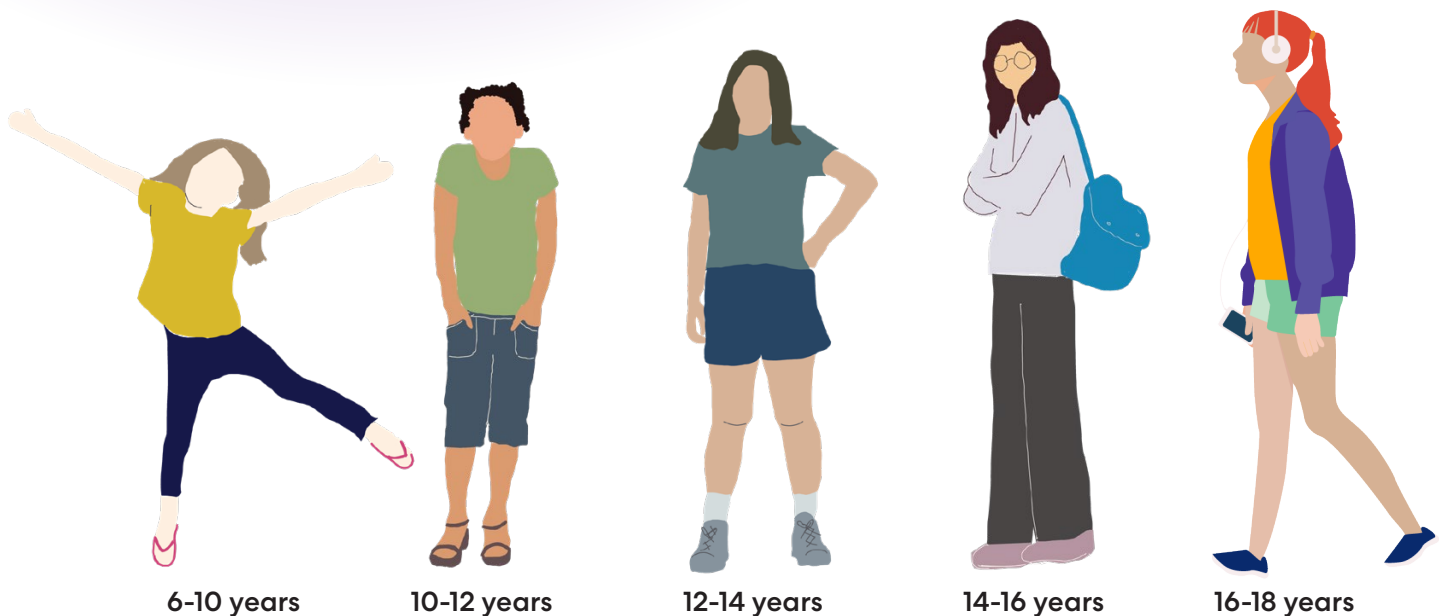# GIRLS JUST WANNA HAVE FUN

How do we design a better public realm for adolescent and teenage girls?

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6-10 years   10-12 years   12-14 years   14-16 years   16-18 years

We want to acknowledge the following individuals and organizations for lending their insights, expertise, and, in some cases, their patience as we completed this valuable research project. Your contributions were invaluable to the success of this Incubator.

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Overview+ Definitions

Girls and women experience the built environment distinctly differently than boys and men. They use and navigate it differently, from trip chaining between work, school, and home to selecting specific travel routes as required by their caregiving responsibilities or feelings of safety. They also face unique physical, social, economic, and symbolic barriers to its use – barriers that geographer Leslie Kerns notes "shape their daily lives in ways that are (although not only) gendered."

Just as we're starting to reckon with the fact that the design of public space is not gender-neutral for adults, we must also realize this is the case for children and adolescents.

Teens and young people are some of the most frequent users of public space (Travlou et. al, 2008). Public spaces are key settings for youth development: they are some of the only places youth can claim for themselves. They're spaces for isolation away from and in resistance to adults and caregivers and are also the main stage for socializing and relationship building with friends and peers (Matthews 1998, Depeau 2001).

Notable psychologists and researchers, such as Eleanor Maccoby, Dr. Carolyn Edwards, and Patsy Eubanks Owens, have well-researched and documented the differences in adolescent development play and socializing patterns. Public spaces are extremely important for mental, social, and physical development through adolescence.

The environment around teens can help them build self-identity, gain confidence, build social relationships with peers, explore freedom, and discover the community around them (Owens, 2002). When public spaces hinder these opportunities, teens don't feel a sense of belonging, which can lead to anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Barron, 2022).

We know that the public realm is critical for adolescent development, and yet few amenities in these spaces consider an important demographic: girls.

While teens are some of the most frequent public space users, they face various barriers to its use and are sometimes purposely "designed out" of these spaces (Travlou, et. al, 2008; King et. al, 2001). The teenage years are "in-betweenness," or a place of life where one is not quite a child and yet not quite an adult. This "in-betweenness" greatly impacts their experience of the built environment and public realm. Teens face hostility in public spaces, where their mere presence is seen as "loitering," and they are perceived as potential perpetrators of vandalism or delinquent acts (Travlou, 2003).

"The adolescent is neither a child nor an adult, although they can act as either"

Patsy Eubanks Owens, Landscape Architect and Professor, UC Davis

Our cities are not YET designed for, by, or with girls.

INTERSECTIONALITY

Age

Teenager / Adolescent

Definition: This research project defines teens/adolescents as young people aged 13-19. Typically ages 10-19, encompassing the pre-teen/early, teen/middle, and young adult/late adolescent phases of development. *This definition was adopted from the American Pediatrics Association and WHO.*

Relevance: A time of significant growth, both mentally and physically. The environment around adolescents is critical to brain development.

Gender

Girls

Definition: This research project defines girls as not only those assigned female at birth (AFAB) but also includes transgender girls, gender expressive, or otherwise feminine presenting individuals. *This definition was adapted from the "Confronting the Sexist City" by Eunice Wong and Vinaya Mani.*

Relevance: The differences in play between boys and girls occur in the location of play, type of play, and activity preferences.
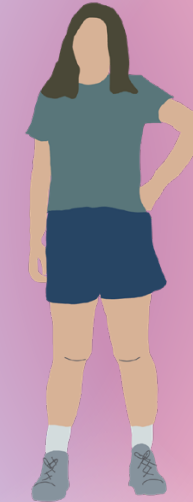
Urban public spaces like sidewalks and streetscapes are no longer the primary settings for spontaneous meetups. Instead, they are designed to support specific activities, like the burgeoning pay-to-play café culture, which naturally excludes a population with limited, if any, discretionary income. Simple non-commercial activities such as "hanging out" are thus seen as a nuisance and face heavy regulation and surveillance by business owners and the police (Travlou, 2003).

According to the Outdoor Industry (2022), neighborhood and city parks, playgrounds, and state parks are the most popular venues for youth outings. Yet, studies show adolescent girls are less likely to use parks and other public spaces or participate in outdoor activities. The 2022 Outdoor Industry Trends Report reveals that boys ages 13-17 continue to outpace girls in their age group, partly due to a drop in girls' participation at the onset of puberty (13 years old). This was also evident in one study by Make Space for Girls, a UK-based charity, which found that only 12% of teenagers using park facilities were girls.

Research Questions

1. How can the design of public urban spaces empower and support girls and young women?

2. How do we design urban spaces in ways that contribute to the overall well-being and sense of belonging of girls?

3. How can designers combat gender stereotypes while also prioritizing the unique and nuanced experience of girls while designing?

4. How can the design process better engage youth, specifically girls, so they have a more direct impact on their communities?

Do teen girls participate lesser in outdoor activities due to lack of interest? We'd argue it is less about a lack of interest in outdoor activities and more about a lack of safe, quality, appropriate outdoor spaces for them.

The designs of parks, playgrounds, and open spaces continue to maximize multi-use game areas, skate parks, BMX tracks, or the "holy trinity of equipment ." These spaces, however, are primarily used by boys and men and are places where girls have little to no interest, feel intimidated by, or run the risk of harassment or worse (Barker et al., 2022).

One study confirmed this perception of neighborhood parks as "boys' places," a perception that limits girls' use of the parks (Lloyd, Burden, and Kiewa, 2008), and another indicates that boys actively exclude girls from play, thereby prohibiting their use and participation of public spaces (Riemers, etc. al, 2018).

Children spend most of their day in schools and schoolyards. For teens, schoolyards are a place for play, socializing, and learning. In the schoolyard, teens develop their identity, showcase their skills, and test how to behave around children of other genders. Recreational tasks also help teens set goals, complete tasks, and claim space. Yet, school environments rarely consider how to facilitate developmental activities for teenagers and are instead designed to control their behavior (Owens, 2002). For teenage girls, who are often pushed to the periphery of schoolyards by their male counterparts, the schoolyard design signifies a strong hierarchy of who gets to enjoy most of the space.

While a plethora of environmental psychology, landscape design, environmental planning, and children's geography literature explores perceptions and experiences of the public realm, much of it is limited to younger children rather than teenagers. Additionally, teen-focused research centers on the methodological aspects of studying teens and the public realm or the correlation of their participation in physical activity with the presence and types of outdoor spaces. Few studies translate the feedback into actionable strategies for planners and designers to modify their design thinking, processes, and practices in a more equitable, gender- and age-inclusive way.

One study that inspired this project was by Danish-based Henning Larson. Their "Urban Mind" project asks, "How can the design of urban spaces contribute to the mental well-being of teenage girls?" We were inspired by their thoughtful approach to exploring this question and by how they translated the work into actionable design strategies that practitioners can use to further the development of gender-inclusive public spaces. This study served as a framework for our inquiry into the experiences and perceptions of teen girls in the City of Chicago.

We understand teenagers have a unique and varied perspective, yet our current design and planning practice oversimplifies or overlooks these diverse needs of girls ages 13-18.

This study aimed to understand how teen girls between 13 and 18 perceive and use public space. We wanted to investigate the elements that attract or deter teen girls from using public spaces. Through a review of current literature and interviews with a multi-disciplinary set of experts, we gained insight into how we might reimagine public spaces and the processes by which we design them to support play, socializing, and a sense of belonging for girls and young women.

Public Realm / Public Space

The network of publicly accessible outdoor open spaces in our urban built environments, regardless of ownership. This includes, but is not limited to, sidewalks, parks, schools, and public transit (stations, stops, and plazas).

Research Synergies

This Incubator offers an opportunity to expand our understanding of inclusive design and build upon previous work and research. This research draws from and applies to all Perkins&Will practice areas and disciplines. The following list is a high-level inventory of past and present research initiatives that can guide the firm and its designers in creating more equitable, inclusive, and affirming designs.

- Confronting the Sexist City – Innovation Incubator (2022), Eunice Wong and Vinaya Mani (TOR)
- Gender-inclusive Toilet Design – white papers per (r)esearch (2017 to 2021), various authors and experts, including Mark Walsh and Lindsey Peckinpaugh (CHI)
- PRECEDE – firmwide initiative, Erika Eitland and Kati Peditto (BOS/DEN)
- Social Equity Toolkit – firmwide initiative, Gabrielle Bullock (LAO)

Fall 2022 Innovation Incubator
Vinaya Mani Urban Designer II, Toronto/Ottawa studio
Eunice Wong Associate, Urban Designer, Toronto/Ottawa studio

Confronting the Sexist City

Perkins&Will

The grassroots-level research we do for our projects helps us deliver extraordinary results. But while each studio contributes to a body of critical knowledge that informs our work, often these findings aren't documented or shared—until now.
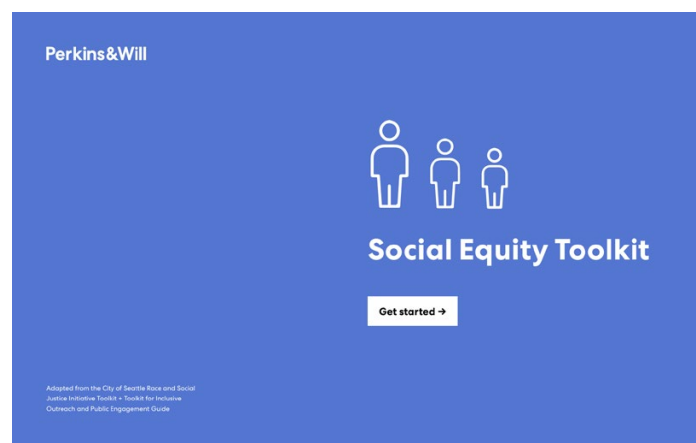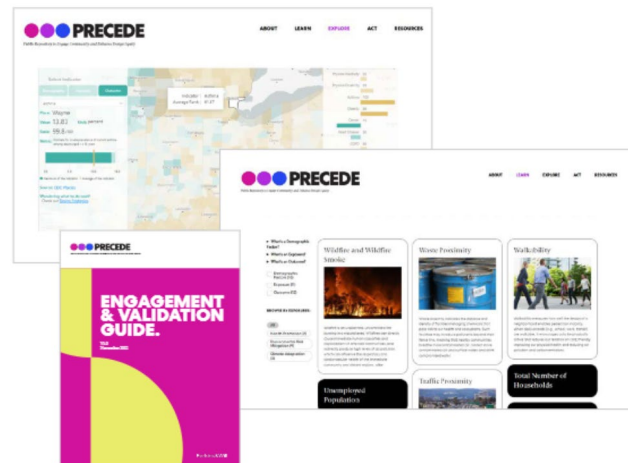
Study Limitations

Age + Gender

Although a generalized discussion of adolescent girls 13-19 needs follows, it is important to acknowledge that this age group is not a monolith. Many socio-demographic characteristics, identities, and experiences impact and shape youth needs and the affordances they are and are not granted by the physical environment. Our study is limited to age and gender. It does not delve into how other layers of one's identity, like race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, language, and ability, impact and influence their perception and experience of public space. We would be remiss to acknowledge, however, that as our study focuses on teen girls in Chicago, one of the most segregated cities in the nation, issues like race and class significantly impact girls' experiences of the built environment. This is an opportunity for further study.

Outdoor Public Spaces

During our study, we received feedback that for those growing up in the suburbs or rural areas where parks were sparse or not within walking distance of their homes, their "public spaces" were indoors. They spent their teen years inside the interior urbanism of libraries, shopping malls, community centers, or other "perceived public" indoor spaces. While indoor spaces were excluded from the scope of our study, this is another opportunity for further exploration.

Urban + Peri-Urban Dwellers

The feedback regarding suburban and rural adolescent experiences led to the realization of another study limitation. While our study focuses on two layers of identity—gender and age—it also unintentionally layers in another: urban or peri-urban city dwellers who live in connected, walkable communities with easier access to parks. This study's results and the following recommendations still apply to those beyond the urban boundary; however, suburban and rural teen experiences and perceptions of the public realm are likely to be more nuanced than our study could capture. This is an opportunity for further study.

STUDY
METHODOLOGY

The Process

Literature Review

Expert Interviews

The Process

This innovation Incubator began in December 2023 and lasted five months. We used various tools and resources to consolidated available, relevant data and make the connection from research to practice.

We approached the topic through a multi-disciplinary lens, synthesizing different fields of study to create a comprehensive perspective on the topic. We gathered insights and expertise from fields such as behavioral science, landscape architecture, urban design, gender studies, psychology, and public health.

Literature Review

What do we currently know about teen girls and the built environment?

Expert Interviews

Who are experts in the field and what can we learn from them?

IRB & Focus Group Coordination

What insights can today's teens provide us about their experiences of the public realm?

Report & Documentation

How do we frame and communicate these insights in an exciting way?

Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval

As part of the Innovation Incubator, the team proposed focus groups with teenagers in Chicago to better understand their first-hand experiences of the built environment and to develop a shared vocabulary around the design of public spaces. The focus groups required Institutional Review Board (IRB) training and approval since our research involves human subjects, specifically children. Since the IRB approval was not anticipated at the start of the study, the timeline for the focus groups was significantly delayed. The team completed the required training and shared the methodology for focus groups with the IRB committee in May 2024. As of July 2024, IRB approval is pending and the focus groups have been tentatively planned for August 2024, once schools open for the new school year.

Tips for Future Researchers...

- Ensure that you budget time for preparation, review, and approval.
- Complete your training beforehand (takes approximately 4 hours).
- Prepare methodology in advance. Be sure you have a clear picture of who you will be engaging, what activities you will conduct, and the limitations of the study.
- Know who to talk to if you have questions. Kati Peditto was instrumental in the preparation and completion of our IRB process.

Literature Review

We began with a review of available peer-reviewed literature, relevant case studies, and similar research initiatives to develop a cohesive summary of our knowledge on the topic of gender and age in the built environment.

Literature Review: The literature review included numerous research papers, articles, and design and engagement toolkits. Research into the relationship between adolescent behavior and public space is a relatively new area of study. This topic emerged in the design, psychology, and public health sphere over the last 50 years, as teenagers become a noted demographic, and they began to access and take over public space.This demographic continues to experience rapid change as advancements in technology, language, culture, and access to information expand. Our primary focus was to understand current research related to girls, ages 6-18, and their experiences of play, socialization, and feelings of belonging within the public realm.

The literature review hinged on three themes centered on play — age, gender, and space. We aimed to understand adolescent development and its relationships with everyday spaces, and how these spaces can help or hinder mental, emotional, and social development. We sought to answer how teenagers use, occupy, and are attracted to spaces differently from younger children and adults. We also sought to understand how 'play' changes between gender and across age groups. Finally, we explored the ways in which these themes express themselves in 'public' space, of different scales and types.

This research brings together findings from seminal texts like *Children's Experience of Place* by Roger Hart, *No Teens Allowed: The Exclusion of Adolescents from Public Spaces* by Patsy Eubanks Owens, and *Play Patterns and Gender* by Carolyn P. Edwards, Lisa Knoche, and Asiye Kumru. A full list of references can be found in the bibliography at the end of the document.

Case Studies: To support the findings of the literature review and expert interviews, we developed three case studies, each tied to a key theme or finding. These case studies are real-world examples that illustrate how teens behave in, interact with, or are influenced by the built environment.

Research Initiatives: A point of reference for this research was the Urban Mind Process and Design Guide by Henning Larsen, a study conducted in Copenhagen between 2022 and 2023. The research aimed to understand how urban public spaces can be more appealing to teenage girls, while also contributing to their mental health and physical well-being.

We found that most existing research into this topic has narrow applicability due to its location and scope. Most research is based on European and Scandinavian countries, like Denmark, the UK, and Sweden and it is focused on methodology of engaging with teens and less so on the design application of their feedback. Through the literature review process, we prioritized research from the United States, where possible, as it showcases the urban and suburban conditions that may impact how teenage girls navigate public spaces in the cities where our studios are predominantly based.

Expert Interviews

After developing an understanding of current, available, and relevant research, we engaged an interdisciplinary and intersectional group of seven topical experts related to public health, education, psychology, sociology, and design. These interviews supplemented and validated the literature review through firsthand observations and expert insights related to the topics of play, design, and adolescent behavior. All the interviews were conducted for one hour, over Zoom or Microsoft Teams and experts were compensated through a gift card.

Although the experts came from diverse fields, they echoed each other in their observations. In short: all said that the design of parks, school playgrounds, and other public spaces influence how teenagers, both girls and boys, behave. Experts noted that while age and gender do influence behavior, cultural backgrounds and socioeconomic conditions also add to the complexity of adolescents' experiences, especially as it relates to access to privately-operated, public space, like malls and museums. Youth engagement experts from Urban Minds and Territory Urban also stressed the importance of including teens in the urban design process, and they provided tips for talking to clients and strategies for engaging focus groups. We have used quotes from the interviews throughout the report to supplement the key themes of our research.

Theory & Observation

- What are similarities or differences between how boys and girls play?
- How does the urban environment impact adolescent development?
- How do you notice social and individual behavior changing through adolescence?

Design

- How can public spaces (parks, playgrounds, streets) better support girls' well-being and sense of belonging?
- What are key challenges that reduce opportunities for play and socialization in our cities?

Practice

- How can practitioners more fully, appropriately, and inclusively engage youth in the design process?
- What are challenges that limit youth engagement in current urban planning processes?
- What are key issues for teenagers and adolescents that cities overlook while designing public spaces?

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KEY
THEMES

Adolescent Development

Societal Constructs and Messages

Teens and the Public Realm

Key Themes

The topic of designing public spaces for teenage girls is not one-dimensional; it brings together factors of age, gender, behavior, health, stereotypes, and urban design. The following three themes emerged from our the literature review, and they were further validated during the expert interviews.

The themes intersect with and relate to each other, illustrating the larger, complex narrative behind the challenges that teens, both girls and boys, face when accessing and using public space. The research discusses teenage behavior in relation to play, and intentionally calls attention to teenage girls through the document.
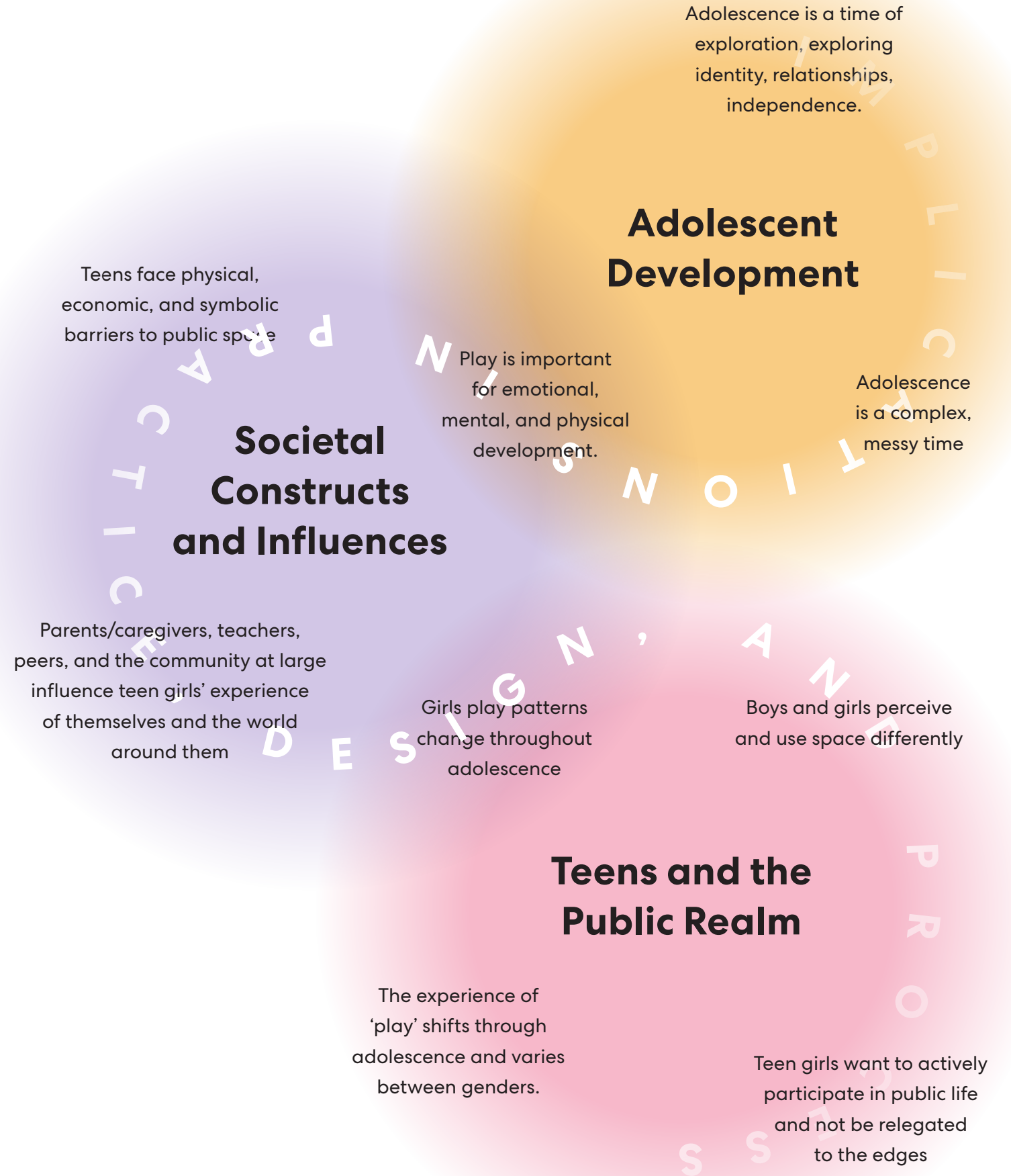
Adolescent Development

Being a teenager is more than the biological processes that include the physical and mental changes of adolescence. Its a phase of 'in-betweenness', where one transitions from child to adult. Understanding how teenagers see themselves, their social groups, and the environment around them is crucial to the design of inclusive public spaces. Here, we also focus on the evolution of 'play' into 'socializing' through the most quintessential teenage pattern - 'hanging out'.

Societal Constructs and Influences

Teenage behaviors, attitudes, and experiences are greatly influenced by societal norms and stereotypes. For both girls and boys, the adults around them directly and indirectly communicate messages about identity, conduct, and inclusion. This theme explores the complicated relationship teenagers have with the cities and adults around them, and the "images" and stereotypes they are depicted as. We cover the spectrum of influences influencing teens, the policy mechanisms meant to regulate their behaviors, and how those regulations translate to built space. Even the smallest details can send powerful messages to teenagers about the right to public space.

Teens and the Public Realm

Finally, the last section showcases how adolescence, gender, and societal constructs influence how teenagers use the public spaces around them. All the above factors don't just determine where teenage boys and girls play, but also how they play, the various styles of play they prefer, and what they desire from public parks and spaces.

Adolescence is a time of exploration, exploring identity, relationships, independence.

Teens face physical, economic, and symbolic barriers to public space

Adolescent Development

Play is important for emotional, mental, and physical development.

Adolescence is a complex, messy time

Societal Constructs and Influences

Parents/caregivers, teachers, peers, and the community at large influence teen girls' experience of themselves and the world around them

Girls play patterns change throughout adolescence

Boys and girls perceive and use space differently

Teens and the Public Realm

The experience of 'play' shifts through adolescence and varies between genders.

Teen girls want to actively participate in public life and not be relegated to the edges

Adolescence is a messy and complex time.

Its when children begin to...

- Explore and develop their self-identity
- Form social relationships and peer groups
- Explore their freedom and independence away from adults
- Understand social responsibility
- Develop abstract thinking, moving from concrete to infinite possibilities
- Seek a sense of belonging

"As an adolescent, privacy is not about who you keep out, but who you invite in and who's allowed in your space... These personal space needs change as you get older and are moderated by gender."

Kati Peditto, Design Psychologist, Perkins & Will

But for teenage girls, its also a time where they...

stop playing outside...

Early Adolescence / Pre-teen

(8 to 12 years)

... stop playing in organized sports

Middle Adolescence / Teenager

13 to 17 years

Late Adolescence / Young Adult

18-21 years

Adolescent Development

Adolescence is a complex phase of development that has varying interpretations depending on the region and culture. According to the World Health Organization, this phase occurs as the transition between childhood and adulthood, and is defined as a person between the ages of 10 to 19. Typically, the ages of 8-12 are considered early-adolescence or the pre-teen years. The ages of 13 to 19 are considered middle to late adolescence or teenagers, and after which they are referred to as adults.

Teenagers experience complex social, emotional, and physical changes because of puberty. During this time, developmental tasks help prepare them to become healthy adults. Self-development happens by trying on different "hats" that shape identity, help them discover interests and passions, explore freedom, and build self-esteem. (Larson and Richards 1989; Nightingale and Wolverton 1993; Pellegrino 1980 in Owens, 2002). During adolescence, children also go through social development, where they discover peer groups based on mutual interests and values and begin to explore how communities and societies work.

Teenagers and Public Space

Access to public space is crucial for the development of adolescents. According to Lieberg (1995), teenagers relate to the city in three ways — *to learn from the city, to use the city as a stage, and to take over and change the city.* Public spaces like parks and playgrounds offer opportunities for children to develop and hone their interests and build social relationships by "hanging out." Adolescence comes with higher levels of freedom, and public spaces offer a respite from the eyes of parents, teachers, or other adults.

Urban areas, streets, parks, and plazas help teens feel anonymous and offer feelings of privacy, even when surrounded by people. Teenagers typically spend more time in public spaces because they have nowhere else to go, unlike adults who have more spending power for places like cafes and shops and designated spaces like bars and restaurants.

While teens are typically the most frequent users of public space, they are frequently excluded through design or regulation/signage. Teens are considered too big or too old for spaces like playgrounds, which are considered "children's spaces." Standard playground signage in the United States displays age limits for participation, and typical post-and-deck equipment is designed for those under 12.

According to Crane (2000), this exclusion of adolescents from public space is often justified for reasons of health and safety, public liability, or duty of care obligations. The control and policing of teens not only prevent adolescent participation in our cities, but also shapes the behavior and attitude that teenagers grow up with. More about these factors can be read on Page 32.

"Sense of belonging"

Limiting adolescents' access to public spaces contributes to a feeling of 'not belonging' to public spaces they grew up in, according to a study by C.Barron (2022). The feeling of 'belonging' is important for youths and their social capital (Schaefer-McDaniel, 2004). A lack of 'belonging' is related to low self-esteem, increased levels of anxiety (Lee & Robbins, 1998), depression, and suicidal ideation (Bailey & McLaren, 2005 as cited in C.Barron, 2022).

"It'd be nice for a teenager to have more third spaces, to study and hang out. I don't want to see people I already know in the mall or library because those are the only two places we can visit."

Audy Noor, High school student and Communications Coordinator, Urban Minds

Clockwise from Top:
1. Teens love places where they can sit, talk, and look out into activities. Source: Adobe Stock

2. Places to retreat are important for self development and to build identity. They also foster non-sports activities that teens might enjoy in the public realm. Source: Adobe Stock

3. 'Hanging out' is a key aspect of teenage socialization and play. Source: Adobe Stock

Understanding "Teenagers"

The term 'teenagers' is relatively new, only emerging into pop culture and everyday diction in the 1950s. In the early twentieth century, the United States and other countries witnessed many changes, as industrial societies transitioned into modern ones. In the United States, high school graduation rates grew about 50% between the 1900s and mid-1950s (C.Goldin, 1998). This allowed young people to create an environment where they could develop their own customs, away from adults. As World War II ended, young people, from the ages 15-19, had a newfound power - they were recognized as potential consumers, many had the ability to vote, had access to automobiles, and could also influence popular culture. These factors propelled teenagers into a distinct demographic and cultural group.

Places to Interact and to Retreat

According to Lieberg (1995), "the daily life of youth takes place in social and spatial contexts that have meaning for them even on a more symbolic level". Lieberg postulates that teens need two different kinds of spaces - *places of retreat and places of interaction*. As cities and urban areas grew in the late 20th century, teenagers began "hanging out" in public spaces like parks or street corners. For those who had money, gathering spaces extended to drive-in movie theaters, malls, and fast food restaurants. Both public and private places are crucial because they help teenagers explore a variety of identities, alone or with their peers.

Adapting Environments

In 1979, Hart's study of 'Children's Experience of Place' in New York established that children value the ability to modify and adapt the environments around them. By giving order and meaning to the environment, and physically modifying it, teens make themselves "at home" in spaces. The freedom and opportunity to modify spaces and take control of their surroundings is essential to the age of adolescence, and can be seen in both public and private environments.

Socializing as Play

An important characteristic of teenage behavior is the experience of "hanging out." This term has often been equated to "doing nothing" or "sitting around," but for teenagers, it is essential to their development. While adults may assume that teens must be in engaged organized activities so that they are not bored, and push to enroll kids in activities, "hanging out" is actually a form of social play as they get to know peers, build relationships, or flirt with others (Owens, 2002). Teenagers of all ethnicities/race "hang out," either by gathering in public spaces in parks or plazas, or in privately-operated "public" spaces like malls, coffee shops, or boba tea shops. Where teens hang out is not only dependent upon their sociocultural and sociodemographic contexts, but also the availability of public and private spaces within their neighborhood. Nevertheless, teens generally engage in some form of socializing, by sitting with friends, talking about common interests, and exchanging jokes (Lieberg, 1995).

When teens consider places to hang out, they look for privacy away from adults, while also still being visible and accessible to the public realm. Staircases, alleys, picnic tables in parks, and benches outside fast food restaurants attract teenagers since there's place to sit and talk to each other, and also to look out into the street or park (Owens, 2002). Adults may classify this behavior as "loitering," assuming that teens will engage in destructive behaviors without adult supervision (Lieberg, 1995).

"Hanging out" is fundamental to how adolescents grow and must be incorporated into our public realm. If adults can socialize in public and private spaces, and children can play in playgrounds, where can teens gather to express themselves?
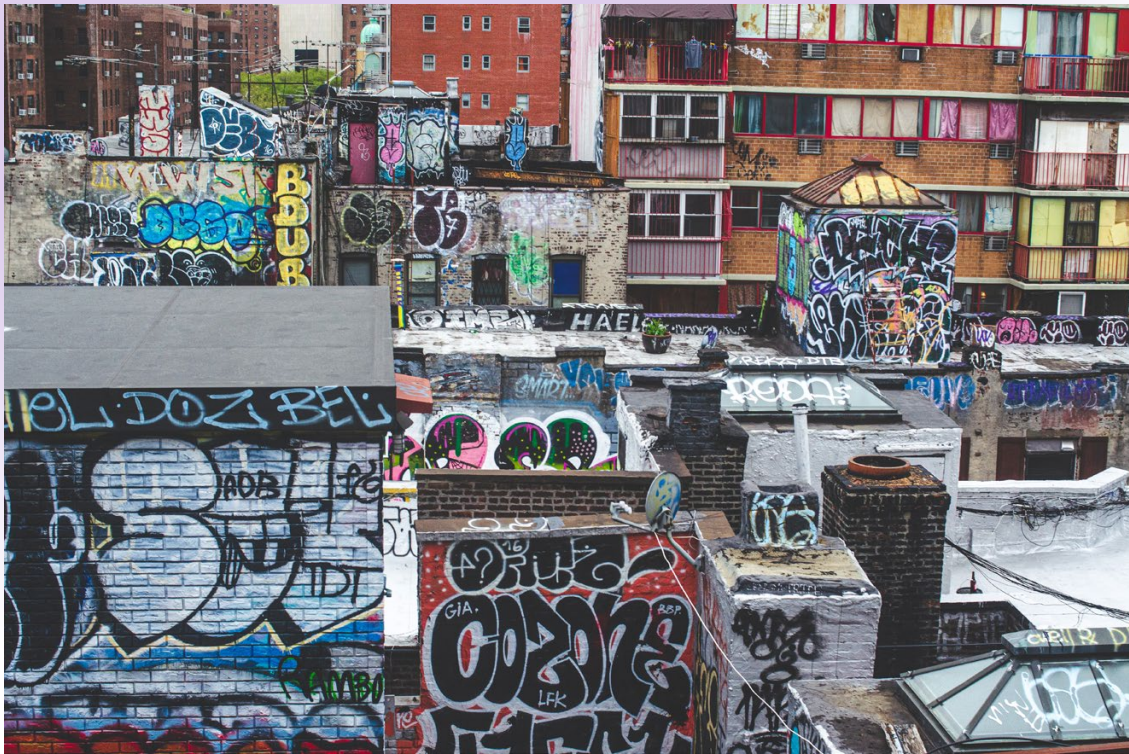

"There's a perception in the United States that loitering is a bad thing. Like it's a crime to sit in one place and hang out for a really long time. But that's an arbitrary construct because how long is too long?"

*Hana Ishikawa,
Landscape Architect, site*

Case Study #1

Clockwise from Top:
Graffiti in New York emerged from teenages seeking to find a form of communication. Source: Adobe Stock

Teenagers like to interact with their environment and modify it. Source: Adobe Stock

Teens enjoy giving back to their community through local initiatives. Source: Adobe Stock

"Youths refuse to adapt to the unwritten rules of public spaces.... They "reduce" the complexity and irrational structures of the city; that is, they make them more comprehensible and less strange for themselves"

Mats Lieberg in 'Teenagers and Public Space', 1995

Graffiti

When adolescents don't like their environment, they either alter it or find a new one. That's one of the reasons modern-day graffiti, as we know it, emerged in the 1960s in Bronx, New York. As public space access changed, teenagers began to feel like they had a right to the city but lacked spaces and mediums to express themselves. In Bronx, teens who came from low-income communities with high crime felt silenced in the public and civic realm. They began to use art and graffiti as a cry for acknowledgement or to initiate change (Deitch, 2011). According to David Ley, 1974, graffiti evolved into territorial markers that represented a group or an individual. These tags or markers were used throughout New York as a "twilight form of communication" for teenagers to articulate their emotions, send messages to civic authorities about their needs, and challenge social values of that time (Ley et. al, 1974). As graffiti spread across the country and the world, it was seen as vandalism and teenagers were cast in a negative light — one of revolt, violence, and crime.

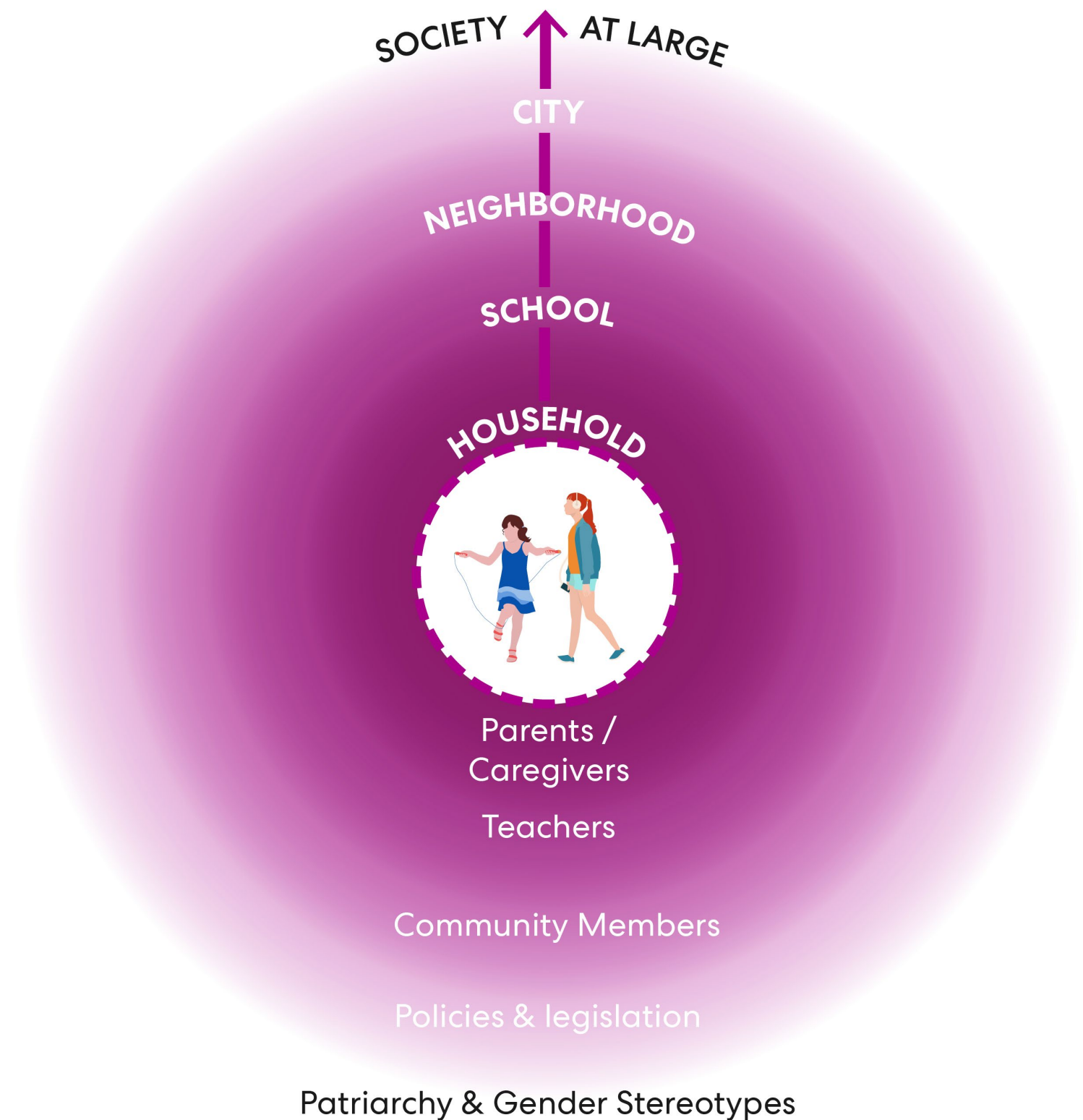## Adapting and Changing the Environment

When teens attempt to change their environment to suit their needs, they can be disruptive. However, these changes can manifest through various behavioral patterns. For some teens, it might mean rearranging seating and play equipment to foster better forms of play. Others might use a space beyond its intended purpose, like skateboarding in plazas or or outdoor staircases. Public spaces should present the possibility of change and have flexible, interactive elements like splash pads, giant lego blocks, and movable seating, which does not dictate only a singular kind of behavior. Today, teens are also at the forefront of sparking change in their local communities and are shown to care about the environment, climate change, and sustainability. When teens were asked to rank their top priorities for a mental health-friendly city, 21% of respondents voted for the city to "have opportunities for youth to serve their community" (Collins et al., 2024).

In many contexts, teenagers are seen as "invaders." They are too loud, too old, too young, and too broke for public space ... all at once

"I think that a lot of times, the police can't really distinguish between a cool hangout, a safe hangout ... and then just kids looking to cause trouble."

Sizwe Morris-Louis, a Philadelphia high-schooler

SOCIETY ↑ AT LARGE

CITY

NEIGHBORHOOD

SCHOOL

HOUSEHOLD

Parents / Caregivers

Teachers

Community Members

Policies & legislation

Patriarchy & Gender Stereotypes

The "Spectrum of Influence"

Social Constructs and Messages

Since the advent of modernity, public urban space has been perceived as unequivocally white, upper-class, and male. The home, or private realm, on the other hand, has been the realm of women, an idea rooted in patriarchal and capitalistic ideologies. While we continue to deconstruct these hierarchies and break with these binary assumptions, research shows that as much as we want to perceive public space as a "neutral" realm, men's and women's personal experiences of the same place can be quite different.

Gendered Issues

Women experience physical, social, economic, and symbolic barriers to freely express themselves in and use public space. Leslie Kern's book Feminist City discusses a variety of messages and societal constructs that influence women's experiences in public space. Narrow sidewalks impede pedestrians traveling with strollers, carriers, or mobility assistance devices – necessities for caregiving, a responsibility predominantly provided by women. Women and girls have different restroom needs due to menstruation, pregnancy, menopause, and caregiving, typically taking longer and requiring more reliable access. Yet, decision-makers rarely view the lack of public bathrooms as a gendered issue (Criado Perez, 2019).

From a policy and operations perspective, something like snowplow schedules and routes focusing on roads over sidewalks and prioritizing business districts and commercial corridors benefits commuters. How is this practice gendered? Because commuters traveling to employment destinations are, in most places, predominantly men. Sidewalk users, conversely, are typically service-sector and domestic workers, women's realm of responsibility. Decision-makers who do not approach their policy, practices, designs, and public space management through a lens of gender will perpetuate and exacerbate many of these inequitable experiences in the public realm.

The pervasive harms of gender-based violence and harassment that occur in the public realm impact their experience, behaviors, well-being, and mental health. According to a 2019 study by the UC San Diego Center on Gender Equity and Health's Stop Street Harassment Project, not only do 81% of women report experiencing some form of sexual harassment or assault in their lifetime, but 68% report harassment in a public space, like on the street or in a park. Harassment and inappropriate behaviors make women and girls feel less safe, limit their time in spaces, and change their routines and behaviors to increase their feelings of safety and comfort.

Teen girls experience many of the same messages, barriers, and constraints as adult women, but they are also impacted by an additional layer: age.

The Spectrum of Influence

Throughout adolescence, teens experience a spectrum of influences that directly and indirectly communicate messages and narratives. According to prominent studies by Hill and Lynch (1983), adolescence is a time of intense pressure and socialization into gender roles and behaviors, or as they've coined it, "gender intensification." During adolescence, girls become more self-conscious, report lower self-esteem, and become increasingly concerned with interpersonal relationships and their physical appearance. Pressures to conform to culturally sanctioned gender roles and constructs come from a variety of sources – parents/caregivers, teachers, peers, community members, and the media. Their messages influence, control, and regulate teens' behaviors, appearances, and movements.

Parents and caregivers are adolescents' first point of reference for psychological and societal constructs. According to Hill and Lynch, parents and caregivers typically communicate messages of independence and self-confidence to sons over daughters. They teach boys to be assertive and bold, compared to expectations for girls to be polite and accommodating. Daughters are perceived as vulnerable, and caregivers prioritize protection and modesty through their regulation of how girls are to sit, talk, behave, and dress. Parents limit girls' mobility, the amount of time allowed outside/in public, and with whom they can spend that time (Blum et al., 2017).

According to our conversation with Patsy Eubanks Owens, it's not that parents trust girls less; they trust them more than boys. Their control is more about

"Be it acknowledged: The man-made environments which surround us reinforce conventional patriarchal definitions of women's role in society and spatially imprint those sexist messages on our daughters and sons. They have conditioned us to an environmental myopia which limits our self-concepts...which limits our visions and choices for ways of living and working...which limits us by not providing the environments we need to support our autonomy or by barring our access to them."

From Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics (1981)

1. Signage in many public spaces specifically prohibits youth activities like congregating (e.g., "hanging out"). Source: Adobe Stock

METROPOLITAN POLICE DEPARTMENT (DC POLICE / MPD)

DC announces 7 youth curfew focus areas. Here's where they are

By **Ted Oberg, News4 Investigative Reporter** • Published August 17, 2023 • Updated on August 17, 2023 at 11:54 pm

Tampa teen curfew: City leaders delay vote on proposal aimed at curbing crime

By Kellie Cowan and Genevieve Curtis | Updated January 25, 2024 12:28pm EST | Tampa | FOX 13 News |

LORI LIGHTFOOT

What Are The Rules For Chicago's New Curfews For Minors, And How Will They Be Enforced?

Published May 17, 2022 • Updated on May 17, 2022 at 7:43 am

Ineffective youth curfews expand across the nation

Clockwise from Top:
1. Skateparks are prominent teen hang out spots, and they tend to be located in "undesirable" areas such as below highways or bridges.
Source: Adobe Stock

2. Teen girls hanging out on steps, a popular space for gathering.
Source: Adobe Stock

protection. Unfortunately, this desire to protect girls is not unfounded when, according to a UC San Diego Report, harassment first happens to most people when they are teenagers, with 50% reporting that they experienced it by the time they were 17.

There are also familial expectations and roles that impact girls' use of the public realm. Adolescent girls also become more "sex-typed" in their familial roles, responsible for the caregiving of younger siblings, a responsibility that extends to the public realm. (Blum et al., 2017, Marks et al., 2009, East et al., 2009)

Teachers are a second point of reference for societal constructs and messaging. Teachers intentionally or unintentionally impact an adolescent's identity development each school day by monitoring students' behaviors and appearances. They may unwittingly place gendered expectations on girls in the classroom that then influence how they behave in or navigate public spaces.

In the larger community, public policies, laws, and ordinances aim to regulate teens' presence and behaviors in the public sphere. These policies restrict when teens can use public spaces, which spaces they can use, and what they can do there. According to Eubanks Owens, these policies stem from the public perception of teens as perpetrators of crimes, inappropriate behaviors, or trouble. Perceptions that lead to distrust or suspicion of teens when encountered in public settings – a setting crucial to their growth and development.

Cities attempt to regulate and police teens through curfew or loitering laws, anti-graffiti campaigns, or skateboard ordinances (Collins,

2001). According to an article by Stateline, a non-profit state-focused news organization, more than 400 towns, cities, and counties across the country impose nightly curfews on teens. These laws aim to restrict teens use of public space, preventing them from social interactions and getting together with their peers (Owens, 2008; Collins, 2001).

Chicago has long had a teen curfew. It's been in the news in recent years, from the 2022 "teen takeover" of Millennium Park that resulted in then-Mayor Lightfoot moving the curfew from 11 to 10pm, to current Alderman Brian Hopkins pushing for an even earlier curfew of 8 pm (Axios). Some A study from the Campbell Collaboration in 2016 found, however, that curfew laws are ineffective in reducing crime and victimization, and organizations like the ACLU argue these laws violate individual rights (Owens, 2008).

Influences on Design

Policy and design go hand in hand. These messages of exclusion and hostility reveal themselves in the physical environment through hostile architectural practices. Playground signage places age limitations on the space, prohibiting those over 12 from using the equipment. Park rules signage prohibits loitering, or the simple act of "hanging out" for teens.

Many cities strategically omit or remove seating from public spaces to deter specific populations without recognizing how this impacts not only the unhoused but pregnant people, the elderly, and teens. some cities target teens directly through high-pitched speakers or special lighting that deters them from using the space.

Case Study #2

Sonic Devices

According to a 2019 article from NPR, Philadelphia installed a small anti-loitering speaker known as "the Mosquito" in more than 30 parks and recreation centers. The Mosquito emits a constant, high-pitched, pulsing noise that, according to the manufacturer, only affects people 25 or younger (though there is one sound profile they claim affects all ages). Park officials have been installing them across their system since 2014 to deter young people from hanging out in and around public spaces. Washington, DC, had these devices installed at one time but has since removed them due to complaints from the National Youth Rights Association. These speakers have been installed across Europe as well, though Scotland removed them from train stations by 2017.

Pink "Acne" Lights

A 2019 article from The Guardian reports that bright pink lighting, aimed at creating an unflattering environment that highlights a person's blemishes, was installed in public areas in Mansfield, UK, in 2009. The lighting makes teens' acne stand out, a cruel strategy to deter them from hanging out in public spaces at a time when teens are already experiencing feelings of uncertainty about their identity and self-esteem.

Clockwise from Top:
1. Teens playing basketball in a Philadelphia park that has the Mosquito speaker installed (gray box). Source: Kimberly Paynter, WHYY

"They have a right to congregate, it's part of being a teenager."

Peta Halls, National Youth Agency

The experience of 'play' shifts through adolescence and between genders, causing girls and boys to perceive and use spaces differently...

There is one type of masculinity that skate parks and pump tracks cater to, but they are missing a whole other type of boy and a whole lot of girls.

Imogen Clark (Make Space for Girls, Bloomberg)

imaginative

collaborative

"fitting in"
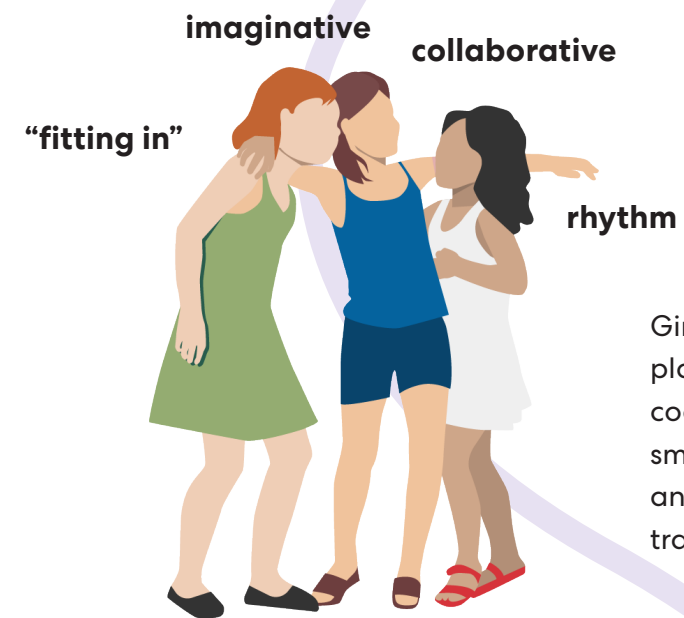
rhythm

Girls prefer collaborative and imaginative play, with rhythm and whole-body coordination. Play is often structured and smooth-flowing. Girls select playmates and friends based on shared personality traits – does this person "fit in" with us?

competitive

game-based

physical

"rowdy"

Boys prefer rough and tumble play, which is game-based, physical, and competitive. Play is discontinuous, and will often switch to another game. Boys select a peer group based on shared interests – can we play games together?

Teens and the Public Realm

Since girls and boys have unique styles of play, they also perceive space differently, within their home, neighborhood, schools, and parks.

Within the Community

Boys and girls exhibit different patterns related to access, mobility, and use. Girls tend to play in spaces or places closer to home or indoors while boys play further away from home while not under direct supervision (Edwards, C.P., Knoche, L., & Kumru, A., 2001). These patterns are shaped by the messages that teens receive, from adults like caregivers and teachers, or through media — there is a hierarchy of who gets to use public space, and teenage girls are often excluded from the list.

In Parks and Public Space

Parks and public spaces around the world, which are most commonly designed with Multi-Use Games Areas (MUGAs) or hard-surfaced courts, lead to teen girls choosing not to use public space. MUGAs are flexible spaces that are meant to accommodate different types of competitive team play. They are typically designed with with natural or artificial turf for sports like soccer or football, or are hard-surface courts used for basketball, tennis, or other similar sports. MUGAs are enclosed by a fence, which keep the ball inside the playing area, and sets a clear perimeter boundary indicating those who are included or simply observers.

Who are the primary users of these spaces? A study by Make Space for Girls, a UK-based charity, recorded only five (5) girls using an MUGA in their subject park space, out of 60 total users (Barker et al., 2022). This aligns with similar research showing that boys utilize fields and courts more

often than girls (Riemers and Knapp, 2017). The simple presence of boys may discourage girls from using the fields. Boys take up 10 times more space than girls, typically occupying the larger, more central spaces, leaving girls to the periphery (Edwards, C.P., Knoche, L., & Kumru, A., 2001).

While research shows prioritizing MUGAs discourages girls from using parks, traditional park design typically places MUGAs as the central feature surrounded by benches or other programming like playgrounds. When teens use large fields, they are faced with a fishbowl situation, drawing attention from those along the periphery looking in at them. According to our experts, teenage boys do not mind this situation and have even been known to prefer the attention. However, girls retreat to the periphery, where they can look out instead (Make Space for Girls).

According to Owens, parks need 'prospect refuges', which are smaller spaces and alcoves where teenagers can look out into their surroundings but not be seen. While this is true of teenage behavior, prospect refuges are especially crucial to the way girls use public spaces.

In Schoolyards

For nearly nine months per year, children spend most of their day in schools and schoolyards. For teens lucky enough to attend a school with a schoolyard, these spaces are a place for play, socializing, and learning. But these spaces can also serve as sites of contention between boys and girls, since they are rarely designed with teenagers in mind (Owens, 1997). In the schoolyard, teens develop their identity and showcase their skills. Recreational tasks also help teens set goals, complete tasks, and claim space. Through middle

Clockwise:
1. Sports courts and fields designed with fences are hardly used by teenage girls, who feel trapped within the space Image Credit: Unsplash

2. Staircases and alleys are common places for teens to 'hang out' since they provide seating and a place to look out into the city. Source: Adobe Stock

3. Teens love playgrounds but often find that play equipment is too small for them. Teens desire challenging play places with climbing and swinging. Source: Adobe Stock

school (grades 5 to 8; ages 9 to 14), adolescent girls and boys also become more aware of their bodies and re-learn how to interact with each other. Yet, school environments rarely consider how to facilitate developmental activities for teenagers and are instead designed to control their behavior (Owens, 2002). For teenage girls, who are often pushed to the periphery of schoolyards by their male counterparts, the schoolyard design signifies a strong hierarchy of who gets to enjoy most of the space.

"Boys will be in the huge central space and girls are over in the corner, where they mess around and giggle and push and shove, away from boys watching....When girls have spaces where they feel anonymous, they want to go out and be badasses."

Lahna Addington, Educator, Cameron Middle School

From Left to Right:
1. Teenage girls enjoy activities with rhythm like skipping, hopping, and jumping. Image Credit: Street Lab

2. Volleyball is played as a collaborative sport between boys and girls because there's less discrepancy between talent and less contact between players. Source: Adobe Stock

3. Different forms of seating and benches can foster socializing between teens and other groups. Image Credit: Street Lab

Programming and Equipment

Programming and play equipment strongly influence how boys and girls play because they indicate what behaviors are allowed/encouraged in the space. Boys and girls differ in their physical activity preferences, levels, and in their types of play. When public spaces are designed around fields and courts, girls are deterred from using them. In 1999, Vienna's *Frauenburo* department observed that after the age of nine, the number of girls in public parks reduced dramatically. One of the primary reasons was that the city's parks were designed around one large open space, which girls couldn't and didn't want to compete for, with more assertive boys.

For girls, play can take a variety of forms — walking, creating things, climbing, sliding, resting, being active, or playing tag games (Riemers and Knapp, 2017). These forms of play require physical movement but they are not always sports-based and need not be competitive. Instead, they foster cooperation, collaboration, and interaction between a group.

In one research study, girls aged 12-13 years old mentioned swings, slides, and sandpits as facilities they use in parks (Van Hecke et al, 2016). "Well-designed playground equipment can foster co-mingling, to sit, slide, and swing, at the same time.

There are fewer opportunities for co-mingling on a court, only some kids get to play and others don't", mentioned Lahnna Addington, educator at Cameron Middle School in Chicago.

Girls are also more likely to use parks and playgrounds that can be used by multiple age groups (Van Hecke et al, 2016). Since girls are entrusted with caregiving duties from a younger age than boys (East et al, 2009), they often babysit their siblings. Playgrounds that allow for multiple age groups to use the same space allow girls to keep an eye on their siblings.

When boys and girls play together, it is usually through games where both groups can collaborate without competing. Hopscotch and jump rope are examples of co-ed play that use rhythm, teamwork, and communication, where girls need not be aggressive to compete. In the United States, volleyball is seen as a women's sport due to the passage of Title IX and increased funding opportunities for women's volleyball teams across schools. One reason that Lahnna Addington attributes to the success of volleyball is that it requires "less contact", meaning teenage girls need not push or shove to win. There is also less discrepancy between talent, unlike basketball, which requires players to be fast and aggressive.

Park Features - Nature, Aesthetics, and Safety

Most research related to how teens use public spaces show that they value open spaces, greenery, sport and play facilities, and the presence of other adolescents (Mertens et al, 2019). However, new gender-aggregated qualitative and quantitative research shows that boys and girls look for different things when visit public spaces.

One study conducted in Belgium shows that girls value maintenance and upkeep when visiting a park, compared to the availability of sports facilities (Mertens et al, 2019). Teenage girls also value the aesthetics of a park, specifically nature and greenery, color, historical information, and the availability of quiet spaces (Van Hecke et al, 2016). On the other hand, girls also consider factors that may negatively influence physical safety, like insufficient lighting, poor maintenance, secluded areas, or too much traffic. Other observational studies also show that teenage girls used multiple facilities in a park, like hard courts, water features, basketball courts, swings, and playgrounds, depending on race/ethnicity. Comparatively, boys of all race/ethnicities were seen using the basketball court primarily (Marquet et al, 2019).

"Well-designed playground equipment can foster co-mingling, to sit, slide, and swing, at the same time. There are fewer opportunities for co-mingling on a court, only some kids get to play and others don't"

Lahnna Addington, Educator, Cameron Middle School

Case Study #3

Urban planner and researcher Honorata Grzesikowska and Ewelina Jaskulska, under the label Architektoniczki, carried out a study in two schools in Catalonia, Spain to understand how boys and girls use schoolyards. The study was conducted over a year in collaboration with students, parents, and the community to map the movements of students aged 8 and 14. One of the schools is arranged around a central multi-use field with markings and nets for basketball and soccer. A walking track runs along the boundary, while a staircase leads down towards the school yard.

The team used the spaghetti diagram method to trace how boys (in blue) use the school playground as compared to girls (in red). As shown in other research, boys tend to use more space than girls and occupy the center, pushing girls to the periphery. The area with the most dense red spots is the staircase to the south, a spatial feature that allows girls to sit together in groups and look over the activities, instead of being looked at. As the researchers note, when sports fields and equipment dominate school playgrounds, there is a hierarchy in who gets to use the space. Typically, boys (mostly athletic boys) use the field while all others (girls and boys who are not interested in sports) are excluded. This design of space and behavior sends an important message to teenagers — that play space is gendered and hierarchical, and only certain groups have the right to enjoy it.

"The occupation and use of central spaces is done in accordance with the hierarchy of power, in which there are those who have the right to this space and there are those who are excluded. These patterns become even more evident in outdoor spaces 'focused on football'..."

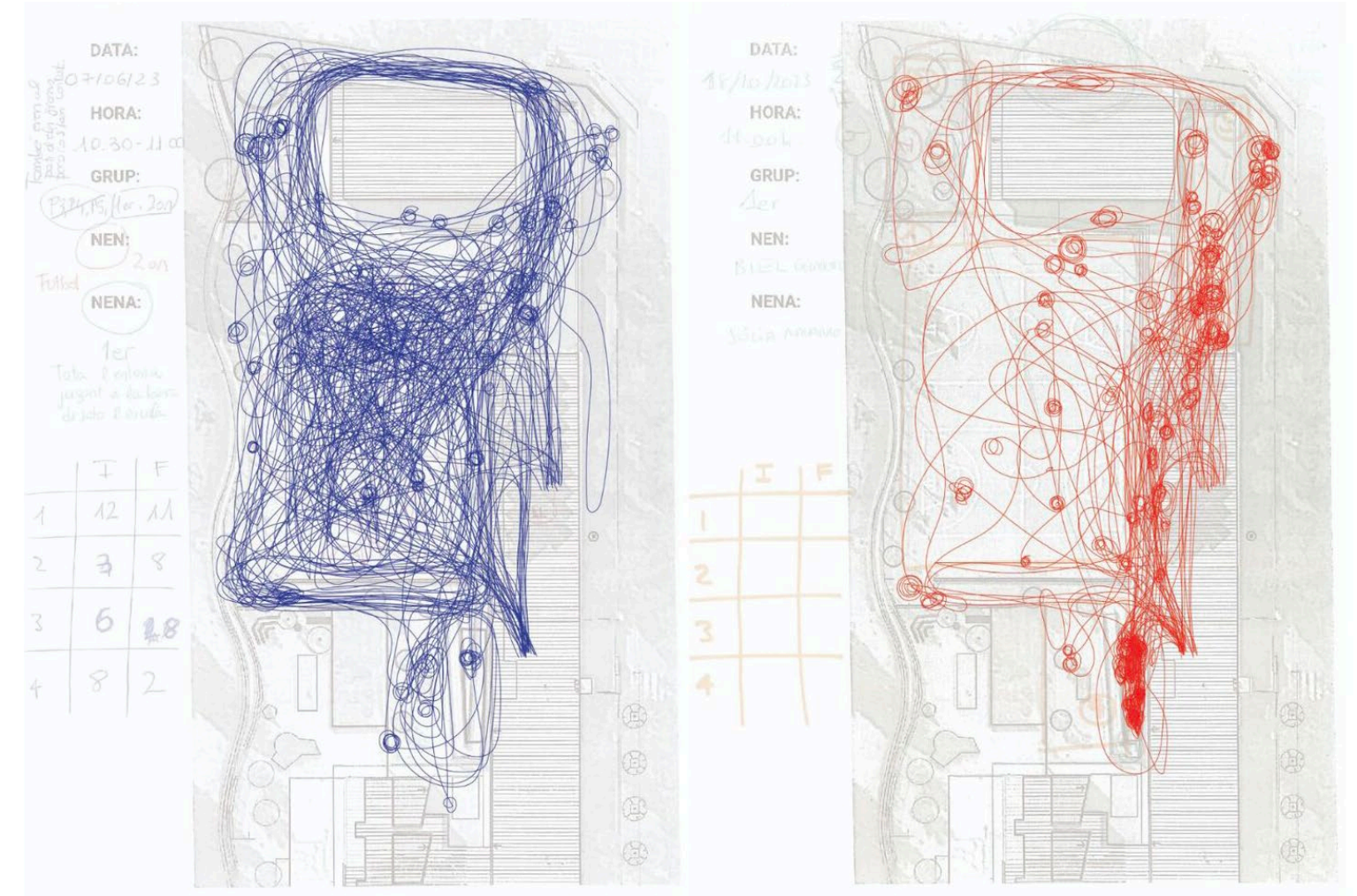*Honorata Grzesikowska, Urban Planner and Researcher*

A school playground in Catalunya, Spain with a central games area that is designed with amenities for basketball and soccer. A walking track runs alongside the games area and a staircase looks down upon the playground.

Image Credit: Honorata Grzesikowska, Architektoniczki

The map on the left and the right tracks the movement patterns of boys (in blue) and of girls (in red) respectively. The boys can be seen occupying the central area, which has been programmed with sports amenities, while the girls congregate in the periphery, where the walking track and the staircases are located. These spaces allow girls to 'hang out' and socialize, while not being the center of attention.

Image Credit: Honorata Grzesikowska, Architektoniczki

STUDY
IMPLICATIONS

Implications in Process

Implications for Design

Implications in Practice

The implications of this study go beyond design strategies, though we will cover that in the following pages. Our findings call for a shift in our industry and a transformation of our practice.

They necessitate re-evaluating our current methodologies and highlight the importance of incorporating diverse perspectives, particularly those of younger generations. By integrating teens' unique needs and perspectives, we can foster innovation, ensure the relevance and sustainability of our designs, and support community cohesion and individual well-being.

"One of our core things is to throw away our own assumptions and actually treat youth as co-creators and not kind of see them like top down, but understanding that there's a huge value in listening."

Angela Ng, Executive Director, Urban Minds

Clockwise from Top:

Teens engaging with the City of Chicago's We Will comprehensive planning process. Source: City of Chicago

Territory Advanced Design Studio teens doing an annual cleaning and makeover for a Territory youth-designed wayfinding sculpture. Source: Territory Urban

Teens participating in an activity for the Clarkston Greenway Feasibility Study, a project by Perkins&Will Atlanta

Teens drawing ideas and sharing thoughts as part of the Jane Finch Initiative, a project by Perkins&Will Toronto, in collaboration with Urban Minds.

Implications in Practice

Improve Pursuits

This study reiterated for the research team the need to add intentional and descriptive language in project scopes that will extend the firm's definition of "inclusive design and engagement" to include age and gender. Our scope of services for community engagement must thoughtfully and intentionally outline how we plan to engage under-represented groups, including teenagers.

We must budget for compensation via stipends to individuals or organizations or consider bringing them onto the team as contracted sub-consultants. By improving how we approach and pursue projects through the language we use and the scopes we propose and following through in the form of active partnerships, compensation, and authentic inclusion, we will create better public spaces for the next generation.

Collaborators: Studio Marketing Leaders, Managing Directors and Principals, Practice Leaders

Update Social Equity Toolkit

The Perkins&Will Social Equity Toolkit is a valuable resource for any project, especially for those requiring community or stakeholder engagement. This research revealed a need to update the Toolkit to ensure age and gender are considered when identifying and mapping key stakeholders.

Collaborators: Gabrielle Bullock, Chief Diversity Officer, JEDI Council, JEDI Champions

User Design Audit

As part of our practice, we recommend incorporating a more intentional approach to evaluating how well our designs address different user groups – particularly teen girls. Some tools and tips for this workshop include:

Consider a "user group workshop" where the design team meets with JEDI Champions, Research Champions, and other topical experts to evaluate the design through a user's lens. Even better, bring in your teen partners to critique your work. They will have a variety of insights into how you might improve the design quality in a way that resonates with them and creates a space they want to enjoy.

Develop user profiles considering age, race, ability, life stage, and class. Use your knowledge of the project type, and consider the demographics of the surrounding community as well. Consider running quick demographic reports to support your user group profiles and using the design strategies outlined in the "Implications in Design" section, review the public realm design of your project.

Collaborators: Design Directors, Design Principals, Project Managers

Build Relationships

Authentic engagement requires building bridges and cultivating relationships with the community and stakeholders. Writing teen-focused engagement into a scope of services is easy, but building trust with teens takes time, energy, effort, and investment. We encourage all studios to build relationships with youth organizations in their cities by volunteering at the organization's events, sharing knowledge through presentations and workshops, inviting organizations into the studio for tours, or perhaps by offering job shadowing and internships.

Building these relationships will not only help us co-create better communities, but it may also help build a pipeline of designers, design advocates, and civically engaged individuals. Authentic engagement is not transactional. It can, however, be transformational, building trust, fostering ownership, and creating safer, more inclusive communities for all.

We encourage all designers to seek out teen-based organizations in their own cities. Many organizations across the nation focus on teens and the built environment, but these are not the only avenues to engage with this age group. Consider high school student councils, youth groups, club sports organizations, or other youth-based organizations that not only bring a teen perspective but may also have a special interest in your specific project type.

Some potential partners for studios to consider include, but are not limited to:

- Territory Urban Design and Chicago Architecture Center, Chicago, IL – Teen Program
- Urban Minds, Toronto, CAN
- 1UP Youth City Builders Program, Toronto, CAN
- SF Urban and San Francisco Young Planners, San Francisco, CA
- Seattle Architecture Foundation, Seattle, WA – Tweens and Teens Program
- Young Urban Leadership Program, New York, NY
- ACE Mentor, National

In addition to building relationships with local youth organizations, take advantage of opportunities to engage studio tour groups with our projects beyond simply a walk through our workspace. Consider facilitating brainstorming sessions with them around one or more of the projects your studio is working on that may be relevant to them. Perhaps they would have interesting insights into a school, community center, or park design that the adult design team hadn't yet though of!

Collaborators: Co-Create, Practice Leaders, Project Managers, Studio ACE Mentors, Studio NOMAS members

Implications in Process

Make Space for Them in the Process

When we discuss the idea of "space" in the process, we are not simply asking for their help and insights; we must also compensate them for their time. They are the experts in the experiences of their communities and built environment, albeit with a unique perspective different from adults. Teens should not be seen as a box to check but as essential stakeholders and contributors who will provide critical insights to help us shape more effective and inclusive designs together.

Consider intentional engagement through strategies such as Teen Steering Committees / Working Groups or partnering with a local teen organization and contract them as a sub-consultant.

Meet Teens Where They Are

Teenagers imbue public spaces with their cultural values and meanings. They have specific places where they gather with friends and feel safe. We should seek out these places rather than require them to find us. Engaging with them where they are, in spaces significant to them and their friends, will ensure that our designs resonate with teens' lived experiences and cultural contexts.

Listen, Let Go, and Let Them Lead

Sometimes, we must step back and allow teens to take the lead. This requires a shift in perspective. We must approach them as emerging young adults who will add valuable ideas and insights, not as children. We must empower, not patronize, and allow them the opportunity to drive change. Acknowledging their potential helps us create better urban public spaces and will support their growth and development as future community leaders.

"I think we forget to hear their voices, and yes, sometimes they're chaotic and sometimes they're not reasonable, but they need to have a voice in their space, right? They need to have a voice and to hear them is how we create spaces for them."

Lahnna Addington, Educator, Cameron Middle School

Clockwise from Top:
Clarkston Greenway Plan Engagement Workshops with Teens participating. Photo by: Olivia Bowdoin, project led by Perkins&Will

Western Avenue Corridor Plan Teen-led Engagement by Territory Urban. Source: City of Chicago

Douglass18 Teen-led Mini Golf Design by North Lawndale Teens. Photo by: Cassandra Rice, project led by site

Implications for Design

The result of this study is not to give designers direct solutions by proposing elements that they can add to every public space to make it teen girl-friendly. Instead, we propose three design drivers — *fun, flexibility, and freedom*, which can help make spaces more attractive to teenagers, both boys and girls. Use the following tips when designing public spaces:

- **These recommendations do not need to be considered only in the context of teen-specific spaces (schoolyards, play spaces in park). Consider them while designing any public realm since teens are likely to be there.**

- **Think of how spaces make you feel — safe, welcoming, sheltered, expressive, bold, silly — rather than specific design elements.**

- **Not all teens are the same; safety could mean different things — adapt ideas to your context.**

- **If you can, test ideas out through tactical urbanism. Better yet, get teens involved so you know exactly what they want!**

"Picnic tables and seating are underrated. We need places to sit down and just chill. Also, no one told us we have to graduate from playgrounds [as children]... I'm too tall for the playground in my school now and I wish we had more climbing structures and challenging play equipment."

Audy Noor, High school student and Communications Coordinator, Urban Minds

From Top to Bottom:
1. Consider interactive, dynamic elements where you can socialize. Sometimes, it's nice to do things with a friend. Source: Adobe Stock

2. The public realm is not just for play, it hosts other quieter activities too. Make space for it. Source: Adobe Stock

3. Incorporate natural elements like water and greenery so teens can interact with it. Source: Adobe Stock

FUN!

- Bring color and aesthetics into the public realm. It's okay to use pink!

- Incorporate seating and places for socializing

- Provide spaces for different play types, not just sports. Teen girls enjoy dancing, jumping, climbing, skipping, walking, among sports.

FREEDOM!

- Create spaces where teens can be anonymous and away from adults

- Smaller zones for teen girls to be loud and aggressive, away from the male gaze

- Make spaces safe to use at all times of day and refrain from controlling teenagers through design

FLEXIBILITY!

- Make spaces interactive and add flexible elements so teens can modify the space to suit their needs

- Break down larger spaces into smaller zones with diverse activities

- Locate activities together so teens can switch between different forms of play

CONCLUSION

Approacing Our Work Through a Gender- and Age-Inclusive Lens

Approaching Our Work Through A Gender- And Age-Inclusive Lens

While we approached this research through an urban design lens, girls and women are primary users of every space Perkins&Will designs. While the issues they face and the design strategies we use to address them may differ for different practice areas, this topic is relevant to each project. This study looked at teen girls and the built environment through primarily an urban design lens, but there is an opportunity for continued study through various lenses.
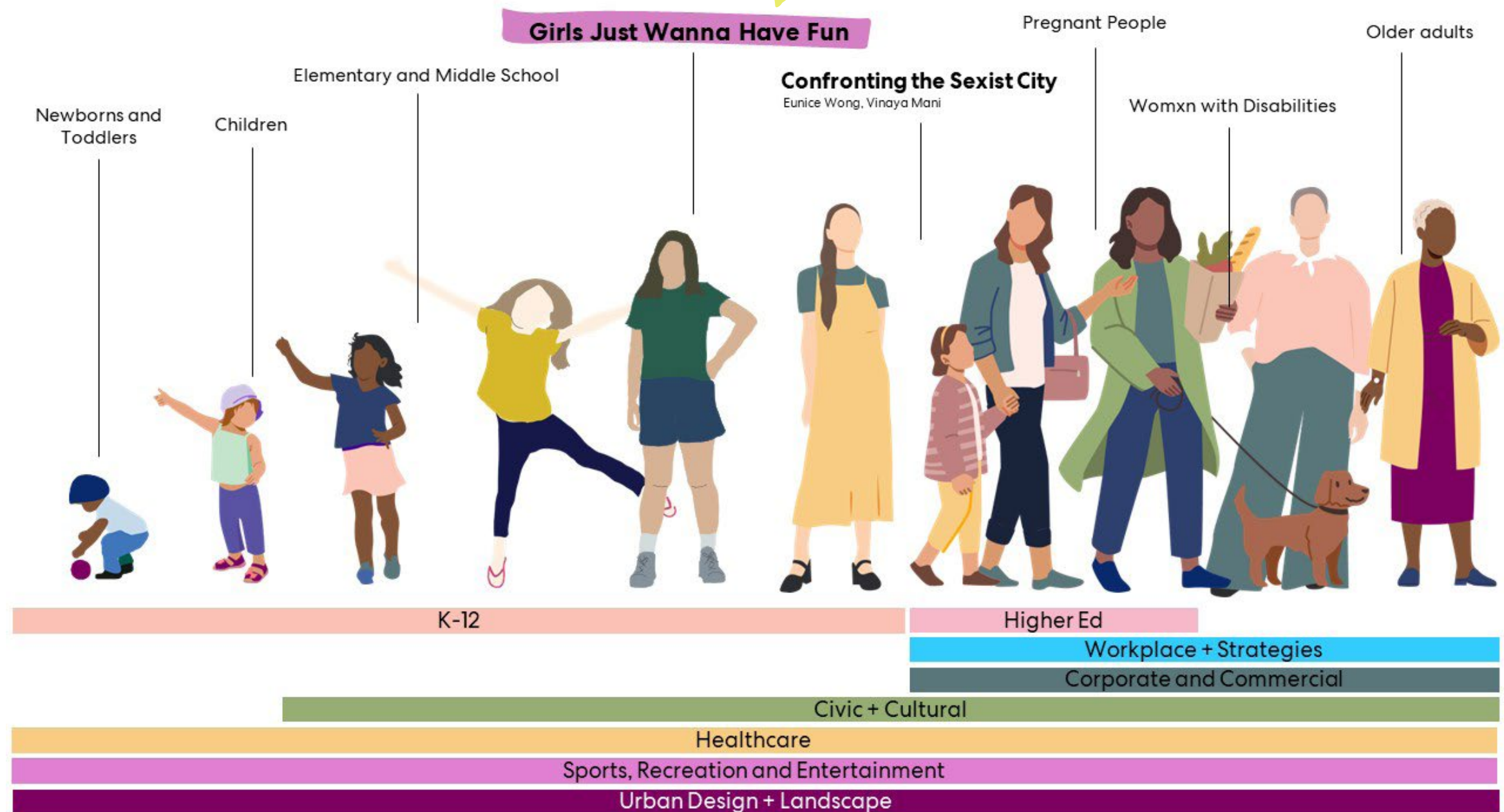
Age: This study prioritized the needs of teen girls between the ages of 13 and 18. This is only one small phase of girlhood. We have the opportunity to study not only pre-teen and young adulthood but also childhood. We should also consider additional opportunities to study how the built environment impacts women and how our designs might help or hinder their navigation of the world.

Life Stages: There is the opportunity to study how women's and girls' design needs shift at different stages of life. How might one's needs change from adolescent to young adult? How might they change from a single woman navigating the world independently to a pregnant person to a caregiver or parent navigating the world with dependents? How might that change when one transitions from primary caregiver/parent to grandparent?

Generational Shifts: Generational changes will impact how our buildings and spaces are used. Someone who goes to one of our schools as a child may have very different workplace needs than their parents.

As designers, we facilitate the co-creation of new and reimagined spaces, places, and buildings for communities across the globe. The built environment and the spaces we design are physical manifestations of the values, perspectives, and people in and around them. Teens are a critical piece of this puzzle.

If we aren't designing for the next generation, then who are we really designing for?

Newborns and Toddlers

Children

Elementary and Middle School

Girls Just Wanna Have Fun

Confronting the Sexist City
Eunice Wong, Vinaya Mani

Pregnant People

Womxn with Disabilities

Older adults

K-12

Higher Ed

Workplace + Strategies

Corporate and Commercial

Civic + Cultural

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