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HOW, AS ARCHITECTS AND DESIGNERS,  
DO WE BECOME STEWARDS FOR PUBLIC SPACE  
THAT SUPPORTS THE SAFETY OF WOMEN,  
GIRLS AND GENDER-DIVERSE PEOPLE?

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# HOW, AS ARCHITECTS AND DESIGNERS, DO WE BECOME STEWARDS FOR PUBLIC SPACE THAT SUPPORTS THE SAFETY OF WOMEN, GIRLS AND GENDER-DIVERSE PEOPLE?

Lisa Pike

*This paper is a high-level summary of a working document that Lisa Pike has developed in her role as associate architect at Allford Hall Monaghan Morris. The document is designed to support the design teams in the early site analysis and concept design stages to ensure that a well-rounded approach is being taken to better support the safety of women, girls and gender-diverse people in the built environment. Recognising that, as designers, we cannot fix this issue in its entirety, this paper draws out some of the key principles and design prompts to encourage other designers to take women's safety into consideration whilst at the drawing board.*

## CONTEXT

*Designing cities that work for women will make cities safer, healthier, more vibrant and more pleasant to live in for everyone.<sup>1</sup>*

In a world where evidence is mounting that the safety of women, girls and gender-diverse people is not a primary consideration in urban contexts, it makes a great deal of sense that we, as architects and urban designers, should leap at the opportunity to rewrite this script, insofar as it is possible through design.

As our understanding of gender has broadened, so have the discussions central to it. This paper takes account of cis-women and girls (both adults and younger persons presumed female at birth), those who identify as women (including transgender and non-binary people) and others who are not represented by or are marginalised by the prevalence of male, able-bodied bias in the urban realm – explaining why the term *womxn* has been adopted, in its capacity to reflect a broader definition of 'woman.'

The limitations of the data we have to work with should, however, be recognised. Where available, it is often disaggregated for cis-gendered discussion or, at times, inconsistent or unclear as to its inclusion or exclusion of non-binary or transgender people. What is clear, however, are the potential benefits available through designing for diversity and safer spaces for all – male, female or gender non-conforming. The built environment contributes to failing half (51 percent in the UK 2021 census<sup>2</sup>) of our population – arguably in part, an outcome of ill-considered urban planning, community engagement and architectural specification, the effects of which are retrospectively managed through cumbersome and often ineffective means, such as CCTV or security lighting. Identifying these urban failings as an architectural opportunity is valuable for a number of reasons.

Firstly, when our *womxn* are dying or being abused because an urban environment has contributed to social harm,<sup>3</sup> we should care. Given that gender-related violence is preventable, not inevitable, it should be seriously considered that architecture has a role in the reduction of such violence through innovative responses to areas such as policy revision and the elimination of structural gender inequality.

Secondly, space that is designed through an intersectional lens for a diversity of users brings mutual benefits for all. Additionally, it provides an avenue for impact through stakeholder and community engagement. Through early and meaningful engagement with community groups, our design development is furnished with lived experience and expertise. This, in turn enables community buy-in. The best we can hope for as architects and designers is that our communities want to own the spaces we design – so it is only right that there are appropriate levels of input and co-design at the heart of the process.

This paper is positioned from a lived, professional and urban planning perspective within the UK. Prefaced by a literature review, it proposes a toolbox of principles that could be considered within the briefing and early design development stages of a project. This toolbox is not exhaustive, but rather puts forwards a series of starting points – or prompts – for design, elements that the design team, client team and local planning authorities might consider during the collaborative design development process. It sets out why community engagement during this process is fundamental and can be leveraged to bring forward proposals that discourage antisocial behaviour through community ownership and understanding of people's lived experiences.

## AVENUES FOR APPRAISAL AND DESIGN

The proposals put forward in this paper are underpinned by two salient publications – *Safety in Public Space: Women, Girls and Gender Diverse People*<sup>4</sup> and *Cities Alive: Designing Cities that Work for Women*.<sup>5</sup> Arup's wider Cities Alive series and a number of publicly available strategic documents produced by the Greater London Authority (GLA) provide wider context and relevant strategies for consideration here – such as the Transport for London Night-time Charter:

*Safety in Public Space* proposes three avenues for designed outcomes that result in a safer public realm for women – understanding, making and using. It proposes a cross-industry level of responsibility in making our public spaces safe, ranging from the way we *listen* to multiple and diverse voices; the way we *make* through co-design with diverse collaborators; and the way we *use* policy and community strategies to support women's safety in the long term. *Cities Alive* offers four key themes that constitute a positive and safe public environment for women, girls and gender-diverse people: safety and security, justice and equity, health and wellbeing, and enrichment and fulfilment. These themes help to shape a framework for the understanding and making processes set out below and provide a themed lens through which analysis and design can be undertaken.

## Understanding

As this paper is geared to tackling the issue of women's safety in the built environment as architects, it suggests that the avenue of understanding is two-fold in nature. Firstly, it is fundamental to understand the site itself in detail via thorough site analysis undertaken through the lens of safety. What are the existing physical barriers to safety – lighting, blind corners, visually obstructive landscapes? What social behaviour does the site currently encourage, and how? Are there certain user groups that are prioritised by the urban environment, such as vehicles or the able-bodied?



Figure 1. Scope potential for the architect's influence during the design and briefing stages.

Does the site allow for people to comfortably dwell there? Is it welcoming to carers with children? Is the shortest route to and across the site also the safest? Does the site have a starkly different character after dark? It is important that such questioning is supported by the collection of gender-disaggregated data so that a clear and factual picture can be developed to support site appraisal.

Secondly, we need to listen to and understand the existing intersectional communities relevant to the site. Their lived experiences, tacit knowledge of the area and personal investment in their shared spaces is all crucial information for shaping an outcome that is representative and facilitates community ownership. How we undertake the process of understanding is set out in the toolbox section below, where key principles are linked as both analysis themes and design prompts.

Key considerations for effectively evaluating a site for gender-diverse constraints and opportunities might include:

- Understanding the existing demographic and identifying invested local communities.
- Do existing public amenities include such facilities as gender-neutral and women's toilets, shelter and water?
- Is anti-social behaviour being prevented where possible, or is it being encouraged by the environment or lack of maintenance?
- Is there a maintenance/litter strategy in place?
- What positive impact can be made beyond the site itself?
- Examining routes to and through the site.
- Reviewing lighting and sight lines.
- Appraising the landscape for visual obstruction or the capacity to conceal weapons.
- Do pedestrians have priority?

## Making

Design principles that facilitate equitable public space are best embedded in the early design phases, so that they are integral elements. In the UK, we would place this work under RIBA Stage 0-2 feasibility and concept design stages. At this point in the programme, key principles that are relevant to the brief and site should be identified and explored through design, just as one might prioritise sustainability or accessibility principles. As architects are often the lead consultant at this stage, we are afforded a great deal of influence over the drawing board. This is also the point at which co-design processes should be implemented, if they are to constitute a meaningful form of engagement.

Informed proposals that are co-designed might include:

- Identifying and tying into existing legislation.<sup>6</sup>
- Co-locating community-led brief elements with existing public amenities.
- Adaptable design principles to support changing needs.
- Defining a landscape and public realm strategy that establishes clear sight lines, the overlooking of pedestrian spaces and step-free access.
- Working with clients, management and end users to produce proposals that emphasise ease of maintenance so that the design has an afterlife that is easy to maintain and is well cared for; and clear management strategies are in place prior to handover.
- Positive messaging through public art and installations associated with 'meanwhile' use (see below).
- Beyond the site boundary – what site-specific developments could have positive wider impacts?

## Using

This avenue becomes most relevant once the site is occupied and in use. It draws on existing legislation, policy and management strategies to ensure that the principles embedded in the design are being successfully carried out once the site is handed over. Whilst it is important that the design team is cognisant of existing policies and local strategies that support safety design principles, this paper focuses on the processes of understanding and making.

## A TOOLBOX FOR DESIGN

This section proposes a toolbox of principles for design. These principles have been identified for their ability to augment womxn's safety in the built environment in relation to safety and security, health and wellbeing and enrichment and fulfilment. While the following list is not exhaustive, it aims to provide prompts for thought and asks the overarching question: What are the small moves that can have a big impact?



Figure 2. Proposed toolbox of designer's prompts.

### Adaptable use

The notion of adaptable use not only supports the sustainable principle of "long-life, loose-fit," but also enables a space to accommodate a community's evolving needs and adapt throughout its life. Where are our proposals readily adaptable? Buildings that are of continual service to their occupants are less likely to fall into disrepair, encouraging anti-social behaviour, and are more likely to become cornerstones of a place's identity, promoting positive connection. Adaptability can be supported through an ordered hierarchy of spaces and considered structural solutions that allow for flexibility of layout, an adaptable servicing strategy and evolving brief requirements over time. This in turn speaks to the urban design principle established by Jane Jacobs, who signalled that the complexity of a city is too intricate for one person to resolve, but rather allows for evolution by the people who constitute it.<sup>7</sup> If our proposals have a guiding framework with the right amount of flexibility, this enables cohesive evolution over time by the site's current and future occupants.

### **Creative response to the brief**

Approaching the brief creatively allows space for intensive co-production with local community groups and stakeholders to identify how the brief can be made flexible or best tailored to its user groups and suited for innovative responses. Brief-making should be considered a cyclical process that is first founded on and then refined by the existing diverse neighbourhoods and communities in a given area.

We should ask: Are the architectural responses creative and employ out-of-the box thinking – for example, embodying a reconsideration of what play, and work might look like for different people, aiming to enrich the spatial experience and enable fulfilment in innovative and diverse ways?

### **Clarity of entrances and wayfinding**

Routes to and through the site should be clear and accessible. They should be able to be navigated with confidence and with minimal reliance on signage so that occupants' decisions can be made instantaneously, particularly in high-risk scenarios. When women find themselves in an unsafe situation or feel uncomfortable, there need to be multiple and clear exit routes from A to B, C and D. Where multiple routes cannot be provided, such as pedestrian bridge links, it is important that the route offered is as direct, clear, well-lit and overlooked as possible. Material selection should consider robustness, transparency and a level of maintenance required to promote the chosen route as a well-maintained and safe option for all users.

### **Ground floor and active edges**

An active frontage should be promoted as much as possible to establish a lively, overlooked and welcoming environment, avoiding excessive blank façades such as plant screens along main routes.

Are the ground-floor uses well considered and co-located appropriately? Do they tie into existing community amenities or provide accommodation that would benefit diversity? Are the entrance points to buildings well considered and located along main routes, and are they secure and discouraging of tailgating?

Undertaking a mapping exercise of existing ground-floor uses on the site enhances our understanding of the existing commercial and community environment and allows us to tie our work into these elements in a meaningful way, whilst introducing new and complementary uses. A rich public realm typically involves a good mix of uses, avoiding homogeneity of use and therefore, potentially, of user group.

### **Twenty-four-hour building**

The after-dark environment includes not only nighttime, but that period during the winter months where collection of children from nurseries or schools and commuting home from workplaces and co-curricular activities may pose additional threats. We can expect people such as shift workers – of whom 3.9 million or 44 percent are female in the UK<sup>8</sup> – and young women to be making their way to and from their places of work or residences, entertainment venues or after-dark sport and recreation.

How can our proposals contribute to the after-dark environment and encourage positive, round-the-clock use of these spaces? Also, do lighting arrangements illuminate at human scale, without glare?

A good mix of round-the-clock uses at ground-floor level and an approach to façade design that creates opportunities to look across public spaces help to establish passive surveillance and offer mutual protection.

## Pedestrian priority

Clear delineation of pedestrian, cycle and vehicular routes promotes a hierarchy of users within the space. Where safety is compromised, this is often because vehicles take priority over a route or there is insufficient separation between cyclists and pedestrians. Do our proposals prioritise pedestrian movement and safe cycling routes for a range of abilities? Can all users exercise independent movement safely?

Opportunities should be found to make space for rest, play and gentle exercise in a way that is safe and enjoyable. With consideration for the human scale, proposals should also look to provide public shelter zones in a visible and climate-specific manner, so that the invitation to safely and enjoyably occupy the public realm is available year-round.

Recognising that womxn often have a distinctive approach to active travel and often use trip-chaining<sup>9</sup> – the connecting of tasks such as running errands and collecting children – any urban strategy should seek to enable meaningful and plentiful connections through active travel and public transport.

## Landscape and play

Biodiversity and planting is vital to a proposal's sustainability strategy and should be considered in a way that reinforces wayfinding and access. Has the maintenance and location of dense planting that could, for example, hide a stowed weapon or obstruct visibility, been planned for so as to minimise such risks? Is there an allowance for places to rest, relax and safely congregate? Is play space planned that facilitates a range of play activity beyond the traditional hard-surfaced multi-use games area (MUGA)?



Figure 3. Queen's Quarter is a high-density residential scheme of three towers nested within an intensively landscaped ground play, incorporating an array of play spaces for all ages.

### **Tidy and well cared for**

Public spaces that are ill-maintained or where litter is prevalent create an unwelcoming environment that invites antisocial behaviour and a lack of community ownership. Improving how a space is overlooked and perceived impacts positively on the occupancy and dwell times of those spaces.

Does the design support an easy-to-maintain waste and maintenance strategy so as not to encourage antisocial behaviour and the illegal or inconsiderate dumping of waste?

Because user-centric design helps to bestow a sense of ownership, access to and legibility of the maintenance and upkeep strategy should be clear to all.

### **Plugging in**

Augmenting or tying into existing public amenities and venues can enhance the vibrancy of a place and produce mutual benefits, such as increased visibility of local businesses and footfall to them. These places might be womxn-owned or provide spaces beyond the site boundary for safe gathering. By enhancing the site's connections to these spaces, womxn's fulfilment and wellbeing might be addressed or new, safe routes to these locations introduced.

What existing opportunities within the site or wider context are our proposals plugging into and amplifying in ways that offer the potential for community enrichment and fulfilment, as well as safe passage?

### **All-age and family-friendly**

Womxn of all ages should be able to connect with the public realm in a safe and fulfilling manner. Do our proposals provide quiet, secure and accessible spaces for all? Can children access play spaces and exercise independent movement without crossing vehicular paths? Has consideration been given to gender-diverse families and what amenity space they might need, or how public spaces can represent this diversity? Can older generations easily navigate and engage with the site in a safe and joyful way?

### **Celebrating diversity through art**

Public art has a wonderful ability to educate and celebrate a place's identity and the people who constitute it. By introducing public art, womxn artists can be supported and their history celebrated, raising the profile of both site and artists in the process.

Can the history and achievements of women and gender-diverse people, especially those relevant to the site or wider community, be visualised and celebrated through public art?

### **Well-considered 'meanwhile' uses**

Temporary works or unoccupied spaces between decant (temporary rehousing) and site mobilisation can create vacant and sometimes perceived unsafe spaces. There is an opportunity here to develop a clear 'meanwhile' use strategy that is locally led, providing temporary space for community groups to come together in an innovative way.

Has a clear plan been set out for temporary works and development sites? How could 'meanwhile' use support wider public safety and wellbeing and provide opportunities for young girls, gender-diverse people and women?





Figure 4. Brentford Masterplan had a clear and locally driven programme of meanwhile use within the existing buildings prior to mainworks commencing.

## SUMMARY

This paper has proposed that the built environment has a role in supporting the safety of womxn and gender-diverse people that goes well beyond the obvious and unimaginative security interventions that do little to foster a hospitable sense of place.

A holistic approach, stemming from thorough site analysis of existing constraints and opportunities, can produce enriched and coordinated proposals that support not just the physical security of womxn, but also their wellbeing and fulfilment in their local communities. In interpreting the brief creatively, an innovative response can provide an environment for thriving and truly representative public spaces that will benefit the wider user group and stand the test of time, as adaptability is embedded at the concept stages of design. By linking the early appraisal and concept design stages to a brief that emphasises innovation and adaptability, a given space is much more likely to experience enhanced longevity, as well as the ability to adapt to the evolving needs (including safety and security) of all gender-diverse peoples.

Designing for a ground floor that is actively occupied and overlooking, and connected sensibly to the wider site, promotes the creation of a public realm that is inviting and encourages positive social engagement as well as longer dwell times.

A design brief and proposal that identifies a thoughtful programming of the relevant spaces for 24-hour presence can mitigate the hostility of spaces that otherwise become dominated by vehicles or human presence at night.

An all-ages landscape and public realm strategy that pulls this approach together through opportunities to interact safely and with clarity and is easily maintained promotes a healthy space that a broader population can call 'ours.'

Whilst as architects we may not be able to directly prevent the trauma and crime that is perpetrated against womxn of all ages, we can begin to challenge the narrative that public space is a space for marginalisation. The scene can very intentionally be set for a public realm that is co-produced by its stakeholders and end-users – a better representative of half of its population.

## Contributions

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