

Technical Mission - Freiburg, Germany

Text and photos: Laura Leal | Editors: Paula Mendonça and Raika Moises

The **Children and Nature Technical Mission**, organized by Alana, visited Germany between September 10 and 16, 2017, offering professionals committed to the themes of **children, nature** and **cities** the opportunity to visit Freiburg, one of the most nature-loving cities in the world. See how this experience unfolded in the report below, written during the trip.

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Travelogue - Day 1

Today began our technical mission in Freiburg, Germany. We came to see what makes this city a reference for sustainable urban planning, the integration of nature with urban life, and child-friendly design.

A delegation of 17 Brazilian professionals from different organizations will be with us this week, following an intense itinerary that focuses on **solutions for urban sustainability and quality of life; public policy; research and innovation on children's relationship with cities; and children's participation in urban planning**. We will report our daily activities and the inspiring experiences and initiatives seen in Freiburg.

Before anything else, why Freiburg? **This city has a long tradition of environmental protection. In the 1970s, its citizens mobilized against a project to build a nuclear reactor nearby, leading to a three-year long resistance.** By the end, an alternative source of energy had been presented and the nuclear reactor project was shelved. The local citizens and university professors had been so active that they remained mobilized after this victory. And this movement is still present today, turning Freiburg into a reference for greener and more humane cities.

Vauban Neighborhood - a model for sustainable districts

We start our journey at the Vauban neighborhood, a model for sustainable residential districts. After the Second World War, the region's abandoned barracks were occupied by artists, students, and low income residents. They slowly transformed the neighborhood, and by the 1990s an urban plan was drafted in partnership with public authorities. **The plan was designed so the neighborhood would have low energy consumption, low car use, and streets that could be harmoniously shared by children, bicycles and pedestrians.**

Today's medium size cities have about 65 cars for every 100 residents, but in Freiburg this number falls to 42, and in Vauban it plunges to 17. There are incentives for its approximately 5,500 residents to not have cars. And there is a parking lot at the neighborhood's entrance for

those do have one, since street parking is not allowed. There are clear streets signs to keep from going over 30 km/h.

We walked around Vauban with the company of [Aiforia](#), a consulting firm, that showed us the **grünspange (green areas), public spaces with some natural resources and playgrounds that allow children to play freely in nature**. There are tree trunks, areas with sand and gravel, slides and seesaws. But each grünspange is different, since each area's residents take part in its construction and contribute to its maintenance.

In addition to these common spaces, there are public squares where markets, meetings and neighborhood parties are held. Even the neighborhood's streets are color coded to help children know where they are - for example, the colors of the houses and street furnishings help them know where they are. This allows for even greater autonomy for the children walking around there.

"And what about safety?" we asked. The answer was simple and encouraging: "The idea is to keep the neighborhood alive, and thus increase the sense of safety. Its living aspects (street lighting, shops, restaurants, people) take the place of monitoring and surveillance systems," explained Andrea Burzacchini, founder of Aiforia.

With basic planning and low cost initiatives, combined with the residents' participation and a partnership with public authorities, Vauban shows that it is possible to bring more nature into our and our children's lives.

Children's Adventure Farm

We also visited the neighborhood's [Kinderabenteuerhof](#) (website is in German), an adventure farm for children. This is a space where children can experience rural activities and have direct contact with nature. There they can play freely among chicken, pigs and sheep, or participate in activities like feeding the animals and making bread.

The park is part of a national association that gives backing and support to adventure farms around Germany. In addition to serving as a children's space, there are two preschool groups that attend in the mornings. "Class" is almost always outside. "A sustainable education is only possible through experience (doing, smelling, feeling), which leaves marks in the memory and help the learning process," says the farm's director, Joachim Stockmaier. And what about the risks present in a natural environment so full of possibilities? Stockmaier considers them essential: "Those who do not experience risk during childhood will have enormous difficulty facing real risks later in life."

In addition to welcoming children and families, the farm also opens its doors to other schools. According to Stockmaier, Germany's National Educational Plan has guidelines encouraging the work done by schools in places that offer experiences in nature. This facilitates the establishment of partnerships between municipal public schools and adventure farms.

The farm we visited takes care to include everyone in the community, making an effort to ensure the inclusion of disabled children and those who have recently migrated to the region. With the national policy of granting asylum to immigrants, the farm has tried to attract these residents with social activities. "We don't want to serve only one part of society, we want to offer the farm to everyone," emphasizes Stockmaier.

We walked around the wooden houses, the grass, wandered around with the chickens, and even found a hotel for insects. “This is a place to breathe,” said Stockmaier, and this is what we felt.

Zusammen Gärten - a project for intercultural integration through horticulture

“Do you want to plant your own vegetables? Do you want to meet people? Do you want to do gardening, work, or hang out with other people? Since July of 2016, we have been building an inclusive intercultural community in this space: it doesn’t matter where you are from, what language you speak, how old you are, whether or not you are disabled, whether you know about gardening or not: come and join us! Here we want to work together and learn from each other, enjoy the garden and have fun!”

It’s with this sign that the [Zusammen Gärtern](#) (website is in German) welcomes people with open doors or, more precisely, without doors. This community garden has no walls or gates, and was dreamed up by the plot’s owner, who donated the space for everyone to contribute and enjoy it. We were greeted by its co-founder, Johanna Dangel, who told us that besides the vegetable garden, there are various activities to attract the neighbors, like parties, bonfires and workshops. People can contribute to the space with volunteer donations or 12 hours of annual work in the gardens.

And what about the children? “They are the great links that connect the families that come here,” says Johanna. At first there was no specific plan for them, but the children slowly appeared and started getting involved with everything. A partnership with the adventure farm, which is right next door, has brought more and more children to the garden. They have proven to be an essential element to the space’s operations. “They expand this space’s value within the families and are proud to belong to this place,” Johanna told us.

We ended our day in this welcoming environment with a community dinner: vegetables from the garden cooked on the fire pit in the middle of the space. A great way to end the first day of our mission.

Travelogue - Day 2

“To do something for the children is to do something for everyone”

We started the second day of our Technical Mission here in Freiburg with a presentation by Doris Bäumer, coordinator of the state campaign “[Mehr Freiraum für Kinder, ein Gewinn für alle](#)” (website is in German), translated as: **More free space for children, a gain for all**. We rode bicycles to the University of Freiburg, where Bäumer told us about the campaign that has been taking place in the state of Nordrhein-Westphalen (NRW) since 2015. **The initiative’s goal is to show cities the imbalance between the circulation of pedestrians and cars, and then present solutions that promote safer mobility in areas with moderate traffic and free spaces for children that demand few resources.** Bäumer noticed these changes also have positive effects for other groups, such as the elderly.

The motivation behind this movement came from the realization that children today spend more time inside their homes than outside, and the way the use of technology has been stunting children’s motor skills and contributing to an increase in childhood obesity. Another motivation was the high car traffic in front of schools, so they started thinking about ways to convince families to make the trip by foot or by bike, installing toys on the sidewalks to make it more fun for the children. Nothing like a friendly city with playful ideas for children to encourage them to circulate and play freely!

As of now, 22 cities in the state have adhered to the campaign and are already implementing measures that contribute to children’s safe movement. Each administration receives technical support to carry out these changes and, more importantly, to promote inter-sector coordination between different departments in the city. **One suggestion is to map out possible routes to the schools to create “playful paths” that encourage children to go by foot.** Another proposal is to offer temporary leisure streets to the residents, spaces devote to play and closed to cars, an initiative similar to the [ruas de lazer](#) that exists in some Brazilian cities.

Some towns like the campaign’s ideas so much that they have changed the way they manage public space as a whole. In Mülheim, for example, a “master plan for play” was instituted, while the town of Aachen established children’s well-being as a prerequisite for new construction.

And what do children have to say about all this? Everything! The process of developing the plan includes the participation of families, and this includes children too. They help point out the city’s negative aspects, and also help transform these environments. The children’s involvement is a way of considering their view of the city, and also offers an opportunity to teach about active citizenship. The participation of all municipal offices is also important to make public agents feel responsible for the issue and for the changes being implemented. Bäumer remembers that, with just a piece of chalk, a child can change an entire street, marking routes and spaces for circulation, as well as leaving their mark and vestiges around the city’s pathways.

Bäumer claims that the campaign’s success is mainly due to the cooperation between the municipal offices and the local residents’ participation. The challenge? To keep changing more cities while spending little, and that the plans don’t stay just on paper.

Freiburg's transit system

We grabbed our bicycles and rode around to learn about the city's urban transit system, considered sustainable and child-friendly. The founder of the [Aiforia](#) consultancy, Andrea Burzacchini, took us around. He explained that for urban mobility to be sustainable, you can't take only the cars' energy source into account, there must be a diversity of means of transport, balancing the different means in a modal system, consisting of pedestrians, cars, public transit and bicycles. And we can see that there have been several advancements in Freiburg when it comes to encouraging the use of bikes.

In addition to public policies, campaigns and incentives, we noticed some practical changes during our tour: a reduction in car speeds, narrower streets, fewer parking spaces, barriers to keep cars from going into certain areas, and in traffic, priority is always given to bicycles. Another important point is that the streets don't have a segregated space for bikes, like bike lanes. "If they are a priority in traffic, then bicycles cannot be segregated to one lane," said Burzacchini. We visited a location dedicated to children and their bicycles, featuring a track with traffic signs where they can safely practice their bike riding. **Children over 7 are encouraged to do this training so they can move around town with greater autonomy. Managed by the city, the initiative is part of a national policy that requires the implementation of spaces like this in every German municipality.** This way, children are encouraged from early on to use the bicycle as a means of transportation.

We headed back to the city center by following the Dreisam River, and in the middle of our trip we found a swing hanging from a bridge, an invitation to contemplate nature in the middle of the city.

A municipal action plan for inclusion

In the afternoon, we met with [Guido Willmann](#) (website is in German), the city's inclusion coordinator, and Sarah Baumgart, a delegate in charge of inclusion elected by a council, at the Freiburg mayor's office. Willmann told us that a national action plan was approved in December of 2006, based on a UN Convention on the rights of people with disabilities, with the main objective of taking the issue of inclusion out of a social assistance system and into an equal rights system, taking disabled people's right to self-determination into account.

Sarah Baumgart was hired by the administration in 2013, as a representative of the city's disabled people. She can communicate freely with various areas of public administration, and also serves as a reference point for civil society in issues related to inclusion. "My work's priorities focus on public spaces without barriers, housing without barriers," explains Baumgart. The mayor's support is essential to make this happen effectively, adds Willmann.

When it comes to education, Germany has a variety of models: schools only for children with physical and intellectual disabilities; schools that welcome disabled students into their classrooms with assistance from specialized professionals; and schools with inclusive classrooms, which integrate the various teaching objectives for each child.

They explained that there is not a strong inclusion policy for primary education schools run by the state.

Despite the efforts to lower resistance to inclusive education, some parents still believe their children's performance will suffer with the presence of children with disabilities. Much of this is due to Germany's educational system, which still places curricular performance above all else, to the detriment of other social and emotional skills (here you can see a study by Alana and ABT Associates that shows "[The benefits of inclusive education for students with and without disabilities](#)"). On the other hand, Freiburg's preschools try to bring in students with disabilities, and have had some successful experiences in primary education. The current goal is that every neighborhood has at least one school capable of welcoming students with disabilities.

During our conversation, we noticed that Brazil's experiences with inclusion can contribute to this discussion in many ways.

Children's council

From there we visited the Stadgarten, or state park, to meet [Josephine Hebling](#) of the Kinderhifswerkes Children and Adolescents' Council. She is a former member of the "[Children's Council](#)," an official committee composed of children elected by the city that regularly interacts with the mayor's office and the city council. Her activities began in the 6th grade, after she took part in a "Dream Workshop" to think of improvements she would like to see in the city. The Children's Council was created based on this experiment.

There have been many achievements since then! "**We made a space for ourselves and slowly gained respect,**" explains Hebling. She reminisces excitedly about a meeting she attended at the UN to present suggestions for solving various issues, such as bullying, together with other children.

The experience has worked so well that they created a state council, gathering children from different cities. Hebling's dream? To see a national council capable of representing all of Germany's children.

But not everything is so rosy, she says. "**Many politicians think children cost more than they contribute,**" she adds. They don't understand that "when an adult listens seriously to a child, they see the world with different eyes."

Travelogue - Day 3

“Let’s look for the footprints of play?”

Imagine a city in which children no longer go out on the streets, where children’s routines are organized around indoor spaces, where play only happens in a directed fashion and leisure time is dominated by electronic devices. What can you do to bring children back into the city? This was the question that led the city of Freiburg to commission a study from the local university’s [Institute for Applied Social Sciences \(FIFAs\)](#) (website is in German) to identify the spaces for children’s activities in the city, the distance between children’s homes and a location for play, and the quality of these environments. They then went after the “footprints of play” the children one day left around the city.

Christine Kimpel, a researcher at FIFAs, told us the study included 4 thousand families with children, and combined three types of evaluation: a quantitative one, where city workers collected data on the home surroundings (how many cars they had, what their yard was like, the closest park, etc.); and two qualitative ones, one with the parents and their children to find out their opinions about leisure spaces; and another with some of the families, who conducted a daily observation of the children’s use of time (how much time they spend for play, for school, for structured activities, etc.).

Among the results, one impression was that the way childhood is lived has a spatial impact on the city. During the study, they tried to look not just at the spaces built specifically for children, but at the entire geography of play travelled by them, with an eye on preserving these spaces as important areas for welcoming children into the city. Therefore, it was important for the project to consider bus stops, vacant lots and the various routes taken by children as spaces for play, making the city space more attractive to children. Furthermore, these **spaces should be accessible and attractive to adults as well; be safe, but not totally without risk (since there is no world without risk!); not be monotonous; and should guarantee opportunities for interaction. With all this in mind, it was time to take action!**

We need an entire playful city

It was during the implementation of this project by the city of Freiburg that [Bagage](#) (website is in German), **a workshop for pedagogical ideas that has an interdisciplinary team of architects, pedagogues and sociologists**, joined in. The group plans and builds spaces for free play around the city. **We visited their offices, located in an old factory that had been occupied in the 1970s, during the period of mobilization against the nuclear reactors. The space is known today as Fabrik, and includes other organizations, businesses and a preschool. We could already see small installations by Bagage on Fabrik’s exterior, such as a clay snake in the bike parking area, a door with a face, a snail mosaic, sand, rocks and water, all available to the children who walk around there, and which offer us clues to what a playful city can be like.**

Bagage is also asked by schools to rethink their outdoor spaces. The team evaluates what is already present, and bring in natural elements whenever possible. Their plan starts with a chat

between Bagage's pedagogues and the school's staff and children. After their idea is ready, everyone participates in its implementation.

Udo Lange, Bagage's director, showed us various projects they have done. "The city is for adventure. We don't need just parks, we need an entire playful city, this is the future," he told us. The group offers creative ideas, with initiatives like mixing furniture with natural elements, planting bushes, and preserving rugged terrain or a creek's curves. Lange tries to prioritize natural spaces, practicing a living architecture that changes over time, since "paradise is not furnished." But when there is a demand for playing equipment, they opt for more playful shapes and colors.

"The possibility of a happy childhood depends on the quality of its spaces. They don't need overly planned spaces, children can claim a space for themselves and transform it," suggests Lange. For example, leaving rubble behind in a park can be enlightening. "Children need things to play with, not readymade toys."

We left Fabrik and went around the city to see some of its parks. In the middle of our trip, Lange pointed out a small empty park with standard equipment. "**Construction companies build these environments as compensation to the city, but what's the point of making something the children won't use?**" he asked. We reached our final destination, a large park where a project was implemented 20 years ago with children's participation. **Lange told us that there was a hole in the middle of the park, the result of a World War II bomb explosion, which had been preserved in the original project. Unfortunately, the city recently filled the hole and took down some vegetation, claiming a lack of safety.**

Despite the city's support, there are still some barriers when it comes to safety. Coordinated participation by various municipal agencies has been essential to implement the changes in the parks and spaces around the city, but safety rules often distort some of the original proposals.

We later visited a preschool in Vauban where Bagage had consulted. The school director, Dominique, told us that the children spend more time outdoors, with freedom to create. And the material they use in nature preferably comes from nature. There is a natural space next to the school, with mud, water, and small hiding places made from branches. On the other side are equipments also designed by Bagage. Lange asked: guess where the children prefer to play? The answer: the natural space.

Learning about Lange and Bagage's efforts showed us how their work, from start to finish, is devoted to creating a friendly and welcoming city for children, allowing them to claim public spaces from early on. **Bagage's work respects and, above all, honors children.**

The Playground Project

During the day, we also spoke to Gabriela Burkhalter, creator of the [**Playground Project**](#), a travelling exhibit and research project on the history of the world's playgrounds. Burkhalter offered us a perspective of play through art, and showed us some initiatives by artists, designers and collectives that make furniture for children. In her research on the development of playgrounds over time, Burkhalter documents the origins of more participatory and creative furniture, and also of more standardized ones, with designs that worry

more about safety. In the researcher's opinion, the more standardized ones, like slides, monkey bars and merry-go-rounds, usually prove to be more boring and less enticing to children.

The idea for the exhibit came when Burkhalter and her husband noticed museums did not have a dialogue with the city. They built a playground outside the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh, where her husband was a curator, and it became a great success. They then installed a small exhibit inside the museum on the history of playgrounds. And today she tours the world with this exhibit, making us reflect on the role of art in children's play.

Travelogue - Day 4

“Children do not disrespect their own fear”

The day started off rainy, but in the morning we went to the [Waldhaus](#) (website is in German), or Forest House, a community space at the entrance to the Black Forest located in Freiburg. Run by a foundation, the space welcomes schools, children and local residents. We took shelter from the rain there while we waited for our guide for the day, Brigitta Blinkert, an educator who works in schools in the forest.

We walked towards the woods and soon started hearing the sound of children. A little ahead we saw two cabins. The group was part of the Forest House vacation program. **But what about the rain? It wasn't an issue. Some were trying to build a fire, others were burning logs, one group was drawing, and others were running around.** The educator took us to see the forest couch, which the group had built earlier that week and were about to take down when the program ended. Branches were used to form a circle, and the children were slowly taking them back into the forest. The next week a new group would arrive, and a new couch would be built. **There are about 30 forest schools in Freiburg, most of them started by the parents. “This is the best way for a child to develop, they are moving all the time and experiencing real life in the forest,” says Blinkert. The forest “routine” starts in the morning, with a circle that symbolizes the start of the day, and then the children are free to play.**

“I am watching them all the time, but I try to stay invisible in a way that they can reach me when they need to,” explains Blinkert. There are dangers, but there is a way of managing them so the children don't run any risks. One way is to establish agreements with them, like marking an area where they can circulate, not running while carrying sticks, and if they want to cut something, they must do it sitting down. But Blinkert guarantees, “the children don't do anything they are scared of doing, because they do not disrespect their own fear.”

Phillip, an educator in one of the cabins, says that there is no program at the Forest House, . “There is so much creativity when you're six years old that it makes no sense to propose things. The idea is that the children come and discover the world through the forest. If they are really into doing something, we help them out.” To him, the greatest advantage of the forest schools is that when the child returns to the classroom to learn about nature, they will be able to relate with their heart, because they already know what is being said, they have already lived it.

Klaus Goldmann, the educator in the other cabin, explains that he has worked with pedagogy in nature for 20 years, and only now is his work receiving recognition. A new state pedagogical plan has included for the first time a guideline that says it is necessary to bring children to the forest. “This is a huge help to us, we no longer need to justify why we bring children into nature.”

Inspired by these educators and children, we went on to Wohnhalde, a kindergarten in the forest. We met Jana and Kerstin, who told us the space started out small and slowly expanded, with help from the parents, to create a space that is welcoming and free at the same time. “We started with children between 1 and 3 and four women with a lot of desire to spend time outdoors. We had some concerns about safety with the first groups, but one day a boy ran down a hill and fell into a mud pit. We were scared, but one of the women who had experience in the forest saw what happened and said: how amazing, come see! That's when we realized that if

the children go back home clean, it's because something went wrong, after all, we are a school in the forest," recalls Jana.

We finished the first part of the day amazed by the possibilities that contact with nature can offer. It was inspiring to meet so many people passionate and engaged with what they do. And the rain? By this point, in the forest, it was an ally.

Nature must be felt

One question that kept nagging us was: **who are these nature educators? How do they prepare to be with the children?** The answer came in the afternoon, when we met Sabinne Bammert from [Natuschule](#) (website is in German), part of the staff at the Nature School, a center that has offered training in environmental education and nature pedagogy since 1998.

"The main thing is the experience and enthusiasm with which they do the course, this is how they become aware," says Bammert. To her, experiencing nature can be enriching not just to the participant's professional life, but also for their personal lives.

The focus of the course is always on practice. "Learning about the trees that exist in a forest inside a classroom does not bring people closer to nature. You have to go outside, see, feel, so that what is being taught has meaning. The experience of nature must be felt with your head, your heart, and your hands."

And this is what we did. We walked to the city park and experienced with our body and soul some of the activities in the School's courses. We collected natural materials from the park, contemplated the sounds around us, walked around with a mirror to see nature from a new perspective.

In another day in our Technical Mission, we met people in love with nature and committed to spreading this love. To celebrate the day, the Sun came out to remind us that nature is with us always.

Travelogue - Day 5

City detectives

After an intense week filled with experiences and knowledge, we had a morning off. In the afternoon, we returned to our Technical Mission and walked to a park to learn about an initiative that has made a big difference in some aspects of the city: *Stadtteildetektive*, loosely translated at **Neighborhood Detectives**.

The project came out of the 1993 study conducted by the Institute for Applied Social Sciences (FIFAs), the one Christine Kimpel presented to us on the 3rd day of our Mission, which tried to identify the spaces used by children in the city. Ten years after the study, a group asked: What has changed? What needs to be improved? They concluded that in order to evaluate what needed improvement, they had to ask those with the biggest interest: the children.

So they created the *Kind und Umwelt* association (loosely translated as the Children and Environment Association), and in 2004 they created the Neighborhood Detectives, so the children could express what they thought of their surroundings. In partnership with the schools, the volunteers who make up this initiative developed a questionnaire to help the children point out what was good along their route, and the obstacles along the way or the spaces that seemed dangerous to them.

Among the tools used by the children to collect information was a map of the routes they take along the neighborhood, on which they would rate spaces as good, medium or fair. The results of the investigations were presented to various actors in the city: residents, police, transit secretaries, and the children themselves. With the results in hand, the Neighborhood Detectives raised the city's awareness and some things slowly changed, such as improvements in parks and traffic signs on streets near schools. The project has been conducted in eight neighborhoods so far, and the intention is to do it in the whole city.

To learn about some of these mapped spaces, Reinhold Schepers, a representative of Kind und Umwelt, took us on a "tour." First we walked to a park that had been rated as unfriendly, due to a lack of lighting and other uses that hindered play. We then went to another park that had undergone changes after the children's evaluations, and the children were there!

We also visited a common space for teenagers that was created after an initiative by the area's residents. The building belongs to the city and also has a library. At the door, we met a group of children who were putting the finishing touches on their cars for a traditional race that happens annually in the neighborhood. The "automobiles" are made by the children themselves with help from the parents, and the secret is a good set of breaks, they told us.

The beginning of the beginning

Throughout this week, we saw a variety of partnerships and features in Freiburg that help build a kid-friendly city. We spoke to educators, architects, civil servants, residents, experts in urban mobility, a secretary for inclusion and accessibility: they all showed us that in

order to follow a path towards a new concept for the city, a dialogue and respect for childhood, and valuing the presence of nature are all essential.

Children in Freiburg are more present in public spaces, play in the streets, squares and parks, move around on bikes, are heard about their needs, interact with nature on a daily basis, and are taken into consideration in the city's planning. And all of this is happening now, after **many years of mobilization and participation by different social actors, who keep on working to make the city more kid friendly.**

Our delegation now embarks on a new trip, to think about the bridges, networks and actions that these experiences have mobilized, and the challenge of developing initiatives that can work within a Brazilian context. **Thinking about a kid friendly city means planning actions that guarantee their presence in public spaces. And what about you, how can you contribute to unwall the children in your city?**

We hope our Technical Mission has also sensitized those who followed our travelogue. Soon we will present the fruits of this enriching experience on our website and networks.

See you soon!