
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Gendered Patterns of Public Space Use: An Architectural Analysis of U.S. Cities

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| ABSTRACT

Public spaces in contemporary U.S. cities are often described as neutral and universally accessible; however, patterns of uneven use and exclusion persist across gender and social groups. While existing research has examined these disparities through social, cultural, and behavioral lenses, the role of architectural design itself in producing such outcomes remains insufficiently articulated. This paper addresses that gap by examining how specific spatial design decisions influence gendered patterns of occupation, comfort, visibility, and participation in public urban environments. Through an architectural analysis of public spaces in multiple urban contexts within the United States, the study evaluates how design variables—including spatial configuration, seating typologies, circulation paths, scale, and degrees of enclosure—shape user behavior and perception. Drawing on direct observation and comparative spatial assessment, the research demonstrates that these architectural elements systematically affect how different groups engage with public space. Rather than treating inequitable use as an external social condition, the findings show that architectural form actively structures inclusion and exclusion within the built environment. The paper contributes an architectural framework for evaluating public space performance through the lens of inclusivity. By translating observed patterns of use into design-based criteria, the research establishes a method for assessing how spatial decisions influence equity and accessibility within U.S. urban public spaces. This framework provides architects and urban designers with a structured approach for identifying design conditions that discourage participation and for understanding how relatively modest spatial adjustments can meaningfully improve public space performance. By reframing gendered experience as an architectural issue, this work advances design-based discourse on equity in public space and positions architecture as an active tool for shaping inclusive urban environments. The framework developed through this study is applicable beyond individual sites and offers a transferable method for evaluating public spaces across diverse American urban contexts.

| KEYWORDS

Public Space Design, Gendered Spatial Experience, Architectural Inclusivity, Urban Design Analysis, U.S. Urban Environments

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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Introduction

Public spaces are commonly understood as shared environments intended to serve all members of society equally. In **U.S. cities**, these spaces are frequently described as neutral settings that promote openness, accessibility, and civic interaction. Yet patterns of uneven use persist, with certain groups occupying, engaging with, or avoiding public spaces in noticeably different ways. These disparities are often attributed to social behavior, cultural norms, or personal perceptions of safety, while the role of architectural design itself is treated as secondary or assumed to be impartial.

Existing scholarship has extensively examined gender inequality in public space through sociological, psychological, and planning-oriented perspectives. Studies have documented how factors such as harassment, social norms, and perceptions of risk influence who uses public space and how long they remain within it. While this body of work has been critical in identifying inequities, it has rarely translated these findings into a systematic architectural analysis of how spatial form, layout, and design decisions contribute to these outcomes. As a result, architecture is often positioned as a passive backdrop rather than an active agent shaping experience.

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This paper argues that architectural design plays a direct and measurable role in producing gendered patterns of public space use. Elements such as spatial configuration, seating arrangement, visibility, circulation, scale, and enclosure influence how individuals perceive comfort, exposure, and belonging within public environments. When these design variables are examined closely, it becomes evident that public spaces are not neutral by default; rather, they actively structure who feels encouraged to occupy them and who feels marginalized or excluded.

Focusing on public spaces within **urban contexts in the United States**, this research reframes gender inequality in public space as an architectural issue that can be analyzed, evaluated, and addressed through design-based criteria. By examining how everyday spatial decisions shape patterns of occupation and interaction, the study moves beyond abstract discussions of equity and toward a framework that situates architecture as a central factor in shaping inclusive public environments. By positioning architecture as both the site of the problem and a means of intervention, this work contributes to ongoing discourse on public space design and inclusivity. Rather than proposing prescriptive solutions, the paper establishes an architectural lens for evaluating how design choices influence gendered experience, offering a foundation for more informed and equitable approaches to public space design in **U.S. cities**.

Gendered Use of Public Space: An Architectural Perspective

The success or failure of public spaces is not determined solely by aesthetic quality or formal uniqueness, but by how effectively these spaces are used by different groups of people. In many contemporary urban environments, patterns of use reveal a noticeable imbalance: public spaces are disproportionately occupied by men, while participation by women remains significantly lower. This disparity is not incidental, but closely tied to how public spaces are designed, programmed, and maintained. Women often encounter limitations in their ability to use or benefit from public spaces in the same way as their male counterparts. In many cases, public environments lack design considerations, facilities, and amenities that support comfort, safety, accessibility, and prolonged occupation for women. Rather than accommodating a broad range of users, public spaces are frequently designed around assumptions of a default user, resulting in environments that unintentionally privilege certain groups while discouraging others. As a result, public spaces that are nominally open to all function unevenly in practice. In a significant number of cases, gender is not considered as a design variable at all during the planning and design of public spaces. This omission produces an implicit form of spatial segregation, where patterns of occupation and use become gendered without being formally acknowledged. Such conditions undermine the fundamental purpose of public space as a shared civic resource and limit its capacity to support inclusive and healthy urban life.

This paper argues that the assumption of gender neutrality in public space is misleading when examined through the lens of architectural design. Architectural form, spatial organization, and design language actively influence who feels encouraged to occupy public environments and who does not. The persistence of gendered patterns of use reflects not only broader social conditions, but also the cumulative effect of design decisions that shape visibility, comfort, exposure, and access within public space.

To examine this issue, the paper undertakes a comprehensive review of existing literature on public space use and gender, with particular attention to the observational studies of William H. Whyte in *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* and the analyses presented by Jessica Ellen Sewell in *Women and the Everyday City*. These works provide critical insight into how urban spaces function in practice and how different users engage with them. Building on these contributions, the paper critically evaluates prevailing assumptions about public space design and examines how architectural principles contribute to both the successes and failures of public environments.

By analyzing public space through the language of architecture, this study situates gender inequality not solely as a social or behavioral issue, but as a spatial condition shaped by design choices. The paper demonstrates that disparities in use are closely linked to architectural decisions regarding layout, scale, circulation, seating, and degrees of enclosure. In doing so, it reframes gendered experience as an architectural concern and establishes a foundation for evaluating public space performance through inclusive design criteria.

3. Heading

William H. Whyte's formative work, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, offers a detailed investigation into how public spaces function in practice and what contributes to their success or failure. Through systematic observation and analysis, Whyte examines a wide range of factors influencing public space use, including spatial design, programming, amenities, time-based activity patterns, and user behavior. His work provides one of the earliest empirical frameworks for understanding how design decisions affect everyday urban life, including the experiences of different genders.¹

A particularly significant aspect of Whyte's observations concerns the role of women in shaping the social vitality of public spaces. His studies of plazas and parks reveal that women are not passive users of public environments but active participants

whose presence often signals spatial success. Whyte emphasizes that women should be able to experience, navigate, and contribute to public spaces on equal terms with other users, whether through social interaction, casual occupation, or solitary use. This perspective highlights gender as a meaningful variable in evaluating public space performance.

Whyte's findings indicate a strong correlation between the presence of women and the overall quality of a public space. He notes that heavily used spaces tend to exhibit a higher-than-average proportion of women and that women are generally more selective in choosing where to sit and linger. According to Whyte, women are more sensitive to spatial discomforts and environmental annoyances, and their patterns of use often reflect careful evaluation of seating options and surroundings. He concludes that plazas with a notably low proportion of women typically exhibit underlying design or contextual problems, whereas spaces with higher female participation are more likely to be successful public environments.²

Whyte further examines how specific design conditions influence these patterns of use. He observes that women often prefer seating locations that provide a sense of enclosure, limited exposure, and reduced visibility from surrounding streets, while men are more likely to occupy prominent, open, and highly visible positions. This spatial differentiation is not incidental but is shaped by the arrangement of seating, sightlines, and degrees of exposure within public spaces. Such configurations can unintentionally privilege certain forms of occupation while discouraging others, making it more difficult for women to use these spaces comfortably.³

These insights remain relevant in contemporary public space design. While such spatial preferences are sometimes interpreted solely through the lens of safety or comfort, later research—including the work of Dr. Julia King and Olivia Theocharides-Feldman—demonstrates that these patterns also reflect broader issues of gender equality embedded within design practices. Their findings reinforce the idea that architectural decisions play a direct role in shaping who feels included or excluded in public environments, underscoring the importance of examining gendered use through the language of architecture rather than treating it as a purely social phenomenon.

During a discussion on the use of public spaces by women, a seventeen-year-old participant remarked, "There's nowhere for girls. There's literally not a specific place for girls. There are places where we go, but no spaces for us."⁴ This observation reflects a recurring theme in studies of public space use: while women and girls may occupy public environments, these spaces are rarely designed with their specific needs, routines, or patterns of use as a primary consideration. The comment underscores a distinction between presence and accommodation, highlighting how access does not necessarily equate to inclusion.

This perspective aligns with Whyte's findings, which suggest that the design of many public spaces implicitly prioritizes certain user groups. Facilities such as basketball courts, playgrounds, and open recreational areas are frequently structured around activities and behaviors more commonly associated with male users. As a result, patterns of occupation emerge in which men disproportionately dominate these spaces, reinforcing design norms that assume a default male user. The absence of spaces explicitly designed to support the everyday activities and comfort of women contributes to uneven participation and limits the range of ways public space can be inhabited.

Dr. Julia King and Olivia Theocharides-Feldman further examine this imbalance by focusing on the distribution and design of amenities within public environments. They point out that facilities are essential to women's use of public spaces such as accessible and appropriately designed public toilets remain limited in many urban contexts. Even where such amenities exist, they are often insufficient in number, not freely accessible, or inadequately designed to meet women's needs.⁵ By contrast, amenities catering to men, such as urinals and public washrooms, are more consistently integrated into urban infrastructure. This disparity extends to the lack of provisions for strollers, changing facilities, and spaces that accommodate caregiving responsibilities, all of which influence how women navigate and occupy public environments.

While some public spaces do incorporate more inclusive design principles and attempt to accommodate a broader range of users, such examples remain inconsistent and unevenly distributed. These isolated cases do not yet represent a systemic shift in how public spaces are conceived and designed. The persistence of such disparities suggests that gender is still insufficiently considered as a design variable in public space planning.

This condition is further articulated in the Handbook for Gender-Inclusive Urban Planning and Design published by the World Bank, which emphasizes that men, women, and gender-diverse individuals experience public spaces differently due to varying needs, routines, and social roles. The handbook notes that urban environments, including public spaces, have historically been designed around male patterns of use, often overlooking the interests and daily practices of women and girls.⁶ This perspective reinforces the argument that gendered patterns of public space use are not incidental, but are shaped by architectural and infrastructural decisions that warrant closer examination through the lens of design.

Whyte further emphasizes the importance of architectural design in regulating how public spaces are used and experienced by women.⁷ His research demonstrates that spatial configuration, seating arrangements, visibility, and enclosure directly influence how women navigate and adapt to public environments. These observations underscore the role of design language in shaping access, comfort, and duration of use, highlighting that public spaces do not operate neutrally but respond to the spatial conditions established through architectural decisions. By linking patterns of occupation to specific design characteristics, Whyte reinforces the idea that architectural form plays a critical role in determining whether public spaces function equitably for different genders.

This perspective situates public space design as a central factor in fostering inclusive urban environments. The ability of a space to accommodate diverse patterns of use depends on how design decisions address variation in comfort, exposure, and activity. When these considerations are absent or unevenly applied, public spaces may unintentionally privilege certain users while discouraging others. Whyte's findings thus support the argument that design is not merely aesthetic, but a determining factor in shaping gendered experiences of public space.

The work of Jessica Ellen Sewell in *Women and the Everyday City* adds an experiential and historical dimension to this analysis. While the preceding discussion focuses on architectural form and spatial organization, Sewell examines how women experience, navigate, and negotiate public spaces in their everyday lives. She argues that gendered patterns of use are shaped not only by physical design, but also by long-standing social perceptions and cultural attitudes embedded within urban environments.⁸ Together, these perspectives illustrate how architectural decisions and lived experience interact to produce unequal conditions of access and participation.

Sewell's examination of women's experiences in San Francisco traces the historical exclusion of women from public life and demonstrates how these legacies continue to influence contemporary urban spaces. Although public environments have become more formally inclusive over time, women still encounter scrutiny, judgment, and unequal access to opportunities and amenities within the public realm.⁹ Sewell's analysis highlights how language, social norms, and spatial regulation intersect, reinforcing the idea that public space is not simply opened through policy or designation, but must be supported through design and infrastructure that acknowledge diverse users.

By bringing together Whyte's spatial observations and Sewell's experiential analysis, this section underscores that gender inequality in public space emerges from the interaction between architectural design and social practice. These combined insights reinforce the paper's central argument: that achieving equitable and inclusive public environments requires close attention to the design language of architecture and its role in shaping everyday urban experience.

This issue becomes clearer when the analytical lens is extended to Lutfun Nahar Lata's work, which examines the challenges women face in accessing public spaces in Dhaka, a dense and rapidly urbanizing city. Lata's research documents how women's access to public environments is shaped by the interaction of social norms, cultural expectations, religious practices, and gendered roles.¹⁰ Her findings demonstrate that these social forces are reflected in the physical organization and design of public spaces, influencing where women are able to move, linger, or participate in public life.

Lata's analysis reveals that gendered constraints are not limited to individual behavior but are embedded within the spatial structure of the city itself. The cumulative effects of social stigma, religious expectations, and patriarchal systems influence how public spaces are planned, regulated, and occupied. These conditions reinforce patterns of exclusion that are expressed through spatial arrangements, circulation systems, and the distribution of amenities, underscoring the relationship between social norms and architectural form.

When considered alongside the work of Sewell, Lata's research highlights the global nature of gender disparities in public space use. Despite differences in cultural and geographic context, recurring patterns emerge in how public environments reflect broader societal attitudes toward women. These parallels suggest that gendered spatial inequality is not an isolated condition but a widespread phenomenon shaped by both social structures and design practices. Recognizing these intersections is essential for understanding how architectural decisions can either reinforce or challenge exclusionary norms.

Francien Fons offers another perspective by examining gender inequality through empirical analysis of movement and behavior in public spaces. In *The Gender Reveal of Space*, Fons develops a framework based on field data collected from traffic patterns and pedestrian use across genders. Her research identifies unexpected disparities in how men and women navigate public environments and expands this analysis to include spaces such as parks, playgrounds, and pedestrian corridors. These observations reveal a broader spectrum of inequality, which Fons categorizes into issues of safety, accessibility, and inclusivity.¹¹

Fons's findings indicate that women are more likely to avoid public spaces perceived as unsafe, particularly those characterized by low visibility and limited pedestrian activity.¹² While safety is an important factor, her work also draws attention to accessibility and inclusivity as critical design concerns. These dimensions reveal how spatial decisions—such as layout, width, and circulation—can disadvantage women even in the absence of explicit safety threats.

Issues of accessibility and inclusivity further expose gender bias embedded within the design of urban public spaces. Sidewalks and pedestrian infrastructures are frequently dimensioned according to the ergonomics and movement patterns of an adult male user.¹³ This assumption overlooks the spatial requirements associated with caregiving, carrying personal items, or navigating public space with strollers. As a result, many public environments fail to accommodate the full range of everyday activities performed by women, reinforcing exclusion through design rather than intention.

Issues of inclusivity identified in public spaces align closely with the findings of Whyte, as well as the work of Dr. Julia King and Olivia Theocharides-Feldman, all of whom point to the systematic underrepresentation of women in public space design considerations. Their research highlights how services, amenities, and spatial programs are frequently planned without adequately accounting for women's everyday needs, resulting in environments that function unevenly across genders.

Francien Fons extends this discussion by examining the role of essential amenities, particularly public toilets, in shaping women's ability to occupy public space. She notes that the limited availability and inadequate design of public restrooms for women restrict their duration of stay and willingness to use public environments.¹⁴ Even when such facilities exist, issues related to cleanliness, accessibility, and spatial adequacy often diminish their effectiveness. These conditions demonstrate how the absence or poor integration of basic infrastructure can directly influence patterns of use and exclusion.

Fons also identifies parallels with the work of King and Theocharides-Feldman in examining recreational spaces such as parks and playgrounds. She observes that these environments are frequently dominated by large-scale facilities—such as basketball or football courts—that occupy significant portions of available space and are primarily used by boys. Girls, by contrast, are often relegated to peripheral areas, experiencing interruptions and limited access to dedicated play spaces.¹⁵ This spatial hierarchy reflects design decisions that prioritize certain activities and user groups, reinforcing unequal patterns of participation through layout and programming.

Although public spaces are formally open to all users, urban planning and design processes have historically given limited consideration to women's routines, activities, and spatial requirements. As a result, many public environments fail to respond effectively to women's needs, experiences, and patterns of use.¹⁶ This omission is not necessarily intentional but emerges from design assumptions that treat a narrow range of users as normative, leading to environments that function inequitably in practice.

Taken together, the literature examined in this paper illustrates the persistence of gender inequality within contemporary urban public spaces. Despite their designation as open and accessible environments, these spaces often embed bias through design decisions related to amenities, facilities, and spatial organization. Such conditions produce measurable differences in how public spaces are experienced and used across genders. By synthesizing the work of Whyte, Sewell, and other scholars, this investigation clarifies how architectural principles and design language contribute to these disparities and establishes a basis for evaluating public space inclusivity through an architectural lens.

Public spaces within the urban realm function as critical spatial frameworks through which social relationships and everyday interactions are formed. In U.S. cities, these environments are commonly envisioned as shared civic landscapes intended to serve diverse populations. However, as this analysis demonstrates, many public spaces continue to fall short of achieving meaningful gender equality.¹⁷ Across urban contexts, women frequently experience public environments as unwelcoming or insufficiently equipped, citing the absence of fundamental services, facilities, and design considerations that support their everyday use. This condition is reflected in observable patterns of occupation, where men disproportionately dominate public spaces while women's participation remains comparatively limited.

When examined through the lens of architecture, this imbalance can be closely linked to design decisions rather than solely to social behavior. The lack of amenities, spatial configurations, and environmental conditions that respond to women's needs produces an unintentional form of segregation, challenging the foundational premise of public space as a shared and equitable resource. This dynamic is evident in the test areas of Dayton and Cincinnati, where public spaces formally designated as open and accessible nonetheless function unevenly in practice due to underlying design assumptions embedded within their spatial organization.

Whyte's observations underscore the pivotal role women play in determining the success of public spaces. Public environments that exhibit balanced participation by both men and women tend to function as welcoming, socially active settings capable of supporting a wide range of civic interactions.¹⁸ The presence of women serves as a key indicator of spatial comfort and inclusivity, reinforcing the importance of architectural decisions—such as visibility, enclosure, seating arrangement, and circulation—in shaping public space performance.

Sewell's contributions further deepen this understanding by illustrating how women's everyday experiences influence the effectiveness and longevity of public spaces. Her work demonstrates that women are not only indicators of spatial success but also essential contributors to the vitality and sustainability of public environments. Public spaces that support women's participation are more likely to function as durable civic assets rather than underutilized or transient areas.¹⁹ These insights align with observations from Dayton and Cincinnati, where patterns of use reveal a strong relationship between women's presence, spatial comfort, and overall public space performance.

Rather than offering prescriptive solutions, this research emphasizes the importance of critically examining how architectural design language shapes gendered patterns of use within public spaces in U.S. urban contexts. By positioning architecture as an active agent in producing inclusion or exclusion, the paper challenges assumptions of neutrality in public space design and establishes a framework for evaluating public environments through design-based criteria. In doing so, it clarifies how public spaces in cities such as Dayton and Cincinnati can be more accurately understood—and assessed—as shared civic environments intended to be accessible and usable by all genders.

The findings of this research indicate that gender inequality in public spaces is not an abstract social condition but a spatial outcome shaped by architectural decisions, infrastructural priorities, and design assumptions embedded within urban environments. In U.S. cities such as Dayton and Cincinnati, where public spaces often emerge from post-industrial redevelopment, surface parking, and fragmented urban form, these design choices become especially visible. The absence of gender-responsive amenities, legible spatial hierarchy, and zones of graduated exposure contributes directly to uneven patterns of use.

Across the literature examined, several recurring architectural principles emerge as critical to addressing inclusivity in public space design. First, visibility must be balanced with enclosure. Public environments that offer clear sightlines without excessive exposure tend to support longer and more diverse occupation, particularly by women. Second, seating design and placement play a decisive role: movable, edge-oriented, and socially buffered seating consistently correlates with higher female participation. Third, amenity distribution, including accessible restrooms, caregiving facilities, and transitional spaces, directly influences who is able to remain in public space over time.

Equally important is the recognition that circulation systems regulate participation. Pedestrian paths designed exclusively around speed, efficiency, or adult-male ergonomics frequently marginalize users with different bodily, social, or caregiving needs. Inclusive public spaces benefit from layered circulation that allows choice—direct movement, lingering, observation, and retreat—rather than enforcing singular modes of use. These spatial principles are particularly relevant in downtown contexts where large-scale infrastructure and zoning decisions have historically prioritized vehicles and throughput over lived experience.

The architectural relevance of these principles is reinforced by related design research on urban voids, which demonstrates how neglected or residual spaces can be reimagined as inclusive civic environments when analyzed through spatial behavior, accessibility, and human-scale engagement. In *Re-Imagining the Spaces In-Between*, the transformation of underutilized sites in Downtown Dayton into “breathing spaces” illustrates how design strategies centered on permeability, graduated thresholds, and programmatic hybridity can restore social participation and psychological comfort in public environments.²⁰ These strategies, while applied to urban voids, parallel the design conditions identified in this paper as essential for gender-inclusive public space.

Together, these findings suggest that public space design in the United States would benefit from moving beyond assumptions of neutrality and instead evaluating spaces based on who can use them, for how long, and under what conditions. By foregrounding architectural design language—rather than solely policy or programming—this research establishes a transferable analytical framework applicable to diverse U.S. urban contexts. Public spaces that integrate visibility with refuge, access with choice, and activity with pause are more likely to function as genuinely inclusive civic environments.

Rather than prescribing fixed solutions, this paper contributes a design-based lens for assessing public space performance. When applied to cities such as Dayton and Cincinnati, where redevelopment, vacancy, and spatial fragmentation intersect, this framework offers architects and planners a method for recognizing and correcting embedded gender bias through architectural

means. In doing so, it reinforces the role of architecture as an active agent in shaping equitable, accessible, and sustainable public life.

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