

# Streets as Child-Friendly Spaces: Play, Adaptation, and Spatial Negotiation in Shat Tola Pora Basti, Dhaka

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## Abstract

This research paper explores child-friendly activities in ‘Shat Tola Pora Basti,’ a densely populated low-income squatter settlement in Dhaka, characterized by a severe deficiency of dedicated open play spaces for children. Employing qualitative ethnographic methods, the study investigates how the vulnerable children of squatter settlements in Dhaka, one of the third world’s megacities, adapt to their situation of severely deficient open play spaces. The primary findings reveal that two major streets, which run through the residential and bazaar areas, have evolved spontaneously into active play spaces for the children. Despite distinct spatial characteristics, these streets share a common feature: the children's constant negotiation of space through ‘making and breaking.’ Children repeatedly and spontaneously ‘make and break’ their playing activities in response to vehicular traffic. Understanding such contextualized child-friendliness highlights this paper’s niche question: how do streets become a Child Friendly Space (CFS)? The study will contribute to developing sustainable CFS in high-density areas, offering a conceptualization of CFS for vulnerable children residing in Dhaka's low-income squatter settlements.

**Keywords:** Child-Friendly Space (CFS), Informal Settlement, Making and Breaking, Play Space, Shat-Tola-Pora-Basti, Street Play.

## 1. Introduction

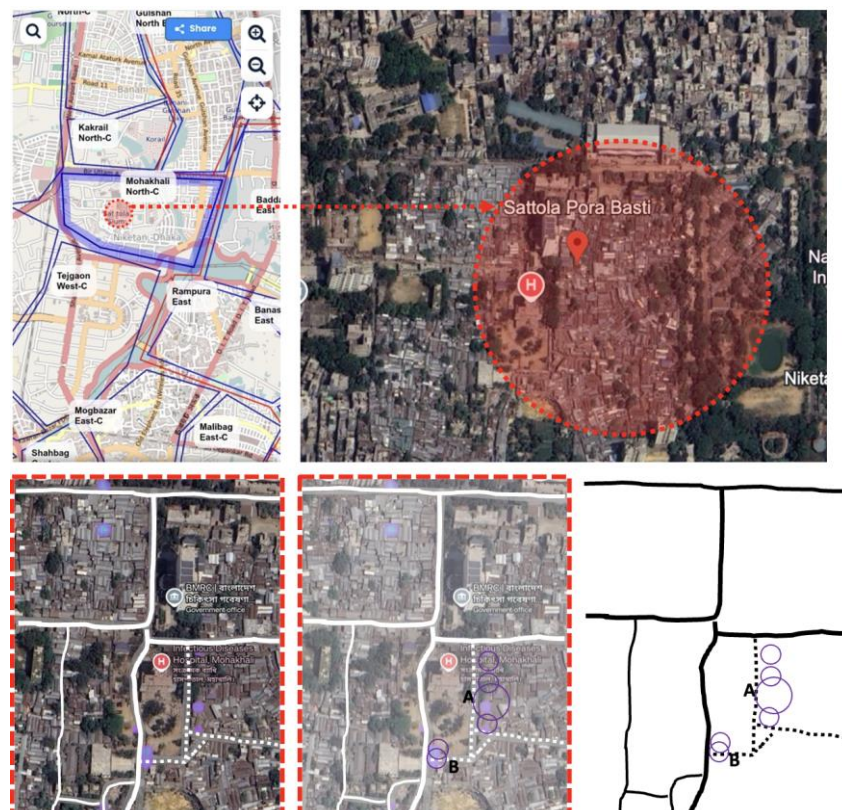
Children are dynamic, rapidly growing beings [1]. They develop quickly across many facets of life. From a mother’s embrace to streets, courtyards, playgrounds, water bodies, beneath trees, haystacks, and dunes, all are growing spaces for their growth [2]. This development includes physical, cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions, shaped mainly by their friendships with their surroundings [3]. Children cultivate these relationships in various tangible and intangible ways, with play being the most effective approach. According to Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [4], every child has the right to play. However, the scope of play is not the same for all children; for instance, a child from a slum or informal settlement experiences a different scope of play than a child from a more privileged background. Consequently, they (children) strive to create a self-contextual ecosystem for play [5]. Child-Friendly Space (CFS) helps to enhance this ecosystem. CFS is a globally recognised approach that prioritises safety, flexibility, and adaptability, thereby ensuring an environment that nurtures

exploration, learning, and self-expression among children. This space employs locally sourced materials and incorporates relevant cultural references, thereby enriching the developmental experiences of children within their respective communities.

According to BBS data (2022), more than 10 million people reside in Dhaka city, while the overall slum population is approximately 4.4 million, accounting for 34% of the city's population [6]. Almost 50% of this slum population are children who are victims of everyday deprivation [7]. Among the 5,000 large and small slums in Dhaka city, this study focuses on Shattola Pora Basti, one of the oldest slums of Dhaka. Children living in Shattola Basti, a densely populated informal settlement in Dhaka, grow up in an environment that poses significant challenges to their healthy development. The narrow, dimly lit spaces leave little room for safe movement, and there are no dedicated areas for play within the settlement. This lack of space not only limits physical activity but also affects children's emotional and social well-being. Despite these constraints, children continue to find ways to play—often by making use of whatever small or leftover spaces they can find. This paper explores how children in Shattola Basti adapt to their surroundings, turning ordinary and frequently overlooked spaces into play areas. By examining these informal play practices through a spatial lens, the study adds to the growing body of research on Child-Friendly Spaces (CFS) in urban low-income contexts. The primary objective is to gain a deeper understanding of how space, or the lack thereof, influences children's daily experiences and development in the slum.

## 2. Context and Method

**Figure 1: Study Site, Its Surroundings and The Selected Two Study Streets**



The study site is the Shattola Pora Basti, located between Niketan (a gated residential neighbourhood) and Mohakhali (a mixed-use urban area that includes both commercial and residential spaces). It is one of Dhaka's oldest slums. The name 'Shattola' refers to a nearby seven-storey building, which has become a landmark for the area, while 'pora basti' signifies "burned slum," suggesting the settlement has experienced multiple devastating fires over the years. Research indicates that the population of Shattola slum is around 36,000 residents across approximately 8,000 households [8].

The target group of this study is children, who make up approximately 40% of the slum's total population[9]. To explore their play behaviour within their environment, the study used field observation as the primary data collection method, based on a critical ethnographic approach. Preliminary field surveys revealed that the slum area is mainly organized around two main types of occupancy: a busy bazaar (marketplace) and residential zones occupied by slum dwellers. Two major streets bisect these distinct zones—Street A, located in the bazaar area, and Street B, within the residential sector (Figure 1, bottom right corner). Due to political unrest in Dhaka at the time of the study, direct household surveys could not be carried out. However, the streets remained visibly lively throughout the day, with children often seen playing both day and night. These two streets were therefore chosen as the main observation sites for this research.

Field observations took place at three different times of the day—morning (10:00 AM), noon (2:00 PM), and afternoon (4:00–6:00 PM)—to capture changes in activity patterns. With permission from the community, a mobile camera was employed to record child-friendly activities. However, photography was not well-received during the morning and noon sessions. In critical ethnography, the researcher's interpretations may introduce bias, as subjectivity is inherently part of the observer's perspective [10]. Using visual tools like photography helped reduce this potential bias. It also supported data triangulation and post-fieldwork analysis. The photographs acted as active elements of the Visual Research Methodology (VRM), which combines visual components—such as maps, drawings, photos, videos, and three-dimensional artefacts—into the research process [11]. In this study, photos, sketches, and maps were used as key parts of the visual research approach to improve the depth and dependability of data interpretation.

### 3. Research Findings

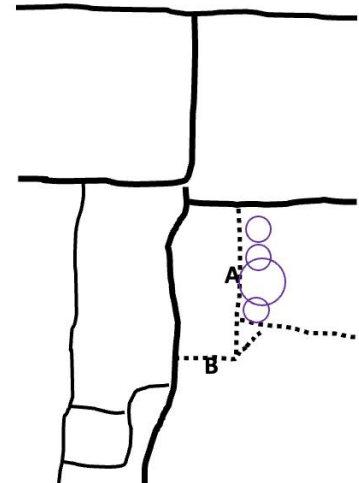
#### 3.1 Making and Breaking

In the densely populated settlement of Shat Tola Pora Basti, the street functions not merely as a channel for movement but as a vital, dynamic arena for children's play. Within the constraints of limited infrastructure and compromised safety, it becomes a contested space—where play is continually negotiated, improvised, and interrupted. Here, children's spontaneous use of the street as a play environment is shaped and constrained by the spatial, social, and environmental vulnerabilities that characterize life in informal urban settlements. In the absence of dedicated recreational infrastructure, children in the basti actively reconfigure their immediate surroundings—transforming alleys, thresholds, and open street corners into spontaneous play zones. This phenomenon echoes patterns observed in other informal urban contexts, where children often resist fixed, prefabricated play structures in favor of flexible, self-directed play. Drawing on found objects and adapting the physical features of the street, they create imaginative and functional environments. In this context, play emerges as a resilient practice—shaped by children's desire for autonomy, mobility, and social connection, even in the absence of formal spatial provisions [12]. On the bazaar street, children make use of brief gaps in activity to engage in play whenever



the space momentarily clears (Figure 2). During busier times—particularly in the afternoons and evenings—when the street becomes crowded, they often shift to watching football games in the open space outside the slum boundary, in front of the BMRC building.

**Figure 2: Children playing on bazaar street**



However, these play zones are constantly at risk of interruption. The streets in Shat Tola are multi-use spaces—frequently used by rickshaws, pedestrians, street vendors, and service vehicles—which often leads to the displacement or disruption of children's activities (Figure 4). These interruptions reflect the "breaking" of play, where children must vacate or readjust due to real or perceived threats, similar patterns found in other studies of overlapping space utilization [13]. During the afternoon, Shattola Bazar becomes vibrant with customers, because after leaving the office, people from the nearby slum come to Shattola Bazar due to its cheap rates (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Bazaar Street becomes busy with customers**



**Figure 4: Bazaar Street become stacked by rickshaw, van, pedestrian**



Nonetheless, children demonstrate remarkable adaptability. Just as described in Kampung Warna-Warni [14], children in Shat Tola adjust their use of space temporally—playing in the streets primarily during non-peak hours, such as noons or evenings, when significant activity subsides. A local bazaar flanks the streets, and during busy market hours, when crowds gather for shopping, children often disappear from the streets, may seek alternate spaces to play. Interestingly, these streets are usually considered safe, as guardians—frequently shopkeepers—can keep an eye on them. This temporal rhythm reflects a negotiated making of play, where time becomes a crucial factor in carving out safe and socially supported moments of leisure.

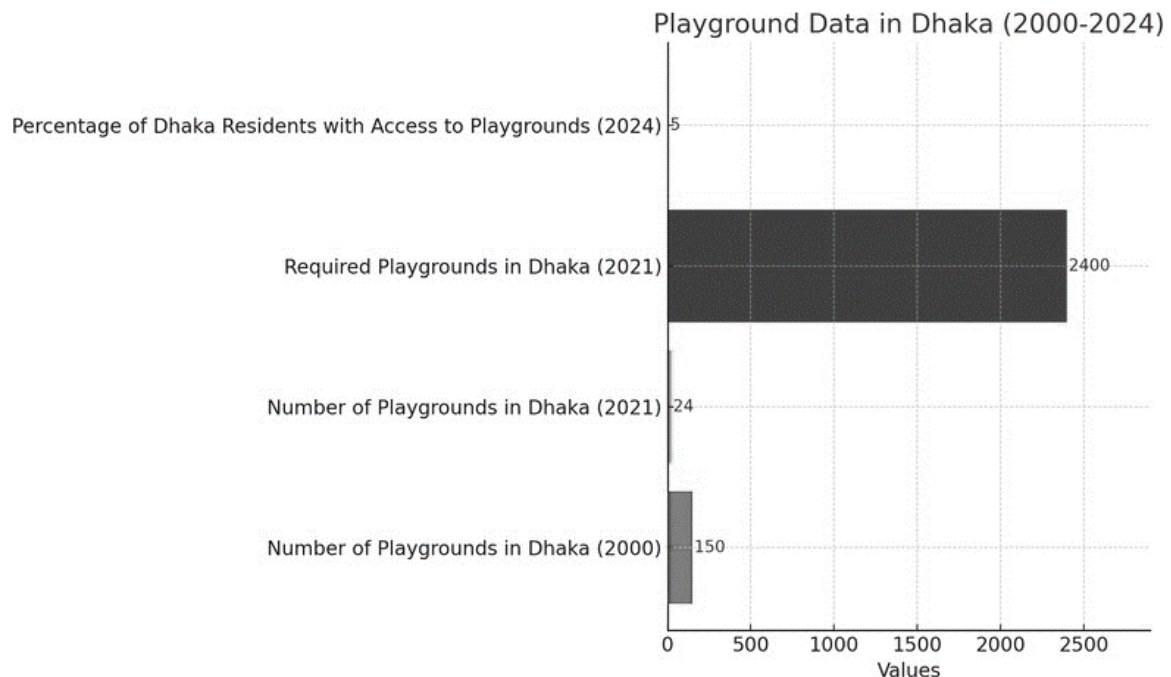
Sometimes, children also bring toys or reuse discarded materials to start playing—another form of "making" seen across under-resourced areas worldwide [13]. However, these actions are often limited by spatial or social constraints: harsh responses from adults, claims on space by vendors or traffic, or dangers from uneven surfaces. Such moments show how child-driven creativity clashes with structural limitations, highlighting the fragility and resourcefulness of play in contested urban environments. Therefore, the street in Shat Tola Pora Basti is not just a physical pathway but a dynamic, child-friendly space (CFS) that is constantly changing, where play is created through appropriation, timing, and social alliances, yet disrupted by competing demands of infrastructure, safety, and adult priorities.

### 3.2 CFS in Urban Environments

Child-friendly spaces in cities aim to cater to children's varied needs, supporting their physical safety, emotional health, and social growth. Such spaces usually include features encouraging active play, social engagement, and community involvement, thereby nurturing learning and development. Accessibility, safety, and inclusivity are key, ensuring kids from different backgrounds have equal chances for recreation and discovery. These spaces might be parks, playgrounds, or even streets designed to limit car traffic, making them safer for children. Furthermore, a good child-friendly area blends six perimeters – safety, accessibility, playfulness, independence, community integration, and green spaces [15]. Urban planners can improve the lives of young people by valuing the input of children and their guardians when creating these environments. But for a slum like Shattola Basti, what it could be is absent in the CFS literature.

From this perspective, the study could contribute through new scholarship. Besides, it highlights the deficiency of playgrounds in Dhaka city.

**Figure 5: Playground situation in Dhaka city from 2000 to 2024**



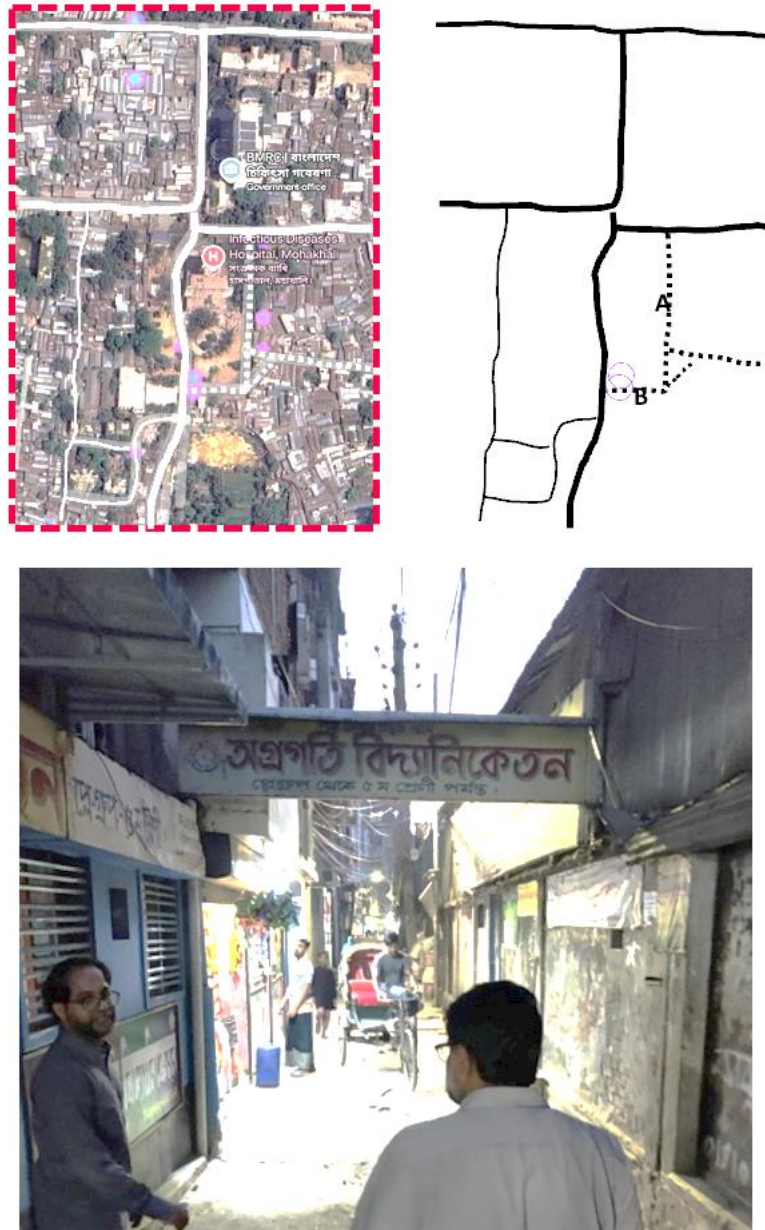
The chart (Figure 5) shows a dramatic decline in the number of playgrounds, with only 24 in 2021 compared to 150 in 2000. The chart also indicates a need for 2,400 playgrounds by 2021 and reveals that only 5% of residents will have access to playgrounds by 2024, emphasizing the critical need for child-friendly spaces in the city [16].

### 3.3 Street (Residential) As A CFS

The concept of child-friendly spaces has gained increasing importance in contemporary urban studies. Communities are increasingly prioritizing the creation of environments that support children's well-being and holistic development. These spaces are designed to be safe, inclusive, and accessible, offering opportunities for play, learning, and social interaction, where play is the prime focus [17]. In densely populated informal settlements such as Shat Tola Pora Basti in Mohakhali, Dhaka, the creation of child-friendly spaces is critical. Given the lack of adequate infrastructure for children, reimagining streets and public areas to meet their needs can significantly enhance their quality of life. Effective child-friendly urban design also fosters inclusive community participation, ensuring that children's voices are integrated into planning processes [18]. This not only empowers young residents but also strengthens community ownership, contributing to more sustainable urban development [19].



**Figure 6: School within community dwelling**



Moreover, the presence of a community-based school, *Aragati Biddyaniketan*, within the neighbourhood enhances the child-friendliness of the residential street (Figure 6). Its proximity encourages regular movement and interaction among children, reinforcing the street's function as a safe, familiar social corridor. The school not only facilitates educational access but also contributes to a child-responsive environment where learning, play, and peer engagement are embedded in everyday community life.

## 4. Discussion

In Shat Tola Pora Basti, the street emerges as a vital space for children's everyday life, offering a setting where play, social interaction, and informal learning take place in the absence of conventional recreational infrastructure. These street spaces allow children to exercise creativity, develop emotional resilience, and build a sense of belonging through spontaneous play and peer engagement. However, the dual nature of

such environments—nurturing yet potentially hazardous—raises complex challenges. The risk of injury, particularly from traffic, continues to limit children's freedom to explore and play safely. A similar concern has been noted in the Zaatari Syrian refugee camp, where children were reportedly at risk of fatal accidents while playing [20]. In response, researcher Nada Mani (2016) highlights the innovative use of restaurant rooftops as Child-Friendly Spaces (CFS), providing both safety and visibility under caregiver supervision.

Inspired by such adaptive strategies, this study suggests that the two primary residential streets in Shat Tola Pora Basti hold potential to be reimagined as active Child-Friendly Spaces. These streets could serve not only as safe zones for children's growth but also as critical elements in participatory urban design and planning. Furthermore, this opens up a broader discourse on the spatial relationship between the street as a public play environment and the private domestic realm of slum dwellers. Recognizing and integrating this street-domestic interface into urban policy and design frameworks may lead to more inclusive, resilient, and child-responsive urban development models in informal settlements. The findings also highlight a broader issue: streets are not officially recognized as suitable play areas in Dhaka's urban planning discussions. Although city plans focus on playgrounds and parks, these spaces are often out of reach for many low-income children because of distance, access restrictions, or overcrowding. In contrast, streets are readily available, familiar, and socially integrated. Their versatility—serving as transport routes, markets, or play zones—indicates they are highly multifunctional. This potential could be valuable for developing child-friendly urban strategies.

The concept of “making and breaking” seen in this study illustrates not only how children negotiate space but also how they exercise control over their surrounding environment. This sense of agency is crucial for developing independence, problem-solving skills, and social cooperation. Nonetheless, it also reveals a structural gap—children's capacity to adapt should not replace the state's duty to provide safe and fair access to play areas. Implementing solutions like temporary play streets, community monitoring, and traffic calming can reduce risks while maintaining the spontaneous nature of street play. From a socio-cultural standpoint, play on Shat Tola streets is closely connected to everyday life. Shopkeepers, street vendors, and guardians serve as informal monitors, their oversight helping to foster a sense of safety. This natural supervision could be formalized with community-led street stewardship initiatives, creating a more organized system for safety while preserving the spontaneous spirit of play. Finally, this study highlights that any intervention must respect the social and spatial structure of the settlement. Too rigid an infrastructure can isolate children from spaces they are accustomed to moving through easily. Instead, design solutions should be affordable, adaptable, and community-based, reflecting the very flexibility that makes these streets functional as CFS.

## 5. Conclusion

This study shows that in Shat Tola Pora Basti, where formal recreational facilities are missing, streets serve as multifunctional spaces supporting children's play, learning, and social interaction. Children adaptively navigate space through practices like “making and breaking,” negotiating access within a crowded, contested urban setting. These behaviors reveal their resilience while also exposing structural inequalities that restrict safe play for low-income urban children. By considering the street as a potential Child-Friendly Space (CFS), this research advocates for a shift in urban policy and design. Instead of seeing streets solely as transit or commercial areas, planners should recognize their importance in promoting community bonds, childhood development, and inclusive urban environments. Strategies like



temporary play streets, traffic calming, and community-led monitoring can improve safety without disrupting the natural qualities of play. The findings emphasize the need to include children's voices and experiences in planning, fostering a child-responsive approach in informal settlements to create more fair urban spaces where all children, even the most marginalized, have access to safe, inclusive, and culturally meaningful play areas.

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