents. When individuals are familiar with one another, they are more likely to address issues directly.

Within vertical housing landscapes, there is, for the above reasons, an *additional need for spaces suitable for social contacts of various kinds* (as described by Lofland, 1998): both intimate relationships between family members and friends (private contacts), more transient relationships between, for example, acquaintances and neighbours ('parochial' contacts), and relationships between strangers (public contacts) need space. Special attention is needed for daily interactions: moments when strangers can become acquaintances. Transition areas between private residences and public spaces often facilitate interactions. Interactions between people do not only occur in spaces specifically designed for that purpose (formal meeting spaces such as a community centre or an arrangement of benches in a park) but can take place anywhere. It is important that both *formal and informal meeting spaces* should therefore be addressed with care. Considering their design, location, dimensioning, etc. can significantly enhance the quality of an environment.

Significance and presence of meaningful persons

The people in a neighbourhood significantly influence its socio-spatial quality. This applies to children and teenagers as well: individuals shape the environment. Meaningful persons, trusted individuals and role models play a crucial role in determining whether someone feels at home in a

Table 1. Ten building blocks for socio-spatial quality according to children and teenagers in vertical housing.

Safety 	The extent to which the environment is perceived as sufficiently safe and allows for the freedom of movement (and independent play) for children and teenagers.
Accessibility 	The extent to which the environment, including the available facilities, is known, usable, accessible, and affordable for children and teenagers.
Encounters 	The extent to which an environment allows for various types of interactions and enables children and teenagers to engage in meaningful relationships.
Meaningful persons 	The extent to which there are key persons in the environment contributing to the developmental opportunities of children and teenagers in that environment, as well as to the livability of the surroundings.
Ownership 	The extent to which residents experience co-ownership of the environment, and children and teenagers can participate in determining and influencing what is possible in the surroundings, including the shared spaces.
Facilities 	The extent to which the environment includes facilities and services that contribute to the livability of the surroundings and are meaningful for children and teenagers.
Vitality 	The extent to which the environment is vibrant and offers ample opportunities and activities that appeal to children and teenagers.
Scale 	The extent to which the environment and the building are perceived as coherent and are comprehensible for children and teenagers.
Privacy 	The extent to which the building and the environment provide residents with personal space and a sense of safety, including areas where children and teenagers can choose to be on their own.
Distinctiveness 	The extent to which the environment or its various elements can be distinguished from other surroundings and is recognisable to children and teenagers.

neighbourhood. They influence the *possibilities for activity*, what is possible and permissible in the surroundings, the *freedom of movement* experienced by children and teenagers, and contribute to a *sense of safety* and the *formation of the identity of the environment*.

During our conversations with children and teenagers, several types of individuals emerged as particularly important, both for themselves and for the community. One such person is a community worker, called B., who is active at a local library in one of the cases we studied. B. is not only important for the supportive activities she arranges for children; above all, her presence in the library as a *trusted person* is highly meaningful. The children have known her for quite some time and can turn to her when needed. She provides with her presence a lot of opportunities for children and teenagers in this neighbourhood, one of them being a safe haven for children as well as their parents, and in that way providing a sort of second home.

> "When no one is home, I go to B." (Boy, 10 years old)

Visibility and accessibility of outdoor spaces

> "I have now told them where I'm going, and they can see from our part of the apartment where I am, so they know whether I am safe or not." (Girl, 13 years old)

For children growing up in vertical housing, the simple act of 'quickly going outside to play' is often not as straightforward. Multiple aspects regarding the (in)visibility and accessibility of the outdoor space from the apartment building were addressed in the research and are important to be considered.

The *distance between the residence and the outdoor space* is greater in vertical housing due to the additional vertical distance. Both children and their parents feel safer when the distance to cover is limited, especially in case of emergencies. Especially younger children tend to meet up close to the entrance of their apartment building or in between two buildings. As they grow older, children are typically allowed to venture further from home. Clear and safe routes are essential for children of every age. Accessing outdoor spaces in vertical housing involves factors such as navigating stairs or waiting for elevators, with reported wait times of up to fifteen minutes during peak hours.

In vertical housing environments, *the time it takes to get from the private residence to the outdoor space* involves factors such as navigating stairs or waiting for elevators, with reported waiting times up to fifteen minutes during peak hours. Children may not accurately estimate this time, leading to potential issues, especially in urgent situations. The importance of a reliable, well-functioning elevator cannot be overstated. Even for families on the first floor, as they depend on the elevator for transporting heavy items like strollers.

The *level of supervision* parents can provide significantly shapes children's freedom of movement during outdoor play. Factors influencing this dynamic include the layout of the apartment building, the spaces overlooking play areas, the presence of balconies facilitating visual and auditory contact, potential obstructions to visibility in the outdoor space, distance in time and space from housing unit to outside spaces, and the location and visibility of routes to interesting places and amenities around the apartment.

Clear and (from the apartment or balcony) visible *visual landmarks* play a crucial role in facilitating supervision and enhancing children's sense of security in outdoor play areas. Establishing meeting points and defining boundaries contribute to effective supervision, providing parents with the means to periodically check on their children and delineating play limits.

Discussion

Landscape as an interdisciplinary concept for analysis and intervention

The findings of this study generate interesting insights and questions about a socio-spatial approach to cultivating child-friendly vertical housing landscapes. One question we want to address is how the above building blocks can be helpful to analyse or intervene in vertical housing landscapes, and who should take the lead in this work?

The visual representation below can serve as a strategic guide for social workers and spatial professionals, encouraging the adoption of a socio-spatial perspective (Delarue & Dufour, 2018) (Figure 1).

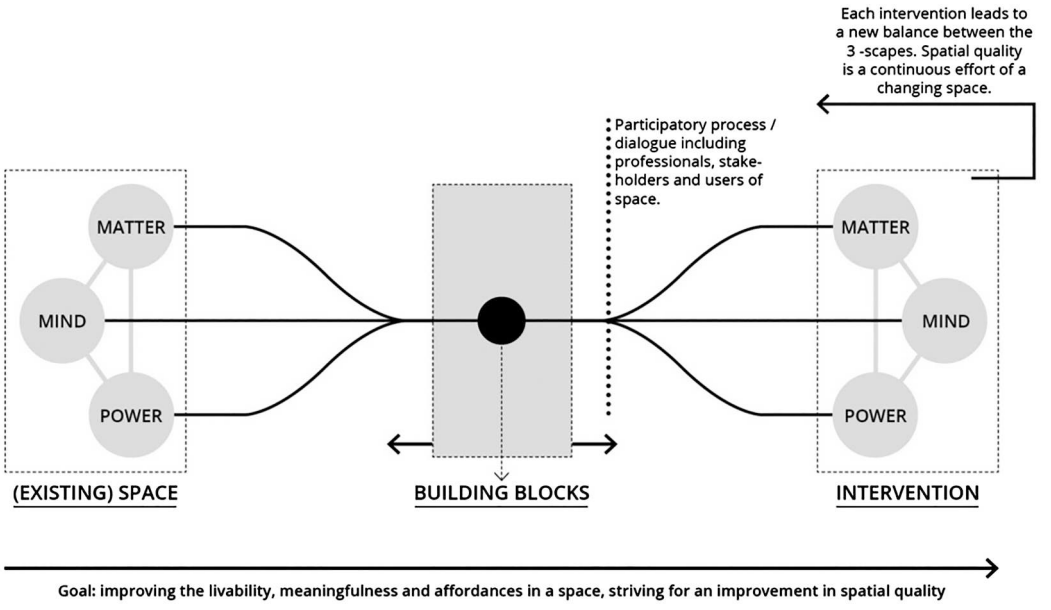


Figure 1. Shows the position of the building blocks as a (1) node, (2) forum and (3) tool for analysis of space and intervention in landscape as an interaction between the three -scapes.

The building blocks serve a triple role:

1. As a **node** connecting the analysis of space with intervention: operating as connectors between socio-spatial analysis and intervention, each building block's specific significance within a space is defined by the intricate interplay of all three -scapes. This, in turn, means that observations about, for example, 'vitality' can include information either of all three -scapes, but do not necessarily lead to responses in the same -scape.
2. As a **forum for dialogue**: recognising the diverse stakeholders involved in spatial interventions, these building blocks provide a dynamic forum for dialogue. Facilitating an interdisciplinary and participatory approach, they can bring together different perspectives and ideas for discussion among users, stakeholders, and professionals. Emphasis is placed on ensuring the comprehensibility and exchanging the different meanings of each building block's content to all parties involved.
3. As a **tool for analysis or intervention**: providing a dual functionality, the building blocks serve as instruments for investigating current perceptions and appreciation of thematic characters of a housing landscape. Simultaneously, the theoretical foundations of these elements can be employed to formulate interventions, ranging from physical changes (matterscape) to regulatory measures (powerscape) and shifts in perception or activities (mindscape).

A socio-spatial perspective in social work

The socio-spatial perspective challenges us to collaborate and bridge the gap between social and spatial disciplines to develop local living conditions with high opportunities for all, and to design social and educational services which enhance democratic processes in society (Deinet, 2002; Spatscheck, 2012).

The evolving role of social workers in spatial planning and vice versa prompts profound questions about the meaning of a socio-spatial perspective in social work and the necessity of 'socio-spatial professionals' (Delarue & Dufour, 2018; Roets et al., 2022).

Urban public space has transformed into a contested arena where competing claims and diverse needs converge, necessitating an interdisciplinary approach. Complex urban issues demand the intertwining of social and spatial elements, as well as an understanding of social and economic positions (Meert, 2008). The dynamic interaction between spatial elements and social practices demands a comprehensive vision of democratic urban space, emphasising social justice (Haijer, 1991). Democracy, viewed not as an end point but as an ongoing process, involves addressing historical, social, cultural, economic, and political relations and inequalities within society. Living together involves dealing with pluriformity and diversity, and with dissensus and contradiction necessary for democracy. This dissensus is about keeping the social debate about collective problems open and guarding that even the most vulnerable groups and situations in society are present within this debate.

Socio-spatial work entails the making of choices by social and spatial professionals, guided by principles aligned with the horizon of a democratic society. Loopmans et al. (2011) address architects and urban planners on their social mission and argue in their 'handbook of social-spatial planning' that social workers should also learn to think and act spatially. Although their intention is to increase the social added value of urban planning processes, the focus of their work is on the inability of social professionals and urban planners to reach out and fruitfully communicate with each other (Loopmans et al., 2011). Segers et al. (2013) examine the concept of spatial quality from the perspective of different disciplines and space users. These authors want to strengthen and support cooperation between social and spatial professionals. The problem, however, is that they do this by translating knowledge and experiences from one group to the other, but in doing so, they pay too little attention to shared normative frameworks of both groups of professionals. The risk is that the spatial perspective in social work is thereby reduced to a communication or collaboration issue, while the potential of a socio-spatial approach lies in avoiding undemocratic processes, and in realising a more socially just society for everyone.

The complexity and unequal appropriation of urban public space, especially for children and youngsters, needs a socio-spatial perspective in all professions which goes beyond issues of translation, communication and collaboration. This prompts another question: Is there a need for a new socio-spatial professional to realise this perspective? Should practitioners and policymakers be trained in both social and spatial theories and practices? Do we have to set up new training courses or educational programmes which pass by segregations between disciplines? Or can we realise more socially just and democratic living conditions in vertical housing landscapes through a socio-spatial professional orientation for each professional?

A socio-spatial orientation for each professional

A youth participatory approach to socio-spatial quality in vertical housing landscapes radically questions the reproduction of space by re-negotiating and connecting the perspective of children and youngsters, social workers and spatial professionals. Therefore, this approach enhances the possibility to stage promising living conditions for children and adults in vertical housing. This is done through a co-creation of knowledge and expertise between social workers and spatial professionals, connected to the knowledge and experiences of young people themselves. In this sense we do not need a new profession, but we need an *enriched* socio-spatial orientation in each profession.

This enriched socio-spatial orientation involves a shared responsibility to achieve a common goal through specialised expertise. It requires specific methods and tasks, based on each profession's skills, knowledge, and frameworks, contributing to meaningful and supportive vertical housing landscapes. Social workers implement participatory approaches in spatial planning, conducting sociocultural analyses of people, places, and situations. Spatial practitioners provide technical expertise in designing spaces that support daily interactions.

Though their expertise differs, professionals aim to create equitable vertical housing landscapes. Recognising each other's professional framework while maintaining integrity is crucial. Constructing socially just spaces is the mutual objective for each profession. Social workers and spatial

practitioners understand space as more than an intervention backdrop. They acknowledge structural forces within a dynamic society. The building blocks for socio-spatial quality in our research provide a concrete framework. Role flexibility and innovative collaborations are essential.

There are no strict or rigidly defined roles for each discipline. It concerns the roles of social workers and spatial professionals, but also from a wider group of people involved. This also provides the opportunity to give the perspective of children and youngsters themselves a full and meaningful place. These roles can shift during the process, including also the role of the person in charge. Role fluidity (Mindell, 2003) means that roles can be shared and distributed among those involved, and therefore has a horizontalising effect. It punctures the vertical hierarchical relationship of professionals and policy makers towards children and youth, and also asks social and spatial professionals to step out of their own frame of reference and open up to the unexpected. Role fluidity makes it possible to approach social problems from different angles to interplay history, present and future in approaching the quality of spatial housing landscapes from different perspectives. In this way, new connections and a shared responsibility can emerge.

This role fluidity also evokes innovative models of collaboration between social and spatial practitioners and renewed organisational structures. Voets and De Rynck (2011) refer to the need for boundary scanners and boundary spanners. Professionals who actively connect the agendas, knowledge, powers and sources of power of various entities and sectors. Who dare and are able to look beyond their own organisational boundaries, so that solutions are found outside the institutional boundaries.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have discussed the question of how a socio-spatial perspective can be helpful in realising qualitative vertical housing landscapes that are meaningful, livable and supportive for children and young people. We positioned this socio-spatial perspective against the categorical perspective on child-friendly planning and design. This included a shift away from the question of what children like or need, toward investigating together with them what a particular environment needs to become more meaningful, supportive and livable to all.

Involving children and young people in this exercise, resulted in a list of 10 building blocks for socio-spatial quality of vertical housing landscapes: accessibility, vitality, ownership, distinctiveness, facilities, encounters, scale, privacy, safety and meaningful persons. These building blocks aim to contribute to a common language between children, social and spatial professionals to help analyse or intervene in vertical housing landscapes. Each building block's significance is defined by the interplay between the matterscape, mindscape and powerscape of the place in question.

Creating more child-friendly environments requires a socio-spatial orientation as a shared responsibility and goal of social work and urban planning. This orientation encourages us to leave disciplinary barriers, search for a mutual understanding of the different types of expertise involved and contribute to innovative models of collaboration and renewed organisational structures.

In sum we should conclude that children growing up in a vertical housing environment is nor a good thing, nor a bad thing in itself. But – likewise other housing typologies – needs a concept of socio-spatial quality that is grounded in the experiential knowledge of children themselves.

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