

Gender aspects in planning urban green spaces

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It is probably not a popular topic in the comparatively traditional and predominantly male green sector, but it is obvious that gender is an undervalued aspect in designing public green spaces. Public spaces should connect people, but a clear segregation has emerged, based on assumptions rather than needs.

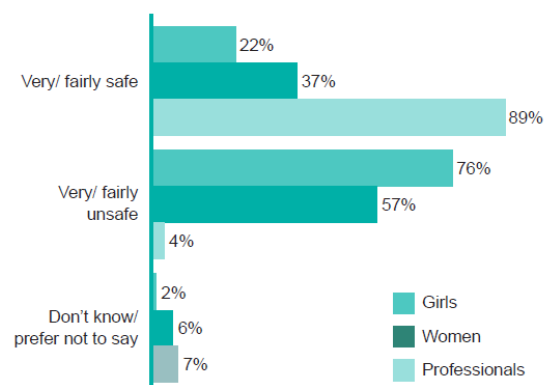


Anyone who has ever planted the wrong ginkgo tree knows how important gender is. The stench from the rotting fruit of a Ginkgo biloba, or maidenhair tree, is notorious. The female variety of this tree can produce bad-smelling fruit, while there is nothing to worry about on the male tree. If this example teaches us anything, it is that you do need to be mindful of gender in public spaces.

For us humans, gender largely determines how we use public space and to what extent we appropriate it. Yet it is a lagging issue in design. Public spaces are supposed to connect us, but we see a clear divide from our early years, which is really only based on assumptions rather than needs. For example, playgrounds are still often designed for one activity (often football), with some smaller seating in the edges. This separation has taught us for years that there are certain activities for boys and others for girls. That men and women experience public spaces differently in later life should come as no surprise. In fact, the [UN Women study in the UK](#) shows that 71% of women of all ages in the UK have experienced some form of sexual harassment in a public space. This number rises to 86% among 18-24-year-olds.

Women may experience public space as more dangerous or at least be more wary of it. A [study](#) performed by the University of Leeds shows that professionals are not aware of the high number of women and girls that think that parks are safe. One of the given recommendations is: “Designers and developers of parks and play spaces work with women and girls from diverse backgrounds at a local level to incorporate gender-related safety needs, interests and preferences. Co-design processes should include women and girls throughout the planning and design process and focus on intersectionality.”

In your area of West Yorkshire, how safe or unsafe do you think parks are for women and girls?



In this context, the experience of safety in relation to green areas plays a very crucial role, but this still proves to be a difficult design task for many municipalities. What is a beautiful park for one person is a source of anxious feelings for another. So, the same place can evoke two very different associations. This can have consequences if part of the population consequently starts avoiding the place.

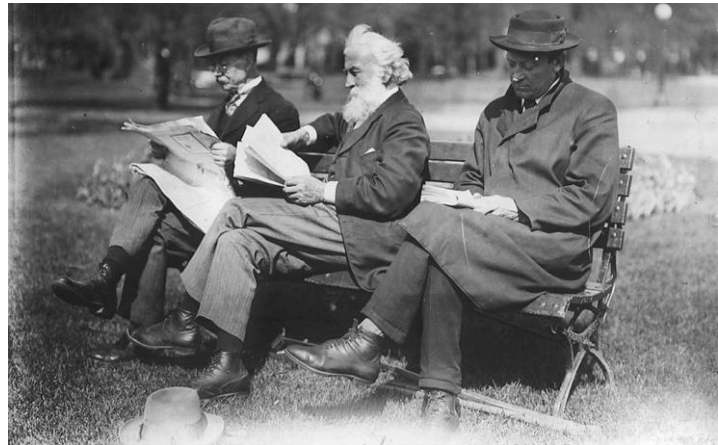
Men and women move through cities differently. Men generally go directly from A to B (e.g. from home to work) and mainly by car, while women criss-cross the city to take children to school, run errands, go to work, provide informal care and go home. Women generally use bicycles and public transport more.

Other target groups, other plans

Now, of course, we should not start designing cities just for women, but this shows how useful it is to approach urban planning from a different perspective. Cities are for all of us, but they are not designed by all of us.

Half the population is women. Yet, historically, cities, including the parks, have been planned by men, for men.

It makes sense that they used their own experiences, perspectives and needs to do so. The result is that, without deliberate intent, our towns and cities have been designed with limited consideration of how half of the people living in them go about their daily lives.



Parks designed by men, for men (Queen's Park Toronto, 1908)

Women represent almost 50% of the population and travel through the city just as much as men do. Nevertheless, inclusive urban spaces are still rare. It remains a challenge for women to find their place in the public space, both in terms of facility use and safety. As awareness of this problem grows, more and more cities are starting to strive towards greater diversity.

It is very important to make people aware that the way cities were designed for years is not the only way. If you want change, you have to involve other groups in your plans. You have to listen to those groups that are often overlooked first.

Is designing for women inclusive?

Gender does not refer to biological sex (e.g. male, female, intersex), but to the socialisation as woman, man or other genders. Gender often impacts our behaviour and thus the way we move around, interact and exist in the city. It is associated with the social expectations established around what it means to be considered a woman, man, non-binary, trans, masculine, or feminine.

[Definition of Gender used by URBACT]

IT'S NOT ABOUT FEMINISM. IT'S ABOUT DOING THINGS BETTER. We are moving from a male-dominated outdoor space to one based on needs for a more diverse audience. It shouldn't be about naming gender, pigeonholing it and linking data to needs. It is about realising that there are multiple ways. The aim is to enable women and men to enjoy public spaces equitably. This is not a matter of feminising street names or name of the city itself. Rather, what cities must do to become welcoming

and safe places for women is adapt to the needs, physical conditions, and expectations of all. That, in other words, means “de-gendering” all that makes up the city in order to create totally inclusive urban spaces that can be readily used by everybody: men and women as well as children, seniors, and people with disabilities.

Gender sensitive urban planning methods

There is a necessity to involve a more diverse group and learn new lessons from it. To move away from the standard white, male gaze, we need to consciously seek out people of different backgrounds and gender, as they are still underrepresented in decision-making.

→Process-orientated approach

Gender-sensitive perspective in all stages of the urban planning process

→Inter- and transdisciplinary discourse



GENDER MAINSTREAMING is a method to make commonplace a consideration of how policy decisions affect different genders at every stage of the built environment’s development – policy, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

In order for policymakers to understand the differences in the way women and men experience the urban environment we need more training, awareness and better evidence of the specific challenges faced by women and marginalised groups.

EXPLORATORY WALKS are used as tool by communities to determine how to improve and restructure the public space in a way that stretches beyond the previous standards shaped by the habits and convictions of the male gender.

It is a field observation method done by a small group. It is designed to identify both positive aspects of the neighbourhood’s public spaces and its areas of concern.



Real opinions and facts can be gathered to be used in the planning and/or designing process. It is a time-intensive method, but allows to gather real data, instead of using assumptions.

USED SOURCES

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