Safe Public Places: Rethinking Design for Women Safety

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ABSTRACT: The rapid pace and nature of urbanization taking place throughout the world has thrown up new challenges for governments, and their populations as well as social scientists and activists. Public place is a social space that is generally open and accessible to all types of people. For many women and girls around the world, just passing through public places- a market, a crowded street or riding the bus – is cause for great anxiety. These spaces are places in order happening crime. People, Space and Place add many aspects that shape individuals perception of safety and also the elements of built environment have a profound effect on the three notions of safety: comfort, belonging and commitment (Tovi Fenster, 2005). On the other hand, gender urban design is important due to some urban spaces are unsafely for attendance of women. Planning and designing safe public spaces for women and girls means creating public spaces with features that enhance women's safety and feelings of safety, and detract from features that cause women's insecurity and feelings of insecurity. Streets, parks, bus stops, sports fields, squares, parking lots, etc. that have been planned and designed according to the specific safety needs of women and girls. Architects, urban planners, transit authorities, landscape architects and planning agencies and educating the design professions about ways to build projects from the outset that consider women's safety as a key element of their design program could set the stage for and induce the psycho-social, behavioural, and cultural changes that need to take place before women are truly able to enjoy public spaces and engage fully in the civic life of their cities. The paper will first explore general issues related to public places i.e in Squares, Streets and market places regarding women's safety. It will then examine factors of design consideration in creating safe built environment in public places. Finally, the paper will look at how public park space has become more inclusive of female users in Vienna, Austria and Toronto, and tries to explore learning from their work.

Key Words: Urbanization, Public Places, Women, Unsafely, Issues, Design consideration, learning.

I. INTRODUCTION

Rapid urbanization is one of the defining challenges of contemporary societies. For cities to realize the potentials and avoid the pitfalls of population and economic growth, good urban planning is critical. In many countries, unplanned city extensions and decades of car-centric urban design have created sprawling city-regions. As these unplanned areas offer few work opportunities, people and goods have been forced to travel long distances to employment opportunities, leading to congestion, pollution and a generally reduced quality of live. A lack of planning has also led to slum formation, spatial inequality and segregated communities in many contexts, exacerbating inequality and injustice and triggering turmoil and revolt. The urban public spaces have important role in urban development programs.

People, Space and Place add many aspects that shape individuals perception of safety. The elements of built environment have a profound effect on the three notions of safety: comfort, belonging and commitment (Tovi Fenster, 2005). India being a patriarchal society, public spaces are male centric. With increasing population density, a diverse mix of people in cities, growing inequalities and lack of opportunities for a large proportion of disaffected youth, urban crime in general is on the rise. Violent crimes against women are also increasing as part of this process. The fact is that women are at risk of violent crime just because of their gender. Violence against women, especially in public spaces, is under-recognised and underreported, and therefore it is difficult to assess the scale of the phenomenon.

Women are particularly affected by urban design choices, the organisation of public services, the mix of urban functions. Fostering a safe urban living environment necessarily demands exploring why women consistently report more fear of crime in urban spaces Architects, urban planners, transit authorities, landscape architects and planning agencies and educating the design professions about ways to build projects from the outset that consider women's safety as a key element of their design program could set the stage for and induce the psycho-social, behavioural, and cultural changes that need to take place before women are truly able to enjoy public spaces and engage fully in the civic life of their cities.

II. WHAT MAKES CITIES UNSAFE?

Many of the factors that make city unsafe for women are common in all the cities. Some voices in the city collected through street surveys, focus group discussions and other meetings reveal the following one or more factors are reasons that make women in the city vulnerable.

(i) A poor urban infrastructure – dark or badly lighted streets, derelict parks and empty lots, badly maintained public spaces, inadequate signage, lack of public toilets.

(ii) Empty streets at night because of early closing of shops and businesses or lack of a tradition of street life.

(iii) Lack of adequate public transport and apathy of bus drivers, conductors and passengers.

(iv) Insufficient presence and unresponsive/aggressive attitudes of police and civic authorities.

(v) Isolation from neighbours and lack of community life.

(vi) Traditional notions of privacy and refusal of neighbours/police to intervene in situations of domestic violence.

(vii) Ideas and beliefs about appropriate behaviour, leading to reluctance to protest in cases of public violence.

III. THE ISSUES: WOMEN AND PUBLIC SPACE

Women and girls experience situations of violence that are different from those experienced by men. Violence that is inflicted against women and girls because of their gender is one of the worst discriminations that they suffer. Women and girls are sexually harassed, in streets, in parks and plazas, in schools, in work places, and while using public transportation. This reality, studies show that women change their routines more often than men. For example, women tend to stop going out alone after dark while men do not. Thus, women and girls feel and perceive safety and insecurity differently than men and boys**.**

In any given day, public spaces are the setting for a myriad of gendered social interactions. As a result of these interactions, public spaces themselves become gendered. For example, in a school yard, young girls may gather together under a certain tree and watch young boys play soccer in a field. As this process continues, the space under the tree will become understood as a "girl's space" and the soccer field will become understood as a "boy's space". This can be problematic because public space should belong to everyone and everyone should have a right to use it - girls should feel free to use the soccer field and boys should feel free to sit under the tree.

IV. WHY IS PLANNING AND DESIGNING SAFE PUBLIC SPACES FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS IMPORTANT?

Safety planning and design for women and girls is important because it creates public spaces where women and all users have equal opportunity to be healthy, secure and happy. This kind of planning is based on the fact that the physical design of urban spaces affects women's use and enjoyment of the public realm.

Designing and planning safe public spaces for women and girls is important because:

(i) It raises awareness of the fact that space is not neutral; the design of spaces can either facilitate or impede their use, appropriation and safety for women and girls.

(ii) It recognises that gender and gender relations between women and men are key factors in how urban spaces are organized and developed.

(iii) It recognises that the city spatially reflects specific social, economic and historical characteristics that are unique to local women's situations.

(iv) It recognises that spaces in the city reflect the relations of power that determine the behaviours and differences in the lives of women and men.

(v) It recognises that the public spaces in a city are usually designed based on a traditional conception of the family and a traditional division of labour among women and men (men as workers in the public space and women as caretakers and home keepers in the home and private spaces). Furthermore, it promotes initiatives to change this spatial organization in order to reflect changing gender roles in society.

(vi) It recognises that women's fears are based on reality (the relationship between feelings of fear and experiences of violence) and that women know when and where they feel unsafe in the cities and why**.**

(vii) It is a useful tool to improve the quality of urban and community life and to reduce women's fear and victimisation.

(viii) It recognises that if women and girls avoid using certain public spaces because they do not feel safe, these spaces will become more insecure for women, girls, and other users. Therefore, it is a useful tool to improve the quality of urban and community life for everyone, and to reduce women's fear and victimisation.

(ix) It promotes the right to the city and to citizenship for women and girls as a condition for equitable and sustainable cities and communities.

V. THE "HEALTHY" CITY

Urban activist Jane Jacobs has highlighted how cities "are not like suburbs, only denser. They differ from towns and suburbs in basic ways, and one of these is that cities are, by definition, full of strangers." For city streets to be equipped to handle strangers, and to make a safety asset, in itself, of the presence of strangers, urban neighborhoods must have a number of factors. An urban street must have a 'clear mark of private and public space' and there must be 'eyes on the street at all times' and it must have users on it fairly continuously.' A clear divide between public and private property shows the division of responsibility for maintenance and emphasizes the theory that the appearance of an area can reduce fear and mischief. Having continuous steer users adds to the number of effective eyes on the street and potential conflict can be reduced based on understanding the different users of an area and potential paths of use. Crime would be reduced because of increased pedestrian traffic (increased "eyes") on the street which would benefit women through increased safety.
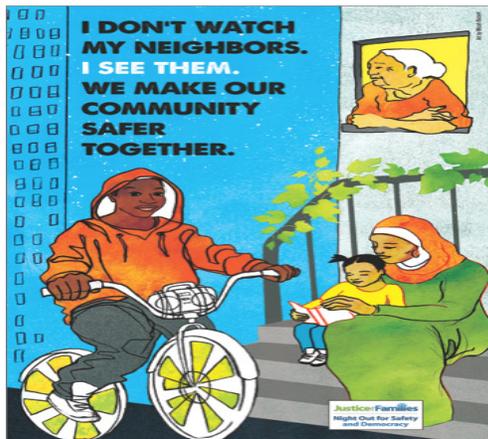
VI. DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

Safety, and the perception of safety, is critical to the vitality of any city and to the well being of all citizens, regardless of gender Experience shows that when a space is occupied by women and girls, it is also occupied by more people in general. Streets, parks, bus stops, sports fields, squares, parking lots, etc. that have been planned and designed according to the specific safety needs of women and girls exhibit the following characteristics:

- Easy access to and from the location
- Easy movement within the location
- Good lighting so that users can see and be seen
- Easy-to-read signs to help users find their way
- Clear, well-kept paths where users can easily see each other
- General visibility of the entire space, free from hiding places where a person could wait unseen.
- Includes mixed uses – many places to hangout, walk, play, eat, exercise, etc. for diverse user groups at different times of day
- Provisions for different seasons (shade in hot weather and protection in cold weather)
- Provisions for young children and the elderly (because women are often caretakers), e.g. in urban areas this could mean low, wide sidewalks for strollers, wheelchairs, and walkers, and areas with slow-moving traffic

VII. TWO PROJECTS AND THEIR RESULTS

Gender Mainstreaming was the approach taken when Vienna's network of public parks commissioned a study to see how men and women use park space. Gender Mainstreaming is not an end in itself but a strategy to achieve the goal of gender equality and involves ensuring that gender perspectives and attention to the goal of gender equality are central to all activities — policy development, research, legislation, resource allocation, and planning, implementation and monitoring of programmes and projects.

The study, which took place from 1996 to 1997, showed that after the age of nine, the number of girls in public parks dropped off dramatically, while the number of boys held steady. Researchers found that girls were less assertive than boys. If boys and girls would up in competition for park space, the boys were more likely to win out. City planners wanted to see if they could reverse this trend by changing the parks themselves and began a redesign of two parks. Footpaths were added to make the parks more accessible and volleyball and badminton courts were installed to allow for a wider variety of activities. Landscaping was also used to subdivide large, open areas into semi-enclosed pockets of park space. Almost immediately, city officials noticed a change. Different groups of people - girls and boys -began to use the parks without any one group overrunning the other.

The evaluations of what design features were needed to make these parks safe and useable public spaces for women and girls helped to establish gender-specific criteria for future planning decisions. Some of these gender-specific criteria include the following:

- Sufficient lighting throughout the park and on park trails,
- Adequate visibility around the area,
- Some play areas close to adjacent to housing to permit social monitoring,
- A clear spatial layout of the whole park and play zones,
- Multifunctional play areas, i.e. special areas for activities favoured by girls, such as volleyball and badminton,
- Hollows in the open field that can be used for ball games, as arenas, for gymnastics, for sitting together and for sunbathing.

VIII. PARIS JARDIN JUAN MIRÓ

The Paris Jardin Juan Miró, in contrast, was not designed explicitly with gender issues in mind but is nonetheless extremely interesting precisely from this point of view. It is a small, neighbourhood urban garden in a mixed-use working-class area laid out in 1993 according to a plan by the landscape architects Liliane Grünig-Tribel and François Tribel. There is no functional allocation of spaces or distinctive system of paths. The park is structured by waves and a complex path and canal system, traversed by a striking footbridge. It is a wooden bridge on an impressive steel substructure. Areas of refuge, observation, and action are equally distributed. There are lawns, a copse, an infant playground, sitting walls, lookout benches, and hidden sitting areas. The park is fenced in and there are strict regulations watched over by park keepers (e.g., ball games are not allowed on the grass area).

Use and satisfaction studies (cf. Paravicini *et al.* 2002) now show that there is a great variety and mixture of users, female and male, in the Jardin Juan Miró. Men and women of all ages use the park on an equal footing in similar forms of appropriation. The unusual design and the focus of quieter forms of use clear foster forms of appropriation that are not role specific. This is generally felt to be agreeable; the park is appreciated equally by both sexes.
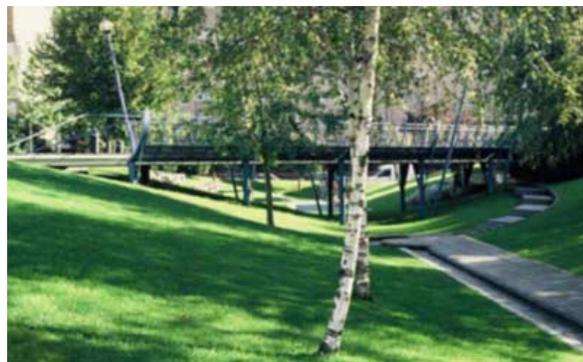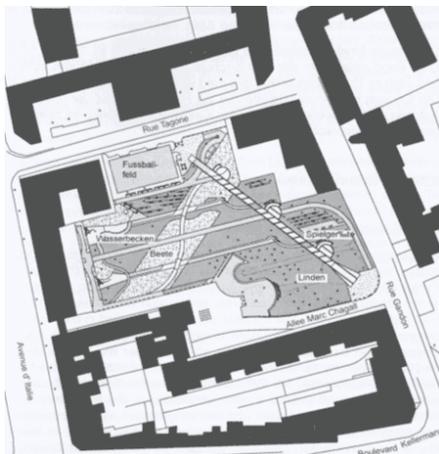
This and similar projects (cf. the model projects in BMVBS/BBR 2006 as well as the collection of "good examples" under bbr.bund.de) operate with clearly defined amenities to meet different demands, with easily surveillable structures and social control to enhance the sense of security, and to some extent with behaviour regulation. Communication points have been created, as well as neutral areas and multifunctional amenities. Under favourable conditions, such measures can clearly help even out gender-specific forms of use and appropriation.

IX. CONCLUSION

Disproportionate fear of urban crime is an oppressive, informal social control of women, often acting to draw attention away from the more pervasive problem of domestic violence, and is unnecessarily compounded by gender ignorant urban planning. While it must be acknowledged that planners can run the run the risk of reinforcing stereotypes in some cases, looking at how men and women use city space differently is a way of influencing a city's environment so that different groups of people can coexist and fully participate in public life. It's a political approach to planning and brings people into spaces where they didn't exist before or felt they had no right to exist. However, relative freedom for women should not be bought at the expense of another social 'group' and gender inclusive planning shouldn't be viewed as a fixed outcome but a process. People and their needs vary from city to city and the needs of Austrian or Canadian women will not necessarily mirror those of Dublin, with its own cultural and social norm and geographic factors to accommodate.

By 2050, 80% of the world's popular will be living in cities and decisions taken today in cities will shape the social and environmental future of the majority of the world's population; these decisions must include women having an equal involvement in the participation and consultation process at all levels of planning to allow them to feel safe and truly claim their cities.

Current findings on the gender-specific use of outdoor spaces, as well as the projects cited suggest a number of rather general recommendations for gender-sensitive open space planning to help both sexes to appropriate open spaces ,

(i) Sufficient open space amenable to appropriation should be available within reachable distance to minimise displacements and competition for use.

(ii) A wide variety of use and appropriation forms should be promoted.

(iii) Multi-functional utilisation, for example of sports facility, should be ensured.

(iv) Security is a necessary condition. This can be achieved through open structures, visual connections with the surroundings, and through supervision.

(v) Amenities should be available for different population groups. They should be clearly defined.

(vi) Atmospheric quality is of key interest, especially for women.

(vii) Small-scale structures are needed, since a dominant, arena-type area favours gender-specific forms of appropriation.

(viii) Moreover, certain protected areas or times are needed so that girls, especially in early puberty, can realise their potential without being disturbed, for example, play sports without being exposed to male eyes.

(ix) The effective participation of the public should be self-evident, but gender-sensitive participation procedures need to be ensured.

(x) More flexibly planned interim use projects also need to be organised with greater consideration for gender-sensitive aspects.

(xi) Finally, more intensive research is needed into the consequences of changes in gender relations for outdoor behaviour.

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