

Just hanging out: Teenage girls and gender diverse-teens use and creation of suburban public space.

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The research-based creative project I am currently working on is looking into the way teenage girls and gender-diverse teens engage with public space in the suburbs to socialise and hang out with friends. The aim is to gain nuanced insight into the implication of informal suburban public spaces on socio-spatial practices concerning safety, identity performance, and marginalisation.

Public spaces have historically been designed by men for men, which continues to create a barrier for woman, teenagers and children to participate fully and safely in public (Kern, 2020; Perez, 2020.). Public and private space is gendered and coded to elicit and maintain certain social behaviours, where public space is a masculine domain, the private is feminised. (Massey, 1994). As a demographic not designed into and sometimes actively designed out of public space, there is added consensus that teenage girls as a marginalised demographic face additional physical, social and psychological obstacles to accessing suitable and preferable space for hanging out (Brussoni et al., 2018; Lange, 2021; Theocharides-Feldman, 2022). This could have significant effects on the psychosocial development, health and wellbeing, and the feeling of safety and community belonging for this group (Düzenli et al., 2010).

Slowly, there is a shift in urban planning, strategies and policies to introduce gender-mainstreaming practices and develop feminist cities to address safety, inclusion and public provisions for women Progressive public policy and local council strategic plans also aim to increase wellbeing and public amenities for teens (inversely alongside anti-loitering and social order policies) which are informed by local data and feedback from residents and business owners. It is recognised that teenagers are a distinct demographic with specific spatial needs for important psycho-social development (Brussoni, 2018). However, policy outcomes tend to be general in nature, or concentrate on providing formal youth spaces and activities inadvertently addressing dominantly male youth needs and uses – for examples sports grounds and facilities, BMX tracks and skate parks (Walker & Clark, 2023). These spaces are still not addressing the distinct socio-spatial needs of teenage girls and gender-diverse teens.

Pushed to the fringes or excluded altogether from the designated teen spaces of sports grounds, teenage girls find themselves occupying the left-over spaces; places like carpark and between buildings.

For a creative-research activity I revisited the public places I used to hang out at with my friends as a suburban teen 25 years ago. I went back to the rooftop carpark and stairwells of the local shopping centres, the carpark at the local fast-food outlets, the front steps of the closed-down shops.

A series of photographs I have titled there/then document and scrutinise the liminal and transient spaces we were equally relegated to and expelled from as teens. Neither child nor adult, adolescence is an in-between stage. Teenagers find themselves in-between public perception seen as both a threat and at risk of danger, and in-between public and private spaces balancing identities and expectations of childhood and adulthood simultaneously. (Valentine, 2004).

It was this notion of in-between-ness from which the aesthetic of the photographs was inspired. The composition of the photographs is geometric with architectural elements cutting through the centre of the frame. This has the effect of the viewer feeling enclosed by the architecture or balancing along the centre edge, poised to fall either side.

The photographs capture a paradox, not only of the liminal spaces represented, but also that of adolescence, female fear, and hanging out as an actively idle social phenomenon (Pyyry & Tani 2016).

Some of these photos have been exhibited already, with further exhibitions planned in the future as the project continues to develop.

Additional planned creative outcomes will include an artist's film, which will be informed by a series of interviews with teens from the Hume and northern Merri-Bek local areas. These interviews should illicit new insight into how teenage girls and gender-diverse teens find, use, and create a place for themselves to hang out in informal public spaces of the outer suburbs.

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