

WESLEY PLAYING

FIELDS

AN EXPLORATION OF PARK LIFE IN OLD OAK AND PARK ROYAL BY YOUNG WOMEN

NOVEMBER 2024



PART 1 INTRODUCTION



Wesley Playing Fields

Social Place and Make Space for Girls would like to extend thanks to the wonderful young women that took part in the engagement sessions: Aafia, Asma, Sulekha, Geetasree, Melissa, Yasmin, Jenizia, and Abisha as well as to the OPDC and London Borough of Ealing for commissioning and prioritising this work, 5th Studio Architects and Jonathan Cook Landscape Architects for their wonderful collaboration on the project.

Of note, where this report refers to boys, girls, young men, and young women, these terms reflect gender identities, acknowledging that gender is socially constructed rather than binary or biologically determined. When such a framing is used we consider this to contribute to an evidence base consistent with the legal framework of the Public Sector Equality Duty under the Equality Act 2010, which requires public bodies to consider reducing discrimination in the use of public spaces in binary terms. Further, while the report primarily focuses on age and gender, it adopts an intersectional approach, recognising that factors such as class, belief, race, and disability also shape experiences of public space.

“When I go to a park I don’t see many girls there so I don’t feel really comfortable.” [Participant]

In our work with teenage girls, they often share that they don’t feel that green spaces or parks cater well to them. However, green spaces are particularly important for teenagers who often have no other free-to-use places available. This is why engaging with them to find out what their concerns are and how they could be addressed is so essential. Engaging with teenage girls to rethink the designs for parks and green spaces also gives them a sense of ownership over these places. It can, in itself, contribute to their feeling more included.

With these issues in mind, The Old Oak and Park Royal Development Corporation (OPDC) and London Borough of Ealing asked us to look at Wesley Playing Fields in Park Royal. The project worked with 8 young people who live in Ealing age 15-18 who identified as women (the Participants). It explored with the Participants what the barriers were to young women using the space and what would make Wesley Playing Fields more welcoming to them.

Through a series of three workshops, delivered in the Autumn of 2024 at OPDC offices, we worked with the Participants to think about what “a space for me” might look and feel like¹. They were tasked with exploring their current use and experiences of parks, public space, and what leisure means to them, in order to then propose a series of design ideas that would encourage and enable them to use Wesley Playing Fields. The park, for numerous reasons, outlined in detail below, was not a space that the young women would use. Their recommendations make the case for providing more informal sport, recreation, leisure and community spaces that are inclusive of more young people, and that go beyond the traditional teen provisions of MUGA (multi-use games area), skatepark and BMX track.

The aim of this report, and the project itself, is to inform architects, developers and planners in the OPDC and Ealing, on the needs and wants of teenage girls for their local green spaces, in order to create public spaces that work better for this demographic. Specifically, the findings from this engagement are intended to influence the design strategy of Wesley Playing Fields and create a more inclusive space for young people.

1. The details of the workshops are set out in Appendix 2 of this report.

PART 2

THE BACKGROUND ON GENDER AND PARKS

Parks are vital public spaces, providing opportunities for activity, social connection, independence, and community cohesion. However, many young people, particularly girls, young women, and gender-diverse individuals, rarely use parks. This is partly because provisions for teenagers often focus on facilities like skateparks, MUGAs, BMX tracks, and football pitches. Though not intentionally exclusive, these spaces are often dominated by boys and young men, leaving others feeling unwelcome. Parks also often only provide facilities for sport when teenage girls (and many boys and gender diverse young people) often list preferring facilities which allow them to play as well.

Research highlights stark gender disparities:

- A study by Social Place's researchers (at the LSE) with Make Space for Girls found that 63% of young men regularly used parks, compared to just 31% of young women; and that, 50% of young men used football pitches regularly, compared to only 6% of young women.
- A Make Space for Girls survey revealed that 92% of teenage users of fenced pitches and 84% of skatepark users were boys and young men.

These disparities reflect a broader issue: that many young people feel unsafe, unwelcome, or excluded from public spaces and are rarely consulted about them. For instance:

- A 2022 Girlguiding survey found that over 80% of girls and young women feel unsafe when out alone.
- Research by Grosvenor (2021) revealed 89% of 16–18-year-olds had never been consulted about their local areas.
- YWL research in Scotland (2021) showed only 20% of girls and young women in Glasgow felt comfortable in their local park.
- And, Stonewall's 2018 report highlighted that over two in five trans people avoid certain streets due to fear.

This exclusion infringes on young women's rights to benefit from public spaces and raises concerns under the Public Sector Equality Duty in the Equality Act 2010.

In the words of this project's Participants:

"We actually both like sports but we wouldn't use sports pitches because males are often dominating with rough play."

"For teenagers if you want to play something you have to pay £15 for laser tag."

"There's a lot of stigma, people have a bad view of teens [...] I went to a park climbed on a big thing but then got stared at by mums..."

To make parks truly inclusive, we must rethink their design and provisions, and actively listen to excluded groups to ensure they meet the needs of and welcome all young people.



Discussion on "what does better look like?"

PART 3

CONTEXT AND COMPLEXITY

Wesley Playing Fields, is a local park along North Acton Road in North Acton. The park was originally built to service a small estate within the wider industrial area of Park Royal, an area which today is still largely industrial. Whilst small, it is the largest park serving the Wesley Estate and surrounding Park Royal area. It currently contains the following facilities:

- a fenced MUGA with basketball and football amenities (the teen provision of the park);
- a children's playground;
- a ping pong table;
- a few outdoor gym equipments;
- and a couple of picnic tables and benches peppered throughout the park.

The young women we worked with did not use Wesley Playing Fields. For leisure, they went shopping, to cinemas and to places like Westfield, Ealing Broadway to hang out with friends; and many also attended the Mosque on Fridays and would meet friends there. In terms of parks and green space, many Participants used those near to their school to hang out with friends particularly after school, or used green spaces local to their homes when they went out with their families, and many took care of their younger siblings by bringing them to these local parks. When they visited parks alone or with friends they enjoyed using the swings or benches, and often also simply walked around with friends with food, snacks, or a drink.

In many ways, Wesley Playing Fields is no different to many of the smaller local parks in London, however there are key complexities and context to the site which affect whether young women choose to use such a space:



1. Construction and Industrialisation

- The site is a green alcove within numerous towering industrial sites with ongoing construction. The feedback from the Participants in this workshop, which resonates with findings from previous work we have done, is that large construction and industrial sites are intimidating and feel unsafe. They offer low visibility and block lines of sight (young women feel they cannot see or be seen which is important for their sense of safety), and as opposed to retail or residential sites – they are often void of people, particularly at night.

2. Exits, Entrances and Paths

- Both entrances / exits to the park are on its west side, hidden within tall planting which blocks visibility from the road into the park and vice versa. These features of the park are intimidating to the Participants as again, it blocks lines of sight, makes the park feel enclosed and that the Participants could be 'trapped' in the park or struggle to get help if there was a problem.
- There is one main existing path within the park, that runs along its perimeter. This path does not connect well to the amenities in the park (eg. the MUGA is not linked to the path). The Participants, found the path a little intimidating, predominantly because it is narrow and there is only one way to navigate the park. In addition, there is a lack of wayfinding within the park which makes it less legible.

3. A Hyperlocal Space

- The park, due its size, facilities and positioning in an industrial site is not a 'destination park'. This means that teenage girls' uptake of the park is likely to be hyper-local, and any interventions should reflect this context. This is also a limitation to the engagement: as while many of the Participants lived locally, they did not live in immediate proximity to the park. As such, many had never been to the park prior to the engagement as it felt "out of the way", and instead would use parks closer to their schools or home.

4. Provisioning

- Currently the park does not provide for the majority of teenage girls. The park provides two facilities for young people: 1. A playground for children aged 4-11; and 2. a MUGA for teenagers. The Participants shared that they would rather go into the children's playground to use the swings, however as the playground is for younger children they felt they would be judged there. They would only feel comfortable using the playground during hours where children were less likely to use it. None of them indicated that they would use the MUGA.

5. Maintenance

- A section of the park is overgrown and enclosed at the north-east edge (the top back) which feels very intimidating and is a safety concern to the Participants. One young woman shared that, "you don't know who could be hiding in there." Furthermore, the benches and seating areas in the park do not have shelter (some have limited tree shelter) and the Participants felt this was a limitation due to both weather and bird poo.

PART 4 RECOMMENDATIONS

We set out below the design ideas for Wesley Playing Fields that the Participants shared with us during the workshops, followed by a summary of their proposals. The goal will be for this space to better serve underserved groups, including young people, but with a focus on addressing the perspectives and needs of local young women. Key references included.

Asma's park proposal aims to create an inviting space for all ages. She suggests circular teen swings for group hangouts, a central fountain with a gazebo surrounded by flowers, and benches—both inside the gazebo and climbable ones facing the fountain—to enhance socialisation and add purpose to the space when on walks. Wider paths with decorative flooring, border planting, and a park map with flora details would improve accessibility and curiosity. Aesthetic lighting, like fairy lights, would make her feel safer and the space usable after dark. Additional amenities include a cricket pitch and age-specific play areas (e.g., playground <14, teen hangout >14).

**Mega Swings,
Moscow, Russia
by Helicity**

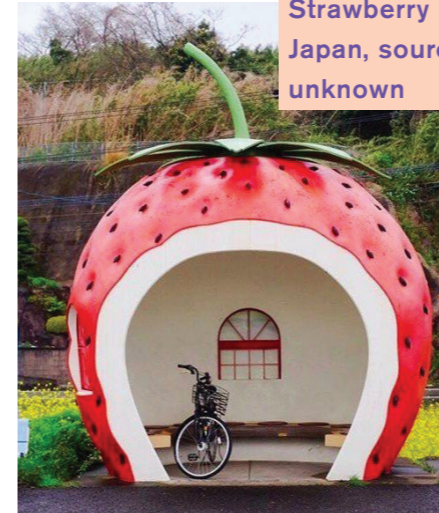


“Seasonal stuff like playful water features but for not just kids”

**Konditaget
Lüders,
Copenhagen,
Denmark by Ja
Ja Architects**



**Strawberry Hut
Japan, source:
unknown**

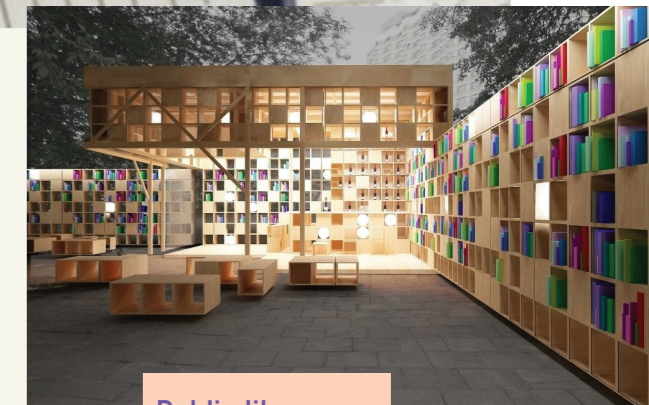


strawberry (fun) hut / shelter

**Los Trompos,
Mexico City,
Mexico and
elsewhere
by Esrawe +**



Aafia's park design is organised into zones and focuses on making the park more social, playful, and active for teenage girls. Zone 1 features a flower patch, mini trampolines, and a summer outdoor cinema. Zone 2 offers a cosy reading area with a greenhouse-like gazebo for reading, book clubs, fairs, and exchanges for all. Zone 3 is a cricket zone. Zone 4 includes seating near the playground for relaxation, group gatherings, and hammocks (in summer), a strawberry shaped hut, and a gazebo with a fountain surrounded by flowers. Zone 5 focuses on beauty and nature with a pond, small statues, and charming huts.

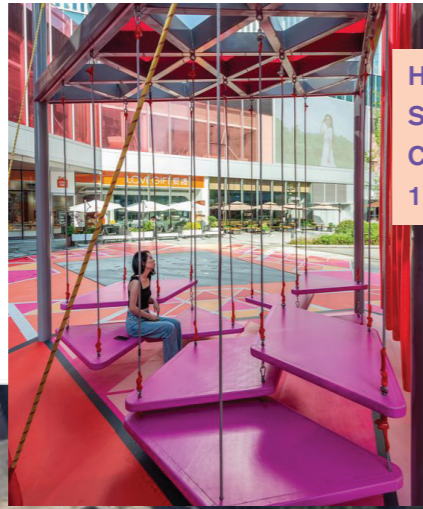


**Public library
competition,
Moscow, Russia
by Archiwood
and Office 17**

HopOp500
Light by Danish
company



Hang Out,
Shanghai,
China by
100architects



Sulekha's park design proposal emphasises creativity, community and fun. She suggests a number of community led initiatives such as an art mural for residents to express themselves, and a community gardening area. She also proposes, a colourful and creatively lit greenhouse-like shelter with cosy seating designed as an open space for reading and socialising. Nearby she imagines large tables under uniquely shaped open shelters for people to draw and paint on and swinging seating for people to socialise on. The park would also accommodate a greater variety of sports, including badminton, tennis, and cricket; and would be beautified with a fountain and flowers.



Serpentine
Gallery Pavilion
2009, London,
UK by SANAA

"I just want something beautiful that we can look at and be around"

Jenizia's park design proposal is about beauty and enjoyment. Flower arches at the entrances, cherry blossom trees, topiary, trees with hanging cosy lights, and scattered flower patches create aesthetic features for people to enjoy and teens to take photos. For teens specifically she proposes, light up large swings (potentially built into a cafe offering public toilets), numerous open clam-shaped shelters with social seating; a reading area with atrium seating and summer movie nights. Other ideas include widening the paths to walk in groups, adding sandpits and slides for children, building a small pond in flooded areas of the park to recycle the water with stepping stones for young people.

"Fairy lights - they're a vibe and it just sets the night mood"



"We get judgy stares from mums if we're on the swings"



Frizon, Umea,
Sweden
by Tyrens
architects

SUMMARY

“A park should be a place where you can spend time, feel safe, and build community.”

The Participants proposed a series of design solutions that they felt would make Wesley Playing Fields a fun, safe, and welcoming space for teenage girls. Their designs and proposals for the space can largely be grouped under four categories (listed in order of the importance they placed on them):

1. Sheltered seating

- All the participants² felt that the park did not have amenities which would allow them to comfortably linger in the space. They all desired a sheltered seating area to either socially hang out with friends and family or to quietly read and relax. Almost all the participants imagined these to be beautiful weather proof partially open spaces or ones made of materials like glass to enable visibility, with comfortable and creative seating.
- Their proposals ranged from fun shaped shelters with circular social seating; social benches with an elevated (and climbable) shelter; and a cosy-lit reading shelter or nook with a large table to draw on.

2. Aesthetic Focal Point(s)

- All the participants felt that the space needed something beautiful to look at, enjoy, gather around, and take photos with. Proposals ranged from water features like fountains and ponds, to lighting displays, photogenic nature, and beautiful planting. Having an aesthetic focal point, they felt, would provide them with both an invitation and a purpose to wander through or linger in the park.
- There were many proposals to achieve this aim such as: a 'seasonal corner' with changing coloured lighting and planting for different seasons or holidays; trees with colourful lights hanging down and flower patches around their base; a pond with water fountains and stepping stones for children which they imagined could recycle the water that was flooding the grounds; creative topiary and beautiful cherry blossoms; an archway of flowers at the park's entrances; a community art wall for local residents; and a gazebo with a water fountain and flowers.

3. Walking paths

- Most of the young women described that they enjoyed wandering around public spaces with friends but that the paths in the park did not seem to enable this. They proposed to better connect the amenities in the park with a series of smaller paths; to beautify the paths with border planting, “interesting flooring and lighting to reflect the mood”; and to widen and light the main paths of the park so that groups could walk together and “so it looks less dangerous and more welcoming.”
- They also felt that the park required signage indicating “separate sports and play areas” and “so you know where to go”. One Participant suggested a sign with a map of the park and information its flora. Another suggested an ‘In Case of Emergency’ sign with emergency contact numbers and the park's postcode. Many agreed that age limits should be placed on signs around amenities like 14+ on large swings for teens; or 10+ on the cricket pitch.

4. Activating Space

- Of utmost importance to the Participants in terms of teen play provision were swings. Almost all proposed swings in some way in their designs, notably large lit up circular teenage swings to hangout in groups. Many suggested shelter or partial shelter for the swings, and one young woman suggested swing ‘pods’ with free wifi and charging ports. A few Participants viewed the swings as part of a teen playground alongside large slides and hangout spaces. Many Participants also proposed to activate the park space with more diverse sporting amenities predominantly for cricket but also for badminton and tennis.
- Furthermore, the site is not near to any food places, a key attractor for young women to use green space, many Participants therefore proposed an affordable cafe where they could get a drink or snack and then wander in the park. One young woman proposed to have a cafe which also ran and maintained public toilets in the park with integrated swings. There were also numerous proposals for temporary activations of the space via summer movie nights, seasonal shows, book clubs and fairs and so on.

2. Whilst eight women were part of the engagement, not all attended all the sessions. Consequently, we find it more useful to talk generally than to offer specific numbers.

PART 5 FINAL THOUGHTS

This report brings to light a number of key concerns that some of the many teenage girls who live in Old Oak and Park Royal have around their parks and green spaces. Moreover, it lays out a series of thoughtful interventions crafted by the young women participants on how to make Wesley Playing Fields, and parks in general, a more welcoming, safe and fun space for this demographic. We believe that these types of insightful observations, ideas and proposals can only come about when young people are meaningfully heard, respected and valued on their own terms and where they feel that their needs and wants are being taken seriously.

The aim is for the insights of the young women to not just inform the redevelopment of Wesley Playing Fields but to feed into future projects in the area as well. By doing this, the project will also have a further legacy for the whole OPDC area. Bringing these aspirations to life will demonstrate to the Participants, and other young women, that by sharing their wonderful insights with key stakeholders, they have the power to influence and shape the local areas in which they are growing up. This will hopefully also give them a greater sense of ownership over the area they live and empower them to be more involved in its development in the future.



APPENDIX 1: FEEDBACK

Overall, the feedback from the sessions has been overwhelmingly positive. In response to the five feedback questions:

- 100% of participants responded that they had enjoyed the workshops
- 100% of participants responded that they were satisfied with what they had got out of the workshops
- All but 1 participant felt that the workshops had changed how they felt about safety in shared spaces; this participant explained with healthy scepticism that:

“I see the effort that is put into making shared spaces safe but it may not stop kids or teens from being in danger by dangerous people.”

- 100% of participants indicated feeling comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas during the workshop with a few responses including:

“I felt that none of my ideas would be judged”

“I felt very heard throughout the sessions since everything I had put out was taken in and discussed”

“They were very understanding, they helped expand on my ideas and improve them”

“Despite having social anxiety, I felt comfortable and respected by the kind workers”

- 100% of participants felt the workshops did not need to be improved to make them more effective for them, however most indicated that they wanted additional sessions and another that the location of the sessions was not well indicated:

“Everyone was really sweet, loved it. More sessions so more time to progress and reflect”

“Not much as I really enjoyed it but time passed by too quick so more sessions”

“Possibly the door to the area could be more specific, maybe a sign”

APPENDIX 2: WORKSHOP STRUCTURE



SESSION 1

Social Place and MSFG gave an introduction to public space: what is public space, why does it matter, what inequalities/gendered differences can we see in public space?

Exercise during which the Participants categorised various spaces and modes of transport by reference to frequency of use. Discussion with Participants on why they went to, used or avoided certain places. Participant collaging and zine-making to explore their initial ideas on:

- What is the public realm and why does it matter, generally and to you?
- What would you like to see in the public realm?
- Does how you experience the public realm differ depending on your gender identity?



SESSION 2

Site visit and discussion with Participants of Wesley Playing Fields

The Participants were provided with a map of the green space and which they annotated with what they saw as key issues, or hurdles to their inclusion within the park; and amended for initial design solutions for this to become 'a place for me'.



SESSION 3

The Participants were tasked with making a mood board / proposal collage for interventions in the park.

They were provided with a large bank of images of parks and facilities and objects found in parks and similar public spaces which were grouped into themes (eg sports, food, swings, skateboarding, seating, lighting, toilets, play).

The Participants selected images that to them best reflected "a place for me", and using these images, various stickers, drawing and writing created their mood boards.



CITATIONS:

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Authored by
Social Place
with Make Space for Girls

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