

Locating Young Women in Public Space. A Feminist Spatial Researcher-in-Residence Model

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Abstract

Young women have largely been left out of public space design and planning processes. There is a need for meaningful knowledge production to be centred on, and grounded within, this group. In this viewpoint, we propose and evaluate our feminist spatial researcher-in-residence methodology for engaging young women in design and planning processes. We developed this model for a series of peer research projects on gender and perceptions of public space, with individuals who identify as girls and young women in the UK from April 2022 to October 2023. We first give an overview of our method which focuses on peer research – notably the researcher-in-residence model – and subsequently go on to discuss two central aspects: (un)learning and visual methods. We argue that such approaches contrast traditional methods of doing research with young people (e.g. surveying), by giving us ways of exploring the banality (eg. benches) and complexity (feelings of safety) of young women’s experiences of the public realm; and by allowing research participants to have greater agency in representing their own lifeworlds. It is our view that this methodology makes the case for why it is essential to value the tacit knowledge that young women and girls have in meaningful and attentive ways if we are to create an inclusive public realm.

Keywords: peer research, feminist methodologies, gender, public space

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I. Introduction

In a discussion with some young women in Crewe, we asked: ‘does it matter who researches public space?’ One twenty-year-old young woman responded:

“If research and who researches into public space isn’t inclusive, how can we expect the public spaces, and the changes that are made to them, to be inclusive too?”
(Crewe, 25 July 2022)

Her astute observations are ones certainly reiterated by feminist methodologies, postcolonial scholars, and those working in the Global South (see Said, 1989; Spivak, 1988; Tayob, 2018; Haraway, 2013; Browne et al, 2017). They warn that there is a lack of diversity within knowledge production, with that of urban design and planning being no exception – in terms of age, gender, race, geography, class, methodologies and so on. Consequently, our current spatial realities are forged by the (overall homogenous) knowledges that those who plan, design, and implement space either have, have access to, or make use of (Kern, 2021).

Young women are one particular group who have found themselves left out from spatial knowledge production. While young women use and value public space greatly, 89% of young people in the UK have never been consulted about their local areas (Grosvenor, 2020). Young people may sometimes be engaged in urban development processes but such inclusions are often tokenistic or extractive: short-term processes fulfilling consultation requirements for planning, without providing meaningful exchange (eg. payment, skill building) nor committing to actual results (Young Foundation, 2020). In academia, this engagement issue has to some extent prevailed in research methods. Morrow (2008) and Cele (2016), for example, found that over 75% of research methods used with young people from 2015 to 2020 in the UK have been ‘traditional’ (interviews, surveys and focus groups) which do not value the different competencies, strengths and communication methods of young people as research participants (Young Foundation, 2020). This does not only disempower young people but also negatively impacts the accuracy of research findings (Tayob, 2018; Larkins et al, 2021; Morrow, 2008). Young women’s limited inclusion within spatial knowledge production may stem from the reality that teenagers are often, and problematically, considered a ‘hard to reach’, disinterested or less competent demographic for planning and research purposes (O’Toole, 2003; Morrow, 2008). Such conclusions are not only highly inaccurate but serve only to excuse us (researchers, planners, developers, etc.) from adapting our engagement methods to young people, and from addressing the barriers to their engagement. It is also particularly problematic for young women who consistently seem to have their spatial experiences and needs overlooked (Skelton, 2000). For example, a number of studies show that young women have significant unaddressed safety concerns in public space (see Barker et al, 2022; Girlguiding, 2022; YWL, 2021; Cosgrave et al, 2020); and public provisioning for teenagers (predominantly skate parks, football pitches, basketball courts, and BMX tracks) have been shown to be severely underused and appear unwelcoming for women and girls (see Bradley, 2010; Rowntree Park, 2021; MSFG, 2023).

In this viewpoint we suggest that to respond to these concerns and to build more inclusive spaces for girls and young women, it is necessary to gather an evidence base of what girls and young women’s spatial experiences are; and for this knowledge collection

to be done meaningfully by working with, learning from, and involving those within whom that experience resides. More specifically, we suggest that using non-traditional research methods may better capture the lived experiences of young women, by focusing on two aspects of our feminist spatial researcher-in-residence methodology: (un)learning and visual methods. This methodology was developed for a series of peer research projects on gender and perceptions of public space, with 16–27 year-old individuals who identify as girls and young women in the UK from April 2022 to October 2023. We argue first, that (un)learning, or the process of learning new and questioning existing knowledge, offers ways of exploring the banality (e.g. benches) and complexity (e.g. feelings of safety) of young women's experiences. And second, that visual methods allow research participants greater agency in representing and exploring their lifeworlds. Whilst there are certainly important contributions made by using traditional survey and interview methods, we argue that because young women's experiences have been ignored and that these experiences are complex and multilayered, there is a need to think of alternative ways in which to bring this demographic into view. Without this, planners, designers and architects continue to risk proliferating exclusionary spaces.

Of importance, while our paper addresses individuals who identify as 'women', women's experiences are not homogenous nor is gender a binary. Instead, this framing recognises that asymmetrical relationships based on gender binaries exist, even as this imperfect categorical framing shifts and changes (McCall, 2005). In addition, while we primarily discuss age and gender, other characteristics such as class, race and disability also contribute to individuals' inclusion within knowledge production and the public realm (Massey, 2008).

2. What did we do?

This paper draws on two peer research projects, *Making Space for Girls* (April to August 2022) and *The Young Researchers-in-Residence* (October 2022 to October 2023) run by the authors, Dr Julia King and Olivia Theocharides-Feldman, both researchers at LSE¹. We hired 29 people aged 16-27 as young researchers-in-residence (also referred to as Researchers) – our colleagues at LSE Cities² and partnered with the charity Make Space for Girls³.

Peer research "...recognises that individuals within any community being researched are themselves competent agents, capable of participating in research on a variety of levels, including as researchers" (Higgins et al, 2007, p. 105). The researcher-in-residence model within our peer research method specifically recognises that researchers "bring expertise which is different from but potentially complementary to that of other team members" (Marshall et al, 2014, p. 803). In our case, the Researchers brought their embodied and lived experiences of identifying as young women in our geographic areas of focus and investigated: '(how) have young women been designed out of public space?'. Researchers were recruited via an application process through various settings, including schools, youth centres, community and residential groups. We requested that

¹ Julia and Olivia have since writing this piece left LSE and now run a design consultancy.

² LSE Cities is an urban research centre based at the London School of Economics.

³ Make Space for Girls campaigns for better provisioning for teenage girls in parks and public spaces.

applicants submit a paragraph detailing their motivations to participate, be aged 16-27 and identify as women⁴.

We structured the programme as open-ended, flexible, site-specific and paid. We did so to empower and incentivise young women to feel that they are essential to spatial conversations, to overcome some of their participatory barriers and therefore to include a greater diversity of voices within the project, and to demonstrate to participants that their insights and time are valued. The Researchers were paid London Living Wage, LSE's starting band for researchers for hours worked. We worked with the Researchers to contribute to their CVs as, for many, this was their first job. The engagement was responsive to the Researchers' availability as a group in each location, unfolding over just a few weeks or longer term often with only evening meetings. We suggested weekly hours capped by our budgetary constraints, which they all largely followed.

We also designed a bespoke intersectional urban theory and design learning programme centred on learning and (un)learning, based on feminist methodologies. We assigned weekly readings, activities, lectures or podcasts and held discussion sessions through Zoom, all hosted on an online whiteboard (Miro). Their weekly activities included photography, ethnographic methods (e.g. participant observations), mapping, drawing, and written reflections; and technologies such as Instagram were used to document activities. We also ran in person discussions as well as site visits, workshops (e.g. collaging) and mapping sessions. The content and structure of the programme changed in response to the site, its geographical complexities and demographics. For example, in Clapham and Brent discussions around race and ethnicity were much more deeply embedded than in sites and with participants where these tensions were less prevalent. Feminist methodologies aim to "re-position communities, activists and others as not simply subjects of research, but as central to the solution of social problems" (Browne et al, 2017, p. 1378). They can challenge the inherent power asymmetries between researcher and researched (the passive research subject) and encourage feelings of inclusion; give participants valuable work experience, training, and wages; build personal, professional, social, and emotional skills and knowledges; and give rise to more attuned and grounded data (Young Foundation, 2020⁵; Larkins et al, 2021⁶). Larkins et al (2021) note that using peer research may be particularly valuable at addressing the research competencies of young persons. MacKinnon (2021) notes that paying peer researchers may help balance the power relations between peer and academic researchers and address extractive concerns (Ibáñez-Carrasco et al, 2019).

Nonetheless, participatory research has not been without criticism and the inherent power asymmetries between academic researcher and peer researcher has a history of critique, especially in postcolonial and development contexts and where it has been deployed as an extractive process (see Kindon et al, 2007; Kesby et al, 2007; Foucault, 1982; Boano and Kelling, 2013; Said, 1989; Spivak, 1988; Tayob, 2018; Cooke and Kothari, 2001). In our own work, there were certainly power asymmetries too. We are two foreign queer cis white women, aged 28 and 40, and upper middle-class academics working in and around London entangled in a multiplicity of power relations, and whose

⁴ The exception is Ashmere, where a specific gender identity was not a requirement for participation and four young men were recruited.

⁵ See desk review of peer research projects in the UK by Young Foundation.

⁶ See review on peer research by the centre for Children and Young People's Participation.

experiences of race, class, gender, and so on do not necessarily map neatly onto those with whom we work (Haraway, 2013). The points below, show how we tried to overcome some of these problematics while acknowledging that such power dynamics can only be lessened and never effaced: “There is no discipline, no structure of knowledge, no institution or epistemology that can or has ever stood free of the various sociocultural, historical, and political formations that give epochs their peculiar individuality” (Said, 1989, p. 205).

3. (Un)learning: Exploring Banality and Complexity

In Hemel Hempstead, when we asked the Researchers ‘do you feel safe in your local area?’ they all responded: ‘yes’. When we followed this with conversations their answers seemed incongruous. In many cases they felt safe because they were taking precautionary measures to avoid feeling unsafe. This exercise revealed to us that when you allow people the time to share their lived experiences with you, rather than answer tick box survey questions, you get very different results.

When the Researchers were given the time, tools, space and power to reflect and collaborate we were able to develop a shared language of trust wary of not projecting notions of (particularly gendered or racialised) marginality on them. This facilitated them to unravel and reveal internalised, banalised as well as complex experiences, particularly with issues around gender, race, and age and themes like harassment or judgement. A key element of this was focusing on learning and unlearning in our discussions and curriculum.

First, by assigning work and hosting discussions that centred on complex themes, like racial inequalities in gentrification and gendered inequalities within transport infrastructure, it seemed that relevant experiences could emerge. For example, in Clapham, while reflecting on an assigned reading on racial discrimination in a park, one young woman explained that this reminded her of her own experience at the Lidl where she felt uncomfortable and villainised because the security guard there would follow her and her boyfriend around the shop. She was not sure whether this was because she and her boyfriend were young, black or a combination of the two. After the above Researcher had shared her experience in the Lidl, another Researcher felt comfortable sharing her own conflicts around race and public space. Prior to this neither had openly shared how race was significant to their spatial experiences.

Second, by taking the time to discuss and assign activities, readings, and lectures that encourage young people to reflect critically about their own experiences, we were able to unpick internalised and banalised facets of their public lives. In Clapham again, a reading on teenage spaces had led another young woman to formulate her own experience: “My female friends and I constantly struggle to find places where we can relax and have peace. It never occurred to us before that there are no places specifically designed for teenage girls” (Clapham, 3 May 2023). Furthermore, in Hemel Hempstead, we asked the Researchers: *Do you think the state has a responsibility to provide amenities for teenage girls?* They all answered *no*. Many had internalised the belief that young women should not have spaces for them, even though they recognised that young men did. However, when taught that there are in fact accountabilities towards them for safe

and playful spaces, this was empowering to them and they began making ‘suggestions’ for change like wanting swings or trampolines instead of football pitches. In all our sites, dialogue and communication became ‘the main prompt of a process of co-determination whereby different types of knowledge are exchanged in order to create an inclusive space’ (Caretta and Riaño, 2016, p. 259).

4. Visual Methods: Representing one’s own lifeworlds

In Clapham, after reviewing existing examples of spaces designed explicitly for teenage girls, the Researchers designed a local amenity ‘for them’. One Researcher’s design suggested simply adding an armrest to a low brick wall on her estate that she and her friends were already using as a bench (Figure 1). Her design exposes that visual methods may allow individuals to express their lifeworlds in novel ways which celebrate unheroic spaces.



Figure 1a (left): ‘The Brick Wall’,
Figure 1b (right): ‘The arm rest’, photograph and drawing by a Researcher, Clapham.

A large part of our programme consisted of Researchers engaging in visual methods such as mapping, photography, drawing, site analysis, and using digital platforms such as Miro and Instagram. Many academics suggest that using digital or visual methods may give rise to more attuned and grounded practices (see Causey, 2017; Awan and Langley, 2013; Berger, 2008), and provide a more suitable research methodology for working with youths (Morrow, 2008; Young Foundation, 2020); and for people to express their lifeworlds (Caudwell, 2018; Tayob, 2018).

First, using visual methods allowed the Researchers to work in approachable, familiar and playful (e.g. Instagram; photography) ways that were also fun, collaborative, and modal (e.g. Miro), while enabling them to have greater agency over their representation. Tayob (2018) suggests that drawing may offer a more attuned way of ‘telling’ the spaces of subaltern populations, thereby granting ‘the researched’ greater agency in their life stories. Caudwell (2018), who studies trans-swimmers’ narratives of self, notes this is

particularly the case when topics centre around complex feelings such as judgement, safety and surveillance. In our work, the use of Instagram enabled the Researchers to easily capture daily moments by using a familiar tool. One Researcher in Trowbridge used Instagram to illustrate how a lack of maintenance (rubbish) is a central deterrent for her from using public space, and a contributor to the safety concerns she encounters taking a shortcut home (Figure 2). Visual methods also allowed Researchers to “choose how to express themselves” (Morrow, 2008, p. 56) and better captured the experiences of more timid Researchers who could simply, quietly, put together their maps, drawings, reflections and photos. Furthermore, while the Researchers have little control over how we write about their lifeworlds (certainly a limitation of our work and much peer research), they are the sole authors of their maps, drawings, and designs.



Figure 2: 'Analysis through Instagram'

In a second sense, visual methods allowed Researchers to reflect differently on their spatial experiences and offer alternative readings of space that are not represented by typical maps (e.g. feelings of safety) (see Figure 3). In Awan and Langley's (2013, p. 229) mapping of migrant territories they note that mapping can be “a critical practice that questions easily held assumptions regarding the use and value of city-space.” Similarly, Corner (1999, p. 213, 217) describes that, “mapping acts may emancipate potentials, enrich experiences and diversify worlds” and that “by showing the world in new ways, unexpected solutions and effects may emerge.” For example, through mapping, one Researcher realised that she avoided part of her town centre because the density of barber and betting shops in the area meant that men loitered and dominated use of that space. Another Researcher described that it was through mapping the businesses that had disappeared in her local area: the New Look, Poundland and Costa and the “bougie” ones that had replaced these, that she understood why she no longer felt welcome on the high street. By engaging with photography, drawing, and mapping, researchers may seize an opportunity to advance understandings of young people's

public realm experiences and fill gaps in peer research, and creative research methods (Young Foundation, 2020).

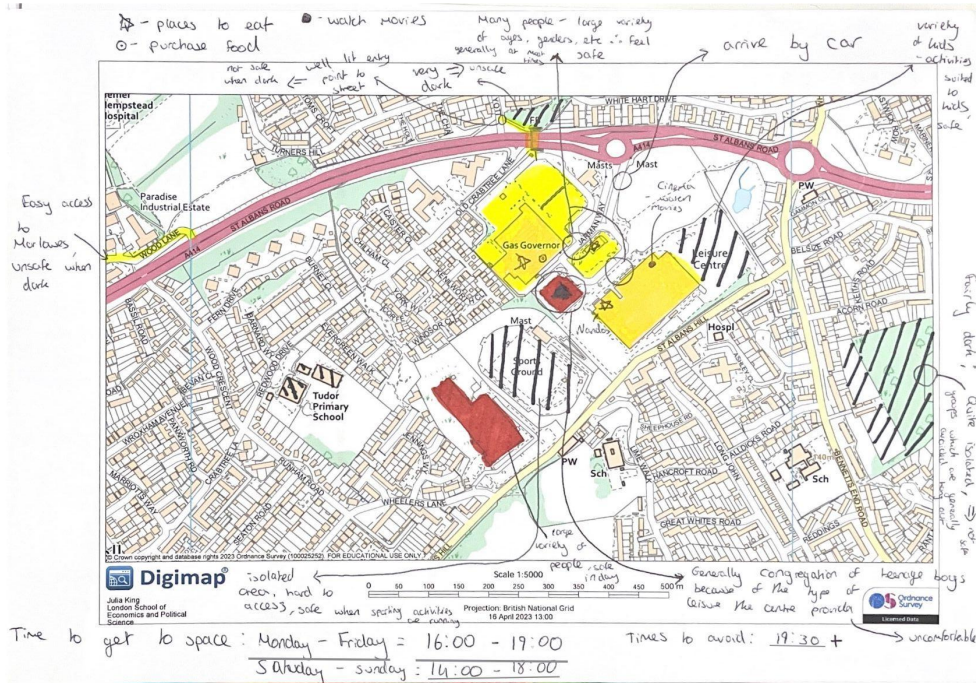


Figure 3: A Researcher’s map of the local leisure centre in Hemel Hempstead (hatched lines: don’t use but want to; red: don’t use; yellow: use regularly)

5. Conclusion

Our viewpoint has sought – at the very least – to interrogate – and hopefully – to address: Why and how might we conduct spatial research with girls and young women? And how can a feminist researcher-in-residence methodology offer a compelling way to address young women’s experiences of public space?

We suggest the peer researcher-in-residence method as an innovative feminist approach to urban research. Crucially, it may attentively allow researchers to value the tacit knowledge that young women and girls have in ways that are not extractive but that foster an exchange of skills, resources, knowledge, and accreditations. We further believe that without this methodology the same findings would not be gleaned: findings on complex and banal themes like judgement and fear, and the importance of an armrest. While we have developed this method to work with young women, we believe it can – and would – benefit from being adopted with other groups, notably ones that may too be marginalised from the built environment and its processes.

By adopting this view, we are not suggesting that traditional methods such as surveys are futile. On the contrary, large-scale data sets are often the most compelling way to reveal the scale of problems and by consequence the scale of the solutions, particularly when seeking political and policy change. Instead, a feminist spatial researcher-in-residence model can help frame the way these methods are first approached, to develop the right language to engage with this audience whose take on issues will have

sensitivities and subtleties that are not always obvious; and second to contextualise, qualify, and nuance any findings gleaned through more traditional methods.

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