



Overview

Table of Contents

Family Friendly

Why Raise Your Kids in the Suburbs?

Putting Child Care in the Picture

A Rural Problem, Too

It's Bustling Beyond the Arch

Kansas City Tries Something Similar

Texas Turns on the Tap

When Goals Collide

Small Town Design: Getting It Right

Brew Meisters

Blight Fight

Perspectives

News

Letters

Planners Library

Viewpoint

2007 Editorial Calendar

Advertising in 'Planning'

Circulation Audit

Editorial Contacts

Search Planning.org

My APA

Isabelle Florence Groc,
AICP

ID# 116878

Paid through: 03/31/2008

My Information

Logout

My Conferences

More Conferences and Events...

Member Resources

[Planning magazine](#)
[interact](#)
[Practicing Planner](#)
[My CPD Program Credits](#)

Make a Donation

[- Hurricane Katrina Relief](#)
[- Other Donations...](#)

June 2007

Family Friendly

Parents with young children say 'yes' to living downtown.

By Isabelle Groc, AICP

Watching the trains come and go, listening to the ship horns, riding the streetcar, browsing the local bookstore, and splashing at the Jamison Square water fountain are some of the weekend activities Nancy Davis enjoys with her four-year-old son in Portland's Pearl District. "It is just wonderful for a child because you are exposed to so many new sights, sounds, and smells," Davis says.



The Pearl District is a relatively new neighborhood in the heart of Portland, the site of a massive conversion of historic warehouses into a transit-oriented, high-density, upscale residential community. Most activities are easily accessible by trolley or by foot, and the Davis family rarely ever needs to drive elsewhere. "There is always something to do just outside the doorstep," Davis says.

Nancy Davis and her husband both live within walking distance of their offices, making them part of a new generation of parents who have decided to move downtown with their children. They have

given up the space offered by the traditional suburban single-family home to enjoy an urban lifestyle that includes reduced commuting time and convenient walks to parks, retail, and cultural amenities. Downtown has become an attractive playground for both parents and children to explore.

Families' aspirations to live downtown may have caught some city planners off guard. In the past decade, most urban revitalization initiatives have been based on the assumption that downtown living would be attractive primarily to young professionals and empty nesters.

"If I have a choice to live in a house with a yard that has twice as much square footage as I could afford downtown, why would I live downtown as a family?" According to Gil Kelley, director of the Portland Planning Bureau, that is the question families often ask themselves. But, he adds, "there is a new generation that says I can walk to the grocery store, to my day care, I can have a park two blocks away instead of eight or 10 blocks."

"In this neighborhood, we don't necessarily have families who move here; we have couples who move here, have families, and want to stay here very badly," notes Patricia Gardner, vice president of the Pearl District Neighborhood Association.

Still, the current number of children living in the Pearl is quite small. Portland State University's Population Research Center found that only 26 students enrolled in the Portland Public Schools District lived in the Pearl District in 2002, or about one student per 200 units. In October 2006, the number of students living in the Pearl was 54. The assumption that families do not want to live in the central city means that downtown neighborhoods often lack the necessary child-friendly amenities that would support the lifestyle that the Davis family enjoys.

A recent market study completed by the Portland Development Commission on the demand for family-oriented condominiums found that a significant number of families with children were interested in living in the central city. However, existing projects do not contain the right combination of unit types and prices to attract this demographic over the long-term. According to the Portland Development Commission, out of the 5,300 units in the Pearl District, roughly 68 percent are studios or one-bedroom suites, 28 percent are two-bedroom units, and four percent are three-bedroom units. Some of the units are luxury lofts not suitable for children.

To live in the Pearl, Davis worked hard to make her living space suitable for a child. She and her husband asked the developer who built their one-bedroom condo to convert the unit's second bathroom into a child's bedroom. When they moved to a 1,600-square-foot unit, they once again had to work with the developer to adapt the floor plan.

The people in the neighborhood

It is Saturday morning in downtown Vancouver, British Columbia, and the Roundhouse Community Center in the Yaletown neighborhood is filled with people of all ages taking classes. In one of the rooms, 10 kids ages one to four years old and their parents are attending the Music Together program. They are all singing: "There's a cobbler on our street, Mending shoes for little feet, With a bang and a bang and bang bang bang." Roxy the instructor uses the chant to talk about who else might be working down the street. Parents and kids are quick to offer suggestions. How about the bakery? "There's a baker on our street, Making treats for us to eat, With a yum and yum and a

Printer-Friendly Format

yummy yum yum." And the singing goes on with a fruit and vegetable store, a park, and a market.

Kids don't have to look too far in their surrounding environment to add new verses to the nursery rhyme. Steps away from the Roundhouse Community Centre there is indeed a fruit and vegetable store and much more: the Dorothy Lam Children's Centre, the David Lam Park equipped with swings and play structures, the Elsie Roy Elementary School, the seawall, all within walking distance of residential developments.

"Our classes go on walking field trips to the public library, the art gallery, the symphony, the aquatic center, Science World. It is such a rich location," says Isabel Grant, the principal of Elsie Roy Elementary School.

Vancouver is often regarded as the poster child for family-friendly downtowns. In 2001, there were about 3,000 children 14 years old or younger living in the downtown peninsula, and the number of public school children living downtown has increased by more than 350 in the past five years.

This success is often credited to the city's high percentage of Asian and Eastern European immigrants, who are accustomed to raising kids in dense cities. But city planners say it is also the result of careful planning and design with families in mind.

In 1992, the city of Vancouver adopted design guidelines for high-density housing aimed at families with children. One-quarter of the units must have at least two bedrooms — to be suitable for families — and the city requires that developers contribute to public amenities such as child care facilities and parks. The renovation of the 19th century roundhouse now known as the Roundhouse Community Centre was financed by Concord Pacific, a Vancouver-based real estate development company.

But even with the amenities in place, planners were surprised by the downtown baby boom. "Families have taken up the urban core beyond our wildest dreams," senior housing planner Rob Whitlock says. The Elsie Roy Elementary School, which opened in Yaletown in 2004, is already operating at capacity. According to David Negrin, Concord Pacific's senior vice president of development, the company is responding to demand from families by increasing the number of units with two bedrooms or more from 30 percent to 60 percent in its recent developments. "It is such a large part of our market now," Negrin says.

In August 2006, a team of Portlanders took a trip to Vancouver to learn how they could make the Pearl more child-friendly. Portland Mayor Tom Potter has made children a priority, and in 2006 he supported the creation of a Children's Bill of Rights.

Several initiatives are under way in the Pearl District to make it more family friendly. In May 2006, a family forum attracted 150 parents and children, who discussed their needs for affordable, family-sized housing, a community center, and child care. Two neighborhood nonprofit organizations are now proposing to build an affordable housing development that would include a child care facility on-site. A new three-acre neighborhood park with play facilities is in the works. And according to Gil Kelley, a review of the needs of families wanting to live downtown will be part of the upcoming central city plan update in the next two years.

Portland is not alone in trying to better understand how to bring children back to cities. In the wake of the 1996 United Nations Habitat II conference, which declared that the well-being of children is the ultimate indicator of a healthy habitat, actions have been undertaken to improve the quality of life in cities for young people around the world.

In June 2006, the city of Denver declared its intention to become the "number one child-friendly city in the United States." The current focus is on engaging youth in a meaningful way in city building and in creating "a culture that recognizes the resources and the assets that young people have to contribute," says Maria Guajardo, the executive director of the Mayor's Office for Education and Children. A key issue is how to ensure that the city is accessible to all children and youth.

The public space question



City planners know that the establishment of a few basic principles is not enough. There are serious challenges when it comes to making downtowns more child-friendly.

One critical task is to consider the design of the public realm based on how children use public space. For many parents, the idea of letting their kids play unsupervised in an urban public space is frightening. For safety, security, and traffic reasons, children now live more controlled lives than in the past, and their access to the outdoors is more limited. The era of children playing freely in the street is over. Today, if children are to play

outdoors, they generally do it on playgrounds.

However, in her book, *American Playgrounds: Revitalizing Community Space*, architectural historian Susan Solomon shows that concern over injury liability has taken some of the fun out of play spaces and has limited the design of many American playgrounds. In her opinion, playgrounds have deteriorated into set pieces of prefabricated play equipment that children do not enjoy and end up not using. If she is right, then there is a need to revisit what is truly meant by child-friendly public spaces.

"When kids were free, they didn't choose to go to the playgrounds because they don't want to be segregated away from the world of adults," says Roger Hart, the director of the Children's Environments Research Group at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. "They want to be where the action is, and they want to be able to create their own play. They don't want to be in simple environments that have pieces of equipment that some adults thought would be good for kids. How long can you play on swings and slides?" he asks.

In an effort to rethink the value of playgrounds, New York City is developing a playground near the South Street Seaport that will have loose parts, sand, water, all kinds of recycled materials, objects, and tools that will enable greater variety of play not only based on physical skills but also on the imagination. The site, due for completion in 2008, will employ trained "play workers" to manage the equipment.

"You need to take care of the desire for diversity, the desire to manipulate things, to construct, to transform the environment, to engage in fantasy play not only alone but with other children," says Hart, who has been consulting with the city in developing the playground.

Beyond playgrounds, planners are looking for ways to create safe and fun environments right in the heart of the city. For Mark Francis, a professor of landscape architecture at the University of California, Davis, a child-friendly downtown is a place where "you can see children using the downtown on their own and not under adult supervision." Francis advocates the concept of "mixed life," spaces where children of all ages can mix, hang out, and share the area with a variety of people, including seniors. He gives the example of farmers markets, which bring people together and where children can freely run around while their parents are shopping.

Planners are also looking to European cities for ways to let children reclaim the city streets. In the United Kingdom, "home zones" are streets that accommodate and facilitate children's play and community interactions. The concept originated with the *woonerf* (translated as "living yard"), which emerged in the Netherlands as a way to make streets available for public use. The street becomes children's playground.

Age gap



Sufficient play space is important for another reason. It appears that a lack of space may be one of the major reasons that some families abandon downtown. A 2001 Portland State University study found that housing and the desire for more space were the most critical reasons families decided to move out of the city. Vancouver's Asian and East European population might stick to the downtown, but most North Americans are fundamentally attached to the idea of a house with a backyard, especially as their children grow up and need more space to play.

Sunny and Carol Gupta moved from San Francisco to Vancouver with their two children two years ago. They settled in a two-bedroom and den unit on the 20th floor of a Yaletown building overlooking the David Lam Park and the water. They were planning to stay in Yaletown for only a few months until they discovered all the kid-friendly amenities of the area and how easily they could organize play dates with other children within their building.

Despite these advantages, they will be moving out in a few months to a house with a yard. Carol Gupta likes the idea of a backyard as an extension of the home. "You can still be doing your thing as a mother inside the home and have an eye on your children and know what they are doing," she says. "When you are at the park, you are putting all your activities aside just to be with your kids. It is a different mindset."

A possible answer to this aspiration might be to integrate the "backyard" right into the downtown environment. Safe and defensible spaces can be created close enough to residential developments so that parents feel they can let their children play with minimal supervision. The city of Vancouver is trying to address this need and is considering revisions to its 1992 design guidelines to incorporate more outdoor play spaces adjacent to indoor amenities.

However, there are no specific plans yet, and while downtown Vancouver seems to work best as an early childhood community, it does not necessarily do as well in terms of retaining school-age children who need to move independently in larger spaces and cannot be easily accommodated in

small condo units and existing playgrounds. Carol and Sunny Gupta have noticed that many families leave downtown once their children reach school age. The transient nature of the downtown community is a concern as they do not want to see their children heartbroken every time their friends move out of the neighborhood. "Being able to build sustainable long-term relationships is something we want to do for our kids," Sunny Gupta says.

Planners cannot always formulate specific strategies to address middle childhood — ages six to 12 — in part because they may not believe that parents can realistically raise their children downtown. "Speaking as a parent, I can tell you that when your children are between five and 16, you don't want to let them out of your sight even though you have a beautiful park at the end of the street; you don't want to let your kid go to the end of the block in a high-density environment," says Vickie Morris, a senior social planner with the city of Vancouver.

Some cities find they cannot provide enough affordable housing downtown — or provide enough public school classrooms for the number of families who are moving downtown. As a result, some planners simply consider the downtown as a visiting destination for children rather than as a viable place for families to live.

To Bill Anderson, FAICP, San Diego planning director, it is unlikely that downtown will ever be a major family residential community compared to other San Diego neighborhoods. The downtown should be designed as a "place that is conducive for families from throughout the city to visit and use," Anderson says.

This view is disappointing to Kristine and Gregg Zucchetti, who currently live downtown San Diego with their two children, ages three years and 10 months. "Nothing has been done to accommodate my lifestyle and the family that I have," Kristine Zucchetti says of the downtown that in her opinion offers very few amenities for children. The couple is now ready to give up the downtown life that they love and move out. "It is unfortunate because we will still be working downtown, but we will have to start commuting so that our kids can have a better area to play and grow up."

While planners may have done a good job to make downtown a good place for early childhood, they yet have to make child-friendly downtowns more sustainable so that kids can actually grow up there. "We don't yet have cities that have thought of a range or types of play environments which are appropriate for different ages," Hart notes. Kids are growing up and planners need to grow up with them.

Isabelle Groc is a Vancouver-based freelance writer and photographer who writes about cities and the environment.

School Availability

School availability and quality may be a contributing factor to parents' decision to stay downtown over the long term. Two elementary schools and one high school serve downtown Vancouver students, and all of them are at capacity. The Vancouver school district capital plan includes a proposal to build an additional elementary school on the International Village site downtown that would accommodate up to 500 K–7 students. The application is currently under review by the province. There are no plans to add a new secondary school downtown, partly because the school district is uncertain about whether there will be enough students to support such a facility.

"We are very cautious about the numbers because what we haven't seen yet is whether or not after living downtown with their children, parents may find that as the [the children] get older, they need more space or that downtown is not a good environment for older kids," says Henry Ahking, planning and facilities manager with the Vancouver School Board.

In contrast, San Diego public schools have been losing enrollment over the last five years, and the downtown schools are no exception. According to the San Diego Unified School District, there were 380 K-12 students residing in the area covered by the Centre City Development Corporation in 2006, a drop from 628 in 1999 despite the increased residential development that occurred downtown in recent years. One possible explanation is that more parents living downtown turn to private school choices and have reservations about the quality of public schools.

"The public school is total chaos," says Kristine Zucchetti, who sends her son to private school. Zucchetti indicates that education was a top priority in her decision to move out of the city.

Portland Public Schools are losing 300 to 500 students per year, but the schools currently serving families living in the Pearl District with K–12 children are well regarded, and enrollment rates are generally stable. "Both public elementary schools have good reputation and are easily accessible to us," says Nancy Davis.

Resources

Images: Top — Elodie Doumenc and Jake Davis improvise a game on the sidewalk in Portland's Pearl District. Photo by Isabelle Groc. Middle — A sign promoting Denver's Child & Youth Friendly City Initiative. Photo by Jennifer Kirschke and Nicole Drobek. Bottom — Sunny and Carol Gupta and their children, Marina and Sandon, play in their downtown Vancouver condo. Photo by Isabelle Groc.

To learn more about Denver's Child-Friendly City initiative and other projects undertaken by the Children, Youth and Environments Center for Research and Design at the University of Colorado: <http://thunder1.cudenver.edu/cye/>.

For details on UNESCO's Growing Up in Cities program: www.unesco.org/most/guic/guicmain.htm.

About UNICEF's Child Friendly Cities Initiative: www.childfriendlycities.org/home.html.

To learn about the research conducted by the Children's Environments Research Group at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York: <http://web.gc.cuny.edu/che/cerg/>.

About Portland's Children's Bill of Rights: www.portlandonline.com/mayor/index.cfm?c=40070.