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ARCHITECTURE OF WOMEN'S EVERYDAY LIFE: REDEFINING SAFETY IN URBAN SPACE

ARCHITEKTURA CODZIENNOŚCI KOBIET: REDEFINICJA BEZPIECZEŃSTWA W PRZESTRZENI MIEJSKIEJ

Abstract

The article examines the architecture of women's everyday lives as a key dimension of urban research. It highlights how mobility, access to services, and nighttime movement reveal systemic gaps in urban design. Drawing on the literature and statistical data, it assesses the factors shaping women's sense of safety and identifies directions for creating more inclusive urban spaces. The study demonstrates that the perspective of everyday architecture is a key analytical framework for understanding how the built environment shapes women's daily spatial experiences and reproduces structural spatial inequalities. It further argues that incorporating women's everyday practices into urban planning is essential for developing more inclusive and equitable urban design solutions.

Keywords: *gender-sensitive urban planning, inclusive design, public space, women's safety*

Streszczenie

W artykule przeanalizowano architekturę codzienności kobiet jako istotny wymiar badań nad miastem. Wskazano, że praktyki mobilności, korzystania z usług i poruszania się po zmroku ujawniają braki w urbanistyce. Na podstawie literatury, danych statystycznych oraz dobrych praktyk oceniono czynniki wpływające na bezpieczeństwo oraz zaproponowano kierunki zmian w stronę bardziej inkluzywnej przestrzeni. Celem artykułu jest ukazanie, że perspektywa architektury codzienności stanowi narzędzie analityczne pozwalające zrozumieć, jak środowisko zbudowane wpływa na codzienne doświadczenia kobiet. Artykuł dowodzi, że uwzględnienie codziennych praktyk kobiet jest niezbędne do formułowania bardziej inkluzywnych i sprawiedliwych rozwiązań urbanistycznych.

Słowa kluczowe: *bezpieczeństwo kobiet, inkluzywne projektowanie, przestrzenie publiczne, urbanistyka wrażliwa na płeć*

1. INTRODUCTION

Cities are places of innovation, residence, social interaction, and recreation for diverse populations, functioning as multicultural melting pots[1]. Feminist urban studies argue that

[1] M. Gyurkovich, K. Racoń-Leja, F. Suchoń, *The hidden legacy of modernisms*, [in:] *Defining the Architectural Space: Architecture and History*, vol. 2, Oficyna Wydawnicza ATUT, Wrocław 2025,

urban space is not gender-neutral[2]; rather, women experience the city differently from men. Their mobility patterns are often more complex, reflecting caregiving responsibilities, concerns about personal safety, and prevailing social norms[3]. Women are twice as likely as men to take children to school, rely more frequently on buses for daily travel, and only 30% have access to a car during the daytime[4]. The perspective of everyday architecture provides a framework for understanding how the built environment shapes women's everyday activities while revealing the embeddedness of structural inequalities in urban design.

The perspective of everyday architecture provides a framework for examining how the design of streets, public transport stops, pedestrian crossings, and local services influences women's safety, comfort, and independence. Weisman's[5] (1994) research demonstrates that inadequate lighting, poor legibility, and limited visibility – particularly in transitional spaces – reduce women's sense of safety. Kern[6] (2020) argues that women's everyday lives are shaped by the persistent risk of violence, which influences their decisions about moving through urban space. The concept of everyday architecture makes it possible to identify hidden barriers that are often overlooked in conventional urban analyses but are crucial to women's quality of life. Particular attention should therefore be paid to the "everyday" places, needs, and spaces – such as homes, streets, public transport stops, shops, and playgrounds – that constitute the essential network supporting daily life[7].

The ARUP report[8] identifies four key thematic areas that require improvement to enhance women's quality of life in cities: safety and security, equity and equality, health and well-being, and growth and fulfilment.

The aim of this article is to examine how the perspective of everyday architecture contributes to a deeper understanding of women's spatial experiences and reveals hidden inequalities embedded in the built urban environment. It argues that women's everyday activities – including mobility, safety concerns, caregiving responsibilities, and the use of urban infrastructure – provide valuable insights for critically examining existing design practices and identifying pathways towards more inclusive and equitable urban environments.

The study used a mixed-methods design, combining qualitative and casebased approaches. The research was preceded by a semi-structured literature review, encompassing scientific books and online sources in both Polish and English. The selection of literature was purposeful and focused on works relevant to the conceptualisation of the research problem and the formulation of the theoretical framework for the analysis.

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[7] D. Spain, *op. cit*., p. 138.

[8] *Lighting the way for women and girls: a new narrative for lighting design in cities*, "Arup", https://www.arup.com/projects/perceptions-of-night-time-safety-women-and-girls (access: 9.07.2026).

2. URBAN DETERMINANTS OF WOMEN'S SENSE OF SAFETY

Diversity and inclusivity have become fundamental values in contemporary urban design, shaping both the physical character of cities and the quality of life of their residents. Contemporary urban planning increasingly acknowledges the diverse needs of users, emphasising the importance of adapting public spaces to the requirements of different social groups. Inclusive design must therefore consider accessibility, safety, and family-friendly amenities to ensure that urban spaces are welcoming, functional, and enjoyable for everyone, including women, men, older adults, and children. Adequate lighting, clearly visible and well-defined public spaces, and well-lit pedestrian routes contribute significantly to people's sense of safety, particularly for women. Well-designed places for rest and recreation, access to green spaces, and the availability of essential social services support everyday life and strengthen social cohesion within local communities.

From women's perspective, safety in the city – particularly within public spaces – is a critical concern. Fear of assault, sexual harassment, and other forms of violence limits women's ability to fully enjoy and engage with public spaces. One in five women stated that they had refrained from going out in the evening because of fear of being assaulted. Among men, this proportion is nearly four times lower. These figures represent not only statistical evidence but also tangible constraints that affect women's mobility, employment opportunities, and participation in social life. Research indicates that safe and well-maintained pavements, the presence of people in public spaces[9], and street greenery can contribute to reducing crime[10]. Improvements in public safety can also be achieved through well-designed lighting in parks, public squares, and streets[11]. In Oakland, California, cost-cutting measures that reduced public lighting were associated with an increase in incidents of sexual harassment and violence against women[12]. However, many cities worldwide lack sufficient financial resources to provide adequate street lighting. In addition, proposals to expand urban lighting are often challenged by environmental concerns, particularly regarding their potential impacts on biodiversity, including insect populations. Nevertheless, these objectives need not be mutually exclusive. Approaches such as intelligent and energy-efficient lighting design can simultaneously minimise environmental impacts and improve public safety.

To improve safety in the small Swedish town of Umeå, a dark, poorly lit pedestrian underpass that women and girls perceived as unsafe was redesigned (Ill. 1). The lighting was enhanced, and the tunnel entrances were reshaped with more rounded forms, improving visibility into the underpass and reducing the number of potential hiding places. An additional exit was also added in the middle of the tunnel, allowing women to leave if they feel uncomfortable for any reason. Photographs of birch trees, a symbol of the city, were installed on the tunnel walls.

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[9] K.E. Schertz et. al., *Neighborhood street activity and greenspace usage uniquely contribute to predicting crime*, "npj Urban Sustainability" 2021, no. 1, art. 19.

[10] J. Lin, O. Wang, B. Huang, *Street trees and crime: What characteristics of trees and streetscapes matter?*, "Urban Forestry and Urban Greening" 2021, no. 65, art. 127366.

[11] Arup, *op. cit.*

[12] S. Walter, *Crime Rises in Oakland, and Dim Lights Get Blame*, "The New York Times", 23.09.2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/23/us/crime-rises-in-oakland-and-dim-lights-get-blame.html (access: 9.07.2026).



Ill. 1. Pedestrian underpass designed with women in mind[13]

The scientific literature indicates that cities designed to support women's caregiving responsibilities should provide proximity to essential services, high-quality pedestrian infrastructure, safe and well-lit walking environments, and accessible public transport systems[14]. In 2022, the School Streets programme was introduced in Warsaw, temporarily closing streets adjacent to school entrances to motor vehicle traffic during the times when children arrive at and leave school. The initiative aims to encourage walking and cycling as alternatives to travelling by car. The first School Street was established in the Ursynów district at Primary School No. 323. Data collected during the pilot project showed that between 7:30 and 8:15 a.m., traffic around the school reached its peak, with as many as 230 vehicles passing through the surrounding narrow residential streets (Ill. 2), equivalent to more than five vehicles per minute[15].



Ill. 2. Access roads to Primary School No. 323 in Warsaw: a – before the implementation of the project; b – after the implementation of the project[16]

[13] Umea, *Se Umeå ur ett nytt perspektiv!*, "Umeå kommun", (n.d.), https://www.umea.se/sida/genderedlandscape.4.4117ebf317b9aa1fe014581.html (access: 29.06.2026).

[14] L. Kern, *Feminist city: Claiming space in a man-made world*, Verso, 2020, p. 41

[15] For comparison, during the morning peak hour, an average of six vehicles per minute travel in each lane of Puławska Street (2,286 vehicles across six lanes between 7:00 and 8:00 a.m.), while Pileckiego Street carries an average of three vehicles per minute per lane (1,088 vehicles across six lanes during the same period).

[16] „*Szkolna ulica" przy Szkole Podstawowej nr 323 i Przedszkolu nr 50*, "Zarząd Dróg Miejskich", 2022, https://zdm.waw.pl/dzialania/droga-na-szostke/wdrozenia/hirszfelda/ (access: 29.06.2026).

An interesting measure of cycling infrastructure is the Copenhagenize Index[17], which ranks cities according to their bicycle-friendliness. Among European cities, Utrecht, Copenhagen, and Ghent occupy the top positions, while the Polish city of Wrocław ranks 28th. Why is monitoring cycling activity so important? Cities that achieve higher rankings provide all residents, regardless of gender, with access to a well-developed cycling transport system. Higher scores are awarded to cities where the proportion of female and male cyclists is relatively balanced. This approach is based on the observation that women are more likely to cycle when they feel confident and safe on the roads.

In Montreal, women travelling on night buses can request that the driver stop between designated bus stops, thereby shortening the walking distance to their destination and reducing the risk of assault. In Wrocław, an initiative aimed at creating a safer city has been piloted through organised safety walks, during which women identify and map locations they perceive as particularly unsafe. In Warsaw, civic organisations have advocated for the introduction of an on-demand night transport service, following a model similar to that used in Canada.

3. ARCHITECTURAL DETERMINANTS OF THE SENSE OF SAFETY

The concept of *universality of architecture* is synonymous with architectural accessibility, as defined in the principles of universal design formulated in 1985 by Ronald Mace. These principles concern equitable access to public and social spaces for all citizens, regardless of their physical or mental abilities[18].

In London, United Kingdom, the charitable organisation The Bridge, which supports women's health and well-being, has established a women-only gym. The facility is staffed by female trainers from diverse backgrounds. In 2024, the Rzeszów City Hall presented a redevelopment proposal for the Market Hall located in the city centre. The project covers a total area of 16 hectares. Its design was developed using an ecofeminist perspective[19]. The project involves the transformation of the Market Hall and the adjacent Jutrzenka market facilities to make them more user-friendly and better suited to the needs of both vendors and customers. During the public consultation process, men primarily emphasised the need for additional parking spaces, whereas women highlighted the importance of wider pavements, more green space, and improved accessibility. In response, the design proposal prioritises reducing car traffic, introducing green public spaces, and creating new recreational areas.

4. SOCIAL PARTICIPATION

Creating places that serve the needs of diverse social groups requires the active participation of residents in the design process. Public consultations should be conducted to enable

[17] M. Milert, *Dla kogo jest miasto? Jak stworzyć przestrzeń, która o nas dba*, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, Poznań 2025, p. 36.

[18] K. Kleszcz, A*rchitectural universalism – a new approach or an expression of traditionalism?,* vol. 2., Oficyna Wydawnicza, Wrocław 2025, pp. 81–95, https://dpa.arch.pk.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/06_TOM_II_JUSTYNA-KLESZCZ.pdf (access: 08.07.2026).

[19] A. Cymer, *Dzielnica dla kobiet – to dzielnica dla każdego,* 2024, "Culture.pl", https://culture.pl/pl/artykul/dzielnica-dla-kobiet-to-dzielnica-dla-kazdego (access: 29.06.2026).

community members to share their perspectives and propose solutions related to planned developments. Such participatory processes not only lead to more inclusive design solutions but also provide valuable insights into the actual needs of future users. An interesting example can be found in Bredäng Park, located in the suburbs of Stockholm, where a public space was designed specifically for adolescents. Landscape architects organised a series of workshops with teenage girls to better understand their expectations and preferences regarding public space. As a result of these consultations, a multifunctional public space was created that incorporates a wide range of features within a relatively compact area (Ill. 3). Although the activity zone occupies an area comparable to a small sports court, it also includes comfortable seating areas and less structured, playful elements, such as an interactive puzzle designed to encourage physical activity, social interaction, and informal play.



Ill. 3. Plan of the activity zone in Bredäng Park on the outskirts of Stockholm, designed by teenage girls[20]

The park incorporates numerous design features that enhance both user comfort and safety. These include a canopy integrated into the main structure, providing protection from adverse weather conditions, as well as built-in lighting and Bluetooth speakers, enabling the space to be used throughout the year[21]. Among the urban features designed to meet the needs of women living in Umeå are several distinctive benches suspended above the ground, resembling swings. Attached by chains to a colourful overhead structure, they are arranged side by side in a circular configuration reminiscent of a giant carousel. The installation was designed by teenage girls from the city, who sought to create an engaging recreational space for the local community. In developing the design, they took into account the average height of the women expected to use the space, estimated at 1.65 metres (Ill. 4).

[20] *Bredängsparken Basketplan*, "Google Maps", https://www.google.com/maps/@59.296991,17.9298708,94m/data=!3m1!1e3?entry=ttu&g_ep=EgoyMDI2MDcwOC4wIKXMDSoASAFQAw%3D%3D (access: 13.07.2026).

[21] Nivå Landskapsarkitektur, *Bredäng Park – dance and play!*, "Landezine", 26.10.2020, https://landezine.com/bredang-park-dance-and-play-by-niva/ (access: 29.06.2026).



Ill. 4. Suspended benches in Årstidernas Park, Umeå[22]

5. CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY

There are numerous detailed recommendations on how planning policies and practices can become more gender-responsive. For example, consultations concerning urban regeneration plans, policies, and development projects should actively involve both women and men. Statistical data should be disaggregated by gender, race, age, and health status, and additional research should be undertaken where necessary to provide an appropriate evidence base for planning. Data collection should capture the activities of both women and men, including travel patterns, employment, caregiving responsibilities, and leisure needs[23]. The spatial distribution of housing and employment should be planned in ways that ensure women – who continue to undertake the majority of caregiving responsibilities – have equal access to employment opportunities, while also enabling men to participate more actively in family care. Integrated public transport systems should be further developed and complemented by supporting infrastructure, such as childcare facilities, public toilets, baby-changing facilities, and seating areas, designed to accommodate the diverse mobility patterns of women and men. Urban and local policies should be considered together, as fundamental issues such as inadequate lighting or poor accessibility to buildings may undermine the effective implementation of sustainable development strategies. Such measures would reduce the need for unnecessary travel, improve urban accessibility, and enhance the overall quality of urban planning. From an urban planning perspective, it is essential to create public spaces in which all users feel safe, to incorporate diversity and inclusion into the design process, and to actively engage residents in planning and decision-making.

In conclusion, the architecture of everyday life, viewed through the lens of women's experiences, provides an important framework for analysing spatial inequalities and developing design recommendations based on the lived experiences of female users. As such, it

[22] G. Coi, *(Re)designing the city for women,* 22.06.2022, "Politico", https://www.politico.eu/article/city-women-gender-equality-umea-sweden-urbact-gendered-landscape-climate-change-emissions-transport-frizon-tunnel-security/ (access: 7.07.2026).

[23] C.H. Greed, *Women and Planning: Creating Gendered Realities* (1st ed.), Routledge 1994, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203410288 (access: 6.07.2026).

contributes to the broader discourse on spatial justice and the inclusiveness of the built environment. Its ultimate objective is to create cities in which every person, regardless of gender, feels safe, respected, and included. Inclusive design is not only an effective response to contemporary urban challenges but also a means of improving the quality of life for all residents. Although it is widely recognised that incorporating a gender perspective can enhance the effectiveness of policies and interventions implemented for the benefit of local communities, this approach remains relatively new and insufficiently understood among planners and local authorities.

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