

"Teenagers and the City: How youth shape public spaces through creativity, sports, and social connection"



Public spaces hold a unique value for teenagers, offering a stage for recreation, cultural expression, and social interaction. Across various studies, these spaces have been shown to play a significant role in the mental, social, and physical development of adolescents. Teenagers often engage with public areas like parks, squares, and even neglected or abandoned spaces in ways that differ from adults, repurposing them as places to express their identity, engage in physical activities, and cultivate peer relationships. This article explores how teenagers use these spaces, how they shape urban aesthetics, and why policymakers need to adopt a more passive approach to observing their behaviors.

The Importance of Public Spaces for Teenagers

Teenagers, more than many other age groups, depend on public spaces. Research shows that, almost 80% of teenagers prefer being outdoors rather than indoors, with over 30% regularly using streets and parks for socializing. These spaces offer teenagers a respite from adult supervision, providing them with autonomy and a sense of ownership over their surroundings. Studies in several European countries highlight that public spaces are often where teenagers build their social networks, engage in recreational activities, and find a sense of belonging.

For many adolescents, spaces like skate parks, basketball courts, and informal gathering spots are essential for socialization. Data shows that facilities designed with teenagers in mind—such as sports courts and skate parks—experience significantly higher usage among teens than those without such infrastructure. In fact, surveys indicate that up to 73% of teenagers frequently use these facilities when they are available.

Teenagers and the Aesthetics of Public Spaces

Teenagers not only use public spaces for recreation; they actively transform the aesthetic of these environments. Street art, music, and fashion are critical elements of youth culture that find expression in public spaces. Studies have noted the importance of street corners, graffiti walls, and other informal urban spaces where teenagers congregate and express their identities through these art forms.

Graffiti and street art, once seen as acts of vandalism, have been recognized in recent research as powerful tools of self-expression among youth. Legal graffiti walls, for example, allow teenagers to showcase their creativity in a way that enriches the urban aesthetic without breaking the law. Research also shows that spaces featuring legal graffiti walls or areas designed for youth performance, like stages for music and dance, are more frequently used and valued by teenagers. Additionally, fashion plays a significant role in how teenagers use public spaces. Street corners and open spaces become stages where teenagers display their latest fashion trends, hairstyles, and accessories, contributing to a dynamic, youth-driven aesthetic that permeates certain urban areas.

The Reclamation of Abandoned Spaces

In cities across Europe, neglected or abandoned spaces often become the playgrounds of teenagers. Numerous studies show that teenagers are highly resourceful in transforming vacant lots, rundown parks, or overlooked urban areas into social hubs. This trend has been observed in multiple European studies where teenagers turn these areas into skate parks, graffiti zones, or gathering spots for social interaction.

The concept of "microgeographies" has emerged in research, referring to how teenagers create their own spaces within the urban landscape, often without adult supervision or involvement. This use of space provides a sense of autonomy and ownership, reinforcing the idea that public areas are more than just physical spaces; they are also symbolic landscapes where teenagers assert their independence and social identity.

Rethinking Policy: From Participation to Observation

Many urban planning initiatives have aimed to involve young people in the design of public spaces, but these efforts often fail to capture the organic ways in which teenagers engage with their environments. Research suggests that traditional participatory methods, like community meetings or consultations, are often ineffective when it comes to teenagers, as they are either underrepresented or their voices are not taken seriously.

A growing body of research advocates for a more observational approach to understanding teenage behavior in public spaces. By passively observing how teenagers naturally use public spaces, urban planners can better design areas that reflect their

needs. For instance, researchers have found that teenagers often prefer spaces that offer an element of risk, such as skate parks or climbing areas. These spaces are frequently used because they provide both physical challenge and social visibility.

Moreover, digital tools like social media are proving to be valuable in understanding teenage use of public spaces. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok offer insights into where teenagers congregate and how they interact with public areas. Research shows that social media not only documents teenage activity in urban spaces but also influences how they navigate and utilize these environments.

The Role of Sports, Music, and Fashion

Sports and physical activities play a crucial role in how teenagers engage with public spaces. Across Europe, surveys consistently show that teenagers are drawn to areas where they can participate in organized or informal sports. Basketball courts, soccer fields, and skate parks are popular spaces that meet both recreational and social needs.

Music is another key element that shapes how teenagers use public spaces. Whether through impromptu performances or the presence of stages designed for youth concerts, music provides teenagers with a platform for self-expression and community-building. Studies have shown that public spaces equipped with performance areas for music and dance are highly valued by teenagers.

Fashion, too, is closely tied to teenagers' use of public spaces. Urban research points to the importance of public spaces as "stages" where teenagers showcase their personal style, which is often influenced by local or global trends. These spaces become arenas for both self-expression and peer interaction, contributing to the broader aesthetic and cultural landscape of a city.

Why Teenagers Matter for the Future of Urban Spaces

Teenagers are among the most frequent users of public spaces, yet their needs are often overlooked in urban planning. Research conducted across Europe highlights the importance of these spaces for teenagers' social, physical, and emotional development. In the UK, 81% of teenagers reported using public spaces multiple times a week, further emphasizing their central role in the lives of adolescents. By shifting from forced participation to passive observation, cities can create public spaces that truly reflect the needs of teenagers. This approach will not only ensure that spaces are used more efficiently but also foster a sense of belonging and ownership among the youth. As researchers have noted, the ability of teenagers to shape public spaces is crucial for creating more inclusive, dynamic, and vibrant urban environments.

Public spaces should accommodate teenagers and actively reflect their evolving needs. By observing and integrating their behaviors and preferences, cities can build spaces that support both individual expression and community-building, ultimately contributing to a more connected and aesthetically diverse urban landscape.

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Raffaella Lioce