

# Children Reimagining Their City

## Early Childhood Education as an Engine for Social Creativity and Transformation

**T**he living postmodern city is not just the city that can be seen, touched, or governed, but also the city that can be wondered about, imagined, re-invented. . . . And what

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better wonderers, imaginers, and re-inventors than young children?

I am an educator in Varna, the third largest city in Bulgaria;

I belong to an NGO called Kaleidoscope Foundation for Childhood Development and work with an alternative school for young children called The Children's House. In 2024, Kaleidoscope and the Children's House began cooperating with the local authorities on strengthening young children's participation in their city, particularly with respect to important landmarks of Varna. Together with

four groups of children between 2 and 6 years old (approximately 50 children in total) and their teachers, we began a journey of (re-) discovering, imagining, and narrating our home city — all from the youngest citizens' perspectives.

This initiative led to an unusual exhibition called “Children Thinking About Things That Aren't There,” which covered the windows of the City Municipal Building of Varna with children's drawings representing their unique voices. This project made sure, likely for the first time in Bulgaria, that local authorities realized the right of very young children to co-participate in shaping our city in a playful and age-sensitive, but also quite visible and respectful, way. It also started an important process on questioning the multiple connections between children, education, and the “polis” — turning them into a driving force for the community and a point of cultural critique.

The questions underlying this project are:

- How do we let even the youngest citizens participate in the city's vivid transformations? What is the impact of children's voices on public spaces and adults' perceptions?
- How does the city interact with the many intelligences of children?
- How do we confront the “one-size-fits-all” educational





Children were invited to comment on the urban environment in their verbal language and the language of drawing. One noted area of potential improvement concerned the water fountains, which are too high for small children. The drawing represents a solution of differing sizes for the fountains.

mode, and start following qualitative rather than quantitative principles?

- How do we construct quality not for, but with, children?

### Political Courage

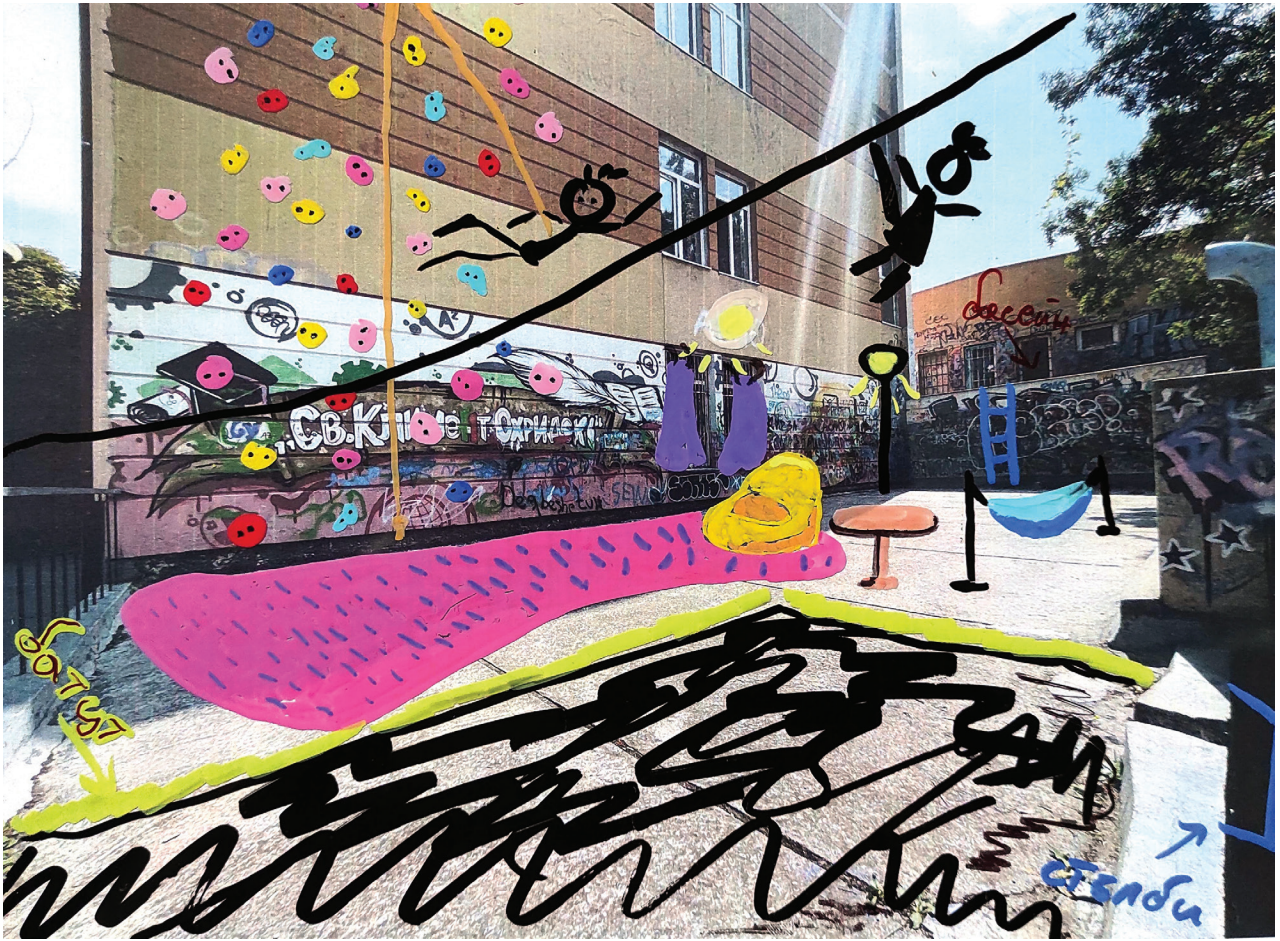
The redesigned Municipal Hall in Varna became a contemporary monument of children's rights and potentials. The initiative was made possible through a powerful commitment from newly elected Deputy Mayor of Education and Culture, Mr. Pavel Popov, who guaranteed that children's voices would be not only seen, but also heard by the local people in power.



“The child is not a yet-unfinished adult whom we need to place in a controlled environment while we wait for nature

to do its job and bring them to maturity. Nor is it a vessel for adults to pour knowledge and skills into, in an effort to accelerate

this process. The child is a person . . . existing in a state of unlimited potential, which makes them even more valuable



and capable of shaping adults, just as adults shape children. If we grow into learning from children, we will recognize the diversity of their means of expression (as in *The Hundred Languages of Children*) and suppress our tendency to confine them to the instrumentalized language with which we describe the available world. Trust in children and delegating power has an undoubted social effect: it leads us to a society of responsible individuals, respect for differences, harmonization of individual and common interest.”

—Pavel Popov, Deputy

Mayor of Education  
and Culture in Varna  
Municipality, 2024

### The Hundred Languages of Children

A city government that views children not as objects of teaching, but rather as bearers of exploratory thinking, freedom, and creativity, which are of great importance to the urban progress, is rare — not just in Eastern Europe but across the world. Local authorities and early educators in Varna are making an unusual social transformation, and we are not alone in doing so. Since 2019, Kaleidoscope Foundation has been in dialogue with the city of Reggio Emilia in Italy and Reggio Children, the international global center for

quality early childhood education and children’s rights. In 2024, the Bulgarian Foundation officially became a member of the Reggio Children International Network. Our efforts to make the many intelligences and languages of children visible are a tribute to the great visionary Loris Malaguzzi and the world-renowned municipal experience of preschools and nurseries in Reggio Emilia, while also rebuilding the connection to early Bulgarian reform thinkers.

Working with the “hundred languages” in Bulgaria is like learning to swim against the current. It makes you consider significant questions. How do we actually put the competence and potentials of young children first in a society that is still largely dominated by

traditional models? How do we advocate for more democratic education in a post-communist country with a wounded democracy and a centralized education system? These are difficult questions Bulgarian educators can (and should) be asking more frequently. Unfortunately, we have no answers for them yet. Instead, we started raising awareness of process learning and knowledge as a social construct, the role of children's ideas and imagination for urban progress, and the transformative impact of making children's culture visible at the heart of the city.

We know that these concepts are important for shaping modern holistic policies and high-quality educational practices. It is the concept of quality in education that we really need to re-invent for our needs: **quality that is livable and socially visible, equally shaped by adults and children, and able to be measured by its transformative impacts.**

### Leading the Way Into Systemic Change

Leaving an imprint on the Municipal Hall was a strong start, but advocacy for children's rights can't stop there. In September 2024, Varna hosted an inspiring



educational forum “Children and the City” (Bulgarian title: “Градът и децата”) with early educators Marina Castagnetti and Paola Strozzi; another international event on this topic is planned for the fall of 2025.

In December 2024, Kaleidoscope transformed another critical urban location, the central square of Varna, into a large, open city exhibition. The project, called “Children in the Square,” represents research on the processes of urbanization and how they impact children's rights to free movement and play. It addresses

urban landscape changes that have affected children in Varna, and generally in Bulgaria, within the last generation. Local educators encouraged 70 children and teenagers (3-16 years), their families, and community members into “conquering” the square for frequent meetings, play, and discussions. This has led to visions for making the central square “a more beautiful, more social and more playful area for all ages.”

### A Right to the City Is a Right for Everyone

“Cities are constructed by adults. They are only made for individuals of working age, and are produced in the most material sense. Houses, streets, squares, workshops, cinemas, theatres, automobiles, motor-ways are built for them. Children are completely abnormal in this anthropological model; they put up with its irrationality and its violence, they suffer its





constrictions, its prohibitions and repression. .

**. . . Cities . . . must be regained and made-to-measure for adults and for children."**

—Loris Malaguzzi, 1969

This quote from Loris Malaguzzi has been particularly inspiring for the work we did with children and for Varna in 2024. Children, especially young children, have this extraordinary sensibility about and empathy toward the world. They are highly capable of looking at everyday things with

feelings, of questioning the environment, and discovering estranged, wondrous beauty in it. Yet children are generally forgotten or, at best, underestimated when it comes to city planning. I believe early educators can play a big role in shifting this paradigm.

We should be the ones facilitating how the city is "*regained and made-to-measure for adults and for children,*" by the children themselves. When we immerse the city in the thinking and learning processes of children through their own imaginations, eyes, mouths, hands, and bodies, we create a shared construction of

co-learning for both children and adults. In this construction, children can do precisely what they are very good at: looking at the world with new and different eyes, and constantly asking all the "*What is*" and "*What could be*" questions. All citizens can share in these learning reflections, not just parents and educators, and, in turn, provoke their own inner learning experiences and challenge their expectations and attitudes (for example, ones about learning and children in general). Last but not least, the concept of visible learning as a motor for fundamental change can inspire teachers and policymakers to shape early education around the great human values of organic curiosity, imagination, empathy, participation, and community.

If that's beginning to sound like a recipe for a society of lifelong learners and innovators, then it's time to stop and reflect again. It's tempting to imagine the perfect "one-size-fits-all" approach, but considering Malaguzzi's open-mindedness when he spoke of cities "made-to-measure," his idea would have been far from certainty and standardization. Maybe "*regaining*" and "*making the city to measure for adults and for children*" is not a final destination, but rather an open-ended process, an invitation to discover together (children, adults, citizens, politicians) a kaleidoscope of potentials, ideas, images, and changes for a better community: a city that is sensitive to the various ways human beings move, think, imagine, play, connect with (or take care of) each other and nature . . . a city made for growing, learning, and belonging.

#### *Disclosure Statement:*

The author reports no conflict of interest.