City Space Architecture

Empowering Young People in Shaping an Intersectional Future for Public Spaces

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Abstract

Public spaces, such as squares, urban parks, and communal areas are arenas that reflect societal values and power structures, influencing who has access and how they engage with these spaces. This viewpoint explores the application of intersectionality—considering factors like gender, race, and socioeconomic status—in understanding how diverse identities shape the lived experience of young people in public spaces. More specifically, it focuses on girls, and it reflects on the intersectional challenges girls face in four different contexts to include Belgium, South Africa, Iran, and Sweden. The analysis reveals the complexities of safety, accessibility, and inclusion girls face across all cases. This viewpoint underscores the value in using an intersectional lens in designing inclusive public spaces and highlights the pivotal role of young people as advocates for change.

Keywords: public space, intersectionality, young people, gender, urban planning

1. The potential of an intersectional perspective to study public space

Public space includes places where diverse people can meet, interact, and engage in various forms of exchange and dialogue on matters of shared interest (Bravo et al. 2020). Examples of public spaces include parks, squares, and communal areas. But public spaces are not just physical locations; they are dynamic social arenas that hold profound importance, shaping societal values while also fostering a sense of community. Public space is where social groups can assert their right to the city, its infrastructure, and its resources (Mehta and Bosson, 2021). For this reason, it often reveals the nature of the urban fabric—who has access, and who does not.

Studies that critically examine public space acknowledge the diversity of urban injustices that characterise contemporary spaces (Anguelovski et al. 2020; Apostolopoulou and Liodaki 2021; L'Aoustet and Griffet, 2004). These studies are important because, by mapping and discussing who has access, in what ways, and to what types of public amenities, they contribute to a thoughtful examination of various forms of injustice and how these are shaped by power structures (see: Anguelovski et al. 2020).

In this regard, of interest is how different social and political identities—such as gender, race, age, and religion—intersect to shape experiences of discrimination or privilege in urban environments. Intersectionality includes the notion that individual experiences are not defined by a single axis of identity but is influenced by a number of factors such as gender, race, socioeconomic background, and more. Applying the intersectionality lens to the study of public spaces allows us to develop a more nuanced understanding of the diverse and often divergent ways people engage with and inhabit these shared environments. The intersectional analytical framework (see: Crenshaw, 1989) holds great potential for deepening our understanding of how young people access and use public space.

In dissecting the relevance of intersectionality to public spaces, one must first acknowledge that these spaces are not neutral grounds. Instead, they are imbued with societal norms, biases, and power structures that manifest through the various identities present—or absent. The intersectional lens enables us to recognize that an individual's experience in public spaces is shaped not only by their gender or race but by the convergence of these multifaceted identities. For instance, a woman of colour may navigate a city square differently than a white man due to the intersection of her gender and race, revealing the layers of privilege and discrimination at play.

The impact of intersectionality on public spaces becomes especially evident when considering the diverse identities that converge within them (Garcia and Zajicek, 2022; La Barbera et al., 2023). Gender dynamics, for instance, significantly influence perceptions of safety and accessibility. Women, particularly those from marginalised communities, often experience heightened concerns about personal security, which in turn affects their freedom of movement within these spaces (Day 1999; La Barbera et al., 2023). This is an intersectional struggle where gender intersects with race and socioeconomic status, shaping experiences in ways that a singular lens cannot fully capture.

Race introduces layers of complexity in the public sphere. Studies have shown that people of colour, particularly Black individuals, often face heightened scrutiny and stereotyping in public spaces, which affects their sense of belonging and comfort (Powers et al., 2020; La Barbera et al., 2023). The intersectional lens helps us understand how the experiences of racial minorities are intertwined with other aspects of identity, such as

gender or economic background, and the challenges they face in navigating public environments.

Socioeconomic status is another dimension that intersects with gender and race to shape experiences in public spaces (Potter et al., 2019). Economic disparities often manifest visibly in the accessibility of certain spaces, with individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds frequently encountering barriers to entry or a sense of exclusion (O'Brien et al. 2012; Potter et al., 2019) The intersectional lens emphasises that economic inequalities do not exist in isolation; they intersect with other facets of identity, creating a layered and often unequal tapestry within public spaces.

Young people, with their fresh perspectives and inherent sense of activism, play a pivotal role in reshaping the narrative around public spaces from an intersectional standpoint. Their unique ability to challenge norms positions them as catalysts for change. Through advocacy, activism, and innovative initiatives, young individuals are actively contributing to the transformation of public spaces into environments that truly reflect the diverse tapestry of society.

In the following four cases, the experiences of young girls in public spaces across different urban contexts are introduced from an intersectional perspective. Each case offers a unique opportunity to reflect on and consider questions of inclusivity and how our urban environments address the needs and aspirations of young girls.

2. Case 1: Empowering Women, Public Space and Climate Change, Belgium

During the pandemic, in 2021, BIDs Belgium[1] launched a novel initiative titled *Empowering Women, Public Space and Climate Change* with the aim to empower women and girls by learning self-defence, and to help them to feel more confident and safer when moving in the city alone as women or girls[2]. The initiative to begin with brought together women active in teaching self-defence in their respective regions and countries during the International Women's Day in 2021. It was followed by a call for action directed to policy makers and city leaders to design safer cities for women and girls. Later this initiative evolved to include other interdisciplinary topics such as the disproportionate effects of poverty, conflict and climate change on intersectional women, and today brings together international experts and practitioners.

Recognizing the intersectionality of the matter of women or girls moving in the city alone is important. Women of marginalised backgrounds and in particular women of colour, migrant women, and those from low-income districts, who are resident in socioeconomically marginalised communities are often experiencing lower levels of safety and security in their own neighbourhoods. This impacts them in different ways. For instance, they might tend to spend less time outdoors, be less inclined to socialise in nearby public space and use less parks and other facilities (Bantham et al., 2021; Popkin et al., 2008). Today, the initiative brings together international experts and practitioners to address these interconnected issues and advocate for inclusive, equitable urban environments.

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[1] The initiative was launched by BIDs Belgium (Business Improvement Districts), a think tank focused on managing and enhancing commercial areas while creating inclusive, sustainable cities and communities through creative design thinking, social innovation, and community empowerment.

[2] BIDs collaborates with Kaarvan Crafts Foundation https://kaarvan.com.pk/

3. Case 2: Intersectional Identity in Designing Public Spaces in a Township with Girls, Cape Town, South Africa

Public spaces are intended to be accessible to all, symbolising democratic and communal life (Kaur, 2020). However, in many African contexts, societal expectations often confine girls and women to domestic roles, excluding them from outdoor activities. This exclusion allows boys and men to dominate urban public spaces, engaging in activities such as car washing and playing street soccer, while women and girls face harassment, leading them to take longer routes or use distractions like headsets to avoid uncomfortable situations.

This case acknowledges that the lack of safety in public spaces is a global concern for women and girls. Our research finds that factors such as race, culture, age, and class significantly influence how girls from different backgrounds navigate and avoid public spaces in their neighbourhoods (Stassen, 2023). Further, girls who already have other barriers like limited access to higher education, traumatic family situations, and societal peer pressure were found to face particular challenges in accessing public space. The 'Girls Make The City'[3] (GMTC) project is aimed at these girls, who are striving to improve their lives and set positive examples for the youth.

Figure 1a. Workshop activities (Nov 2023).

To understand the local context, the GMTC project team made of five researchers and social entrepreneurs, conducted a workshop with local organisations in Langa, a black township in Cape Town (Western Cape). Elderly women were invited to map out unsafe areas both affecting women and girls, providing valuable insights into the community's challenges. Local organisations also assisted us in recruiting 17 girls aged from 16 to 25 years. For this we used specific nomination criteria to ensure that the selected participants represented the intended population of girls who showed qualities of:

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[3]Girls Make the City (GMTC) is a project launched by Wetopia and managed by Open Design Afrika (ODA) with support from Cape Town-based partners. The initiative tackles the critical issue of safety for girls and women in South Africa's urban public spaces. Wetopia collaborates globally with local communities to build inclusive societies, fostering unity and striving for more inclusive cities. Rooted in the African humanist philosophy of UBUNTU, ODA promotes democratic participation, knowledge sharing, and equips communities with future-oriented life skills through creative experiences that nurture Creative Intelligence in participants of all ages.

changemaker by nature, leadership skills, passionate and driven to make a difference, eager to learn, empathetic by nature, community-driven, innovative, problem solver, solution seeker, quick thinker, between the ages of 16 and 25, driver of change, punctual, responsible, team player, collaborator and finally aspirational. With this project we aimed to add depth of analysis and further understand the gap between local public safety statistics and the need for gender-sensitive urban planning, especially in marginalised townships.

Figure 1b. Quotes from two workshop participants.

During the workshops, the girls expressed pride in their township's cultural history but also voiced concerns about the lack of public spaces that accommodate young mothers and also of those girls who prefer nighttime activities (Figure1a). Many felt that existing public spaces failed to meet their needs such as visiting a park freely with their children and allowing them to wear what they want without feeling like they would be cat-called, forcing them to worry about childcare or safety as public spaces are unmaintained and do not accommodate for such activities to take place in the context of Langa. We thus used a bottom-up approach to understand how the insights provided from local residents could inform interventions, comparing academic theories with the everyday experiences of those using these spaces.

The girls proposed creative and authentic interventions to reclaim public spaces. Some of the suggestions included creating a sister hike trail marked with pink footsteps to symbolise their presence and designing memory walls with local artists to honour female icons from the community. By the time we completed the third workshop, the participating girls showed significant growth in confidence and determination, emerging as leaders and advocates for safer, more inclusive public spaces in their neighbourhood and African townships (Figure 1b).

4. Case 3: Participatory Mapping with Teenage girls of Meeting Places and Public Spaces in Södertälje, Sweden

Public spaces and meeting places where young people can gather, socialise, and spend time outdoors greatly affect their mental and physical health (D'Haese et al. 2015; Spruijtenburg et al. 2024). While municipalities commonly invest in public infrastructure such as sports fields, skating parks, and outdoor gyms, these facilities often cater primarily to the needs and interests of boys and young men. In contrast, it has been noted by

activist groups how teenage girls' needs and interests are seldom met by such facilities, and what is generally available (see: Make Space for Girls[4])

Our research in vulnerable districts in Södertälje (Sweden) found constraints on young people's engagement[5] in outdoor activities and recreational pursuits, including concerns about safety, lack of access, and stigma (Buijs et al. 2024; Rodela at al. 2021). In July 2021, with the support of the Ronna Youth Centre, we conducted a participatory mapping activity[6] with five teenage girls residing in and near the Ronna neighbourhood. The objective was to gather qualitative data on access and use of public spaces and meeting places, and better understand their lived experiences as residents of that area classified at that time as having low levels of safety and security by Swedish Police Authority. Educators at the Ronna Youth Centre played an active role in the recruitment process. The activity lasted about 1 hour and 30 minutes. We began by focusing on their lived experiences, mapping places they liked and disliked. We then opened up a discursive space for them to raise questions and issues of concern, which the researchers subsequently presented for discussion at a stakeholder workshop (see: Rodela at al. 2021). The session was facilitated by a female colleague, while three other researchers took notes and collected observational data. The activity provided in-depth insights into teenage girls' experiences of safety, stigma, and the gendered nature of access to urban green and public spaces, as well as discrimination and community dynamics.

Of particular interest is how the data collected helps us to understand aspects related to intersectionality of the teenage girls and how that influences their use and perception of public spaces. As children of immigrant parents in Sweden, the girls expressed a strong sense of belonging to Ronna, which they described as "home" and a supportive community. But they also listed a number of challenges they face daily due to the negative stereotypes attached to that particular neighbourhood that the media describes as a "criminal hub." They saw harm in that narrative: it was directly affecting them. When asked the group explained to us how it creates stigmatisation which they experience recurringly when interacting with people from outside the community. The girls emphasised that these stereotypes not only misrepresent their lived reality but also affect their access to and freedom in public spaces, where they often feel judged or marginalised. These experiences reflect a broader intersection of identity, where being young, female, and from an immigrant background shapes their everyday use of urban spaces, often creating certain barriers. Despite these challenges, the girls demonstrated optimism, rejecting the negative labels imposed on them and sharing their aspirations with us during the session, for their professional futures in fields like medicine, education, and law. This complex intersection of identity and public space reveals the gendered, racialized, and socio-economic dimensions of urban life. The activity revealed how public spaces are not equally accessible for all in Ronna, and particularly for teenage girls.

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[4] Make Space for Girls, Parkwatch (makespaceforgirls.co.uk).

[5] Research funded by the National Research Program for Sustainable Spatial Planning, grant number 2019-01887 and by an Internal Departmental Grant by Södertörn University.

[6] Research approved by the Swedish Ethical Board (ID: 2019-05938). All participants received information in written form and orally by one team member, including how collected data will be handled in anonymous form and ways it will be used. Informed consent was obtained by the participants who were at that time aged above 15 years.

The girls expressed discomfort with a nearby urban forest (i.e., Ronna Forest), which they perceived as dark, unsafe, and associated with potential dangers due to negative activities like alcohol consumption and related behaviour by older youth.

Figure 2. Participatory Mapping Activity with Girls

During the mapping they also reported on how their experiences in public places come to be shaped by gender and age (Figure 2). This group of girls reported on how, when they gathered outdoors, older women or other community members might feel entitled to patronise them about their behaviour. They experienced, when gathering and sitting on benches at the Ronna Multisport facility, being asked by adults, or boys, to leave or to be quieter. This, they contend, does not happen to boys, who have broader access to most public spaces, and are allowed to be loud. Which is interesting and it appears as the adults are reinforcing 'traditional' gender norms of who can go where and what they are allowed to do, and how to behave (loud associated with masculinity while being quiet and polite with femininity).

The workshop activity provided a unique opportunity to understand how age, gender, and immigrant status intersect to shape girls' perceptions of safety, belonging, and interactions within their community. Recognizing and further investigating these intersections is crucial to developing a more comprehensive understanding of young people's lived experiences in vulnerable communities, which is necessary to plan, design, and build more inclusive spaces that cater to the diverse needs of youth in Södertälje, and elsewhere in Sweden.

5. Case 4: Participating in post-disaster recovery in Sarpolezahab-Qasreshirine, Iran

After the Sarpol-e Zahab earthquake in Iran in 2017, several young women and other educated youth came back from school and college to help with the disaster recovery

work (Preliminary Report of Mw7.3 Sarpol-e Zahab, Iran Earthquake ECHO, 9 Apr 2019). Young women from disadvantaged backgrounds in cities often want to go back to their hometowns after they finish education, even though they face few chances because of poor infrastructure and resources.

The involvement of young educated women in rebuilding their communities after disasters showed how their identities as women, youth, and members of less privileged groups overlapped. They made key contributions to many areas, like city planning, rebuilding homes, and setting up temporary shelters. Their unique position gave them special insight into their communities' varied needs. This highlighted how being both community members and professionals allowed them to push for recovery plans that were more inclusive and focused on what people needed.

Despite this, young women faced barriers due to gender-based rules and weak disaster recovery plans. Public spaces following disasters often reflect societal views on safety and unequal power for women. Gender-based social rules and recovery plans limit women's access to resources and opportunities. For example, many women reported feeling unsafe in public spaces, despite their participation, because recovery planning overlooked their specific needs.

A notable example of overcoming these problems occurred in Qasreshirine. There, members of the university[7] and government[8] teamed up with young women to get them involved in planning and rebuilding after a disaster. This project is regarded as one of the most significant initiatives following the Sarpol-e Zahab earthquake in Iran. The contributions of these women played a crucial role in shaping post-disaster policies, resulting in more inclusive planning and design.

When these young women became involved, they challenged traditional ideas of gender roles and demonstrated their ability to influence major decisions. They helped create community-led plans that advocated for policy changes, aiming to enhance safety and create public spaces that everyone could use.

Understanding how these young educated women contribute to rebuilding areas after disasters is essential to creating sustainable recovery plans. Their identities as women, youth, and individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds provides them with a unique perspective on the needs of the community, even in the face of religious and cultural constraints. This example underscores the importance of empowering women to play a role in post-disaster efforts, ensuring that we can build inclusive cities capable of addressing future challenges more effectively.

6. Conclusion

Understanding questions of access and inclusion in public spaces greatly benefits from an intersectional viewpoint since that allows us to shed light on aspects that are less understood when it comes to the lived experience young girls have with these spaces. In this viewpoint we discussed how young people come to access and use public space in four cases and how intersecting identities may have impacted on that. Specifically, aspects related to inequality have merged and proved to be quite present in all four cases.

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[7] University of Tehran recover and social science team and sharif university of Tehran rebuild and structure team.
[8] Housing Foundation of Islamic Revolution and their sub institutions in collaborating with resident citizens.

A commitment to resolving gender-based inequalities is central to the creation of inclusive public spaces. The influence of young people on this front is evident in their advocacy and there is a need to integrate novel methods and tools which can open up urban planning and governance to different groups. We would like to end this viewpoint by suggesting that the intersectional perspective on public spaces is an idea but also a call to action—one that young people are answering with determination. Their contributions go beyond being mere users of these spaces; they are advocates for a future that celebrates diversity, champions equity, and prioritises sustainability.

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