

Making Space for Girls

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Introduction

When a young woman in Crewe was asked what public spaces she uses, she remarked that: *“There’s nowhere for girls. There’s literally not a specific place for girls. There’s places where we go, but no spaces for us.”*

This document provides an evidence base on how young women experience the public realm, and what changes they would like to see in their local areas. It summarises findings from the LSE Research and Impact Support Fund (RISF) funded peer-research project ‘Making Space for Girls’ run by LSE Cities with charity group Make Space for Girls and nine peer researchers (researchers-in-residence, RiR) from Crewe and Trowbridge during June and July 2022. The research reveals a conflictual relationship between young women and the public realm. Young women consistently negotiate needing to use and trying to seek out public space for autonomy, privacy, socialisation, independence, relaxation and fun; while constantly navigating the need to keep safe, experiencing feelings of exclusion, judgement, and discomfort, and aware that their needs are neither heard nor met.

Context

There is little research on the relationship between young women and public space. However, what we do know from existing research is that in the UK, public space generally appears to be unfriendly for girls and young women; public space youth-facilities do not cater well for or appeal to young women; and public space planning processes have an age and gender bias.

For example, Young Women Lead (2021) found that only 20% percent of Scottish girls and young women

interviewed felt comfortable in their local public spaces; and a previous survey by Girlguiding (2020) noted that 40% of young women between 11 and 21 indicated that they feel unsafe when they leave the home and avoid being alone. In terms of public space use, a 2012 Swedish study demonstrated that for young people above the age of eight, parks and public spaces are dominated by boys (80%) (Blomdahl et al 2012). In the UK, this is exacerbated by a lack of consideration for gender in youth facilities. Not only has funding for youth services declined by 69% on average since 2010, but when youth expenditure is allocated, it is almost entirely invested in football pitches, skateparks and BMX tracks which are overwhelmingly used by men and boys, with young women having little or no provision (Plan International UK 2020; MSFG 2020). A lack of consideration for this demographic in public space is unsurprising when one considers that 89% of young adults aged 16 to 18 have never been asked about their neighbourhood, and that simultaneously only 14% of the built environment workforce is comprised of women (Grosvenor 2020; Cosgrave and Henderson 2020).

Such research—while narrow—paints a sobering picture that evokes many further questions such as: what makes young women feel (un)comfortable in public space? Why don’t young women use youth facilities? How might design contribute to these realities? How can planning and design processes as well as higher education meaningfully engage with these issues and this neglected demographic?

Methods

This research project adopts a peer research methodology—a participatory research method in which people with lived experience of the issues

being studied take part in directing and conducting the research. It does so to engage meaningfully with young people, particularly young women, in the built environment—a sector in which they are seldom included. The findings presented here stem from peer-research undertaken by nine 17 to 21 year-old, self-identifying girls and young women in their local areas of Crewe (East Cheshire) and Trowbridge (Wiltshire) during June and July 2022.

The two geographic sites (Trowbridge and Crewe) were selected in light of their receipt of significant funding through the Future Highstreets Fund (Trowbridge) and Levelling Up (Crewe) which are likely to significantly transform the local public realms. The peer researchers were engaged in a “research-in-residence” style seven-week, paid, learning and working experience where they followed a bespoke curriculum designed specifically for this research project. The curriculum, fostered social-scientific and architectural skills and was comprised of lectures, readings, discussion sessions, and site and mapping visits. The researchers investigated the theme “(how) have girls been designed out of public space?”

Research Findings

The research the peer-researchers conducted on their experiences reveals that:

1. Young women do not feel safe in public space.

Their sense of vulnerability is exacerbated by dead-ends, poor or unreliable transport infrastructure, insufficient lighting (after dark), minimal footfall, and groups of boys and men. Conversely they feel that informal surveillance (onlookers and passersby), the elderly, children, dog-owners, groups of women, as well as aesthetic and well managed public space make them feel safer. Safety is a prerequisite for whether they can fully enjoy a space. They remark:

“I like using that park because I know that if you shout loud enough someone will hear you”

- RiR aged 17, Crewe

2. Young women have limited use of, feel unwelcome in, and experience exclusion from public spaces and youth facilities.

Young women feel that public spaces are not ever

‘for them’. Yet they recognise the existence of: ‘male only’ spaces such as multi-use games areas (MUGAs: basketball courts, football pitches), green spaces at night, and highstreets outside betting shops, barbers and pubs; children’s spaces such as playgrounds and play areas; and adult spaces such as pubs, and (because of affordability) retail, restaurants etc.

Young women acknowledge that while nothing is physically stopping them from accessing youth facilities; they abstain from doing so because they feel intimidated by male users, judged, unwelcome, and not provided for by these spaces. Multiple young women expressed that they had stopped doing activities such as skateboarding and no longer used allocated facilities because of these feelings. Instead they tended to occupy empty fields, benches, and spaces without assigned ‘purposes’. They observe:

“There isn’t normally anything fun for young women to do.”

- RiR aged 17, Trowbridge

“There’s nothing stopping us going through the gates [of MUGAs] but we don’t feel we should.”

- RiR aged 21, Crewe

3. Young women feel stigma and judgement in public spaces.

Young women feel stigmatised in public space as teenagers especially in larger or mixed gender groups; in spaces where there are more rules and formal surveillance (CCTV, private public space); and where certain public space structures exist (playgrounds—often with swings too narrow to fit their hips). This stigmatisation deters them from using many spaces and facilities such as playgrounds or from gathering in large groups.

“There’s a lot of stigma about people our age loitering. I tend to avoid [play areas] because I don’t want to be frowned upon. It’s stigma from the other generations and people with time to spare [...]. Shame that one group will ruin it for all of us. Even if I am meeting a friend or waiting people will walk past and frown.”

- RiR aged 17, Crewe

4. Young women feel that their city/town infrastructure (maintenance, development, transport) affects how and whether they use public space.

Young women's mobility is highly varied and is greatly impacted by their gender (perceptions of safety), age or life stage (drivers' license, living with parents etc), socio-economic situation (ability to afford a car or a bus fare), and their local public transport infrastructure. Young women in general do not feel satisfied with and do not feel safe on public transport in their local areas, this directly affects when and if they access public space. In addition, young women feel that poor maintenance—for example, litter and broken amenities such as swings—make spaces feel unappealing and unsafe and affect whether they can use and enjoy them. Young women are also deeply affected by changes to and developments (especially large-scale) in their local areas.

“I get off my bus...one stop early [...] before the station, that way I don't have to go to the bus station... Especially in winter. It's a sketchy place. There are homeless people and alcoholics there...you wouldn't want to be alone”

- RIR aged 21, Crewe

“They are taking our town... It's like it just happened overnight during COVID” (on the demolition and shop relocation in Crewe)

- RIR aged 17, Crewe

5. Young women value public spaces that are affordable, social, aesthetic, well-managed and spaces that can offer them privacy and autonomy.

Young women feel that public spaces can provide privacy and self-expression, away from the rules and regulations of the home. However, this privacy is often carved out in highly visible spaces (eg. open fields) in order to maintain a sense of safety.

Young women value green open spaces as places to 'relax' and 'detox'; hang out with friends; go on walks, cycle and roller skate; and walk dogs. In terms of highstreets and retail areas, they want spaces that are affordable; that target their demographic; that are conducive to socialisation; and where men do not dominate the pavements. They feel that their local areas either do not provide (Trowbridge) or no longer provide (Crewe) these types of public spaces.

“I like broad spaces because it makes you feel like you're in your own bubble because you're so spaced out. It's the same feeling you get when you're in your room by yourself.”

- RiR aged 21, Trowbridge

“A public space for me is somewhere you can go to escape rules. There's so many restrictions and guidelines about what you can do. Just having a bit more freedom. At home there's rules and sometimes you just want to go on a walk.”

- RiR aged 17, Trowbridge

First Principles

When it came to considering what principles should be followed when designing future public spaces the young women noted that planners and designers should:

1. **Accept, recognise and prioritise girls and young womens' concerns and needs without designing boys out;**
2. **Promote inclusive and judgement-free places (public space design solutions that work better for everyone);**
3. **Create more accessible (physically, socio-economically, and transport wise) spaces;**
4. **Prioritise feelings, and place emphasis on creating spaces that elicit positive emotions over financial gains;**
5. **Support the right for young women's and different groups' varied needs and wants to be considered in public spaces and put in place better and more safety parameters;**
6. **Innovate the provisioning of public space amenities and explore new forms of youth facilities;**
7. **Reject tokenism and engage users in meaningful consultation which is actively anti-discrimination and diverse;**
8. **Design public spaces with amenities to linger (better, and free public toilets for young women –and everyone– and essential amenities);**
9. **Create intentional spaces whether purposeful or purposeless;**
10. **Better address and engage with social change.**

This document has summarised girls and young women's experiences of and desires for the public realm in their local areas of Crewe and Trowbridge. In both sites, young women expressed a great need for an improved public realm in which they feel safe, welcome, included, recognised, prioritised, and substantially engaged with. The peer research methodologies adopted by and developed through this project have inherently proposed ways in which to engage with young women in the built environment. It is our ambition that by evidencing young women's relationships to public space and by providing an engagement methodology for young women in the built environment, that their lived realities may be considered and meaningfully addressed in planning and design processes.



Site survey with RiRs in Crewe

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