


ONE SATURDAY I went up to the castle to see the city view with our 6-year-old. Perched on the furthest corner with the best vantage point on the top terrace is a large binocular. Our boy ran immediately to it keen to take a peek. After scavenging through all my pockets I victoriously (and relievedly) produced a 1 euro coin and stuck it in as quickly as possible to please the impatient observer. To our surprise, the step on which you stand when positioning the binoculars is only at one height — way too low for a 6-year-old to



be able to reach the eyepiece. I ended up trying to hold up a 22kg wriggly child for the next few minutes as he kept on slipping up, over and under the eyepiece trying to adjust and turn the heavy binoculars to actually see something through it at all.

This piece of design is symptomatic of many moments where design in cities fails to consider its users. What with street kerbs too high for buggies or wheelchairs at intersection points, lack of public toilet facilities, bus stops without seats, green lights at pedestrian crossings lasting way too short for less able citizens, unlit passages making especially women vulnerable or hostile pedestrian refuge islands, cities can be full of barriers.

Empathy is when we anticipate another person's need before they spell it out for us. It is encompassed in small everyday gestures. The way a city speaks to us — through its design

of public spaces and public services — is a series of such day-to-day gestures. They can be welcoming, but sometimes they can make us feel excluded or unwelcome. An empathic city is one where the most vulnerable — whether it is children, women, disabled people or the elderly — feel that their needs have been considered by those commissioning, designing and managing public spaces. In Copenhagen, for instance, simple low-cost solutions across the cycle path network provide a convenient way for people of all ages and abilities to fulfil their daily trips: you can find special tilted cyclist rubbish bins, making it easier to throw rubbish in without the need to stop; footrests before the stop line at intersections; and smooth continuous cycle lanes with no 'hard edges' on entry points.

All of these small gestures have to be based on a shared vision and understanding of how public space influences people's sense of inclusion and well-being. As children can't vote, they often have little agency over shaping their city. Fortunately, city leaders around the world started to recognise that giving children opportunities to play or simply 'hang out' is crucial in the creation of close-knit communities. For instance, the initiative Junges Grätzl in Vienna helps residents create temporary public space interventions with and for children thanks to the financial and organisational help of the city. Besides creating new opportunities for people to socialise outdoors and improving the microclimate, these ini-



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tiatives encourage a sense of collective care and responsibility for the shared space. Eva Braxenthaler, the programme's

coordinator, noted that what is most empowering about the initiative is that residents can realise their ideas quickly. Meanwhile projects\* like this can help kick-start the necessary changes quickly and cheaply, as well as gather feedback to incorporate into long-term improvements.

As urbanisation continues, meanwhile projects can be a valuable tool to make cities more empathetic and welcoming for everyone: to leave room for people to build relationships with their city and with one another. ●

## SMALL STEPS THAT MAKE CITIES WELCOMING

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\*You can read more about the value of meanwhile projects in the book Petra put together with Büro Milk: 'Meanwhile City: How temporary interventions create welcoming places with a strong identity.'