

Becoming.
Architectures for
a planet in transition.

Proceedings of the UIA
World Congress of Architects
2026 Barcelona

Volume 1: Call for Participants



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Editors

Pau Bajet, Mariona Benedito,
Maria Giramé, Tomeu Ramis,
Pau Sarquella and Carmen Torres

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Introduction 19

1. Critical Design

<i>Alluvial Decoder (City of Raleigh Storm Memorial)</i> A Gang of Three	25
<i>Farallones Coffee wet mill</i> AGENDa	31
<i>Benjakitti Forest Park</i> Arsomsilp Community and Environmental Architects and Turenscape	36
<i>Bottling warehouse and offices for a Tequila company</i> Atelier Ars	42
<i>La Nave. Rehabilitation of an old industrial warehouse</i> Atienza Maure	48
<i>A Botanic LAB: Rethinking Educational Pedagogy through Productive Infrastructures</i> Bertoia, Máximo	54
<i>Renaturalization of Liconsa Parking</i> Borque, Beatriz; Vidal Tomas, Jorge	60
<i>Regenerative Biogenic Façades For Extreme Climates</i> CINARK – Center for Industrialised Architecture	66
<i>Why Do I Have to Move?</i> CO53; Cramer, Sharona; Oron, Yotam	72
<i>Park in the Prado Neighborhood - Life in a Garden</i> Connatural; Mazo, Edgar	78
<i>Environmental restoration of Rec Comtal in Vallbona</i> Enrich, Carles	83
<i>Rethinking Industrial Environments: Integrating Culture, Tradition and Sustainability</i> Estudio ALA	89
<i>The City of Indigenous Arts</i> Estudio MMX	95
<i>Guayaquil 650 Veterinary Clinic</i> Adamo-Faiden	101
<i>Land, Labor and Civic Ecology</i> Gravelle, Connor	107
<i>Circular Building Cultures: 1:1 Design Research Methodology</i> Gregoric, Tina; Institute of Architectural Design, TU Vienna	113

<i>Khan Jaljulia Restoration</i> Khuri, Elias	118
<i>Ending Well</i> Kpodo, Courage	123
<i>The Grid</i> Mai, Trung; Ad hoc Practice	129
<i>Mass Madera: Advancing Industrialized Timber Construction in Spain</i> Mass Madera IAAC	134
<i>Diadema Educational Block</i> Muniz, Cristiane; Viegas, Fernando; Francelin, Bárbara; Zati, Thiago Augusto; Escola da Cidade	139
<i>Paleoinnovation in Agadir: embodying tomorrow</i> Naji, Salima	145
<i>P.A.R.C. – PREVIOUS ATMOSPHERES RECOVERY CHAPTERS</i> OESST; Escolano Ferrer, Adrià; Steegmann, David; MARBORIS; Armengol, Mar	151
<i>Your Greenhouse Is Your Kitchen</i> Office for Roundtable and JXY Studio	156
<i>6 social housing units in Santa Eugènia, Mallorca</i> Oliver Barceló, Carles	162
<i>Tuzla Stream Co-habitat: Urban Regeneration through Waterscapes</i> Openact architecture	168
<i>Compluvium Pavilion</i> P + S Estudio de Arquitectura; Parada, Francisco; Salvador, Laura R.	174
<i>Rupgaon: A Paradigm for Climate Resilient Symbiotic Community Development</i> Polin, Fatiha; PERCEIVE	180
<i>Open Regeneration of Housing Estates in Barcelona</i> Ravetllat Mira, Pere Joan; Rearq – Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya (UPC)	186
<i>Waycha Mayu Urban Biological Corridor</i> TAV	193
<i>Shelter for Homeless Women: Architecture Serving Social Reintegration</i> Vivas Arquitectos	200

2. Critical Image

<i>All Come From Dust</i> Ben Slimane, Younès	208
<i>The Great Together</i> Calzado, Rocio; Meurer, Jasper; Docar Films	211
<i>Food Architectures of Marine Cultivation for Ecological Production and Regeneration</i> Carvajal, Sebastián	214

<i>Tuned Territories: Water, Resistance and Decolonial Architecture</i> Counter Tropics: Figueredo, Natalia; McKenzie, Victoria	220
<i>The Storm: Architectures of Vernacular Geoengineering</i> De Vicente, Jose Luis; Franch i Gilabert, Eva; FAST	226
<i>Turning the Ecological Gears</i> Falkeis, Sophie	232
<i>Documenting Difference</i> Fleri Soler, Ella; Darmanin, Andrew; Text Catalogue	237
<i>City Unfinished – Voices of El Ermitaño</i> Golda-Pongratz, Kathrin	243
<i>PALIMPSEST: Overwriting architecture</i> Goula, Adrià	246
<i>Humanitarian Imaginary</i> Greder, Damien; Fernandez Contreras, Javier	251
<i>HOUSE-04: Reviving through Careful Inhabitation</i> Gross, Anne; Bucherer, Luna	257
<i>Under the Ice</i> Kessler, Michel; Oesch, David	264
<i>Converging Alphabets</i> Marcolin, Simone	267
<i>Datapolis+: The Materiality of Data</i> Micucci, Caterina (Atelier Atollo); Swagerman, Paul; Sanaan, Negar; Cournet, Paul	273
<i>The Twilight Zone</i> Mkhabela, Solam	239
<i>The Inmortal, a reflexion on the Sexto Panteon legacy</i> Namer, Léa	281
<i>One-Floor / One-Woman: Spatial Implications of Women's Labour</i> Oggioni, Chiara; Sun, Yi; Wo-Men Work	286
<i>Quito Fragmented</i> Paz, María Isabel	293
<i>Kutch's Living Birdhouses: Community Sanctuaries for Coexistence</i> Prabhakar, Nipun	299
<i>Antropia</i> Quagliato, Luca; Trupia, Guglielmo	305
<i>supra-grounds</i> Redzisz, Aleksandra	308
<i>Reviving local games, Reclaiming Public Spaces: Let's Play Initiative Nepal</i> Shrestha, Sadichchha; Sharma, Rojita	303
<i>The Invisible Hands</i> Stokholm, Caroline; Sorensen, Jenny Amdi	315
<i>Scrap Oriented Urbanism - Speculative cartography for socio-material urbanism</i> Torrego, Daniel	317

<i>THE ECOLOGY WILL COME AND WELCOME YOU IN IT'S BOSOM.</i> Torres Nadal, Jose Maria	324
<i>'Alternative urbanism: self-organising markets of Lagos'</i> Tosin, Oshinowo	331
<i>Fins ací (it ends here). Paiporta, Valencia, October 29, 2024</i> Villalba, Milena	334
<i>The Mineral Landscape Has a Light Blue Sky</i> Zegers, Marcos	339

3.

Critical Essay: Speakers

<i>The Cloud is burning! Cloud architecture in the spanish context</i> Andueza Ribot, Álvaro; Ribot, Almudena	346
<i>Weaponization of Water: Hydrological Infrastructure as Battlefield in Black Sea</i> Berchul, Yevheniia; Agzamov, Nabi	354
<i>Subterranean Resonances: The memory of the Air-Raid Shelters in Barcelona</i> Bertero Mastrangelo, Ana Laura	361
<i>Beyond demolition, architectures of care. Sociotechnical taxonomy of housing estates</i> Calzado, Rocio	374
<i>Counter-Cartographies of Migrants to the Canary Islands</i> Cano-Ciborro, Victor	382
<i>Marine Food Architectures for Ecological Regeneration in Chilean Patagonia</i> Carvajal, Sebastián	390
<i>Performative Earth Walls: Climate-Responsive Geometry for 3D-Printing</i> Colombo, Juana; Ali, Farah; Ring, Luca Owen	399
<i>Brownfields</i> Córdova Porte, Fernanda	408
<i>Floating Manaus: Riverine Legacies and the Urban Utopia</i> De Bonis Silva Simões, Isabella	417
<i>Becoming Cybersyn Architecture and the Reassembly of Systemic Intelligence</i> del Campo, Matias; Manninger, Sandra	427
<i>Erased from Within: Interior Loss and the Fiction of Preservation</i> Ergun Kocaili, Buket	436
<i>Discoteca de playa: mobilizing desire to reimagine the coast</i> Esteve Castelló, Pol	444
<i>(A)esthetics of the Everyday: Environmental Poetics in Social Architecture</i> Felipe Muñoz, Francisco	453
<i>Origin and Evolution of Architecture. On Human architectural ethology</i> Frediani Sarfati, Arturo; Alcaina Pozo, Lara; Barham, Larry; Hernandez Aguilar, Adriana	464

<i>The Systemic Making of Space: Lucius Burckhardt's Architecture of Perception</i> Gross, Anne	474
<i>Architecture as Ethical Resistance to Colonial and Capitalist Violence</i> Habash, Nadia	481
<i>Intersectional Urbanism: building cities of justice and climate resilience</i> Iacconi Iambrenghi, Ilaria	488
<i>Lithium Extraction and Ecological Resistance in the Andean Altiplano</i> Ipinza-Olatte, Constanza; Nakamura, Ayami; Morales Puebla, Valentina	495
<i>Spaces of Knowing: Co-creating Embedded Architectural Research Through Everyday Encounters</i> Kus, Aga	504
<i>Designing Otherwise: Architecture Beyond the Human</i> Labriola, Valentina	516
<i>Re-Sourcing: Design, Extraction, and Infrastructural Legacies in Western Australia</i> Lee, Elspeth Mary; Holohan, Donn Alexander	522
<i>Obscure Niches: Mapping Urban Becoming in Metro Manila's Interstices</i> Lorenzo Belandres, Jose	530
<i>Rethinking Competitions as Visibility Systems in the Digital Age</i> Ma, Vanessa; Cheng, Leroy	538
<i>Learning from Garcia Faria: Circular Metabolism in the late XIX</i> Martí Elias, Joan Maria	545
<i>Designing with Rare Earths: Unveiling Material Geopolitics</i> Pujals, Blanca	556
<i>Anarchaeological practices for radical imagination</i> Valtchanova, Manuela	566
<i>Becoming Biomass: a future history of regional biomaterial transition</i> Velikov, Kathy; Thun, Geoffrey	574
<i>Becoming More-than-Human: Ecological Coexistence in the Urban Linkages Project</i> Zeballos-Velarde, Carlos	583
<i>Spatial Interdependence: Hollowed Villages Becoming Sustainable Communities</i> Zhang, Huinan; Wei, Shiyu; Shan, Jun	593
<i>CO-POIESIS: Reused-Timber-Pavilion by Robotic Fabrication in Biennale Architettura 2025</i> Zhu, Yalei; Gao, Tianyi; Wang, Shitong; Yuan, Philip F.	602

<i>Terrain Vague +30. An investigation into "Wild Territories"</i> Amadu, Giovanni	612
<i>City and war: Urbicide and reconstruction through complexity topology-memo</i> Aquilué Junyent, Inés	619
<i>PRACTICING ARCHITECTURE USING ONLY WHAT ALREADY EXISTS: READYMADE IN ARCHITECTURE</i> Ascensão, Tiago	626
<i>URBAN LANDSCAPE STUDIES, Tools for Becoming Ecologically and Socially Resilient</i> Bartumeus Ferré, Sara	634
<i>The Politics of Comfort: From Insulation to Situated Care</i> Betti, Giovanni	641
<i>Architectural diversity and AI: cultural context under algorithmic imaginaries</i> Campo Ruiz, Ingrid	648
<i>Fostering Connections: Age-Friendliness in Hong Kong's Neighbourhoods</i> Chau, Athena	656
<i>ICT Adoption and Social Participation: Remote Sensing in Brazilian Favela</i> Couto Nunes, Antonio	669
<i>Mycelium Architectures for Circular and Living Construction</i> Datta, Ipsita	676
<i>ATTUNED TO TIME: Rethinking Temporality in Architecture</i> Diéguez, Marcial	684
<i>Reclaiming Urban Memory through Emotionalist, AI-Assisted Criticism</i> Dinc Kalayci, Pinar	689
<i>Too H±man: Qualifying the Image of the Body in Design</i> El Ghrayche, Mariane	697
<i>FAST – Building collective awareness in architectural education</i> Enache, Amalia; Blidariu, Cristian	707
<i>Reimagining Cities Through Play: A Vila do Mañá</i> González Álvarez, Sandra	715
<i>Anagram City</i> Gorozpe, Eduardo	722
<i>TOWARDS A POST-INDUSTRIAL REINHABITATION</i> Gual Ors, Francisca; Garriga Gimeno, Queralt; Garcia Odiaga, Iñigo	730
<i>Trazas de Ronda</i> Gutiérrez Armendariz, Jaime; Molinero Miranda, Itziar; Aguilera Ruiz, Andrea	737
<i>Well-being Design: New Paradigm of Public Housing in Hong Kong</i> HKSARG Housing Bureau; HK Housing Authority; Architecture Commons / Neighborhood Innovation Lab; The Hong Kong Polytechnic University	743
<i>More-than-human Design (MTHD): Reimagining Urban Spaces for Tyne Kittiwakes</i> Jin, Jiayi; Ozbil Torun, Ayse; Zhai, Bing; Zhu, Mingyu	752

<i>Citizen participation processes as a method for urban planning</i> Lopez, Carlos	763
<i>Challenging Technocentrism: Subtropical China's Campus Designs Reimagine Tropical Modernism</i> Ma, Wenhui; Wang, Xuerui	771
<i>Tuning Architecture Through Affect: Memory, Body and Situated Practice</i> Memba Ikuga, Laida	779
<i>Ancestral knowledge: towards a circular and sustainable architecture in Peru</i> Montoya Torres, Vladimir Simon	786
<i>Architectures Beyond Binaries: Reflections from the Common Ground</i> Ortiz de Zarate, Jaione; Sicilia, Lorena	793
<i>Unveiling Jujol's unconventional Archive to address contemporary scenarios</i> Pagès Arjona, Ignasi; Sans Duran, Mònica	801
<i>From Priming to EBD Practice: Designing with Emotion</i> Sabater Terán, Maria Antonia; Ortiz Diez de Tortosa, Iñigo	811
<i>New Ecosystems in the 21st-Century Library</i> Sevillano, Guillermo; Orte, Elena	818
<i>"Mundanist" Architecture: Ordinary Power in Southern Vietnamese Modernism</i> Van der Essen, Alexandra	825
<i>Embedding Intelligence: Integrating AI-Driven Spatial Configurations into Emergency Medical Architectur</i> Wang, Tian; Mu, Jingyi; Xue, Minghui	837
<i>Crystallizing a Market Economy</i> Wen, Zengxin; Zhang, Xiaochun	844
<i>Resisting Homogenization in Shanghai's Historic Core from Internet Economy</i> Wu, Yilong	852
<i>Assemblage of Places: Temporary Spatial Attunement in Wuzhen Theatre Festival</i> Xuan, Yuhong; Zhu, Lin; Qian, Jingyi; Dong, Ran	862
<i>Two Buildings, Two Futures: Hyper-Consciousness and Marginal Socialist Heritage</i> Yang, Yixuan Yang; Hu, Bo	869

5. Critical Essay: Additional

<i>Reassembling Material Worlds: Memory, Matter, and Circular Practice</i> Antonacci, Claudia; Pich-Aguilera, Felipe; Batlle Pages, Teresa	878
<i>AI-Assisted Feminist Urbanism: Digital Tools for Inclusive Spatial Justice</i> Benbarara, Imane	886
<i>CBD Joburg: Navigating Housing Justice through Collective Resilience</i> Bennett, Jhono	894

<i>Becoming Climate-Responsive: Rethinking Architectural Competencies in the Anthropocene</i> Catal, Sena; Arslan Selcuk, Semra	908
<i>Changes in living conditions during times of crisis. Other perspectives</i> Chaves Pont Vidal, Celma	916
<i>The Death of Convention: How Additive Manufacturing is rewriting architecture</i> Davey, Calayde; Snyman, Marie; du Plessis, Chrisna	923
<i>Bio-Challenge to Bio-Potential? Reimagining Water Hyacinth for the Built Environment</i> Davey, Calayde; Govender, Verushka; du Plessis, Chrisna	930
<i>Panarchy in Practice: Can Resilience Thinking Guide Barcelona-Collserola's Transition?</i> De Balanzo Joue, Rafael; Magrinya Torner, Francesc; Art Collective, SiteSize	938
<i>Being Attuned: Architecture Aligned with the Human Expectation</i> Diéguez, Marcial; Mendez, Alba; Araya León, María José	949
<i>Standing Like My Grandmother Did: Architectural Resilience in Rural Türkiye</i> Düzenli, Evrim; Sekban, Fatma Sema; Koç Üzümcü, Öznur	952
<i>Sustainable integration of traditional knowledge within Cameroon's urban planning heritage</i> Edith Flaure, Mipo Tchinkou; Thomas Aimé, Epoune	959
<i>Construction Materials Bank: Architecture, Sustainability and Social Inclusion</i> Falcão da Silva, Luciano; Marchetti dos Santos, Maria Luiza; Fernandes de Souza Júnior, Márcio; Lopes Pessanha, Ana Paula	967
<i>Beyond Utopia and Dystopia: Fictional Strategies in Environmental Architectural Discourses</i> González Fernández, Miguel	974
<i>New Climate Commons – Land Practices Within Ecosystems At Risk</i> Hartung, Leonie	981
<i>Polycolonial Mauritius: The Architecture University as an Onto-Epistemological Monument</i> Issoop, Jawaad	988
<i>AN ASSEMBLY ARCHITECTURE</i> Jacubovich, Ariel Hernán	994
<i>Bridging Vernacular Urbanism and Modern Design in AddisAbaba's Public Spaces</i> Ketema, Dagnachew Amberbir	1005
<i>Architecture of Protest and care;designing through solidarity.</i> Kimulwo, Tonny	1012
<i>Terrain Vague: natural reimagination: a present from the Open City</i> Lanuza, Felipe; Luza, David	1019
<i>Luigi Broglio Space Center and Architectures of Spatial Diplomacy</i> Li, Yidan Karel	1028
<i>The Symbiotic Coral Reef: Architecture as an Act of Emergence</i> Linaraki, Despina	1035
<i>Making connections: new workspace typologies in the age of sharing</i> Liu, Yuqiu; Wu, Yilong	1044

<i>Designing with Disruption: Indigenous Memory, Spatial Justice and Post-Apartheid Cities</i> Mafukuzela, Cebisa; Mcitwa, Sihle	1052
<i>Barcelona, a setting for the urban event</i> Marcos, Carles; Mària, Magda; Fuertes, Pere; Sauquet, Roger	1060
<i>Animate Objects: A Dialectical Reading of Pareidolia in Modern Monoliths</i> Marsino Moreno, Renzo	1069
<i>Reprogramming Adam's House: On Post-Human Architecture and Joseph Rykwert's Legacy</i> Marsino Moreno, Renzo	1076
<i>Mapping urban water palimpsests, seeking new lexicons</i> Maurício, Maria Margarida	1085
<i>Mud-Making: Specificities of Place in Local Material Practices of Extraction</i> Morcillo Pallares, Ana	1094
<i>Embracing Complexity: Epistemic Mediation Between AI and Circularity</i> Navarrete Pardo, Marcos	1100
<i>From Hill to Sea: Resonance of a Preserved Neighbourhood</i> Ozmen, Beril	1108
<i>Post-Anthropocentric Infrastructures: Lessons from South America</i> Peterle, Nicole	1114
<i>The Silent Crisis in Architectural Education</i> Pirondi, Ciro; Muniz, Cristiane	1122
<i>Quantum Sensing Infrastructures and the Architecture of deep underground Worlds</i> Pujals, Blanca	1130
<i>It's all about Particles</i> Ruiz Geli, Enric	1138
<i>REFRAMING COASTAL PORTS THROUGH CIRCULAR AND HERITAGE ARCHITECTURE</i> Saad, Yasmeen	1145
<i>Empowering communities as custodians of Benghazi's Architectural heritage</i> Saeid, Sara; Mavrakis, Dr. Rafik; El-Tayash, Osama; Gallal, Sara	1154
<i>EMBODIED LANDSCAPES. Reformulating the built ecosystem from material tectonics.</i> Salvà Matas, Catalina	1162
<i>Reframing Heritage as a Tool for Ecological Coexistence</i> Sierra Figueras, Mar	1170
<i>Self-organizing Generation Methodology Construction for Residential Aging-friendly Renovation Schemes</i> Song, Zhiqiang; Wu, Yue; Liu, Na; Wang, Miao	1180
<i>Brownfields Becoming City: Architectural Regeneration for Circular and Just Transition</i> Stangel, Michal	1187
<i>Vacant Homes, Crowded Cities</i> Tahiliani, Pratyaksha	1196
<i>Where there is no arrival: Threads of an Emergency Architecture</i> Tegoni Oliveira, João Guilherme; Leão Rego, Renato	1203

<i>Architecture of Care: Reweaving the City through Spatial Interdependence</i> Tong, Ruining; Teng, Jiazhen; Bao, Yibin; Qu, Zhang	1211
<i>The Unfolding of Transformative Agencies through Becoming a Body-Space Agency</i> Ventura, Patricia	1218
<i>Vicarious Memory and Ethical Entanglement: Teaching Architecture Amid Violence</i> Zhang, Christina Chi	1225
<i>Tidal Symbiosis: Climate-Adaptive Public Space as More-Than-Human Infrastructure in Singapore</i> Shang, Yiwei; Tieben, Hendrik	1231

4. Critical Essay: Accepted

Title

Reimagining Cities Through Play: A Vila do Mañá

Author/s

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PØST ARQUITECTAS

Abstract

This essay investigates how play can function as a critical methodology for reshaping cities through the active involvement of children and adolescents. Centred on the long-term participatory project A Vila do Mañá in Galicia, it combines architecture, pedagogy, and art to reimagine public space as both playground and learning environment. Using participatory action research, the project employed workshops, games, mapping, and temporary installations as instruments of exploration and authorship. Three case studies are examined: a giant game board in Vigo's Coia neighbourhood, "living signposts" along the Camino de Santiago in Arzúa, and a literary playground created in Silleda. Findings show that play, storytelling, and care enable young people to generate alternative imaginaries, foster belonging, and strengthen intergenerational dialogue. The essay concludes that recognising play not as leisure but as a civic right and design method allows architecture to nurture inclusive, imaginative, and sustainable urban futures.

Keywords

participatory architecture, youth protagonism, play, urban pedagogy, collective authorship, city of care.

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1. Introduction: Rethinking the City Through Play and Youth Protagonism

In today's cities, public space is losing its democratic pulse. Commercial centres, traffic flows, and surveillance cameras are replacing what used to be arenas for meeting, remembering, and sharing. Children and adolescents, in particular, feel this loss. Their voices almost never enter planning meetings, and their presence is restricted to playgrounds fenced off from the rest of urban life. Shouldn't we ask why the youngest citizens are treated as guests in their own neighbourhoods?

Play offers another way of looking. It resists order, embraces uncertainty, and creates room for imagination. Far from being just leisure, play is political: when children invent a new rule or test a boundary, they are already reshaping the city. They show us that public space can be more than infrastructure—it can be an open board, full of moves yet to be played.

A Vila do Mañá was born from this conviction. It is not only an architectural project, but also a pedagogical and civic one. Over the years, more than 10,000 children and adolescents across Galicia have joined workshops, games, and artistic actions that transformed squares, streets, and paths. I still recall how, in Coia, when asked what mattered most in their neighbourhood, the teenagers answered bluntly: “a roundabout and a shopping centre.” That single phrase revealed an impoverished imaginary and became the spark for turning a forgotten square into a giant game board.

This essay argues that reimagining cities with and through young people is essential for building futures that are inclusive, sustainable, and full of care. Play, storytelling, and co-design are not side activities—they are serious tools that uncover neglected narratives and open possibilities for belonging. From Vigo to Arzúa and Silleda, A Vila do Mañá has shown how modest interventions can change both the physical and emotional maps of a community.

By analysing these experiences, I want to explore how architecture can learn from play: how it can listen, adapt, and nurture. In doing so, the essay contributes to the debates of *Becoming Interdependent* and *Becoming More-Than-Human*, arguing that the city of the future must be playful, caring, and co-authored by all generations.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Urban space is never neutral. It always carries power, exclusions, and possibilities. Henri Lefebvre, in his call for the right to the city, reminded us that inhabitants are not simply users but active producers of space. A Vila do Mañá takes this idea seriously. It

hands that role of producer to children and adolescents. Their games, stories, and drawings become tools to push back against the adult logics that dominate most planning.

David Harvey extended Lefebvre's point. For him, the right to the city is not a private privilege but a collective project. Seen this way, a square repainted as a game board in Coia or a group of adolescents acting as “living signs” in Arzúa is more than play. It is a civic act. It shows that collective authorship can transform how space is seen and lived.

Francesco Tonucci sharpened this idea with *La città dei bambini*. His claim is simple but radical: a city that works for children works for everyone. If children vanish from public spaces, democracy itself weakens. A Vila do Mañá expands Tonucci's vision. It treats play not only as a sign of democracy but also as a way of doing architecture—opening space for creativity, care, and intergenerational dialogue.

There is also an architectural lineage. Aldo van Eyck's post-war playgrounds scattered across Amsterdam turned small, leftover sites into urban laboratories. Their strength was their simplicity: a few hoops, sandpits, climbing frames. Nothing grand, but enough to spark imagination. A Vila do Mañá inherits that spirit and moves it into contemporary Galicia. A giant painted board in Coia, performative walks in Arzúa, or fragments of literature across Silleda—each case shows how small, playful acts can redraw the map of a community.

The Bauhaus also matters here. It blurred boundaries between art, design, and daily life. It encouraged learning by making, and often by playing. A Vila do Mañá brings that spirit outdoors. Workshops become laboratories. Prototypes become games. Interventions in public space become stages where children and adolescents both learn and teach.

Feminist spatial thinkers add another key layer. Dolores Hayden highlighted the invisible labour of care that shapes cities but is rarely planned for. Zaida Muxí and Izaskun Chinchilla argue for a “city of care,” one that values daily life and sustainability above productivity. In A Vila do Mañá, play extends this ethic. To play is to care: to pay attention, to listen, and to create joy as a shared civic responsibility.

Finally, Jane Rendell's idea of architecture as “a space between”—between art, critique, and performance—helps to describe what happens here. A game board, a body pointing on the Camino, words drifting across walls: these are all in-between acts. They are not buildings, yet they are architecture. They are relational, reflective, and transformative.

Placed within the UIA 2026 research lines, A Vila do Mañá contributes to *Becoming Interdependent* through collaboration and reciprocity, and to *Becoming More-Than-Human* by resisting adult- and human-centred logics. To play is to disrupt dominant rhythms and values. To play is to imagine a city that is more open, more caring, and more ecologically attuned.

In sum, play is not a distraction. It is a tool. It is serious work. Through play, children and adolescents generate alternative imaginaries that connect democracy, pedagogy, architecture, and care. To take play seriously is to take the future of the city seriously.

3. Methodology: Participatory Urban Pedagogy and Architectural Experimentation

A Vila do Mañá does not work with a fixed formula. Its method is closer to a cycle: play, learn, transform, and start again. It weaves together architecture, pedagogy, and art, and gives children and adolescents a role as active co-authors of their city. The key is play—not as pastime, but as a critical and collective way of thinking and acting on space.

3.1 PHASES OF THE PROCESS

1. Contextual immersion
Every project begins with walking, listening, and looking. Children explore their neighbourhood's rhythms and forgotten corners. The city itself becomes the board where the game will unfold.
2. Workshops as laboratories
Classrooms turn into playful labs. Drawing, mapping, storytelling, and games reveal how young people imagine their town. These sessions are not diversions but research tools that uncover neglected perceptions and desires.
3. Prototyping and material play
Ideas born in workshops are tested with simple prototypes. Cardboard, fabric, chalk, or recycled wood turn abstractions into tangible artefacts. These prototypes act as bridges: they make imagination visible and negotiable.
4. Public interventions
Some ideas leap into the streets. In Coia, the abstract map became a painted game board. In Arzúa, bodies acted as "living signposts," redirecting attention away from clichés. In Silleda, fragments of a novel spilled onto walls and pavements, turning the town into a literary playground. Each action turned public space into a stage for play and care.
5. Collective reflection
The cycle closes with shared reflection. What surprised us? What worked? What could change? This stage is also playful: a time to rewrite rules, shift strategies, and prepare for the next round.

3.2 PEDAGOGICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL FOUNDATIONS

The method draws inspiration from Francesco Tonucci's child-centred urbanism: if children are visible in public space, democracy is alive. It also resonates with the Bauhaus tradition of learning by making and experimenting. In A Vila do Mañá, workshops, prototypes, and interventions are both educational exercises and urban experiments.

3.3 ARCHITECTURE AS SITUATED PLAY

At its heart, the project treats architecture not only as the construction of forms but as a relational practice. Its modest yet meaningful interventions show that play can be rigorous. A painted board, a performative walk, or a fragment of literature can all generate new ways of belonging.

Through this cycle, play is not an accessory—it is the methodology itself. To play is to research, to create, and to care for the city.

4. Case Studies: Practices of Care and Play in Galicia

4.1 COIA, VIGO – THE NEIGHBOURHOOD AS A GAME BOARD

In Coia, a peripheral working-class neighbourhood of Vigo, A Vila do Mañá invited adolescents to look again at their surroundings through the lens of play. The starting point was a question posed at IES Alexandre Bóveda: "*Which are the most important elements of your neighbourhood?*" The answers—"a roundabout and a shopping centre"—revealed a limited imaginary that reduced Coia to spaces of traffic and consumption.

To challenge this narrow vision, the project unfolded in three playful phases:

1. Perception – spontaneous drawings showed fragmented imaginaries of the neighbourhood.
2. Exploration – with support from architecture students at ETSA A Coruña, adolescents used photography and Instagram to fill an abstract game board with their discoveries, mapping Coia through emotion and curiosity.
3. Synthesis – an unused public square was transformed into a giant game board, painted collectively with stencils and spray paint.

The intervention turned a neglected space into a civic playground. Play became both research and action: adolescents

inscribed their visions directly onto the urban fabric, reclaiming visibility and agency.



Figure 1 "A Vila do Mañá" in the Coia neighbourhood of Vigo. Children and adolescents reimagine the urban landscape as a game board, activating public space through play, care, and collaborative design.



Figure 2 "A Vila do Mañá" in the Coia neighbourhood of Vigo. Children and adolescents reimagine the urban landscape as a game board, activating public space through play, care, and collaborative design.

4.2 ARZÚA – WALKING THE CAMINO DE SANTIAGO

In Arzúa, a symbolic town on the Camino Francés, *A Vila do Mañá* developed MIRA!!! (LOOK!!!), a participatory heritage project. Here, play took the form of estrangement (after Viktor Shklovski): rediscovering familiar places "with fresh eyes."

Children and adolescents acted as "living signposts", guiding residents and pilgrims to overlooked places and stories. Workshops, walks, and creative experiments transformed the Camino

from a tourist infrastructure into a living landscape. Their playful performances destabilised conventional heritage narratives and reconnected the community with its own cultural identity.

Through this, heritage became a game of attention—a practice of pointing, redirecting, and reinterpreting. Arzúa showed that play can be a serious tool for reshaping collective memory and intercultural dialogue.



Figure 3: "A Vila do Mañá" working with the Camino de Santiago in Arzúa. Participatory urban exploration and collective reimagining of public space through the active engagement of children and adolescents



Figure 4 "A Vila do Mañá" working with the Camino de Santiago in Arzúa. Participatory urban exploration and collective reimagining of public space through the active engagement of children and adolescents.



Figure 5 "A Vila do Mañá" working with the Camino de Santiago in Arzúa. Participatory urban exploration and collective reimagining of public space through the active engagement of children and adolescents.

4.3 SILLEDA – REIMAGINING SPACE THROUGH LITERATURE

In Silleda, play took the form of literary exploration. Inspired by *O Señor Aframio. Ou como me rispei das gadoupas da morte* by Antón Alonso Ríos, young participants transformed fragments of the book into graffiti, murals, and painted footprints across the town.

The initial diagnosis was revealing: when asked about key places in Silleda, adolescents mentioned supermarkets or the football field, rarely cultural landmarks. Their daily routines seemed “boxed in” between enclosed spaces. Literature became a way to break this cycle: an invitation to play with words, memory, and territory.

The result was a literary playground, a map of the town built from text and imagination. Words functioned both as an artistic intervention and as a civic statement, reasserting Galician language and memory in public space.



Figure 6 “A Vila do Mañá” working with Galician literature in Silleda. Children and adolescents engage in a collaborative creative workshop reclaiming public space through storytelling, artistic expression, and collective imagination.



Figure 7 “A Vila do Mañá” working with Galician literature in Silleda. Children and adolescents engage in a collaborative creative workshop reclaiming public space through storytelling, artistic expression, and collective imagination.

OVERALL REFLECTIONS

Across Coia, Arzúa, and Silleda, the methodology remained consistent: to play with the city as a way of learning, caring, and transforming. Each case illustrates a different mode of play—board

games, performative signs, literary inscriptions—but all converge on the same principle: play is not peripheral, it is the methodology itself.

Through play, children and adolescents do not simply learn about the city—they change it.

5. Discussion: Lessons for Urban Futures

The three case studies demonstrate that *A Vila do Mañá* transforms abstract ideas—care, play, and participation—into concrete and affective practices that reshape both urban space and community imaginaries. At the heart of this process is play, not as entertainment, but as a method of research, design, and civic engagement. From this experience, several lessons emerge for thinking about the future of cities.

5.1 CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS AS URBAN PROTAGONISTS

The project confirms that young people are not passive users of the city but active authors of its meanings and forms. Their playful actions in Coia, Arzúa, and Silleda disrupted adult-centric logics of efficiency, control, and consumption. Recognising them as protagonists affirms their right to the city while enriching collective imaginaries with creativity, diversity, and emotional depth.

5.2 PLAY, ESTRANGEMENT, AND STORYTELLING AS CRITICAL TOOLS

Play, estrangement, and storytelling act as methodological instruments, not as secondary activities. In Coia, the metaphor of the game board transformed an unused square into a collective arena of dialogue and discovery. In Arzúa, Shklovskian estrangement turned familiar streets into sites of renewed wonder through the figure of “living signposts.” In Silleda, literature became a playful map that redefined the town through words and imagination. Each case illustrates how curiosity and experimentation can serve as rigorous tools for urban design.

5.3 CARE AS AN URBAN ETHIC

The project also makes visible the link between care and play. Care manifests through listening, empathy, and collective responsibility, while play creates the conditions for these values to flourish. Together, they offer an alternative to technocratic models of urbanism, fostering resilience and solidarity in contexts marked by ecological fragility and social inequality.

5.4 SITUATED PEDAGOGIES AND ARCHITECTURAL EXPERIMENTATION

The methodology of *A Vila do Mañá* echoes the Bauhaus legacy of learning by making. Its cyclical structure—immersion, workshop, prototyping, intervention, reflection—shows that architecture can function as education, research, and civic practice at the same time. What is transferable is not the exact form of each intervention, but the playful and iterative process that generates them. This adaptability allows the model to be replicated in diverse communities and territories.

5.5 CONTRIBUTION TO GLOBAL DEBATES

By merging participatory design, pedagogy, and artistic play, the project speaks to international debates on the right to the city (Lefebvre, Harvey), youth participation (Tonucci), feminist urbanism (Muxí, Hayden, Chinchilla), and relational practices (Rendell). It directly engages with the UIA research lines of *Becoming Interdependent*—through collaboration and reciprocity—and *Becoming More-Than-Human*—through the disruption of adult-centric and anthropocentric logics. In doing so, it offers replicable strategies for cities worldwide that aim to cultivate justice, imagination, and intergenerational authorship.

gine public space through care, imagination, and co-authorship.

By aligning with the research lines of *Becoming Interdependent* and *Becoming More-Than-Human*, the project also contributes to urgent global debates on inequality, exclusion, and ecological fragility. It argues that urban futures cannot be defined solely by technocratic or economic paradigms, but must instead be co-constructed through situated, relational, and care-centred practices, where the right to play becomes inseparable from the right to the city.

Ultimately, *A Vila do Mañá* affirms that to reimagine the city is to reclaim it as a playground of care: a place where architecture listens, adapts, and nurtures, and where children and adolescents stand not at the margins but at the centre of collective urban life. More than a set of interventions, it offers a global proposition: that the future city must embrace play not as leisure, but as a civic right and a methodology for creating more interdependent, more-than-human urban worlds.

6. Conclusion: Towards an Architecture of Care and Play

The experience of *A Vila do Mañá* demonstrates that the protagonism of children and adolescents in urban processes is not peripheral but essential to shaping inclusive, sustainable, and imaginative futures. By activating public space through play, storytelling, and co-design, the project reframes architecture not as the production of fixed forms but as a relational and pedagogical practice rooted in care, creativity, and collective authorship.

The three case studies—Coia, Arzúa, and Silleda—show that even modest, temporary interventions can generate profound symbolic and social effects. A giant game board redefined a neglected square as a space of belonging; “living signposts” disrupted the Camino de Santiago with youthful interpretations; fragments of Galician literature transformed a town into a narrative playground. In each case, play was not simply a tool, but the medium itself—the language through which heritage, memory, and everyday environments were reinterpreted as living, dynamic resources.

What makes the project transferable is not the physical form of its interventions, but the cyclical and playful methodology—immersion, experimentation, prototyping, intervention, reflection—that can be adapted to different communities and contexts. This flexibility positions *A Vila do Mañá* as a model for municipalities worldwide seeking to empower younger generations and reima-

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