

Two Mediterranean Cities for Children from the Parent's Perspective

Adam Gebrian [ed.] (2021). *Tři měsíce v Barceloně* [=Three Months in the Barcelona]. Prague: Universum, 272 pp.
ISBN: 978-80-242-7158-3

Adam Gebrian [ed.] (2021). *Dva měsíce v Lisabonu* [=Two Months in the Lisbon]. Prague: Universum, 312 pp.
ISBN: 978-80-242-7848-3

Daniel Kaplan

Children and childhoods in the Mediterranean are perceived differently than those in the rest of Europe or even the world, concerning factors such as climate, society, and culture (Holt, 2010). This book delves into the distinctive nature of childhood experiences in Mediterranean cities, focusing on Barcelona and Lisbon. Despite the undeniable importance of comprehending childhood development in a variety of geographical contexts, research on children in Southern European cities has been noticeably sparse over the past two decades (Baylina *et al.*, 2006; Prats *et al.*, 2011). Recognising this gap in the existing body of knowledge, this review brings forth two books authored by Adam Gebrian, who, as an architect and a father, meticulously chronicles his and his son's experiences within the pages of these books. In doing so, Gebrian contributes to the understanding of the complex interplay between childhood, urban environments, and architectural aesthetics in the Mediterranean. Furthermore, his work offers valuable insights and implications in urban planning, childhood studies and architectural design.

What the author presents in his books is a rather unique perspective. While it is true that literature includes similar accounts of a child's experiences from different contexts, Gebrian's distinctive background as an architect shines through in his narrative. Although his books cater to a broader audience and are somewhat popularising in nature, they intentionally or unintentionally draw upon the rich ideas found in childhood studies and children's geographies, such as stranger danger and general safety in public spaces (Mitchell, 1996; Holloway, 2004), public gaze (Valentine, 1996), and street and playground design (Refshauge *et al.*, 2013) or position of children in society (James and Prout, 2003). Simultaneously, given their accessibility to a general audience, these books can serve as a source of inspiration for geographers specialising in children's

perspectives on the public space in the city. They provide numerous practical examples of how a child of a particular age and size can interact with the urban environment, shedding light on seemingly inconspicuous places that can hold great allure for a young child.

On the flip side, it's worth noting that the author does not delve deeply enough into the political processes that often intersect with creating public spaces. Sometimes, making decisions, even if they are intended to improve the urban environment for children, can be a complex endeavour, and this aspect is not explored comprehensively within Gebrian's books. However, it is important to remember that these works were designed for a general readership, and as such, they do not engage in theoretical discussions that are commonly associated with the topic of children in public spaces. However, including such theoretical discussions might enhance the depth of the analysis.

Hence, the central message of Gebrian's books is surprisingly simple and yet inherently liberating: "Travel with small children, explore your town with them; it is an enjoyable experience." It touches upon the concept of *flaneuse* (Elkin, 2017) or *flaneur* from a child's perspective. However, as the narrative unfolds, it thoroughly examines a myriad of geographical and urbanistic concepts and ideas (i.e. Holloway and Valentine, 2004 or Holloway, 2014). It underscores that children and their lives in the city are still an underexplored topic in the social sciences. A segment of society maintains that children primarily belong in playgrounds and should be adequately accommodated in designated spaces, often away from places that adults frequent for various reasons. This point of view comes from the belief that public spaces are not inherently meant for children. Additionally, there has been a prevailing general disinterest in children and an unfortunate misconception that they are inherently immature and scientifically uninteresting research subjects. However, over the past two decades, there has been a noticeable shift in attitudes towards children, with a growing recognition of their relevance and unique perspectives. The success of Gebrian's books in the Czech market is indicative of this positive trend.





What truly piques my interest in these books, particularly from the perspective of a geographer specialising in children or an urban geographer, is the opportunity they present to explore the still relatively uncharted territory of the father-son relationship within an urban context. Gebrian's background as an architect allows him to intricately weave various situations into the broader context of the city and the role it plays in shaping these experiences. Furthermore, these books serve as a model for citizen science research design or remote research, wherein ordinary citizens play a significant role in the research process. The involvement of citizens in research of this nature holds great potential, and the proliferation of

similar books or diaries could lead to a richer understanding of the father-son perspective on urban life.

Within each section of the books, the author addresses crucial topics within the geography of children. These include discussions on street and playground design, stranger danger, public gaze, and the position of children in society. Importantly, there are numerous passages in which the child's perspective is skilfully reinterpreted, highlighting the author's son's experiences in seemingly ordinary places. These places may appear mundane to adults, often serving as mere background scenery during the journey from point A to point B. However, to a young boy, these spaces represent a world teeming with opportunities to engage and immerse himself.

The organisation of the book might appear somewhat random, structured around the places the author and his son visited. This approach reflects the dynamic nature of travelling with a small child, as Gebrian aptly states, "Travelling with a small child is a fantastic thing. You just have to have plenty of time and be prepared to end up somewhere completely different from where you first expected." Each description of a place varies in length, ranging from half a page to several pages. At the end of each section, the reader is treated to a recommendation or reflection regarding the place itself, sometimes with a specific focus on spending quality time with a child.

References

- BAYLINA, Mireia; Anna ORTIZ; Maria PRATS (2006). "Children and Playgrounds in Mediterranean Cities". *Children's Geographies*. Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 173-183. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733280600806999-183>
- ELKIN, Lauren (2017). *Flaneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- HOLLOWAY, Sarah L. (2014). "Changing Children's Geographies". *Children's Geographies*. Vol. 12, No. 4, pp. 377-392. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2014.930414>
- HOLLOWAY, Sarah L.; Gill VALENTINE (2004). *Children's Geographies: Playing, Living, Learning*. London: Routledge.
- HOLT, Louise (2010). *Geographies of Children, Youth and Families: An International Perspective*. London: Routledge.
- JAMES, Allison; Alan PROUT (2003). *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*. London: Routledge.
- MITCHELL, Don (1996). "Political Violence, Order, and the Legal Construction of Public Space: Power and The Public Forum Doctrine". *Urban Geography*, Vol. 17, No. 2, pp. 152-178. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2747/0272-3638.17.2.152>
- PRATS, Maria; Mireia BAYLINA; Anna ORTIZ (2011). "Koptraia, Bambini, Meninos, Ninas: A View of Children's Geographies in Southern Europe". *Children's Geographies*, Vol. 9, No. 3-4, pp. 477-481. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2011.590717>
- REFSHAUGE, Anne Dahl; Ulrika K. STIGSDOTTER; Bettina LAMM; Kristin THORLEIFSDOTTIR (2013). Evidence-Based Playground Design: Lessons Learned from Theory to Practice. *Landscape Research*, Vol. 40, No. 2, pp. 226-246. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01426397.2013.824073>
- VALENTINE, Gill (1997). "'Oh Yes I Can.' 'Oh No You Can't': Children and Parents' Understandings of Kids' Competence to Negotiate Public Space Safely". *Antipode*, Vol. 29, No.1, pp. 65-89. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8330.00035-184>