Sport SPOTS FOR Girls

PUBLIC REPORT

SPORT SPOTS FOR GIRLS

Towards more inclusive public spaces



BG BE ACTIVE

New European Bauhaus beautiful | sustainable | together

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DESIGN HUB VARNA

Project: Sport Spots for Girls (SSG)1
Pilot territory: South district, Plovdiv1
Partners: BG Be Active · Design Hub Varna · Municipality of Plovdiv – South district1
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This public report aims to present not only what was established within the study of the "Sport Spots for Girls" (SSG) project, but also how these results can be used as a basis for more inclusive urban development.

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PART I

SUMMARY, INTRODUCTION, AND CONTEXT

1.1. SUMMARY

Main theses of the study

- **PUBLIC SPACES ARE NOT NEUTRAL**

The way they are designed and maintained influences who uses them, how long they stay, and how welcome they feel.

- **SOCIALIZATION ENCOURAGES MOVEMENT**

For many girls, physical activity is a natural part of socializing, rather than a standalone goal.

- **A BEAUTIFUL ENVIRONMENT IS A FUNCTIONAL ENVIRONMENT**

Aesthetics, cleanliness, and maintenance create a sense of security, belonging, and a desire for a longer stay.

- **INCLUSIVE DESIGN IS BETTER DESIGN:**

Spaces that consider the needs of girls and young women become more accessible, comfortable, and attractive to all residents.

- **PUBLIC SPACES MUST BE PLANNED AS A CONNECTED SYSTEM**

A quality urban environment is created through connected, accessible, and safe spaces that provide a good experience along the entire route.

Public spaces are a key element of daily life in cities. They provide opportunities for movement, socialization, recreation, and participation in public life. However, the experience of these spaces is not the same for all groups of residents. Especially for girls and young women, access, the perception of safety, and the ability to freely use the public environment are often limited by a combination of social, spatial, and infrastructural factors.

The "Sport Spots for Girls" project aims to explore these inequalities and to propose a new model for designing public spaces that places the experiences,

needs, and daily practices of girls and young women at the center. This public report presents the main results of a study conducted in the South district, Plovdiv, involving quantitative and qualitative methods.

The data reveals a high degree of use of public spaces by the local community, but also shows distinct differences in their experience by different user groups.

The key findings outline three main directions:

1. **Public spaces are a daily part of young people's lives**, but their quality directly affects the frequency and pattern of use;
2. **The perception of safety is a crucial factor for staying**, especially in the hours after sunset;
3. **There is a clear need to rethink the functions of public spaces** – from traditionally oriented towards sports and passing through, to spaces for socialization, stay, and informal activity.

The report is not limited to presenting results, but offers an interpretation of these data in the context of urban planning and formulates guidelines for creating more inclusive, safe, and attractive public spaces.

1.2. INTRODUCTION: WHY RETHINKING URBAN SPACES IS NECESSARY

Urban spaces are traditionally seen as neutral and accessible to all. In practice, the way they are designed, managed, and maintained affects different social groups differently. This includes not only physical infrastructure but also social norms, visibility, the perception of security, and the possibility for spontaneous presence.

The "Sport Spots for Girls" concept stems from the understanding that physical activity and social participation do not depend solely on individual motivation, but are largely shaped by the environment. When public spaces do not provide comfort, safety, or opportunities for social interaction, certain groups – in this case, girls and young women – use them less often or only for transit.

In this sense, the initiative poses the question: "How should public spaces be designed to support the equal participation, movement, and socialization of all citizens?"

This approach is consistent with the principles of the New European Bauhaus, which promotes the integration of sustainability, inclusion, and aesthetics into urban development.

1.3. PROJECT FOCUS AND PARTNERSHIP

The pilot initiative is being implemented in the city of Plovdiv, South district, as a pilot territory for developing and testing a new model for the inclusive design of public spaces. **The initiative is implemented with the support of the EIT – European Institute of Innovation and Technology within the ecosystem of the New European Bauhaus (NEB).**

The choice of the South district is based on its social and spatial profile, the active use of public spaces, and the potential for implementing pilot interventions with the possibility of subsequent application in other urban contexts.

The project combines social research, urban analysis, and a co-creation process, placing the real experiences of girls and young women as daily users of the urban environment at the center.

THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIP

At the core of the initiative is a partnership between organizations with complementary expertise, uniting the civil sector, design, and local government. It is this collaboration that allows the research results to be transformed into practically applicable solutions for public spaces.

- **BG Be Active contributes with many years of experience in placemaking**, promoting an active lifestyle, and working with local communities, placing citizen participation at the heart of the change process.
- **Design Hub Varna brings expertise in the field of inclusive design**, co-design and the development of spatial solutions tailored to the real needs of future users.
- **Municipality of Plovdiv – South district provides the link between the project and local government**, supports the identification of suitable public spaces, and creates conditions for the developed solutions to be implemented and tested in a real urban environment.

The combination of these competencies creates a solid foundation for developing solutions that are both practically applicable, sustainable, and tailored to the needs of the local community. At the same time, the partnership reflects the principles of the New European Bauhaus, **uniting different professional perspectives** in a common process of co-creating more beautiful, sustainable, and inclusive public spaces.

1.4. PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The "Sport Spots for Girls" project has the following objectives:

- to identify spatial, social, and infrastructural barriers to the use of public spaces by girls and young women;
- to analyze patterns of behavior and experience in the public environment;
- to develop a conceptual framework for inclusive and active public spaces;
- to offer practical guidelines for urban planning and design;
- to support the creation of a model that can be applied in other cities.

These objectives are aimed at a broader vision for cities that not only provide infrastructure but also create conditions for equal participation and social connectivity.

PART II

METHODOLOGY, PARTICIPANTS, AND PATTERNS OF USING PUBLIC SPACES

2.1. STUDY METHODOLOGY

The research conducted within the "Sport Spots for Girls" project is designed as a mixed-methods study, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The aim is not only to measure attitudes and patterns of using public spaces but also to understand the daily experiences, motivations, and barriers faced by girls and young women.

The research is based on three complementary components:

- **Online survey** – provides quantitative data on the way residents use public spaces, evaluate their safety, and formulate their needs and preferences.
- **Focus groups with girls aged 13-19 years** – created an opportunity for an in-depth conversation about daily practices, preferred ways of spending free time, and perceptions of public spaces. Through them, qualitative data was collected, which helped interpret the survey results and better understand the reasons behind the identified trends.
- **Expert interviews** – complemented the perspective of the participants with professional analysis of the urban environment, emphasizing the connection between spatial design, social behavior, and the opportunities for creating more inclusive public spaces.

Combining these three methods allowed the quantitative results to be examined in the context of the participants' real experiences and the expert assessment of the existing urban environment. In this way, the recommendations presented in this report are based on both statistical data and practical observations and personal experiences.

2.2. STUDY PARTICIPANTS

The study brings together three complementary sources of information, each involving a different type of participant and performing a specific role in the analysis.

SURVEY

The quantitative part of the research includes 214 respondents, with the sample being purposefully oriented towards the main target group of the project – girls and young women.

GENDER DISTRIBUTION

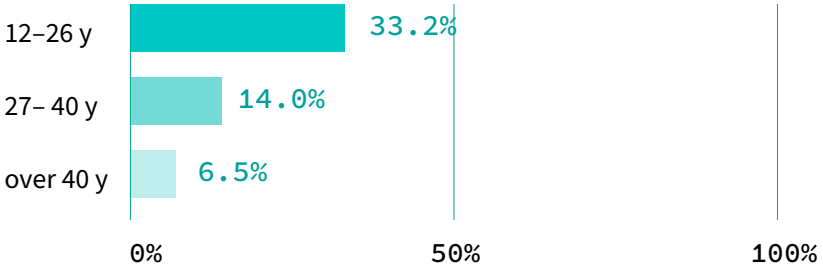
Women/Girls

95.3%

Men/Boys

4.7%

AGE DISTRIBUTION



TERRITORIAL SCOPE

73.8% of the respondents live, work, or regularly use public spaces in the South district, which guarantees a high relevance of the results to the local context.

FOCUS GROUPS

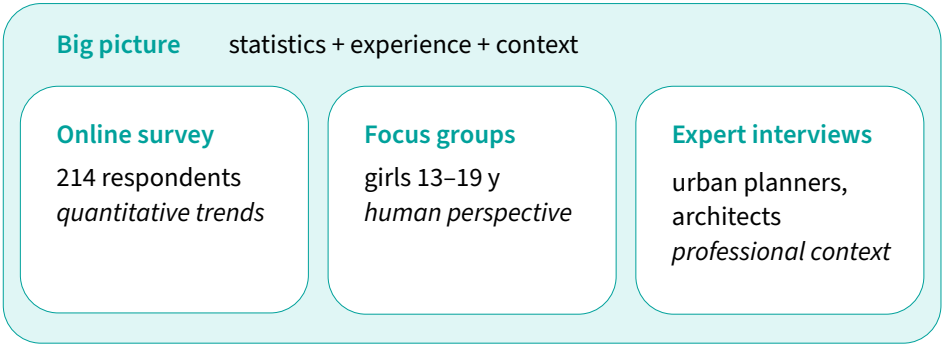
The qualitative part of the research includes focus groups with girls aged 13-19 years. The participants were selected to represent different age stages in adolescence, which allows both similarities and differences in the way girls use public spaces to be examined.

Focus groups provide a deeper understanding of daily practices, social interactions, the perception of safety, and expectations for the urban environment. They allow participants to formulate in their own words what makes a space attractive, accessible, and suitable for them.

EXPERT INTERVIEWS

The research is supplemented by interviews with experts in urban planning, architecture, and public space design. Their aim is to place the results of the survey and focus groups in a broader professional context and to support the formulation of practical recommendations for future interventions.

2.3. WHAT DID EACH METHOD CONTRIBUTE?



Each of the methods used has a different role in the research and contributes to shaping the overall picture.

The survey outlined the main trends and allowed the identification of the most common barriers and needs associated with the use of public spaces.

The focus groups added the human perspective to the statistical data. They showed how girls describe their own daily lives, what makes them feel comfortable or insecure, and how they imagine a space where they would spend more time.

The expert interviews placed these observations in the context of urban planning and design, confirming the need for public spaces to be designed in a way that supports not only physical activity but also social interaction, a sense of belonging, and equal access to the urban environment.

Thanks to this combined approach, this report presents the results not as isolated statistical indicators, but as mutually complementary observations that outline a comprehensive picture of the local community's needs and expectations.

PART III

MAIN RESULTS AND KEY FINDINGS

3.1. INTRODUCTION TO THE RESULTS

The analysis of the collected data reveals a complex picture of the way girls and young women experience public spaces.

The results show that the barriers are not only physical but represent a combination of spatial, social, and psychological factors.

3.2. PERCEPTION OF SAFETY AND ITS IMPACT ON BEHAVIOR

One of the most significant factors influencing the use of public spaces is the perception of safety, especially in the hours after sunset.28 The data show a clear discrepancy between age groups, with older participants (18–26 years) reporting lower levels of perceived security compared to younger participants.28 In this group, a significant proportion indicates low safety ratings, leading to restricted movement, shortened length of stay, and avoidance of certain spaces or routes.

3.3. PSYCHOLOGY OF THE STAY

One of the important findings of the study is the presence of so-called conditional presence in public spaces.

Many participants describe a state of heightened vigilance, where staying in the space is accompanied by constant observation of the surroundings and limited ability to relax.

This state directly affects the duration of the stay and the readiness for social interaction.

3.4. SOCIALIZATION AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

The data show that physical activity among girls and young women is closely related to social interaction.

Instead of structured sports activities, participants often prefer:

Movement is social

- meetings with friends
- informal games
- conversations while moving
- spontaneous group activities

instead of

Traditional model

The traditional model of sports space does not always meet the real needs of this group.

3.5. SPATIAL DESIGN AND SENSE OF BELONGING

The design of public spaces directly impacts whether they are perceived as welcoming.

Elements such as:



- lighting;



- visibility;



- availability of seating;



- greenery;



- lack of isolated and dark areas;

are key to creating a sense of comfort and belonging.

3.6. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AGE GROUPS

The analysis shows clear differences between younger and older participants.

These differences highlight the need for multifunctional spaces that serve different uses.

12–18 YEARS

EMPHASIS ON:

- play
- color and visual attractiveness
- safety through visibility

18–26 YEARS

EMPHASIS ON:

- comfort
- opportunities for a long stay
- a tension-free social environment;
- functionality.

PART IV

FROM DATA TO ACTION: A VISION FOR MORE INCLUSIVE PUBLIC SPACES

This part summarizes the lessons learned from the project and proposes principles that can guide future investments in public spaces both in the South district and in other urban contexts.

The research shows that the quality of public spaces is not determined solely by the presence of sports facilities. It depends on how the space supports people's daily lives — whether it encourages them to stay, interact, move freely, and feel secure.

This is why the "Sport Spots for Girls" concept does not propose a model for building "spaces for girls," but a new way of thinking when designing the public environment.

4.1. PRINCIPLES FOR DESIGNING INCLUSIVE PUBLIC SPACES

The results of the study outline several basic principles, akin to the Placemaking concept, which can be used in the future planning and renewal of public spaces.

• THE SPACE SHOULD ENCOURAGE STAYING, NOT JUST PASSING THROUGH

A public space is truly inclusive when it creates conditions for people to stay longer. Comfortable seating, shade, access to drinking water, and sanitary facilities are part of the basic infrastructure that makes the space comfortable and accessible to all. For women and girls, these elements are often a key factor in choosing whether and how long to use a given place.

• SAFETY BEGINS ON THE WAY TO THE SPACE

The perception of security is not determined solely by the specific playground. Well-lit routes, good visibility, active facades, and the absence of isolated sections are just as important as the space itself.

• MOVEMENT TAKES MANY FORMS

Physical activity is not limited to competitive sports. Spaces must provide opportunities for free movement, play, dancing, balance, walking, and other informal activities that cater to different ages and interests.

• AESTHETICS ARE PART OF FUNCTIONALITY

A well-maintained, green, and visually attractive environment creates a sense of care and belonging. Aesthetics are not a decorative element, but a factor that influences people's desire to use the space.

• FLEXIBLE SPACES ARE MORE SUSTAINABLE

Public spaces should be usable in different ways and by different groups throughout the day. Instead of strictly defined functions, they should offer opportunities for adaptation to different activities and needs.



4.2. SIGNIFICANCE FOR LOCAL POLICIES

One of the most important findings of the study is that relatively small changes in the organization and design of public spaces can have a significant impact on how they are used.

The results obtained can support the development of local policies aimed at:

- renewing neighborhood parks and inter-block spaces;
- integrating the principles of inclusive design into the investment programs of municipalities;
- involving citizens in planning and co-creation processes;
- evaluating public spaces not only by technical indicators but also by the quality of the user experience.

The approach developed within the study is applicable both in the construction of new spaces and in the renovation of existing infrastructure.

4.3. CONCLUSION

The research conducted within the first activities for creating spaces for girls shows that creating more inclusive public spaces begins with understanding the people who use them.

The study confirms that safety, social interaction, comfort, and opportunities for free movement are interrelated factors that determine whether a space will actually be used. When these elements are absent, even well-equipped places can remain insufficiently attractive to a part of the community.

The project offers an alternative approach to urban planning — one that places people's daily experiences at the center and views public spaces as an environment for communication, movement, and belonging.

In accordance with the principles of the New European Bauhaus, the initiative shows that sustainable and beautiful cities are, above all, inclusive cities.3839 The investment in spaces that meet the needs of girls and young women is not aimed at one specific group, but is a step towards creating a more accessible, safe, and high-quality urban environment for everyone.

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