

As we emerge from a tragic pandemic, let's catalyze action among professionals in the fields that shape the physical housing and communities where we live. This series of case studies shares innovations that are advancing a set of **guiding principles** for built environment professionals—from creative ways to redress inequities and engage the public in participatory planning, to unique housing and community models that enable every resident to thrive.



Public Participation in Planning Through PLAY

Espacio Lúdico

By Stephanie Firestone and Esther Greenhouse

Espacio Lúdico (EL), an NGO in Santiago, Chile, activates citizens to help design and improve public spaces and the broader public realm in their communities. Their innovation lies in the unique way in which they engage the public to participate in city planning: they do it through play!

Games and other fun activities are Espacio Lúdico's tools for understanding the problems residents perceive in their communities and co-designing solutions that address them. EL activates different groups within a community and lifts up the voices of more vulnerable ones. They actively level the playing field by providing equal weight to all input in decision-making processes—because “all are the same in the game.” And when COVID-19 prevented their stock-in-trade of in-person engagement, they innovated even further—literally out of a box.

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Needs/Challenges

In 2019, Chileans took to the streets out of frustration with rising education, transportation and living costs, low wages, and widening disparities across the society. Following this social unrest, the public increasingly has pressed governments in Chile (i.e., national and local) to address inequities and to provide the public with greater opportunities for involvement in the processes that affect their lives. Older people, meanwhile, all too often are sidelined in the public sphere as less active participants in society, which is a concern as the share of the population that is age 65+ is projected to reach 21 percent by 2041.¹ Thus, there is both fertile ground for EL’s expertise and a new recognition that they must incorporate the needs of older people.

Innovations

According to co-founder Carolina Carrasco, EL finds creative ways to “emancipate” community members by unleashing their creative ideas and ensuring that their priorities inform infrastructure planning in the city. This people-centered approach of co-designing with community members recognizes that they are the final users of public spaces, and that the “experts” don’t know everything. Their methodologies also come with reasonable price-tags—from playful actions as low as \$500 USD, to playful placemaking as high as \$30,000 USD, making them effective ways for municipalities, government agencies or other stakeholders to solicit and test ideas that can significantly impact communities at all income levels.

Using an applied research process, EL taps local creativity and boosts residents’ input, then fleshes out ideas together with them. The organization next turns those ideas into prototypes, at which point community members join in again to help assess how well they worked. EL also insists on an asset-based approach, guiding participants to identify their community’s strengths and to build on these as opportunities.

Espacio Lúdico runs six programs rooted in this design thinking methodology:

1. *Activadores Barriales* – Neighborhood Activators

met with challenges but overcame them with creativity. Prior to 2020, the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) had contracted with EL to prototype a creative urban intervention strategy. The aim was to engage residents in El Amanecer de Temuco, a vulnerable social housing neighborhood, to improve public spaces that were underutilized and dangerous. Then came the COVID-19 lockdown, which precluded the physical activation of residents on-site.

EL responded with a hybrid social intervention, using physical props to promote discussion among people in the community and then encouraging them to generate and share ideas through digital engagement. Specifically, EL created a toolkit in a box that connected people to the project—a game that traveled from house to house throughout the neighborhood. The box contained 16 square blocks with different colors that represented four characteristics of a public space—social, fun, attractive, and healthy. Through manipulation of the blocks—building them up, connecting them horizontally, aligning their colors—the family articulated its vision for each of the neighborhood’s open spaces. Families then shared their visions by using WhatsApp to send images of their designs, which EL uploaded to a website and YouTube. This way, everyone in the community could continue to play and follow the process, discussing and debating the proposed ideas.

At the neighborhood level, the game became a kind of collective puzzle, wherein each family helped to construct a community-wide conception of public space. Hence,



while they developed their own ideas through the game, they also discovered their neighbors’ ideas and found points of connection.

The game excluded no one. People who could not read could follow instructions through WhatsApp videos or ask questions through a WhatsApp phone line. EL reached 185 players of all ages, including nearly all the neighborhood’s older adults—most of whom lived alone. Thus, the game connected older residents to their neighbors through collective action and helped to address their isolation during the pandemic.

Through the game residents defined new values they wanted to see articulated in the central plaza, the community’s largest open space yet one divided by a street that made it unsafe and largely unusable. Values they prioritized: safe, clean, play-able, funny, walkable, bike-able, attractive, connected, and quiet.

Ultimately, working together, EL and the community co-designed open spaces and public furniture that captured these prioritized values, and a schematic for a more dynamic area—ready to be built once funding is secured and COVID restrictions are lifted.

¹ UN, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division.

2. Ciudad Colaborativa – Collaborative City

fosters local creativity aimed at promoting social connectedness in urban life during the pandemic lockdown and, in some cases, more permanently. Together with other organizations in Chile, EL issued a call for municipalities to apply for a free service, whereby the groups would help local councils co-design and promote lively use of public spaces during the pandemic and build in greater resilience afterward. They raised funds from public and private entities and secured participation by 61 municipalities in 14 regions.

They looked for opportunities throughout the cities and experimented with different approaches to transforming public spaces including: temporary bikeways, street schoolyards, participatory points, free markets, waiting zones and more. They provided images to help the councils envision different possibilities and generate tactical intervention plans. They used digital tools to engage the public and collaboratively diagnose problems needing attention and digital murals to co-develop ideas.



Following models such as the Superblock in Barcelona, they examined options to divert automobile traffic to alternative roads in order to create pedestrian-only streets. They studied public and private transportation and resolved traffic issues by relocating some public transport routes. They worked closely with the local council, transportation department and other stakeholders during the planning process, and the collaborative began to implement these transformation projects in five cities in April 2021.

3. Acciones Lúdicas – Playful Actions

uses tactical urbanism or a pop-up approach. Initiatives temporarily, quickly, and inexpensively transform a space so inhabitants can experience design idea prototypes and explore the possibilities inherent in what are often unsafe or blighted spaces.



4. Ludobarrio – Placemaking

focuses on building a constituency of diverse local stakeholders who leverage municipal investments to improve a significant public space. EL worked with one community to co-design an eclectic open space prototype over a six-month period, leading the city to use lessons from the project in the final design for the space and to invest in additional public furniture, public lights and other amenities.



5. Ludoplaza
– Proposed Development Plaza

engage the community in the creation of public spaces that will connect with a proposed development. For example, a collaboration between EL and Metro de Santiago engaged the public in generating ideas for effectively connecting a subway station to the space immediately near its exit. The effort led to the creation of an in-between space that promotes creative and recreational encounters.



6. Escuela Ciudadana – Street School

responded to the need for open spaces during the pandemic. EL co-designed the transformation of public spaces on school properties into open-space areas for learning and play, thus extending schools beyond their buildings and forging closer ties between school and city. EL proposed “street schools,” or classrooms on streets, and flexible spaces that could be changed as needed for assembly, workshops, arts functions, sport and various movement-oriented activities, and games—all for use by both the school and the broader community.



Successes to Date

EL has applied its *ludic*, or playful, methodology in other countries including Colombia, Uruguay, Argentina, and Mexico in Latin America, as well as in Europe and Asia. In 2019, the city of Buenos Aires contracted EL to create a workshop for older people, who engaged in such activities as creating characters and dramatic movement through play. Co-Founder Carolina Carrasco said it was “much more interesting than working with younger people, since these were people who are uninhibited and more free expressing their ideas.”

Still to Come

EL is currently designing Playful Spaces for All, a new program to promote more intergenerational social life in public spaces, and is discussing collaboration with Chile’s National Service for Older Adults (SENAMA). Ciudad Colaborativa will be implemented in 20 additional cities in Chile, with a focus on improving safety in public spaces. The Ministry of Housing and Urbanism (MINVU) invited EL to participate in the “100 + 100” pilot program, which aims to improve living conditions in 100 informal settlements in Chile and relocate residents of 100 slums into social housing. Through these and other initiatives, Espacio Lúdico will continue to collaborate with citizen stakeholders, municipalities, infrastructure agencies, non-profit organizations, universities, businesses, Latin American institutions, and international agencies, in order to strengthen urban civic innovation and address inequities in the region.

Replicability

Espacio Lúdico is an open platform NGO, so anyone can use the organization’s ideas with attribution. The building box game under Activadores Barriales, for example, can be used in any neighborhood, with minimal adaptation based on the neighborhood’s open spaces.

The policy, political, and cultural context in other countries and communities will determine the ability to replicate EL’s approach. In Chile, local government has become a more influential player over the last decade and must now meet the public’s demand for greater involvement. Prior to the pandemic, EL found rigidity in local institutions, the urban planning sector, and design agencies. The idea of fostering design of spaces not just *for* the community but *with* the community remains novel in Chile, with government lacking experience. During this transitional period, the government is trying to adapt rules and tools to the demand for participation and transparency. EL’s methodology of generating enthusiasm through fun public participation activities and their experience interacting well with local and other levels of government have positioned the organization to help municipalities bring community members into the process.

For more information:
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