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URBAN PUBLIC SPACES AS INFORMAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS: YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND SOCIAL DYNAMICS IN CITIES

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ABSTRACT

Urban public spaces play a significant role in shaping youth engagement and the social dynamics of cities, extending beyond recreation to function as informal learning environments. While research on learning has focused on formal settings, a growing body of interdisciplinary work highlights the importance of everyday urban environments for attention, interaction, and experiential learning. This paper presents a structured review of literature on youth engagement in urban public spaces, with an emphasis on visual attention, behavioral interaction, and spatial experience. Drawing on urban studies, environmental psychology, and education research, it synthesizes how spatial attributes such as greenery, safety, comfort, social presence, and visual legibility affect youth participation and engagement. The findings indicate that well-designed public spaces foster curiosity, social interaction, and inclusive learning opportunities, while poorly designed environments tend to limit engagement and reduce experiential quality. The paper reframes public space as a socially embedded learning environment and argues for its role in enhancing inclusivity and engagement in rapidly urbanizing contexts.

Keywords: Urban public spaces; youth engagement; informal learning; social dynamics; environmental perception; inclusive urban design

The world has been urbanizing at a pace without historical precedent, and the United Nations projects that the urban share of the global population will continue to rise through the middle of the century, with most of that growth concentrated in Asia and Africa (United Nations, 2018). A large proportion of these urban residents are young. In countries such as India, where the demographic structure is weighted towards adolescents and young adults, the everyday environments this group encounters carry a significance that is easy to overlook. Streets, squares, parks, gateways, ghats, and market edges are not simply the residual space between buildings; they are where a great deal of young people's discretionary time is actually spent.

Urban scholarship has long held that the quality of these shared spaces shapes the quality of urban life. Jacobs (1961) argued that the ordinary sidewalk, animated by mixed uses and the informal watchfulness of its users, is a primary instrument of urban vitality and safety. Whyte (1980), through patient observation of small plazas in New York, demonstrated that whether people gather, sit, and linger depends on physical details that designers routinely ignore. Gehl (2011) distinguished the necessary activities people must perform from the optional and social activities that occur only when a setting invites them, tying the presence of the latter to the liveliness of public life. Carr, Francis, Rivlin, and Stone (1992)

INTRODUCTION

framed public space in terms of its users' needs, rights, and meanings. Running through these accounts is a common claim: in public space, people do far more than move through. What this literature has been slower to articulate is that doing far more than moving through includes learning. Research on learning has been dominated by formal institutions — schools, colleges, examinations, and curricula - yet a substantial tradition in educational thought holds that most of what people learn is acquired outside such settings. Eraut (2000) argued that formal and informal learning are better understood as ends of a continuum than as discrete categories and drew attention to the tacit knowledge that accrues through everyday activity. Colley, Hodkinson, and Malcolm (2003) likewise resisted a clean binary, treating formality and informality as attributes present in varying degrees in almost any situation. Schugurensky (2000) distinguished self-directed, incidental, and socialization-based forms of informal learning, the last of which unfolds without any intention to learn. If learning is this pervasive and this embedded in ordinary life, then the everyday spaces of the city become plausible - and largely unexamined - sites of education.

Young people occupy these spaces in a distinctive way. They are among the most frequent users of public space, partly because, lacking the resources and autonomy of adults, they depend on it for both sociability and retreat (Lieberg, 1995; Travlou, Eubanks Owens, Ward Thompson, & Maxwell, 2008). At the same time, they are often unwelcome in it, pushed towards leftover or token spaces and viewed with suspicion when they appropriate more central ones (Childress, 2004; Valentine, 2004). The result is a population that learns a great deal in public space precisely as it negotiates its right to be there. This paper brings these strands together. Through a structured review of literature from urban design and urban

studies, environmental psychology, education, and the geographies of childhood and youth, it asks how the spatial attributes of public space shape youth engagement and what is learned in the process. Three questions guided the review. First, how do spatial attributes - greenery, safety, comfort, social presence, and visual legibility influence the ways young people engage with public space? Second, through what mechanisms does that engagement become a form of informal learning? Third, what follows for the design and governance of public space in rapidly urbanizing contexts? The central argument is that well-designed public space functions as a socially embedded informal learning environment, and that recognizing it as such reframes a question of amenity into one of educational and civic infrastructure - an extension of the long-standing claim that the city and its public life are a right rather than a privilege (Lefebvre, 1996). The remainder of the paper sets out the review approach, establishes the conceptual grounding, synthesizes the evidence attribute by attribute, examines the social dynamics of youth engagement, and develops the reframing before turning to its implications.

APPROACH TO THE REVIEW

This study is a structured thematic review rather than a systematic meta-analysis. Its purpose is conceptual: to synthesize dispersed bodies of work that rarely address one another and to build an integrative framework from them. Literature was identified through Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar using combinations of terms covering public space (public space, urban open space, plaza, street, park), the youth population (youth, adolescents, teenagers, young people) and the learning and perception constructs of interest (informal learning, experiential learning, situated learning, environmental perception, visual

attention, place attachment). Reference lists of key works were followed to capture foundational and frequently cited sources that keyword searches alone tend to miss.

Sources were retained when they addressed at least one of three concerns: the qualities of public space and their effect on use; the relationship between young people and urban public space; or the theory of informal, experiential, and situated learning. The retrieved material was then coded thematically around the five spatial attributes identified in the study abstract and around the learning constructs that connect those attributes to engagement. Because the review spans disciplines with different methods and vocabularies, the synthesis is interpretive: it reads across literatures to assemble an argument, and it does not claim the exhaustiveness or replicability of a formal systematic review. This is at once its principal limitation and the source of its contribution.

CONCEPTUAL GROUNDING

The qualities of public space

Modern thinking about public space begins with a reaction against the idea that streets and squares are merely for circulation. Jacobs (1961) argued that lively, mixed-use streets generate their own informal surveillance - the eyes on the street - and that this watchfulness, more than formal policing, underwrites everyday safety. Lynch (1960) approached the city through the mental images its inhabitants form of it, proposing that legible environments, structured by recognisable paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks, are easier to understand, navigate and hold in memory. Whyte (1980) and Gehl (2011) shifted attention to behavior: Whyte's time-lapse studies established that people are drawn to sittable, sociable, well-located space and that small physical adjustments change how a place is used, while Gehl linked the

quantity of optional and social activity to the quality of the physical setting.

Later work consolidated these observations. Carr et al. (1992) organised the field around three human dimensions - needs, rights and meanings - and identified comfort, relaxation, passive and active engagement, and discovery as the experiences people seek in public space. Mehta (2013) returned analytical attention to the ordinary commercial street, showing that sociability arises from the interaction of physical form, land use, management and the meanings users attach to a place, rather than from form alone. Oldenburg's (1989) account of the third place - the informal public setting, distinct from home and work, where company and conversation are the main activity and status distinctions are relaxed - supplies a vocabulary for the social role of such space. Relph (1976), writing phenomenologically, distinguished authentic experience of place from the placelessness of interchangeable environments, foregrounding belonging and identity. These strands have since been drawn together into systematic accounts of the dimensions of urban design (Carmona, Tiesdell, Heath, & Oc, 2010). Read as a whole, this literature describes public space as comfortable, safe, legible, sociable and meaningful - the same attributes the present review traces into youth engagement.

Learning beyond the classroom

A parallel literature reframes learning itself. Dewey (1938) held that education is continuous with experience, and that the quality of an experience shapes what is learned from it; learning, on this view, is not confined to instruction. Kolb (1984) formalised the insight as an experiential cycle in which concrete experience, reflection, conceptualisation and experimentation feed one another. Lave and Wenger (1991) located learning in social participation rather than individual acquisition, describing how newcomers

learn by taking part - at first peripherally - in the activities of a community of practice. These accounts converge on a picture of learning as situated, experiential and relational, and therefore as something that can occur wherever experience and social participation occur. The informal-learning literature makes the setting explicit. Eraut (2000) treated informal and formal learning as a continuum and emphasised the tacit knowledge that people acquire without instruction. Colley et al. (2003) argued that formality and informality coexist as attributes of almost any learning situation. Schugurensky (2000) distinguished self-directed, incidental and socialisation forms of informal learning, noting that much of it is neither planned nor consciously recognised. Sefton-Green (2004) extended the discussion to the everyday, technology-rich environments in which young people spend their time. Taken together, this work establishes that learning is pervasive, frequently unintentional and strongly conditioned by the contexts in which people act.

Public space as a learning environment

The bridge between the two literatures is short once both are in view. If learning is situated, experiential and frequently incidental, and if public space is a setting in which young people act, perceive, encounter difference and participate socially, then public space satisfies the conditions under which informal learning occurs. Wayfinding in a legible city is a form of spatial cognition; sharing space with strangers rehearses the tolerance and self-regulation of public life; lingering in a comfortable, sociable setting affords the unplanned encounters through which attitudes and identities take shape. None of this is curricular, and little of it is intended as learning, which is precisely why it has remained largely invisible to a field oriented towards schools. The sections that follow develop this claim attribute by attribute.

SPATIAL ATTRIBUTES AND YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

The study abstract identifies five attributes through which public space shapes youth engagement. For each, the relationship can be read as a chain: a spatial attribute conditions a mode of engagement, which in turn supports a process of informal learning.

Greenery and natural elements

Of the attributes considered here, the contribution of greenery is the best evidenced. Attention restoration theory holds that natural settings, rich in undemanding soft fascination, allow the directed attention depleted by effortful tasks to recover (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Kaplan, 1995). The relevance to young people is twofold. Restored attention is a precondition for the curiosity and sustained engagement on which informal learning depends; and the presence of greenery is itself associated with better outcomes for this age group. Systematic reviews report beneficial associations between green-space exposure and adolescents' mental well-being, including reduced stress and depressive symptoms and improved mood and behaviour (Vanaken & Danckaerts, 2018; Zhang, Mavoa, Zhao, Raphael, & Smith, 2020), and longitudinal work links neighbourhood greenery to the mental health and physical activity of young residents (Gubbels et al., 2016). Recent evidence also indicates that adolescents' real-time mental health is associated with urban and architectural design characteristics experienced in everyday environments, highlighting the importance of supportive public settings for youth well-being and engagement (Buttazzoni & Minaker, 2023). The broader evidence connecting nature to health and restoration reinforces the pattern (Hartig, Mitchell, de Vries, & Frumkin, 2014). Greenery, in short, both draws young people to public

space and restores the attentional capacity that engagement requires.

Safety and perceived security

Engagement presupposes presence, and presence presupposes a sense of safety. Jacobs (1961) argued that safety in public space is produced socially, through the continuous, informal observation of streets that are busy and overlooked, rather than through enforcement alone. For young people, the matter is complicated by their ambiguous standing: they are sensitive to whether a space feels welcoming, and they are also frequently the object of others' security concerns, managed through rules, surveillance, and design intended to move them on. Whyte (1980) documented how features introduced to deter unwanted users - removing seating, fencing off corners - tend to suppress ordinary sociable use as well. Where safety is achieved through exclusion, the learning that public space might otherwise afford is foreclosed; where it is achieved through liveliness and visibility, it is opened up.

Comfort

Comfort governs how long young people stay, and dwell time is the medium in which informal encounter and observation occur. Whyte (1980) found that the availability of comfortable, flexible seating was among the strongest predictors of whether a space was used, and that shade, shelter, and microclimate strongly shaped occupation. Gehl (2011) made dwell time central to his account of public life: necessary activities happen regardless of conditions, but the optional and social activities that animate a place - and that bring people into incidental contact depend on a setting comfortable enough to invite lingering. Carr et al. (1992) likewise placed comfort and relaxation among the basic needs that public spaces must satisfy. Comfortable space converts passage into presence, and

presence into the unhurried co-occupation from which situated learning arises.

Social presence and interaction

Public space matters to young people above all as a social setting. Oldenburg (1989) characterized the informal third place as one in which conversation is the main activity and ordinary hierarchies are suspended - a description that fits the corners, steps, and benches where adolescents congregate. The presence of others is both an attractor, since young people are drawn to where their peers are, and the substance of what is learned, since negotiating a shared setting is how the competences of public life are acquired. Whyte (1980) observed that a shared external focus can prompt interaction among strangers, and Mehta (2013) showed that the sociability of a street is produced by the interplay of physical form, use, and meaning. The attachments young people form to the places where they gather can be durable and consequential for identity (Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001). In the terms of Lave and Wenger (1991), the peer group in public space is a community of practice into which young people enter through participation; here, the learning is the participation.

Visual legibility and imageability

The final attribute connects most directly to perception. Lynch (1960) proposed that legible, imageable environments, those that a person can readily structure and remember, support orientation and a secure relationship with the city; learning to read and move through urban space is itself a cognitive accomplishment. A more recent strand has begun to measure how environments are actually perceived, using eye-tracking to record where attention falls. Studies of landscape and urban scenes show that the composition and content of a setting shape viewers' gaze, with natural elements and particular spatial configurations drawing

fixation differently from built ones (Berto, Massaccesi, & Pasini, 2008; Dupont, Antrop, & Van Eetvelde, 2014; Dupont, Ooms, Antrop, & Van Eetvelde, 2016; Dupont, Ooms, Duchowski, Antrop, & Van Eetvelde, 2017), and methodological reviews now treat eye-tracking as an established tool for environment-behaviour research (Lu & Pesarakli, 2023). Work on gaze in real settings further indicates that attention is allocated differently in the world than to images viewed in a laboratory (Foulsham, Walker, & Kingstone, 2011). For the present argument, the significance is that a legible, visually engaging environment guides the perceptual engagement that precedes any other kind: young people attend to a place before they use it, and what captures their attention shapes what they notice and remember.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND SOCIAL DYNAMICS

The attribute-by-attribute account understates how contested young people's use of public space actually is. A consistent finding across the geographies of youth is that adolescents are simultaneously heavy users of public space and marginal claimants to it. Lieberg (1995) described how teenagers use local public settings to create meaning and to move between being seen and being private. Travlou et al. (2008) and Childress (2004) documented the micro-geographies through which young people appropriate the spaces left to them, investing leftover and in-between places with their own meanings. Valentine (2004) traced how childhood and public space are mutually defined, and how adult anxieties regulate young people's access. Matthews, Limb, and Taylor (2000) characterized the street as a third space in which young people carve out a measure of autonomy between home and institution.

These dynamics intensify where public space is privatized or commercialized. The shopping mall, studied as a contemporary youth hangout, offers comfort, safety, and social presence, but under conditions of private control that recast young people as consumers and curtail the rights they would hold in genuinely public space (Vanderbeck & Johnson, 2000; Voyce, 2006). Comparable tensions appear in research on street-based youth and on how urban governance reshapes their mobilities (van Blerk, 2013), as well as in accounts of how young people from different backgrounds read the inclusiveness of the same space differently (van Lieshout & Aarts, 2008). A growing body of design scholarship gathers this evidence into a case for treating youth not as a problem to be managed but as legitimate users and co-designers of public space (Loebach, Little, Cox, & Owens, 2020).

Seen through the lens of informal learning, these social dynamics are not incidental to engagement; they are its content. Territory, belonging, surveillance, and intergenerational negotiation are the curriculum of public life, learned through participation rather than instruction. This is socialization in Schugurensky's (2000) sense and situated learning in Lave and Wenger's (1991): young people acquire the dispositions of citizenship - how to share space, tolerate difference, read social cues, and assert a legitimate claim - by doing so. It also clarifies the contrast between well- and poorly designed environments in the abstract. A space that is green, safe, comfortable, sociable, and legible widens the range of engagement, and therefore of learning; a space that is barren, hostile, uncomfortable, empty, or confusing narrows it, and may teach young people chiefly that they do not belong.

DISCUSSION: REFRAMING PUBLIC SPACE AS AN INFORMAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The preceding sections support a single integrative claim, set out in Figure 1: the spatial attributes of public space condition distinct modes of youth engagement - perceptual, behavioral, and social - which in turn activate the experiential, situated, incidental, and socialisation-based

processes through which young people learn, yielding outcomes that range from individual curiosity and a sense of belonging to the shared capacities of inclusive participation. The relationship is not one-directional: the outcomes a society values can feed back into the design and governance of space, reshaping its attributes. Public space, on this account, is neither a neutral backdrop nor merely an amenity. It is a socially embedded informal learning environment.

Figure 1. Urban public space as a socially embedded informal learning environment

A conceptual framework linking spatial attributes to youth engagement, informal learning processes and civic outcomes.



Figure 1. Urban public space as a socially embedded informal learning environment

Locating this environment within educational theory clarifies what makes it distinctive. Figure 2 places it on the formal–informal continuum proposed by Eraut (2000) and Colley et al. (2003). Where formal settings prescribe content, structure, and certification, and non-formal settings such as clubs and programs organize activity without certifying it,

everyday public space sits at the far end of the informal spectrum: its learning is voluntary, unstructured, incidental, and inseparable from ordinary life. This is precisely the kind of learning a school-centered field tends not to count, and precisely the kind that a young population spending much of its discretionary time in public space is likely to be doing.

Figure 2. The formal–informal learning continuum and the place of urban public space

Adapted from Grant (2002) and (2010), Toolhouse & Hukkeri (2002). Learning settings sit on a gradient rather than in discrete categories.



Figure 2. The formal–informal learning continuum and the place of urban public space

The reframing carries particular force in rapidly urbanizing contexts such as India and the wider Global South, where the youth share of the population is high, where public space is often dense, contested, and informally used, and where investment decisions are pressing. If public space is read as educational and civic infrastructure rather than as discretionary beautification, the case for green, safe, comfortable, sociable, and legible space strengthens, and so does the case for designing it with young people rather than against them (Loebach et al., 2020). The same lens recasts exclusionary responses to youth presence - defensive design, displacement, privatization - as the withdrawal of a learning resource from the group most dependent on it.

The contribution of this review is integrative rather than empirical. It connects literatures on public space, environmental perception, and informal learning that have largely developed in isolation, and it offers a framework in which their findings cohere. In doing so, it also exposes a gap: although the conditions for informal learning in public space are well theorized and the spatial attributes are well evidenced, the learning

outcomes themselves are more often inferred than directly measured.

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This paper has argued that urban public space, when it is green, safe, comfortable, sociable, and legible, operates as a socially embedded informal learning environment for young people, and that engagement and learning in such space are conditioned by its design. The argument reframes public space from amenity to infrastructure for youth development, inclusion, and civic life, with direct implications for how rapidly urbanizing cities invest in and govern their shared spaces. Several limitations follow from the approach. As a structured thematic review, the synthesis is interpretive and lacks the exhaustiveness and replicability of a systematic review. Much of the strongest evidence, particularly on green space and on the geographies of youth, originates in the Global North and may transfer imperfectly to other urban cultures. And the learning outcomes central to the argument are often inferred from engagement rather than directly measured.

That last limitation indicates the most productive direction for future work: the empirical operationalization of the framework. Methods that capture how young people actually perceive and evaluate public space - combining measures of visual attention with perceptual survey data - would allow the links posited here between attributes, engagement, and learning to be tested rather than assumed, particularly in heritage and other distinctive urban settings where the visual environment is especially rich. Establishing those links empirically would move the reframing offered here from a conceptual claim towards an evidence base for youth-inclusive urban design.

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