

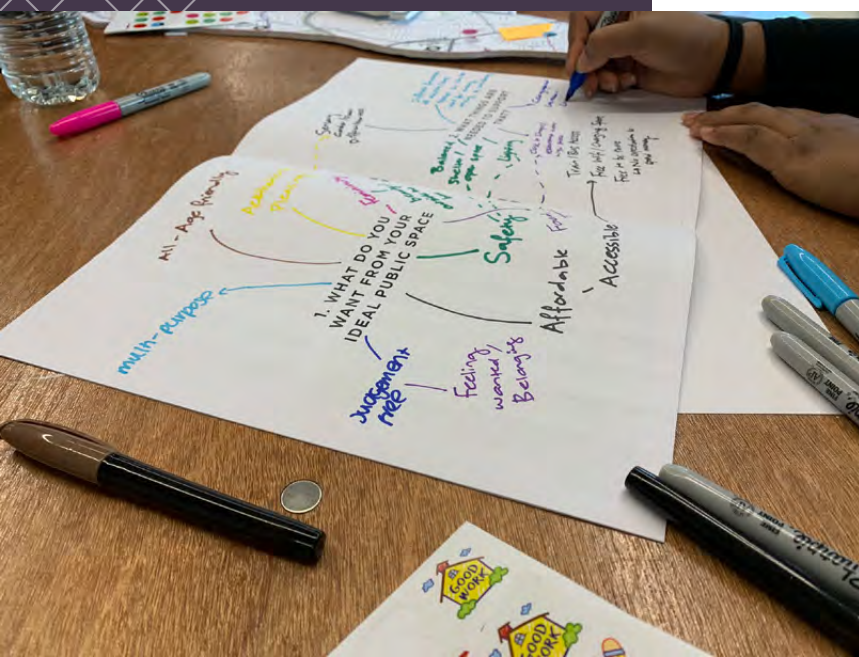
Evidencing local girls and young women's experiences of and aspirations for public space in Brent

NOVEMBER 2022

Countryside
Partnerships



LSE Cities



NOVEMBER 2022

A study of public spaces in Brent by the
Young Researchers-in-Residence, Brent at the LSE
Report, November 2022

A research collaboration between the London School of
Economics and Political Science and Make Space for Girls with
the support of the Granville Centre. Funded by Countryside.

The data for this study draws on field work with young LSE
Researchers in 2022.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarises research conducted by four 'Researchers-in-Residence' on their experiences of public space in Brent. This report is also informed by contributions from additional workshop participants conducted as part of the project. All contributors identified as girls and young women and explored the relationships between gender, youth, and the public realm. The results presented are part of an on-going peer-research project run by Julia King and Olivia Theocharides-Feldman at LSE Cities, the charity Make Space for Girls and funded by Countryside developers. The report serves two central aims: firstly, to provide a much needed and absent evidence base on how girls and young women use, feel about, and articulate changes for their local public realm; and secondly, to suggest ways in which to engage meaningfully with this neglected demographic within the built environment. This report therefore focuses on providing significant information and engagement suggestions rather than on activating physical transformations in the public realm. Nonetheless, it is our hope that such a discussion stimulates changes to be acted upon and for future outcomes to take shape across the built environment in policy, planning, and design.

The report - when written in the first person - reflects the language and wording used by the young researchers.



Workshop at the Granville, November 2022

WHY INVESTIGATE THIS?

Girls and young women's relationship to the public realm has often been ignored in research, policy, planning, and design processes.

In planning for example, youths are seldom consulted when designing for the public realm:

over 89 per cent of youths in England aged 16-18 have never been asked about their local areas by those in charge of effecting change (Grosvenor, 2020).

In design, young women are meant to be provided for under youth allocation. However, in England decades of austerity have meant that the average spend on youth services per local authority has declined by 69% since 2010 (Plan International UK 2020, 119-120). Furthermore, when investments into youth facilities are dispensed, they almost singularly fund skate parks, BMX tracks, and MUGAs (enclosed football pitches, basketball courts). Studies in the UK, Australia, the United States, and Sweden demonstrate that these facilities are used almost entirely by boys and young men. For instance, a 2012 Swedish study evidenced that while boys and girls use public facilities such as playgrounds equally, after age 8, 80% of users are boys (Blomdahl et al 2012). Such outcomes are not intentional, but do represent a gender blindness within design guidance and planning as well as a (gendered) data collection deficit on experiences of public space. This omitting of gender is however unsurprising when we consider that the built environment has a gender problem itself, with only 14 per cent of the built environment workforce in the UK being comprised of women (Cosgrave and Henderson 2020, 19).

In research, the few studies on young women and public space have predominantly been on safety and paint a sobering picture. While everyone should feel safe in their localities, in a recent survey by the YWL Cohort (2021) it was found that only 20% of Scottish women interviewed felt comfortable in their local public spaces. In another UK study by Girlguiding (2022), 52% of girls and young women between 17-21 indicated feeling unsafe in public and avoided being alone.

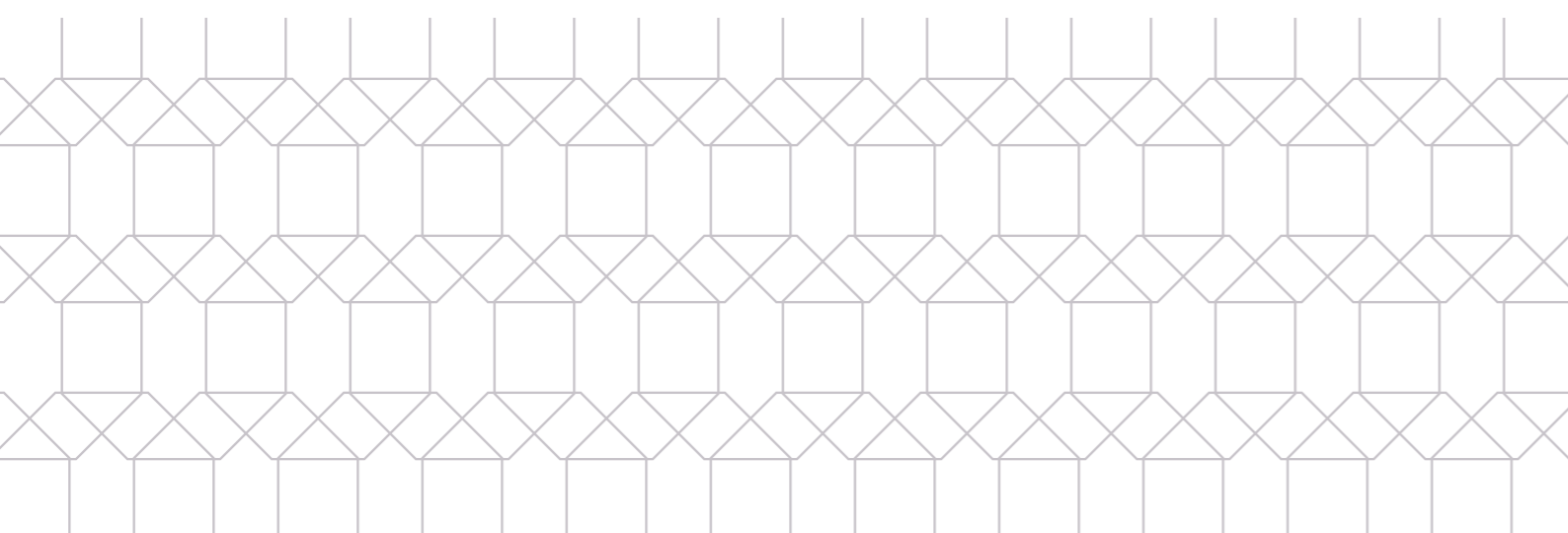
Public space use impacts young women's physical and mental development and wellness; its use increases physical activity and its associated benefits, and fosters young women's independence and peer-on-peer socialisation (Piran 2017; Fitzsimons and Bann 2020; Patalay and Fitzsimons 2020). However, the current status quo is that young women and their daily experiences of the public realm have not been accounted for in policy, planning, design and research about public space (Grosvenor 2020). Without giving proper attention to young women's voices or lived experiences we can be sceptical as to how public spaces can fulfil the duties they have to all their citizens: to be safe, comfortable and welcoming spaces. The research summarised in this report therefore takes issue with this absence, and addresses it by evidencing how public space is used by this demographic and by innovating critical forms of participation that place young women at the centre of the research.



Typical Multi Use Games Area (abbreviated MUGA)



Example of a skate park, in this case enclosed with a fence



OVERALL APPROACH

This research project is premised on a peer-research approach. Peer research is a form of participatory research which "...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, 105). While it is not without criticism, when conducted thoughtfully, peer-research is generally recognised as being able to 1) empower participants and enable their growth through teaching them valuable skills and providing financial compensation; 2) address power asymmetries between researcher and researched; 3) overcome extractive processes of knowledge production; and 4) give rise to better data through the investigation emanating from those whom it concerns (Young Foundation 2020).

There have been two main ways and scales through which we have conducted our peer research: one short-term and one long-term. Firstly and predominantly this document presents peer-research undertaken by four girls and young women aged 19 to 27 and residents of the London borough of Brent. They were hired and paid as researchers by the LSE to investigate their own spatial lives and to study various topics in urban studies. They undertook a part-time six week curriculum which consisted of lectures, readings, discussions, and mapping exercises focusing on the question of "are girls and young women being designed out of public space in their local borough of Brent?"

Secondly, this report is supplemented by the voices of five additional local young women, who contributed through engagement in a 1-day mapping workshop at the Granville centre (South Kilburn) on their perceptions of Brent. The workshop was run by the first group of peer-researchers listed above and guided by researchers from LSE Cities. Participants were prompted to think about how they used (or didn't use) public space and how and if they wanted them to be different.

The young women were all residents of Brent, UK; they came from varied cultural backgrounds, were racially diverse, were predominantly Muslim, and it is unknown what socioeconomic class they were part of.

While our methodology has had many of the benefits known to peer research and as listed above, there are certainly limitations too. For instance, due to recruitment difficulties (dropouts, age group) long-term and short-term participation was limited to nine young women. Findings must therefore be contextualised by the small group size. We also recruited for young persons identifying as young women and did not ask whether they were cis or trans. Given the ample evidence that trans-women experience more complex and additional injustices and violences in the public realm further research may benefit from distinguishing between cis/trans experiences.

KEY FINDINGS

Below, we lay out the key findings from our research which are detailed in the rest of the document:

- **Young women do not feel safe within their local area.** This is primarily exacerbated in green open spaces, and highstreets as opposed to indoor spaces such as retail centres, libraries and community centres. It is also exacerbated by poor or insufficient lighting, lack of footfall (no informal surveillance), media narratives, parental opinions and highly publicised acts of violence – especially violence on women or sexual violence.
- **Young women feel they are not adequately provided for in public space.** They do not feel that spaces, such as parks and highstreets cater to their needs or wants in terms of events offered, urban furniture, neighbourhood layout, activity areas and so on. They feel that conversely children, adults, and (to a lesser degree) boys and young men are provided for. This has greatly contributed to the reality that;
- **Young women feel judgement in public spaces.** They feel awkward and out of place when in public space because they feel they are using facilities, spaces, and events that 'aren't for them' or that they 'shouldn't be there' (eg. playgrounds, MUGAs).
- **Young women feel they need a purpose to venture out to public spaces.** Young women do not venture out of their local radiuses (areas around home or school) without having an explicit purpose such as going to a shopping centre for the cinema, or going to the highstreet to pick up a parcel.
- **Young women enjoy retail spaces but leave their borough for retail.** Retail spaces, like shopping centres or food halls, offer young women active, sheltered and safe spaces to socialise. However, young women want retail spaces to be better connected and closer to one another. They also feel that their demographic is not catered for in Brent in terms of shopping (shops they want to use), therefore they venture to retail centres in neighbouring boroughs to fulfil this need instead.
- **Young women do not use youth facilities.** Young women do not use MUGAs (football pitches, basketball courts), BMX tracks, or skateparks. None of the young women have an interest in using these and felt that such spaces were male dominated and they would be out of place there.
- **Young women enjoy using community spaces.** These spaces feel safe, welcoming and open to them and they appreciate that they are free. However they want such spaces to be more conveniently located, host events that better target young women and their interests, and offer spaces to just 'hang-out' in.
- **Young women do not feel safe or they do not feel adequately provided for in local green spaces.** They feel that green/blue open spaces, often do not target girls and young women enough in terms of adequate safety measures, and enjoyable facilities and events for their demographic.
- **Young women do not feel highstreets cater to their demographic in terms of retail offered or experience.** They perceive Brent's highstreets to be convenient yet hectic, judgemental and male dominated spaces with nothing for them there. Highstreets are often hosts to large groups of men who linger on the pavement and make the young women feel intimidated; and spaces where groups of teenagers are judged or moved along.
- **Young women take issue with many typical design elements within the borough and want these to change.** For example, seating, lighting, outdoor gym equipment and shelter were consistently identified as problematically designed and areas where improvements were needed. For example: lighting should not take shape of spotlights but instead be continuous lighting for safety and enjoyability; benches should have different configurations to invite different demographics, such as social seating for groups of teens; outdoor gyms should not only be designed for male users and bodies but instead cater to various bodies (eg. women's) and fitness choices (eg. yoga).
- **Young women want more indoor and free hang-out spaces and outdoor events and facilities that cater to them.** Young women want more indoor public centres; somewhere between a community centre and a retail spot which are welcoming, free (monetarily), where you can just hang out or engage in a range of activities such as having a meal or playing a board game. They also want outdoor spaces to have, amongst other things, more social seating, gender-sensitive outdoor gyms, youth playgrounds and adequate shelter.
- **Young women identified short-term as well as long-term changes that they wanted in their local areas and connected these to one another.** For example, young women want to feel less judged when in groups in public spaces (long-term), and suggested social seating be implemented (short-term). While they acknowledged that short-term physical changes may not transform more deeply entrenched and long-standing structural issues, such design changes would contribute to better everyday experiences for girls and young women and can help in achieving long-term change.

BRENT

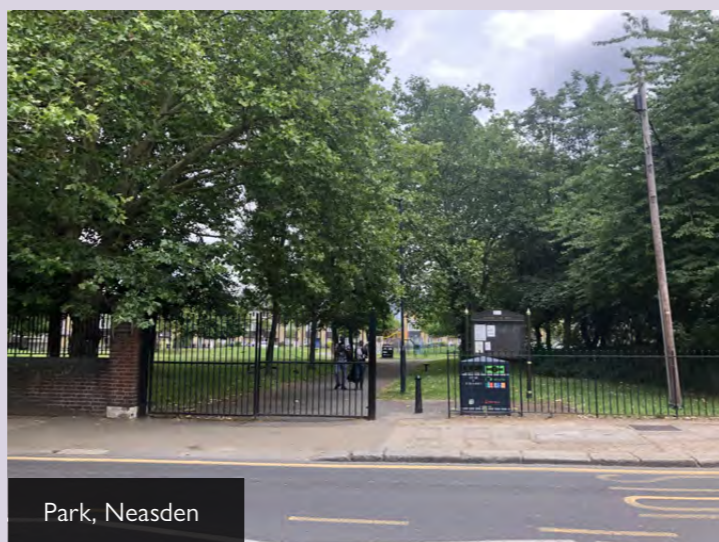
Brent is a large borough in north-west London, which houses around 330,000 residents. It is known for being highly diverse with large Asian and Indian, Black African, Black Caribbean, Irish, and Eastern European residents. By country of birth, it is the most diverse locality in the UK. The borough is also relatively 'young' given that the median age of its resident is 35 - England is 39; UK 40 - (Census 2021) and under 25s represent 31% of the total population (Brent Children and Young People JSNA 2019-2020). In terms of urban change, the borough has undergone significant transformations in the last twenty years; notably the large redevelopment of the Wembley area and the ongoing redevelopment of the South Kilburn area. Young persons growing up in Brent have therefore witnessed its many different faces.



Civic Centre, Wembley Park



Kingsbury Road, Kingsbury



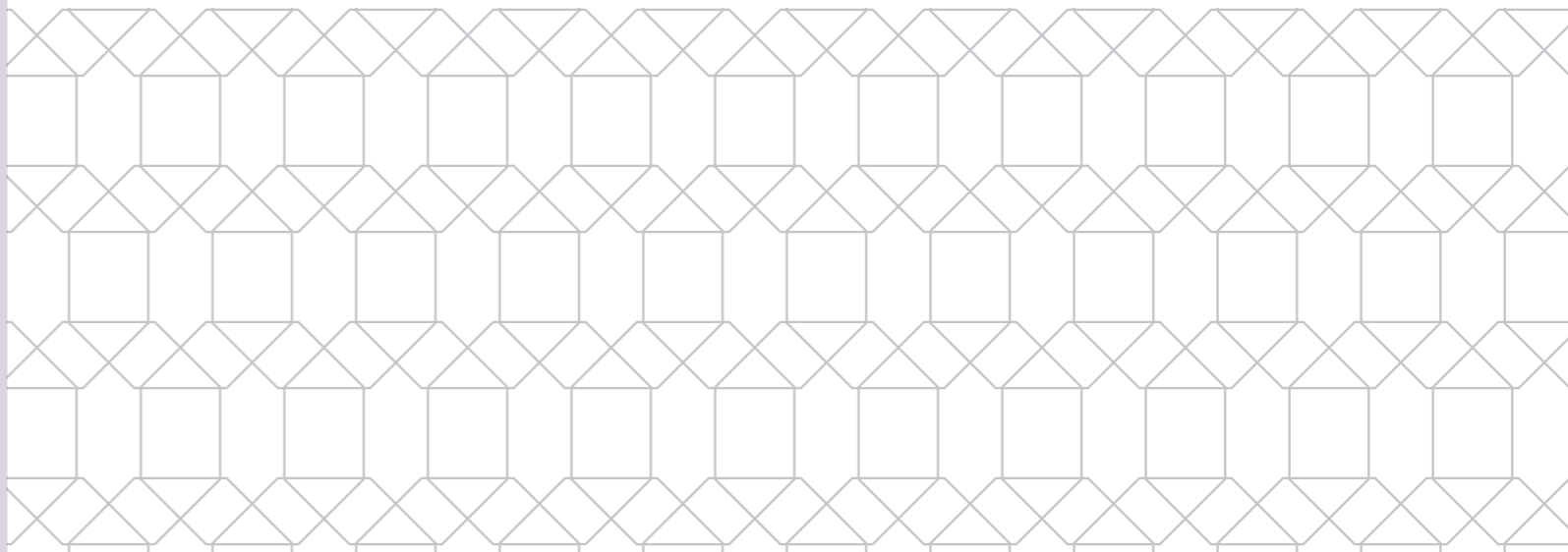
Park, Neasden

HOW YOUNG WOMEN EXPERIENCE BRENT 'AS A WHOLE'

The young women we spoke with mainly used the Wembley (central) and Kilburn (southeast) areas of the borough. Some used the north, (around Kingsbury) but this was predominantly because their schools were located there. In general, because of how big Brent was, the young women had local radiuses around their homes or schools which determined where they hung out. This was especially true for green open spaces, community centres and highstreets however for retail spaces, which were fewer and far between, the young women were happy to travel further and even out of borough. Basketball courts, football pitches, skateparks and BMX tracks were local to many of the young women and yet were not spaces that any of the young women used. These felt to them like spaces for boys and young men. All the young women indicated that they would only travel to parts of the borough where there were 'things to do' which is why many said they didn't go to Neasden, Harlesden or Willesden which were considered 'dead' and the latter two very unsafe. When they did venture out they all wanted the connectivity between places they used to be improved and they all noted that the context and location of a space was essential to its use. For example, they appreciated that in Wembley you could easily and safely go from the station to the civic centre, library, and Boxpark.

Young women do not consistently feel safe within the borough. Lighting and crowds were two of the most important features that contributed to whether the young women felt safe. For example one young woman noted "I feel safer when its families and children. And a good medium between open space and buildings. So, like shopping centres and libraries. It's mostly open, lots of people walking around, and you know where there will be lots of people [...] I feel safe when there's people I don't think I would need to defend myself against." Identifying and evaluating exits and exit strategies were one of the main ways in which the young women assessed and mitigated their safety concerns. One young woman notes that teenage girls feel safe "if you know its easy to get home, or to get out. Knowing where you are and how to get home makes you feel safer in a way." Such tendencies might evidence why young women have a propensity to stick to their local radiuses, and why local amenities are so important. Many sites were both places they liked and that which they found unsafe or problematic. See figure 1 for an illustration of their readings of the Borough.

They all felt that Brent was incredibly diverse and this was important to them. For example one young woman noted that "Brent is diverse and you're able to find shops, restaurants, and places to eat that cater to you... Like halal butchers [...] and you find other people you recognise especially if you're from immigrant communities." They all identified with spaces that felt culturally connected to them and their families. Many of the public spaces they most value are spaces where they spend time with their families or had spent time when they were younger.



KEY SPACES, SPACES WE USE, SPACES WE DON'T USE AND SPACES WE WOULD LIKE TO USE

KEY

Where we are from



Places we like



Places we feel are unsafe



Places we find problematic



Radius of influence



- 1 Kilburn High Road
- 2 Kingsbury High Road
- 3 Boxpark
- 4 Brent Cross Shopping Centre
- 5 Fryent Park
- 6 Queen's Park
- 7 Chalkhill Park
- 8 Kingsbury Library
- 9 Wembley Library
- 10 Chalkhill Community Centre
- 11 The Granville

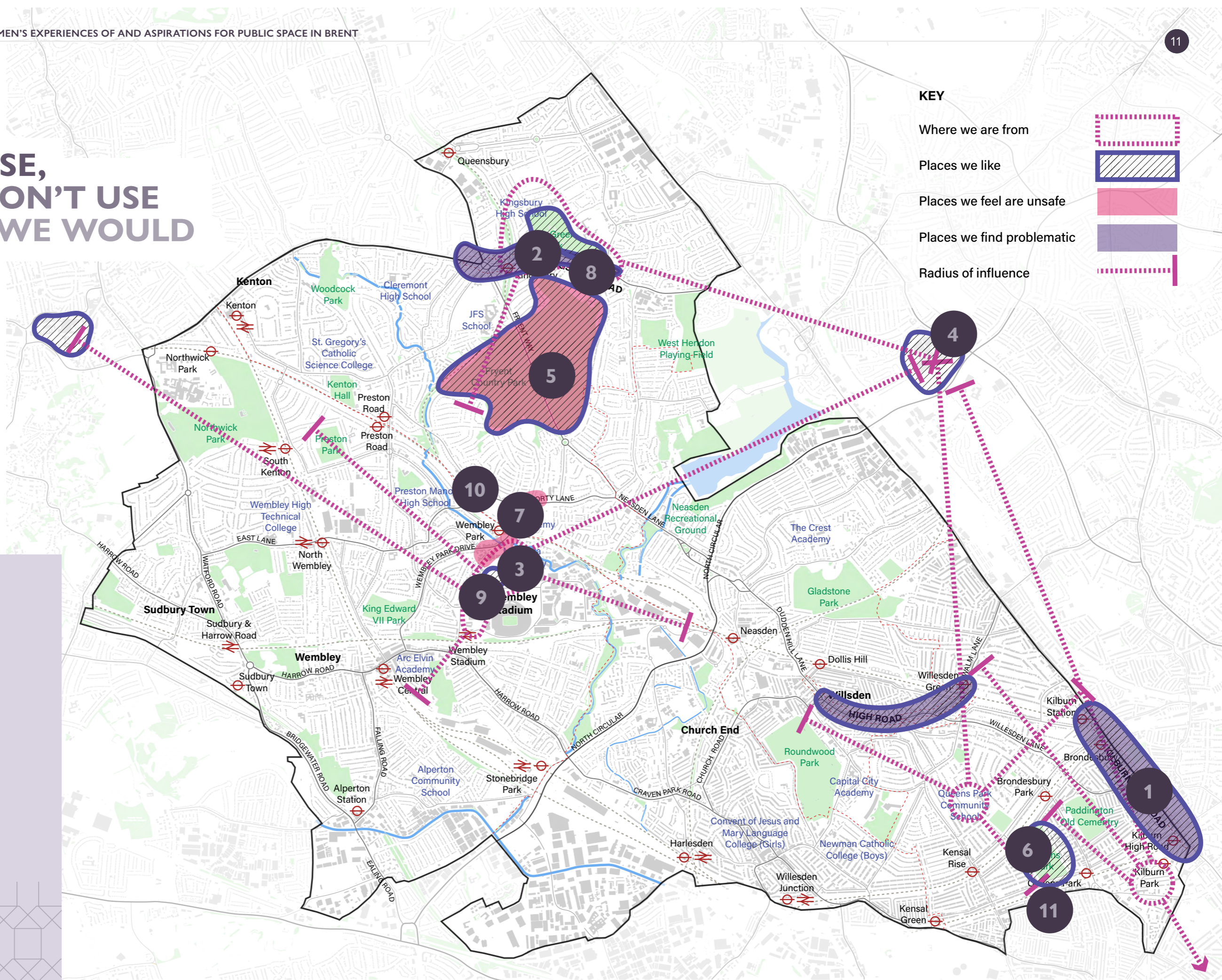


Figure 1. Preliminary analysis by the young researchers of their use of the Borough identifying key sites for further study.

HIGH STREETS

Highstreets are complex places for the young women we worked with and who were part of our workshop.

The young women we spoke to expressed that: they do not feel Brent's highstreets cater to their demographic in terms of retail offered or experience; they feel that highstreets are male dominated spaces whereby men linger and seem to dominate the street; they also feel that highstreets are not for them as they had experienced feeling judged as youths or being asked to move along. They are concerned by crowding as well as road and pedestrian safety and accessibility on Brent's highstreets and express that the design of Brent's highstreets does not allow

people to use such spaces comfortably and at their own pace. For example, a lack of seating or narrow pavements on highstreets mean that people only travel across the area. All the young women therefore expressed that while they went to highstreets this was always 'with a purpose', for example, to pick something up at Argos, and they would never linger there. This pattern of usage was a consequence of the age, gender, retail and design dynamics they had identified.



Kilburn High Road

KILBURN HIGH ROAD

We have a 'love/hate relationship' with Kilburn Highroad: it is convenient and emblematic of Brent's diversity but simultaneously hectic, overwhelming, and for young women sometimes unsafe and unwelcoming. This space does not work particularly well for young women in terms of safety, design, and what is on offer. The area is too crowded, with narrow pavements and many road accidents. The space is dominated by loitering men who are intimidating and take over outdoor seating. Few businesses cater to our demographic, some young women might use the fast food or chicken shops, dessert shops, and beauty salons but this isn't really what we want and we don't really use these. There are also two Kilburn highroads the 'gentrified' side which doesn't represent our Brent, and the local side which feels familiar yet is still inadequately providing for our demographic. The highstreet lacks seating that promotes hanging out or enjoying the space without having to spend money. We therefore go to Kilburn Highroad only when we have a reason for being there, and we don't linger.

1

The highroad is a diverse and convenient place as well as a crowded space that feels male dominated;

2

Young women often feel unsafe, uncomfortable, unwelcome, or inadequately provided for on the highroad;

3

Young women go to the Highroad only when they have a reason or purpose and leave.

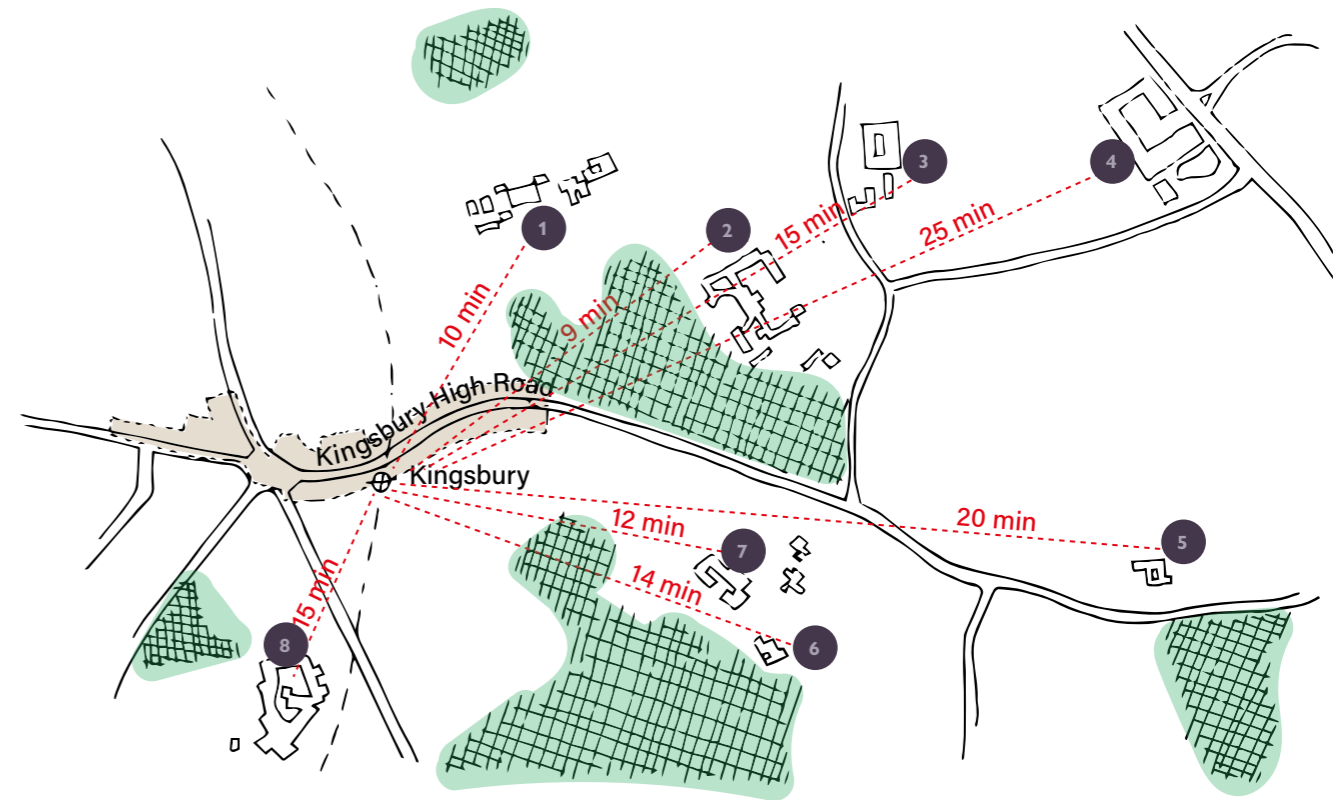
Improvements: Kilburn Highroad would be nicer as a pedestrianised place or a place with wider pavements, more businesses for us, and a social area with tables and chairs. This would allow for the pace of the road to slow down, being there to become more enjoyable and safe, and transform the space into a place that we would want to and feel we have a right to linger in.

KINGSBURY ROAD

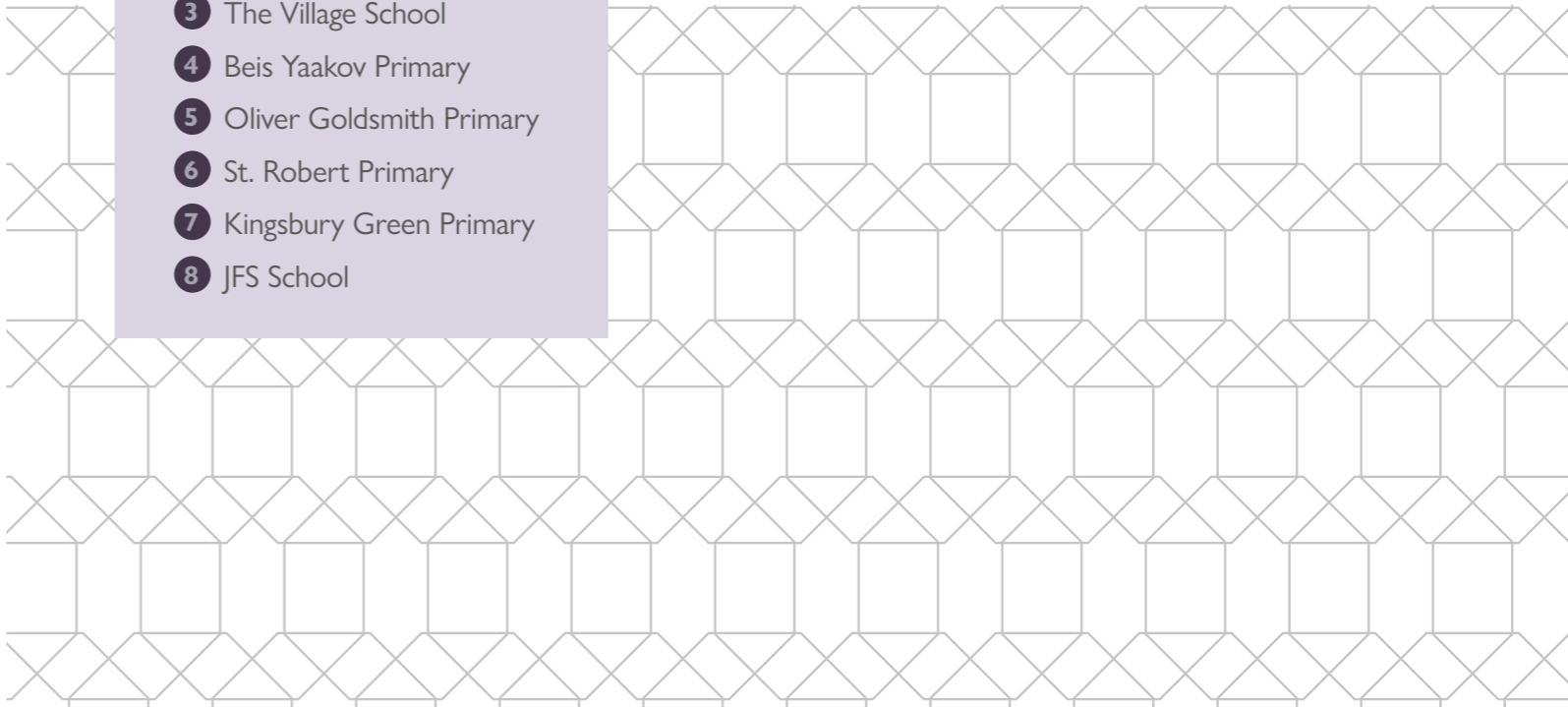
Kingsbury highroad feels convenient and familiar yet judgemental and sometimes unsafe for young women. Ample restaurants, food shops, and home goods stores make this space an important one to the local area and with multiple schools nearby, this space is particularly important to local youth who interact with it on their daily journeys, and lunch breaks. While, especially for those of us who go to school nearby we are always using this road, we feel judged here: security and school personnel monitor the pavements and instruct teens to 'move along' as though we are 'up to no good'— and design features like impractical 1-2 person seating further make us feel judged for being in groups. Further, while the highroad feels safe during the busy daytime, it feels unsafe for young women in the evenings due to a rowdy pub of men and insufficient and poor lighting connectivity between the highstreet and our schools. Poor lighting connectivity from schools to main roads are an issue for many of us, as almost all of us remember feeling afraid going home from school in the dark winter time. As young women, we adapt our behaviours to these realities often venturing out in pairs to avoid group judgement and choosing different routes in the evening to avoid being unsafe.

- 1** The highroad is a familiar but judgemental space for youth, and unsafe space for young women in the dark;
- 2** Surveillance, lighting, poor seating, and male presence have negative effects on young women's enjoyment of public space;
- 3** Context around highstreets (eg. schools) need to be better considered when designing the space (eg. lighting schemes, seating, implementing surveillance, pavement width);
- 4** Young women adapt their behaviours to 'keep safe' and 'be less judged'.

Improvements: We want more, wider, and more accessible crosswalks especially for prams when the road is crowded and because the crosswalks are not placed where people are inclined to cross which is dangerous. We want seating areas that are sheltered and that have benches wide enough for people to have their shopping (see 'shelter' in the elements section later on in this report). We want the context of this space, being close to so many schools, to be taken into account in its design. We want places to be able to hang out with our friends after school or where we feel we are allowed to pause. Perhaps, shops and restaurants in the local area could also offer discounts to school children to let us know we are welcome. We don't want to be judged or be told to 'move on' when we are using a space we should have a right to use in our own way.



- Kingsbury High St.
- 1** Kingsbury High School
- 2** Kingsbury Lower School
- 3** The Village School
- 4** Beis Yaakov Primary
- 5** Oliver Goldsmith Primary
- 6** St. Robert Primary
- 7** Kingsbury Green Primary
- 8** JFS School



WILLESDEN/ HARLESDEN

Not a highroad but rather a whole area, we do not go to Harlesden or Willesden because it feels unsafe, there is nothing for us to do there, and we know that there are gangs and dodgy activity there. This area has high levels of deprivation and needs change, not just for young women but for all ages and genders.

- 1 Young women avoid Harlesden/ Willesden because these areas are perceived as unsafe;
- 2 Young women are incentivised to travel outside of their local radius for a purpose (eg. retail) which Willesden / Harlesden do not provide.

Improvements: In areas like Willesden which have little open green space but dense residential areas we think pocket parks should be built in locals areas so that individuals can meet outdoors in free, well-lit spaces with social seating, a table and some plants. We also think this type of intervention, or a combination of benches and interesting lighting schemes, such as lighting from below, should be essential in high density living areas such as around estates in this area and throughout the borough. In places like Willesden and Harlesden there should be more outdoor gyms to encourage healthy living and good mental health. There is a running track in Willesden but it is expensive. These areas should have some free outdoor exercise equipment. We do not think that existing outdoor exercise equipment is suitable however, as these are often dominated by men or children who use it as a playground. Instead, the exercise equipment we are suggesting is a fitness space that doesn't feel like a 'gym' : it should be adapted to all different types of bodies, and different exercise preferences and styles that exist (eg. a womens body, group exercise, matt exercises like yoga etc.)

RETAIL

In our discussions and activities with the young women they often spoke of retail as these were key places that they used for leisure.

Retail spaces, like shopping centres or food halls, offered them (as young women) active, sheltered and safe spaces to socialise. Here, young women are granted informal surveillance via regular streams of

people. Multiple activities of interest to them are found in retail centres such as social seating to hang out and socialise, restaurants, clothing shops, and cinemas. They are also spaces that parents of young women are often more comfortable with them using independently and so these are spaces they are allowed to exercise independence in. The young women in our research however generally leave Brent to find retail that caters to them as they do not feel that Brent has sufficient or interesting retail. Instead they go to Brent Cross shopping centre, Westfield White City, or Harrow's shopping centres.

BOXPARK

We appreciate that the Boxpark is safe, weatherproof, and caters to different ages but it also feels judgy and is costly. Having a children's play area, a bar but also activities like boardgames and events that we as young women appreciate makes the Boxpark feel inviting to all ages. However, the need to be a paying customer to use the space, and the security and the doorpersons at the entrance make the space feel more exclusionary and judgmental.

- 1 The boxpark is safe for women and caters to many different ages;
- 2 Young women recognise the limitations of commercial semi-public indoor spaces (cost, surveillance) while wanting more indoor hang-out places;
- 3 Surveillance makes girls and young women feel both judged and safe.

Improvements: We want the Boxpark – and indoor public spaces more generally– to have less overt surveillance, where safety comes from people being closeby and good lighting and pathways. We also want to not be required to purchase goods to use the space; we want a free, free to use, community asset. In the Boxpark, such changes could transform the space into one which could be a safe space to study, eat, and for recreation for everyone.



The Boxpark in Wembley

BRENT CROSS SHOPPING CENTRE

Brent Cross shopping centre feels welcoming, safe, open, and familiar to us yet generally past its prime. The families, couples, children and its busy-ness makes it feel safe; and because we can spend as little or as much time as we want there meeting friends, shopping, eating, or going to the cinema it also feels non-judgmental and welcoming. The shopping centre is in Barnet but is an extension of our local lives because retail facilities that cater to our demographic are lacking in Brent. We go there by bus or car because pedestrian access is a hostile maze and the train station is far. However, for some of us it feels like our attachment to the shopping centre might be nostalgic because it has been a childhood family outing place and that in reality many of the stores that catered to young women like us have since shut. Many of us now chose to go to Westfield in White City or Harrow's shopping centres for better retail.

- 1** The borough of Brent lacks adequate retail facilities for young women;
- 2** Brent Cross Shopping centre is a safe, welcoming, familiar and family-friendly place for girls and young women;
- 3** However, Brent Cross Shopping centre has lost appealing retail for young women resulting in them using other retail centres instead.



GREEN/ BLUE SPACES

Green/ blue open spaces were spaces that the young women felt were the most 'risky' and where they felt most obviously underprovided for.

The young women noted that green/blue open spaces, often do not target girls and young women enough in terms of adequate safety measures, and enjoyable facilities and events. For example, they all noted that such facilities often lacked lighting, and that spotlights created patches of darkness that made them sometimes feel more unsafe. In addition, facilities that were meant to target them through the council's youth provisioning: BMX tracks, MUGAs

(football pitches, basketball courts) and skateparks, were not used by themselves or their female peers. They felt that overall young men were provided for through youth allocation but not young women and that children were well provisioned for through playgrounds and sandpits for examples. Overall, they felt that their place in green or blue open space was not on the benches which were for older adults, couples, and the elderly, not in playgrounds for children, not in MUGAs but in the remaining parts of green spaces or the empty unassigned fields. They furthermore, used green open spaces seasonally or inconsistently because of comfort in terms of weather and because of feelings of unease and fear in terms of lighting (avoided when dark, in winter, night-time, etc).



Brent Cross Shopping Centre



FRYENT PARK

Fryent park feels wild, pretty and exciting but unsafe and inaccessible. Entrances are too few, small and located by busy roads that are pedestrian unfriendly. The park feels unsafe because it is isolated, unlit, and the trees on the boundary make it enclosed. We don't use this space in winter or when dark and in brighter months and hours, we only use the 'uglier' part of the park – close to housing – because it is populated and lit. However, since two young women were murdered there none of us use the park and some of us have changed our routes to avoid proximity to it. However we feel that the space's wilderness, informal signage about exciting wildlife, and the group meetings and cleanups that are held there create a nicer, safer and intriguing atmosphere.

- 1 Fryent park is appreciated for being wild and beautiful but feels very unsafe;
- 2 Media and news of violence against women have a strong negative impact on whether young women feel safe and whether they use green spaces;
- 3 Signage, maintenance, and groups of people have a positive impact on young women's use, enjoyment and sense of safety in green spaces.

Improvements: We want the whole park to feel safer. We want to have something to attract us there, whether that be something we can hang out in or something to look at. We would like to see more lighting and better access. We would also like the road and the side of the park to be more open so that we can access it on foot and it doesn't feel so disconnected from the surrounding area.



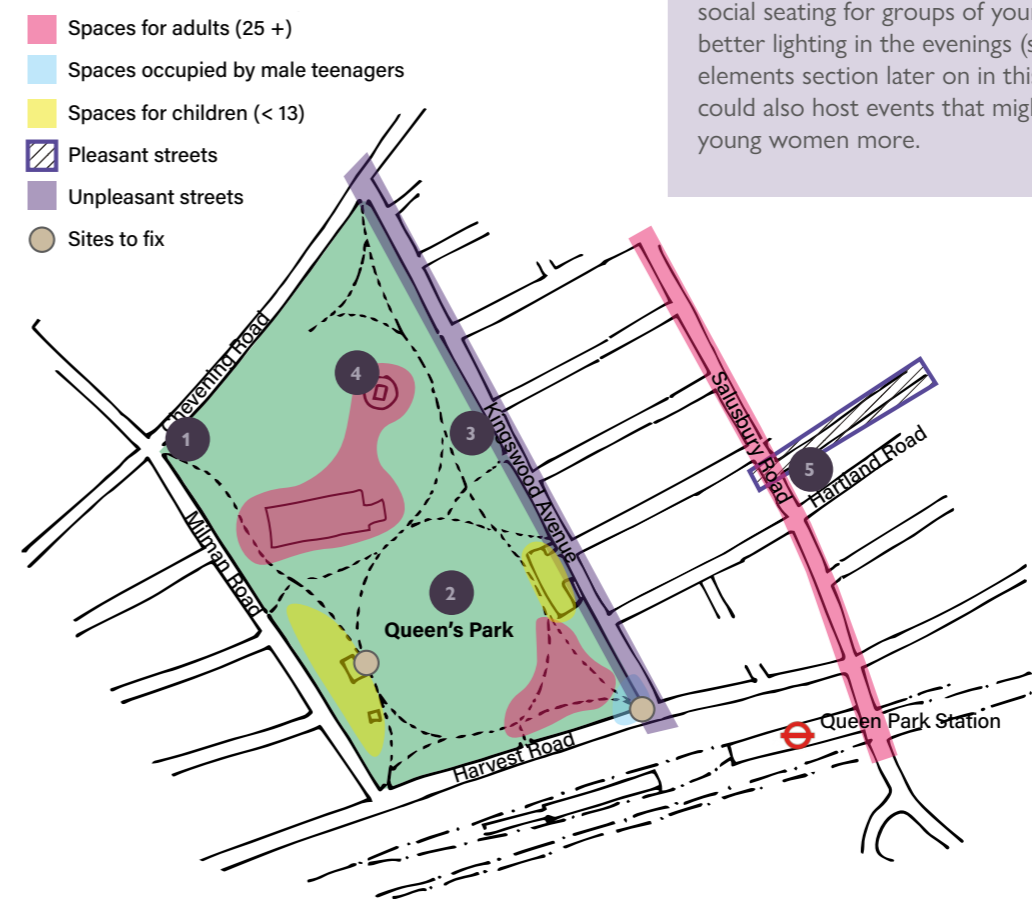
Fryent Park

QUEEN'S PARK

Queen's Park feels safe, welcoming to all, and like a community space and a diverse green haven for us. It is varied physically – with different paths and zones– as well as in terms of facilities – like golf courses and playgrounds– and events – like book fairs and salsa competitions. The park's communal feel, which contributes to our enjoyment and sense of safety, is especially felt on the edge of the park where members of the local area informally put up fliers, notices, and posters. The park rules do not feel proscriptive and informal surveillance by other users and maintenance workers makes the space feel safe and watched over. While we generally love this park, nonetheless, we feel that events and facilities, do not provide for girls and young women as they do for children, boys and young men, and adults, which has displaced us towards using the empty unassigned centre of the park.

- 1 Queen's park feels safe, open, welcoming, relaxing and like a diverse community hub for locals;
- 2 Queen's park is not big but has a wide variety of events, activities, areas, and facilities;
- 3 The facilities, events, and areas at Queen's park do not target girls and young women enough;
- 4 Young women often describe that the only spaces in green open spaces that they feel they have a right to use are the unassigned open fields.

Improvements: We would like to see alternative play areas in the park, that are catered towards young persons with girls and young women in mind. We suggest some sheltered mature climbing frames, outdoor fitness equipment that don't feel like a gym (see 'exercise equipment' in the elements section later on in this report), and some trampolines. We would also like to see more social seating for groups of young women with better lighting in the evenings (see 'lighting' in the elements section later on in this report). The park could also host events that might target girls and young women more.



- 1 Useful notice board at entrance
- 2 Can't use other spaces so end up in middle or the park
- 3 Fencing and bushes makes for a dark perimeter which can feel unsafe
- 4 Bandstand could benefit from light and events
- 5 Walkable street

CHALKHILL PARK

Chalkhill park was once nice but now is poorly maintained and sketchy. Facilities and fencing are broken and the park is littered. Users – especially in the week– are primarily men in their twenties or thirties who are loitering. The park feels 'dodgy' both when alone and in groups, because there is antisocial behaviour and drug dealing going on especially on the edges of the park, and blind spots, poor lighting, and secluded seating within the park. It not only feels unsafe but there is also little to do there for young women. While there is a playground for children with a swing we might like to use we would feel judged for doing so. There is also a BMX track that boys and young men use nearby but there is nothing here that feels safe and enticing for young women.

1

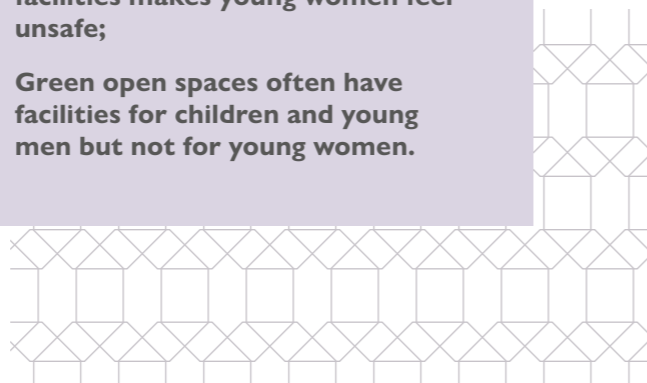
Chalkhill park once felt like a community place but now feels 'dodgy' for young women;

2

The dominance of men in the park, dark spots, and broken facilities makes young women feel unsafe;

3

Green open spaces often have facilities for children and young men but not for young women.

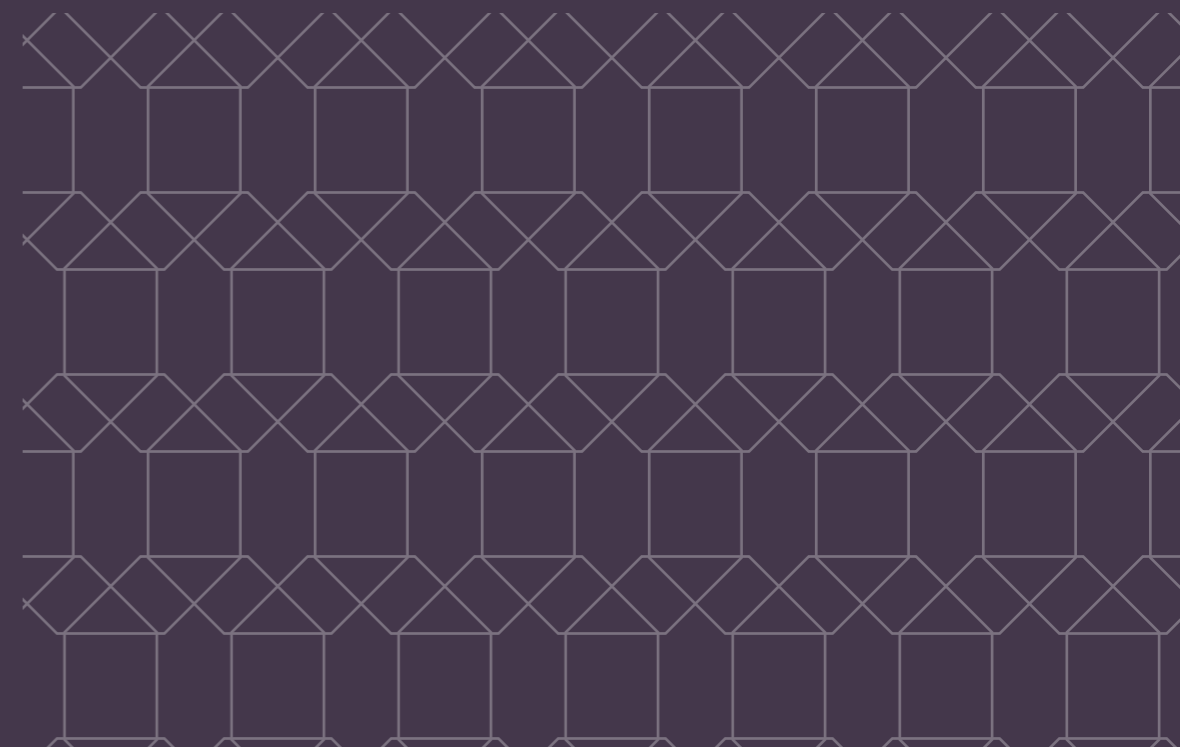


THE CANALS

We want to see a better integration of nature with the more metropolitan side of Brent. We want more trees and for nature to be taken as inspiration for colour choices in the area to blend the green and built up areas of the borough. We think it could further be very interesting to reopen the canals in Brent and bring back some enjoyment of such spaces to Brent. We would like to see seating around the canal areas, with railings separating pedestrian access from the water for safety. We would like to see lighting incorporated into trees and plants and seating there. The seating should have an organic shape, fitting into the surrounding nature but at the same time not being too hidden that it feels unsafe.



Chalkhill Park



Community spaces, were valued spaces for the young women we spoke to.

Young women felt indoor community spaces better catered to the needs of girls and young women than did green open spaces for example because they were free, enjoyable, often hosted varied activities and felt welcoming and safe. However they also felt these spaces still catered more to older persons, for example, one young woman noted that: "a lot of community places seem like they are only for people over 60." The young women also expressed being negatively affected by recent closures of community spaces in the area which they had used often and enjoyed (eg. Rumi's Cave). They wanted more indoor

spaces, like community centres, that were free to use and where they could 'do nothing'. They also wanted community centres that catered to youths which were centrally located like on a highstreet for accessibility, safety, and also for the symbolic message of foregrounding communities and youth in our cities and centres. They wanted spaces they could depend on to be open regularly to use for varied functions (studying and hanging out for example), and if the community spaces had events that there should be ones that catered to young women. This would give them a sense of ownership of such space and therefore belonging.

LIBRARIES - KINGSBURY/WEMBLEY/WILLESDEN

Libraries are important spaces to us, especially during our school years, and we use different libraries for different needs. Kingsbury library, for example, feels open, accessible to all, and the most inviting space for youths. It is a busy, social library with activities, events and different community groups (eg. Brent Youth Parliament). We use it to 'casually work' and as a free indoor social space and a meeting place with friends. Its location – next to the outlet– means that we also often use it as part of a 'day out'. This contrasts with our use of Wembley library which is more of a 'serious' library and a good quiet revision space. Willesden library used to be a space that we used to hang out in because it had an open upper area which acted like a social meetup spot for friends where we could get some work done too. It was a place that our parents (especially for some of our Muslim families) – unlike parks– would feel comfortable with us going to. However, since it was renovated it now feels clinical, anti-social, quiet and exclusively catering to solitary studying.

1

Young women value that different libraries cater to different needs such as socialisation places versus quiet revision spaces;

2

Libraries are important to young women as they provide safe, indoor (weatherproof), and free public spaces to socialise and work in that parents approve of.

CHALKHILL COMMUNITY CENTRE

Chalkhill Community Centre feels open to everyone and gives you a sense of ownership of the space– like 'this is for you'. We appreciate that activities and events are free, that they are an alternative to the more typical outdoor community events, that they cater to the diverse public of Brent such as by hosting church choir and Friday prayer. However it is frustrating that when there is little attendance events are cancelled. It is attached to a community health hub and has a cafe but this cafe feels like it's for the elderly.

THE GRANVILLE

We like the Granville but its location and how events are advertised mean that they sometimes don't reach us. It is geographically wedged within a residential area but on a busy road where there are a series of sites undergoing significant demolition and development. This means that it is located in a bit of dead-zone with little foot traffic and it is not very accessible or safe feeling. We also often find out about local events on Instagram but since the Granville doesn't advertise there and looking at the newsletter isn't really something that girls and young women do, we often miss out. It would be nice to be able to use the Granville freely but since we also don't know before going if the rooms at the Granville are booked out or if we would be able to go to just hang out we often don't show up. If the Granville had a room that was always just free to use to hang out in and couldn't be booked, if it were more conveniently placed, like on the highstreet, and used social media like Instagram to advertise, we would definitely go more.

CLOSED: RUMI'S CAVE

We really enjoyed going to Rumi's Cave which had a Malaysian cafe/ restaurant, a weekend market and hosted events. The community centre had been very active within our community and we feel that this space had catered well to our needs as young women as well as to the needs of others within the Brent community. We are sad and angry by it being shut and the land being turned into flats.

CHANGED/ CLOSED: GRAHAME PARK COMMUNITY CENTRE

Another community space that one of us used to use. It was an important space to her as she would attend religious classes there. It was shut and reopened for sporting activities which no longer catered to her needs, nor felt like a space she would want to use. It has since been permanently closed.

There were certain urban design elements that kept recurring in our conversations with the young women. For example, seating, lighting, and shelter were consistently identified as issues and areas where improvements were needed throughout the borough. The young women were very eloquent and clear about the changes needed to these elements. They were also clear that changing such elements may not transform more deeply entrenched structural issues— such that better lighting would not undo gendered violence— which would have to be addressed through policy, education and so on but could contribute to better everyday experiences for girls and young women— such as feeling safe, welcome, and validated. Below we focus on a few of the design examples the young women took issue with and the changes that these young women wanted to see.

LIGHTING

Lighting, both natural (seasons, time of day) and artificial (streetlights, shop lights), significantly affects our sense of safety. Winter and evenings feel more unsafe for young women because of the reliance on unnatural lighting which is often inadequate or insufficient. There are multiple areas where lighting is insufficient in the Borough: for example around Kingsbury highroad, the Chalkhill Park area, and around many of the estates. One issue of focus for us has been that lighting schemes between our schools and the surrounding areas (where we get our buses or trains or where we walk) are insufficient and in the winter we feel or have felt afraid walking home because it was dark (see Kingsbury Road). There are also multiple areas where lighting is inadequate: for example spotlights feels unsafe around parks because they create dark spots in areas outside of the beam. Lighting that we think works well can be found in Wembley park area because it has both varied types of lighting and sufficient amounts of lighting.

We want more: quantities of lights, upward facing lights, colourful lights, selfie friendly or fun and interactive lights, and don't want to be dependent on shop opening hours for lights to light our way. We are inspired by Christmas lights which are playful, give light but are also not too bright. This kind of light feels like you are supposed to be there whoever you are. We would like to see interesting, soft and upward facing or in-ground light schemes around estates to make these areas feel safer and more enjoyable.

UNDERPASSES/ SUBWAYS

Subways are typically dark, smelly, damp or flooded, secluded, with low ceilings and overgrowth at exits, low visibility and random men loitering. Ironically, given that such infrastructure is typically built to keep pedestrians safe from road danger we, as young women, feel threatened and unsafe in these spaces because of the poor visibility, poor maintenance and eerie feel of them. These tunnels are also disinteresting, unpleasant and boring. Both these feelings of boredom and fear impact our journeys and daily lives.

We want underpasses with visible exits, that are interactive, aesthetic, and well maintained, and where designers provide colourful lights, include local input and represent the local community or area.

OUTDOOR GYMS

We feel that the borough's outdoor gyms do not fit our needs as young women like they do for boys and young men. They feel intimidating, like you need experience to partake, are often broken with poor lighting, and designed for an average male body. They are used by men or young children as a playground, and none of us have ever seen girls and young women there.

We want outdoor gyms with shelter for when it rains, colourful designs, better lighting, exercise matt areas or surfaces for dance and yoga, and equipment designed for average women's bodies too. We feel outdoor gyms should be designed to create a more open and less prescriptive or intimidating space to attract a greater public, such as young women, to use the equipment. We can think of these spaces as non-gym fitness spaces.

SHELTER

We feel that shelters in the borough are both too few and not well designed. For example, on Kingsbury road most shelters are at local shops and restaurants, which are not public nor free to use. There is also not much public seating, and usage of other seating options is seasonal, subpar, or dominated by men.

We suggest designing public shelters that resemble traditional school playground shelters— because as one of us has said “for women having a space that is familiar is very important and it's welcoming to all age groups”. Such a space would be familiar, and wouldn't stand out so users wouldn't feel observed or risk feeling judged. It should have good lighting, benches wide enough for shopping bags especially near retail areas, good lighting and a transparent roof for natural light.

STREET CROSSINGS

We are concerned about road and pedestrian safety which is a problem in Brent. We think that street crossings are particularly conducive to road unsafety. In busier parts of the borough (eg. Kingsbury and Kilburn Highroad) crossings are not placed where most people would like to cross which is dangerous and leads to J-walking. In some areas, like Kingsbury Highroad, there are not enough crossings. And in areas that are prone to getting quite busy the crossings are often not wide enough for prams and those pushing them to safely and comfortably cross. We want more, wider, and better placed crossings.

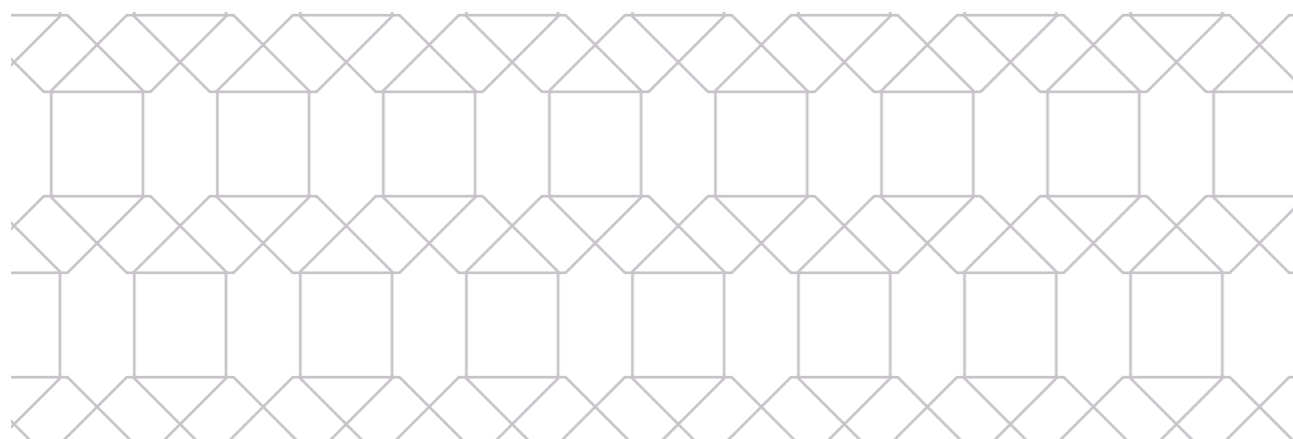
TRANSPORT

We primarily use public transport (bus and tube) to get around the borough. Half of us also sometimes cycle and get driven by our parents, and one of us primarily drives her car. We feel that the borough's train stations are inconsistently pleasant. We like Willesden station where flowers and plants around the sign are uplifting. Wembley Park station feels safe when exiting the station but can quickly be anxiety inducing when approaching a nearby street-corner where the Paddy Power betting shop is— men loiter, smoke and drink there. Furthermore, since the bus stop outside Wembley station has been moved, this had made congestion on one pavement bad and the station is designed so that only one exit/entrance is very busy and the other quiet. Kilburn Park station feels stuffy and there is a gust of air coming from the station that you can smell and feel and crowds waiting outside which can be intimidating. There is also no longer a ticket office and less staff at the station which makes it feel less watched over and safe. At least they sometimes play classical music in the station and the tiny park in the old ticket office is pretty. When around Brondesbury, sometimes Brondesbury station is the more convenient and closer station but we chose to walk to Brondesbury Park because it feels safer. Overall we feel that most train stations could be better designed for young women and their contexts more thought through. These are spaces where you start and end your day and they therefore have a significant effect on your mood and wellbeing.

MUGAS

(MULTI-USE GAME AREAS)

None of us really use MUGAs. A lot of them feel intimidating like BMX tracks, and others just aren't appealing to us especially because large group of teenage boys gather. Perhaps if there were interesting art schemes around the BMX tracks that seemed appealing to young women, they might be inclined to use them. We also feel that if MUGAs were broken up into smaller pitches or had interesting colour schemes on their layout we might be more inclined to partake in the activities that are meant to be engaged in there.

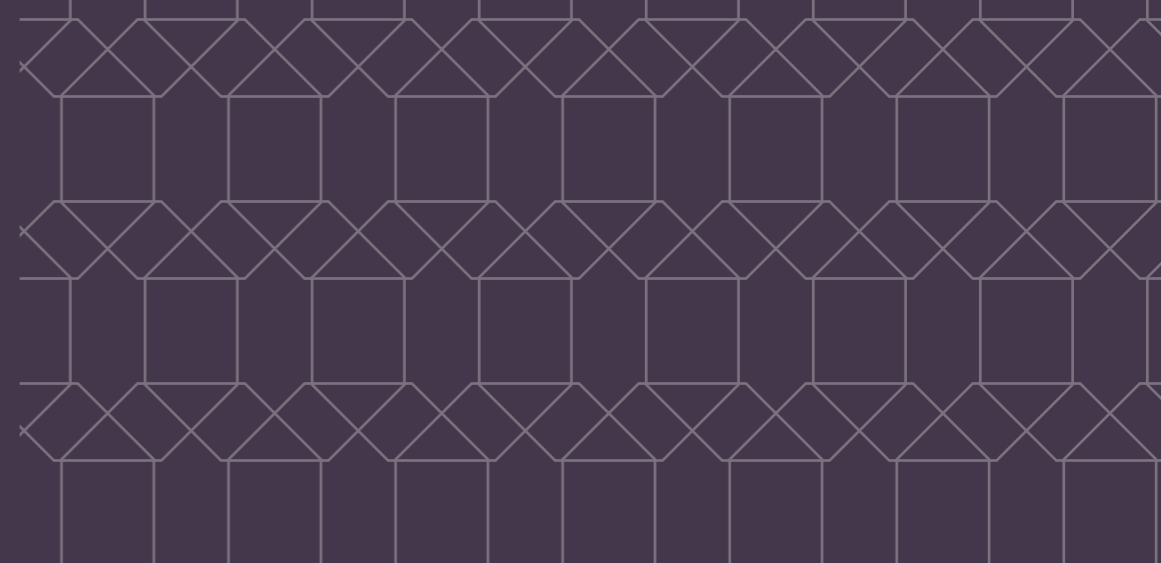


PROPOSED PRINCIPLES



PROPOSED INTEVENTIONS

Having discussed elements and then principles in the workshop setting we then asked each of the participants to think about how they would spatialize these into (architectural and strategic) interventions thinking not only about look and feel but also about the places where they were intervening in and the desired social and cultural outcomes. The following map, figure 2, synthesises this work into one map outlining 10 interventions throughout the Borough. Lighting and affordability are constant features that re-occur but there are also very specific interventions such as opening the canal system as a public space, seating on the high street and non-gym fitness. All the participants are sensitive to what kind of real change lighting can achieve, however, the suggestion to improve lighting within all housing estates in the borough represents thinking beyond lighting, towards stitching underfunded areas into the borough. There are also generousities that go beyond gestures that serve women and young girls – all the interventions would benefit a wider constituency and in some cases the participants stated who these are such as homeless people accessing the internet in libraries. One of the participants reflected that the images they had to hand – a collection of print outs collated by project leads - didn't suitably reflect the aesthetic of the borough. Another participant chose to layout her own version of how a library should cater for multiple demographics. They all reflected on how projects would be funded in a context of budget cuts and discussed if such interventions would materially change how girls and women access public space.





PARK IMPROVEMENTS (EG. WOODCOCK PARK)

- SOCIAL SEATING
- FUN SEATING
- AESTHETIC ELEMENTS (NOT JUST LARGE GREEN AREAS)

HIGH STREET IMPROVEMENTS

- REST SPOTS
- LIGHTING
- WATER
- WITH ENOUGH SPACE FOR SHOPPING BAGS
- VISIBLE BUT NOT TOO VISIBLE

HIGHLIGHT COMMUNITY CENTRES

- LIGHTING
- ART
- SIGNAL THAT THESE SPACES ARE 'FOR US'

IMPROVED RESIDENTIAL AREAS THROUGHOUT BOROUGH BUT PARTICULARLY IN ESTATES

- LIGHTING (BEYOND SPOTLIGHTS)
- BENCHES

IMPROVE MOBILITY BY LIGHTING UNDERPASSES

IMPROVE LIBRARIES AND COMMUNITY SPACES

- ZONE CHILDRENS, STUDY AND MORE SOCIAL SPACES
- FREE INTERNET ACCESS (ESPECIALLY FOR HOMELESS PEOPLE)

IMPROVE TOWN CENTRES (LIKE WEMBLEY PARK)

- HANGOUT SPOTS
- FREE SPACES
- IMPROVED OUTDOOR LIGHTING (SUSTAINABLE, SOLAR)

CENTRE AFFORDABILITY

- FREE HANGOUT SPOTS IN PARK
- FREE SOCIAL SPACES IN SQUARES AND HIGH STREETS

ACTIVATE CANAL

- CURVED SEATING
- IMPROVED LIGHTING
- PLANTS AND WOODED VEGETATION

IMPROVE PARK PROVISION

- MORE POCKET PARKS
- NON-GYM FITNESS SPACES (YOGA)

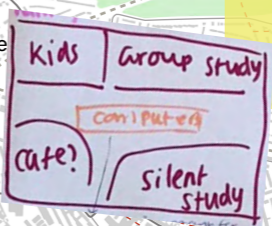


Figure 2. Proposed interventions through the Borough.

CONCLUSION

This report has evidenced how girls and young women interact with, feel about, and articulate changes for their local areas in the London Borough of Brent. The peer research methodologies invoked by this project have also inherently proposed ways in which to engage with young women in planning, design, and policy contexts and across different sectors such as in higher education, the charitable sector, and the private sector.

In a first sense, the young women's findings paint a clear image that the public spaces of Brent fail their demographic. The young women articulate conflictual experiences within the urban realm that have been exacerbated by gender-blind planning and design such as poor lighting or unvaried youth facilities, and by their relative absence from policy, such as by their intersectional needs as youths and women not being specifically addressed. In most spaces in their local areas the young women whose findings have composed this report feel unsafe, not provided for, judged, and unwelcome. For instance, in green spaces young women often juggle the reality of either feeling unsafe or not considered in the amenities provided; and on highstreets they feel they do not have a right to linger and are intimidated by male users. While they articulate frictions within their local areas, simultaneously however, public spaces are essential to these young women who value the positive instances of finding Halal food on their highstreet, events for them in the Chalkhill community centre, Jenga at the Boxpark in Wembley, and their friends socialising at the Kingsbury Library. The findings of the young women involved in this research project provide much needed and nuanced insights into how young women experience the public realm that touch on – yet go beyond – discussions of 'safety'; they crucially illustrate whether spaces are also usable, enjoyable, engaging, exciting and welcoming to this demographic.

In a second sense, and most importantly perhaps, this research additionally makes apparent that young women are highly connected to, affected by, and vocal about their local spaces and the public realm. They identify the places within their local areas that are dysfunctional to them and know that they would like free, safe, open, welcoming, diverse, engaging, playful and interactive public spaces across their borough and spanning parks, highstreets, shopping centres and foodcourts, as well as community centres and public libraries. They have taken these aspirational qualities further and suggested different ways in which this improved public realm can be achieved: from better and more lighting schemes outdoors, shelters and retail catered to young women on the high-street, to gender-sensitive outdoor fitness equipment, and multi-functional and free indoor public spaces to hang out in. Such astute observations are evidence to the reality that young women should be, at a minimum consulted, but more importantly meaningfully engaged with, in policy, planning, and design processes. Not only should young women's voices be more carefully heard, considered, recorded, and incorporated within the built environment but such research also demonstrates the knowledge exchange made possible when partnerships are created across different sectors. Indeed, this project's successful span across the community, higher education, the charitable sector and the private sector is insightful when considering cross-sectoral relationships within the built environment.

It is our hope that this report provides a fertile ground for those working in the various sectors of the built environment to reflect on how our public realm tends to fail young women, how we can strive to make these spaces work better for young women, and how meaningful and diverse engagement might be essential to forging public spaces and localities that are better for everyone.



Workshop at Granville Centre

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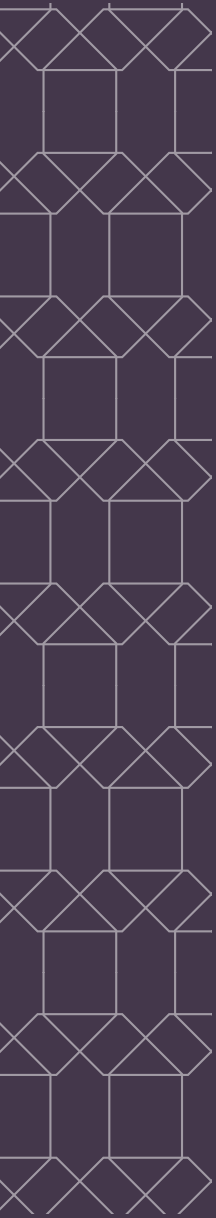
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With thanks to all those who gave their time to contribute to this report.

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