



Towards an inclusive public space

6 building blocks & practical tips for a public space tailored to women and girls

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Over Vital Cities

We are a research and expertise centre that offers knowledge, inspiration and guidance for organisations, federations and governments aiming to create a sustainable, exercise-friendly and liveable environment tailored to users.

<https://www.vitalcities.be/nl>

This publication

This whitepaper is a final product of the G.I.R.L! (gender inclusive space is alive!) research.

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Introduction


Public spaces in 2024 are often not truly public. The design does not always consider the diverse needs and limitations of users, inadvertently excluding certain groups. We can address this by designing spaces that are more inclusive.

Inclusive cities are healthy cities

We may not think about it often, but the public spaces we navigate daily have an impact on our health and, consequently, on our quality of life.² Health is often seen as the result of individual choices, yet, in reality, the built environment plays a significant role as well.


examples

active transport




The design of cities influences whether people choose active travel (walking, biking, or using public transport) to work or school, or opt for the car due to safety and convenience.

green in the area



The presence of nearby nature encourages people to go for a walk.

city and neighborhood as playground



Meeting places, such as playgrounds, encourage physical activity for both adults and children while also fostering social cohesion within neighbourhoods. These spaces bring together diverse groups of people, strengthening the sense of community.

Public spaces can therefore strengthen public health.²

Vital Cities formulated 8 ambitions for a healthy, exercise-friendly environment. Read all about it in our [exercise scan](#)

Who's not participating?

For some people, such as wheelchair users, people with pushchairs, or those with reduced mobility, public spaces present physical barriers that make it difficult or even impossible to move around. There are also groups who can physically access these spaces but face social barriers, as they do not feel welcome or safe in certain areas. This applies, for example, to transgender people or those with a migration background, who are often victims of harassment in public spaces. Women and girls frequently feel less at ease in public spaces due to both physical and social barriers. Insecurity, along with infrastructure that does not meet their needs, plays a role in this.



For girls, women, people with disabilities, and people who do not conform to classic cisgender norms, public spaces can feel unwelcoming, inaccessible, and unsafe.



Domestic Governance Agency, 2023

Read more about how public space affects our health [here](#)

Read more [here](#) about why our public space is less public than we think

Read more about why our public space is less effective for girls [here](#)

How can it be any different?

Inclusive public spaces are environments where everyone feels welcome and safe. They foster social interaction, encourage physical activity, and strengthen community cohesion. **But how can we create such inclusive public spaces?** To explain this clearly, Vital Cities uses the ‘movement-friendly environment’ model. This model is based on the idea that three key pillars are needed to create a high-quality, movement-friendly environment: hardware, software, and orgware.

Physical environment - hardware

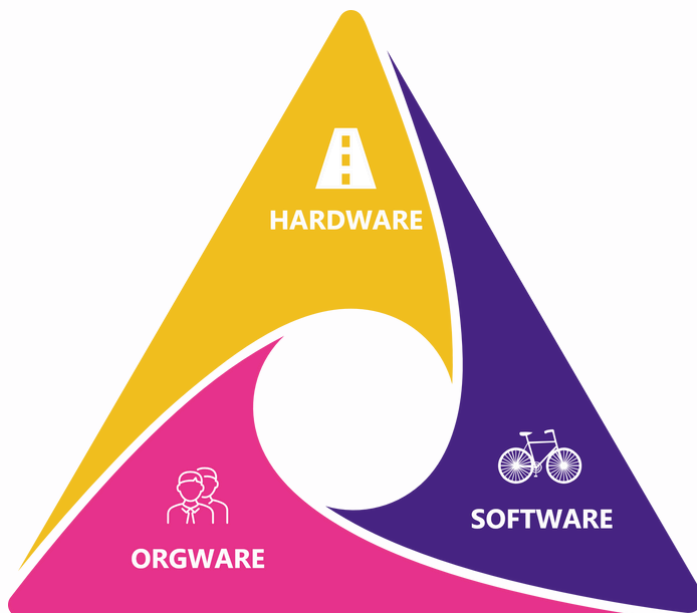
Sports facilities, playgrounds, meeting spaces, green areas, routes, and pathways...

Sports and exercise activities - software

Activities, guidance and coaching, communication, and awareness

Organization of the activities - orgware

Monitoring, management, policy, ownership, collaboration, and participation



This model illustrates that designing an inclusive public space involves more than just creating well-thought-out infrastructure. However, hardware can help address specific barriers that many teenage girls encounter in public spaces. This is the group that this publication focuses on

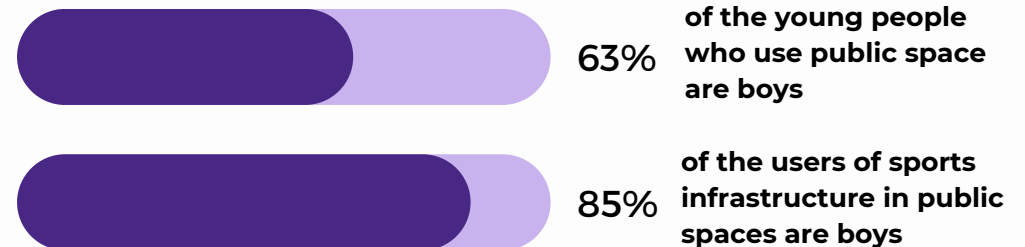
What is the importance of inclusive spaces?

Research shows that outdoor spaces play a crucial role in the development of young people. They serve as **places for learning and socializing**, where young people experiment with different forms of interaction and develop their own identity through engagement with others. Researcher Sven De Visscher even refers to public space as a co-educator for children and young people.⁵ Given that these spaces offer **opportunities for growth**, it is essential that girls have equal access.

Public space is even more crucial for children and young people growing up in social vulnerability, as they often have limited access to both indoor and outdoor spaces and face fewer opportunities for recreational activities. Public spaces provide opportunities for engaging in unorganized leisure activities, such as sports, games and socializing.

However, it is primarily boys who use outdoor spaces for these purposes.⁶

Read more about why public space is important for the development of young people [here](#)



Source figures: Child & Society (2020)

In addition to the development opportunities and leisure activities that public spaces offer, studies also show that **spending time outdoors benefits both physical and mental health**. This is particularly important for teenage girls, as a large international study reveals that their mental health is significantly worse than that of their male peers. They often experience stress, sleep problems, and suicidal thoughts. Furthermore, there are notable differences based on age and type of education: young people aged 11-12 report higher mental well-being than those aged 17-18, and students in general secondary education score higher on various mental well-being indicators compared to those in technical or vocational secondary education.

So, there is much to be gained when we, as a society, invest in inclusive spaces. In short, **inclusive spaces offer teenage girls the following opportunities**

Equal development opportunities

Girls can develop social skills and shape their identity through interaction with others

Leisure & relaxation

Girls can meet with their friends and spend time together. This is especially important for girls who lack space at home, such as those from lower socio-economic backgrounds living in small houses, girls from large families, or girls living in institutions.

Sports & exercise

Girls can participate in sports with a low threshold. This is important for all girls, as they meet exercise standards less often than boys⁹ and experience higher drop-out rates from organized sports.¹⁰ It is especially crucial for girls who participate less frequently in structured sports activities, such as those with a migration background, lower socio-economic status, or in vocational education tracks.¹¹



benefits for physical and mental health



Better access to parks and other green spaces has the potential to be a simple intervention with significant impact.



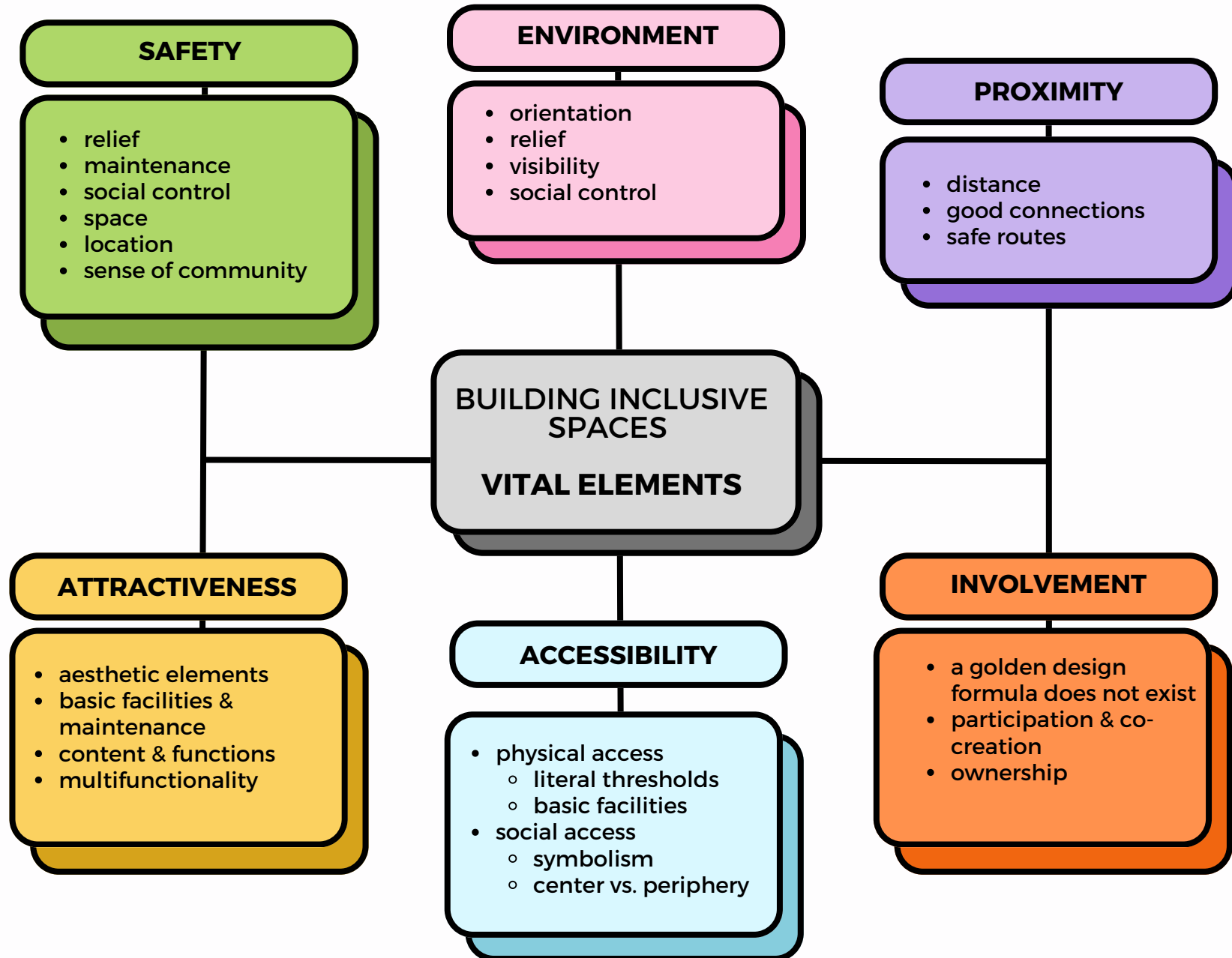
Make Space for Girls, 2023

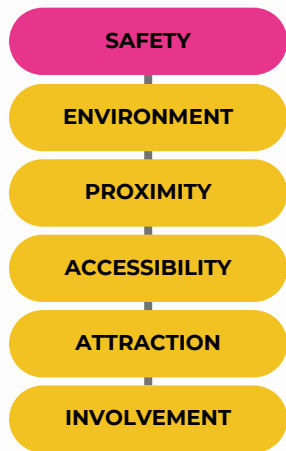
This publication

This paper primarily focuses on the hardware for an inclusive, movement-friendly environment, specifically the physical elements necessary to create an accessible and inclusive public space for teenage girls. Software and orgware are addressed in another white paper. However, we want to emphasize that focusing solely on hardware is insufficient to achieve an inclusive environment; attention to software and orgware is equally crucial.

The goal of this publication is to provide policymakers, designers, and other stakeholders with practical guidelines and inspiration to create more inclusive public spaces that consider the barriers and needs of teenage girls.

Below is an overview of the key points for inclusive design, divided into six categories: safety, environment, proximity, accessibility, attractiveness, and involvement. These pillars serve as the foundation for designing spaces that are welcoming, safe, and usable not only for teenage girls but for everyone. The guiding principle is that urban planners should not design solely from their own perspective, but rather take into account the needs and requirements of various population groups and users.





Safety is a concept with multiple meanings. It encompasses various forms, including objective and subjective safety. Objective safety refers to the measurable factors that define safety in an area, such as crime statistics. Subjective safety, on the other hand, relates to how safe people feel, irrespective of the actual circumstances. There is often no direct correlation between crime rates and people's sense of safety on the streets.¹² This means that a location with few or no criminal incidents can still be perceived as highly unsafe.

Subjective safety, or the sense of safety, is influenced by a variety of factors, including media coverage, social norms and culture, traffic, social cohesion, individualization, and more.¹³ This perception of safety also varies according to personal experiences and characteristics: age, gender, ability, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, origin, and ethnicity all play a significant role. Some researchers even argue that there is minimal correlation between objective and subjective safety.^{14,15} Therefore, a sense of insecurity is much more complex and is sometimes only loosely connected to crime statistics in the neighborhood or city.

Research shows that women perceive public spaces as less safe than men.¹⁶ This feeling of insecurity is even more pronounced among girls and young women, due to experiences with sexual harassment and fear of assault and rape.¹⁶ Statistics reveal that 41% of girls aged 11 to 16 and 49% of girls aged 17 to 21 feel unsafe when going outside alone.¹⁷ The presence of other groups of people in public spaces in particular has an impact on their sense of safety,

especially when these groups consist of boys or men.¹⁸ As a result, girls and women may actively avoid certain places,¹⁹ or their use of public space may decrease overall.¹⁶ This has a negative impact on their well-being.²⁰

Teenage girls also interpret the concept of safety in a different and broader way than adults. In addition to physical safety (such as not being attacked or physically harassed), safety also includes the feeling of not being judged or stared at.¹⁸ For example, 37% of girls feel judged when hanging out in a park.²¹ These feelings of insecurity also contribute to their absence from public spaces, especially sports and recreation areas. In fact, 73% of girls choose not to be active or play sports when people can see them, due to the fear of being watched. This concern is even more pronounced in outdoor spaces, where the likelihood of being seen is much higher.²¹

Personal experiences have a significant impact on the sense of safety in public spaces. Therefore, it is essential to approach safety from an intersectional perspective. For certain groups, the feeling of insecurity may be even more pronounced due to experiences with discrimination, racism, transphobia, and other forms of prejudice. Women and girls of color, for instance, face a higher likelihood of becoming targets of sexual harassment,²² which affects their ability to fully use public spaces.¹⁹ However, there is often a lack of qualitative studies to explore these experiences, as well as quantitative research to measure how frequently minority groups encounter discrimination or unsafe situations in public spaces.

SAFETY

ENVIRONMENT

PROXIMITY

ACCESSIBILITY

ATTRACTION

INVOLVEMENT

Cities that aim to improve safety often assume that cameras and increased police presence are the solutions. However, studies indicate that while cameras may reduce theft, they have little effect on aggression or violence.²³ Furthermore, research on the effectiveness of cameras in enhancing safety remains inconclusive. Cameras can improve objective safety by lowering crime rates,²⁴ but their impact on subjective safety is more ambiguous: some people feel safer because of them, while others experience heightened stress or discomfort.²⁵

The same applies to police presence on the streets: while more officers may help reduce crime, their effect on feelings of safety can be both positive and negative. Some people feel safer due to their trust in law enforcement, while others may feel less safe because of a more negative perception of the police.

Research shows that perceptions of safety vary widely across different demographics, with certain communities feeling distrustful of police due to associations with discrimination and racial profiling.²⁶

Although the design of public spaces cannot entirely eliminate feelings of insecurity, the physical environment (hardware) can still play a role in shaping perceptions. It is crucial to note that investments in hardware should go hand in hand with efforts in software and orgware if cities aim to enhance feelings of safety in public spaces. Ensuring safety in public spaces is a collective effort that involves multiple stakeholders, including policymakers, designers, law enforcement, and the local community.

Below is a brief overview of various factors that can positively influence the sense of safety in a given location, and how the physical elements (hardware) in the vicinity can contribute to this.





maintenance

Ensure the area is well maintained.

A poorly maintained space can create an impression of abandonment or neglect, which often heightens feelings of insecurity. Visible signs of pollution, graffiti, and vandalism further contribute to this sense of unease.



social control

Frequency: When a space is frequented by different people at various times, it creates a vibrant and dynamic environment.

Revitalization: Newly developed or renovated spaces can deter troublemakers and attract a wider range of visitors.

Multifunctionality: A space that appeals to different groups increases the likelihood of a diverse presence, fostering a stronger sense of safety, particularly among girls.



relief

Ensure adequate lighting at the site and in the surrounding streets.



spacious

Ensure the space is spacious enough to allow for some distance between visitors, but not so large and open that it creates feelings of being watched.

Finding a balance between social control and comfort is crucial: visual openness promotes social control, which enhances the feeling of safety, but it is important to maintain an environment that feels cozy and private for girls.

Additionally, it is particularly important for sports areas to be quiet, as girls prefer exercising in more secluded spaces where they do not feel overly visible.



location

Choose a suitable location for the spot:

- A secluded location with little social control can make girls feel unsafe, as they may fear something could happen there.
- Likewise, a spot on the outskirts of the city might not be ideal, as girls may not always feel comfortable or permitted to go there alone.



neighborhood feeling

The feeling of belonging to a neighbourhood enhances the sense of safety. A strong sense of community can be fostered through neighbourhood committees or local initiatives focused on building social cohesion.



orientation

Ensure good 'readability' of the space and its surroundings. This means that people should be able to easily navigate and orient themselves, even if they are unfamiliar with the area:

- By providing clear markings and signposts, visitors can navigate and orient themselves easily within the space, which increases the feeling of safety. Street name signs should be large and positioned lower for better visibility.
- An unclear space where it's difficult to orient yourself creates a feeling of insecurity. Avoid dead-end paths and dark or hidden corners with no social control.



relief

When a place, street, or neighbourhood is poorly lit, women and girls tend to avoid it or stay indoors altogether.

A significant contrast in lighting between main and side streets can also lead to certain streets being avoided.



visibility

Ensure everyone's visibility in public spaces to increase the sense of safety among women and girls:

- create glass entrances and stairwells to promote transparency
- Provide wide, well-lit passages and paths.

Avoid objects or furniture in public spaces that limit visibility:

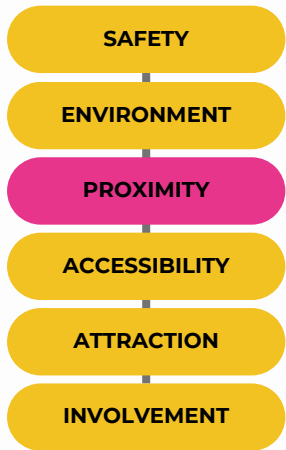
- do not use walls as railings, use balustrades instead
- Avoid creating dead ends or dark corners



social control

Provide 'eyes on the street'. More human presence in our streets makes us feel safer. Provide:

- more housing at street level, because blind facades on the ground floor create a deserted and therefore less safe feeling in the streets
- residential accommodation above shops or offices: after opening hours these areas are often deserted, which can give an unsafe feeling



Accessibility is a fundamental aspect of inclusive public spaces and is often decisive for the success or failure of a public space.

The proximity and location of a space play a significant role, as does the availability of public transport. A space must be easily accessible for everyone, regardless of their mode of transport. When meeting and sports areas are located along busy streets, it negatively impacts the accessibility of the place. Streets and access roads must be safe and comfortable for all types of traffic.^{27,28} Especially for those who do not travel by car, high-quality walking and cycling routes, as well as easy access to public transport, are essential.

People in vulnerable situations often rely on public transport to get around. Studies also show that women use soft mobility (walking and cycling) much more than men. So, when a place is not accessible by public transport or lacks safe walking and cycling paths, it becomes much more difficult for women,²⁹ girls, and people in vulnerable situations to reach it. For younger girls, having a safe traffic connection to their destination is also crucial in order to travel independently.³⁰

City centres often already have a good range of public transport, but the connection with peripheral municipalities or neighbourhoods can sometimes be less obvious. Neighbourhoods with higher levels of vulnerability are often located on the edge of the city. Focusing on improving access to these less connected areas is therefore crucial if we want to create truly inclusive spaces.



Girls attach great importance to the quality design and equipment of the play area. But whether they will actually come will largely depend on the location: is the square close enough, is it logical to go there? And above all: is it accessible in a safe way? How often the children from the neighbourhood are allowed and able to use the square depends mainly on that broader location.



Child & Society, 2020





distance

Provide nearby meeting and sports areas in the neighborhood that are easily accessible for everyone, considering all transportation options. Parents may not always allow their daughters to go outside independently, so a distant location becomes an additional barrier.



route

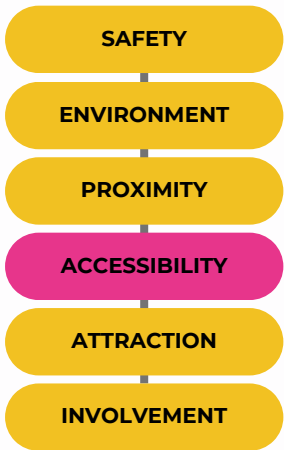
The route to the location must be traffic-safe, with high-quality and secure footpaths and cycle paths. This is particularly important for girls to move around safely. It's an added benefit if the location is not situated along a busy road or requires crossing busy traffic arteries.



connection

Ensure seamless connectivity to other locations:

- The place should be accessible by public transport.
- Girls should be able to move easily between the various places they frequently visit, such as school, the station, local shops, and more.



Accessibility in the context of public spaces encompasses both physical and social components. Spaces can be accessible or less accessible in various ways, depending on the target group in question.

A space is physically accessible when everyone can go to it and use it independently, without relying on others.

— Literally: you can go there and stay there independently

This is often still a challenge for people with limited mobility or those using pushchairs.

A space is socially accessible when all people can have a positive experience there

— Emotional: you feel welcome and at ease

This is often still an issue for various minority groups, such as people from the LGBTQIA+ community or individuals with a migration background.

Public spaces still often present physical barriers for people with reduced mobility, which excludes them. Stairs, high curbs, narrow passages, the lack of wheelchair-friendly paths, and obstacles in their way make it very difficult, or even impossible, for them to access public spaces.

Social barriers may be less visible to the naked eye, but they are no less restrictive. One of the biggest obstacles for girls is when the space is claimed by a group of boys. Their presence can be intimidating and make girls feel less safe. This, coupled with facilities or activities in public spaces that are not tailored to girls, means that social accessibility can sometimes be limited for them.

Several important studies, such as those by Girls Make The City and Kind & Samenleving, identify this as the biggest barrier for girls in public space: boys claiming the space. Additionally, one study highlights that the presence of girls in public spaces is often influenced or regulated by the presence of boys.³¹



A lot of girls I know like to skate, but it's always full of guys there... A friend of mine goes to the skate park at 6 am because it's empty then.



Vital Cities Podcast, Episode 2



SAFETY

ENVIRONMENT

PROXIMITY

ACCESSIBILITY

ATTRACTION

INVOLVEMENT

Although social accessibility may initially seem unrelated to hardware, the environment, design, and infrastructure can still play a significant role in fostering a more inclusive space.

Firstly, design can prevent one group from claiming the entire space by giving the area a multifunctional purpose. When the facilities are tailored to the needs of different target groups, this can also enhance the feeling of being welcome. This aspect—attractiveness—will be discussed in the next section. Accessibility is closely linked to attractiveness: if a space offers nothing for girls, they will feel less welcome or may feel they are not 'allowed' to be there.

Secondly, implicit or subtle references also impact social accessibility.³²

By considering both dimensions of accessibility—the physical and the social—designers can ensure that public spaces are genuinely open to everyone.

— — — — —
“
Accessible places are places where people not only can go, but where they also want to go and can be just like everyone else.
”
— — — — —

Social and Cultural Planning Office, 2021



Movement-friendly space with multifunctional use and smart zoning in Bredäng, Sweden



center & periphery

Give careful consideration to the positioning of various facilities within the space:

- Sports fields, which are often dominated by groups of boys, are typically located in the center of the space, with other facilities, like benches, placed around the edges. This arrangement sends an implicit message to girls and other visitors who do not use these fields, suggesting that they do not belong in the center of the space but are relegated to the periphery.
- Ensure that equal space is allocated to other activities and position them in relation to each other in a way that no single activity dominates the center. This principle should also be applied to playgrounds.



symbolism

Historical gender imbalances and colonial power relations are still often reflected in our streets and public spaces.

- Statues, street names, squares, and other public elements predominantly reference white men in nine out of ten cases.
- These same statues often still bear traces of colonial power relations.

It is advisable for places to have names and references that reflect the diversity of society.



literal thresholds

Public play and sports areas with practical barriers are not accessible at all for people in wheelchairs or with limited mobility.

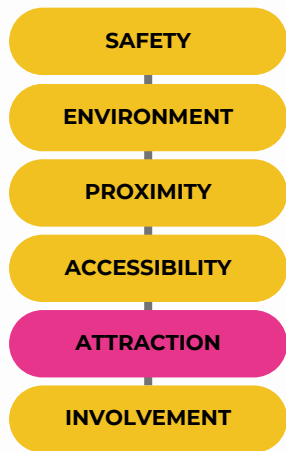
- a base of sand or tree bark
- the stairs
- narrow passages
- etc.

Such barriers can reinforce the perception that individuals are different from 'the norm,' which may make them feel unwelcome.



basic facilities

Basic facilities such as sanitary facilities ensure greater accessibility for women and girls, among others.





An inclusive public space is one that appeals to various groups of people. This is only possible if the space is also attractive. When you think of a pleasant outdoor area, you might instinctively think of greenery, water, or colourful elements. These aesthetic features can certainly enhance the atmosphere of a place, but the attractiveness of a space goes beyond that. To ensure that people are drawn to a location, want to spend time there, and return, more is needed. Facilities, design, infrastructure, and maintenance are essential

The fact that teenage girls spend less of their free time outdoors is also a result of how these spaces are designed and what they can or cannot experience there. An attractive space for girls encourages them to visit and stay longer. For this to happen, the space must offer something for girls and also provide a comfortable environment.

Girls indicate in various studies that public spaces often lack basic facilities that would make them comfortable to spend time in: clean toilets, Wi-Fi, water fountains, and protection against various weather conditions.³³ A space that is completely dominated by boys is also unattractive to girls. As mentioned earlier, design can address this issue. A multifunctional space allows for the activities of different groups of people. Many girls feel that public spaces are not designed with their needs in mind: 68% believe there is nothing for them to do in parks and that the space and infrastructure are intended for boys.³³ The “classic youth places” such as skate parks, calisthenics equipment or football or basketball courts are effectively almost exclusively used by boys: 85% of users are boys.

There is ongoing debate about what needs to be done to encourage more girls to participate in sports in public spaces. On one hand, it is argued that current 'youth spaces' do not sufficiently account for the preferences and needs of girls, and that additional facilities are necessary to motivate girls to engage in outdoor physical activities. On the other hand, the provision of specific infrastructure for girls is also criticized, as it could inadvertently reinforce gender stereotypes, implying that activities like skating and football are not for girls, or that girls themselves are not interested in these sports.

We advocate for an 'and-and' approach: enhancing the accessibility of existing facilities while also broadening the perspective on infrastructure and developing new facilities:

-  Increasing accessibility to existing facilities can primarily be achieved by employing suitable 'software'—such as supervisors who guide girls and organize activities tailored to their needs.
-  Creating or redesigning spaces where a variety of activities can take place is key.

However, the scope of 'hardware' needs to be broadened. Just like many boys, there are also many girls who are not interested in the 'classic' facilities such as skate parks or basketball and football fields. Their wishes and preferences must be considered as well. To encourage girls to spend more time in public spaces, it is essential to focus on what they want now.



aesthetic elements

Aesthetic elements make a place pleasant and attractive:

- lots of greenery and natural elements such as water
- mood lighting
- soft materials
- colour



multifunctionality

Ensure that the place serves multiple functions and allows for various activities. Give each function or activity equal importance by planning the space with smart zoning. For some girls, an intergenerational offer on the premises is important, as they may need to take younger siblings with them when they go outside.

When a place meets diverse needs, different groups of people will be able to use it simultaneously.

A multifunctional place is important because

- it offers the opportunity for various activities
- it is less likely to be claimed by one group



basic facilities & maintenance

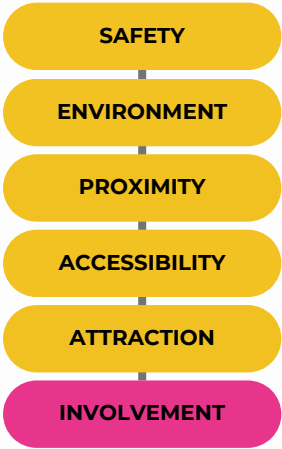
When basic facilities are provided and well maintained, girls will be more attracted to spending time in those spaces:

- free clean sanitary facilities
- drinkwater
- shelter against different weather conditions
- wifi
- charging points
- a shop nearby



filling/functions

Some sources suggest that girls prefer play opportunities over organised sports in public spaces (such as football). Non-competitive play opportunities that stimulate creativity, social interaction, and cooperation are particularly popular. Since this is very age- and context-dependent and therefore cannot be generalised, no concrete suggestions are given here for the design of a specific place for teenage girls.



Involving a diverse group of users in the design process is perhaps the most crucial factor in creating an inclusive public space.

Unfortunately, the design process still often takes place at the drawing board, leading to a one-sided perspective. As a result, the final space may not always meet the needs and expectations of all the diverse groups who will use it. This is why it is essential to involve a diverse group of people early in the design process, when their input can still influence the plans and have a tangible impact on the outcome. It is equally important to value their voices effectively. Designers must be open to the ideas, concerns, and needs of all demographic groups, including girls and young people, who are often overlooked in traditional design processes.

There is no universal design standard or golden formula for creating an inclusive space tailored to women and girls, as every space and community has unique needs and preferences. This is why it is crucial to actively involve end users in the design and decision-making process, ensuring that the space genuinely meets their wishes and needs.

By actively involving girls in the design process, you give them ownership of the space. Ownership is a powerful tool to increase involvement, as it strengthens their connection to the space and their willingness to use it. Moreover, participation boosts girls' self-confidence and empowerment, as they experience that they can contribute to their environment. A successful participatory approach, therefore, requires a genuine dialogue in which girls are seen not only as users but also as co-designers.

— “ —
It is essential that the voices of teenage girls are at the heart of any process if changes are to be successful

— ” —

Make Space For Girls



Looking for a digital tool to visualize space together with young people? Then check out our **YET** application!

Sources

The source list is divided into three parts:

- part 1: the sources from the continuous text
- part 2: the sources of the yellow factsheets with the building blocks
- part 3: the sources of the quotes in the text

PART 1 : text

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