Engaging Teenagers in Public Space

Presentation for WASLA Conference 2020
Kristi M. Park, PLA | Owner, BioDesign Studio
https://www.biodesignstudio.com/
Brief Introduction

Kristi M. Park, PLA is the owner of BioDesign Studio, headquartered in Bellingham, WA. She is licensed landscape architect, urban designer and lecturer at the University of Washington and Western Washington University.

Contact: Kristi M. Park kpark@biodesign studio.com

https://www.biodesignstudio.com/
This presentation is based on research in progress. Due to Covid-19, several research efforts have been indefinitely delayed.

Next steps include conducting additional interviews with stakeholders, an examination of factors such as race, gender, culture and religion, additional public surveys and data synthesis.

Stay tuned for more updates in 2021.
General Definitions

For the purposes of this discussion, teens are defined as 12 - 18 years of age. Public space is anywhere that would be considered not-private (streets, sidewalks, parks, alleys, plazas, etc.)

Diagram Credit: Children and Clinical Studies > Home
This research started when several recurring themes kept popping up in my practice of landscape architecture.
Play Equipment
Consistently traditionally geared towards children under the age of 12 years old.
Public Perception

Conversations often either ignore the teenage age group or actively discourage the gathering of this age group.
HM! TEENAGERS... THEY THINK THEY KNOW EVERYTHING. YOU GIVE THEM AN INCH, THEY SWIM ALL OVER YOU.

@DISNEYTM
Baker Addition, Ballard Seattle: Public comment regarding the current park: “Right now it is filled with teenagers and transients so often it isn't safe for families with small children.”
Health statistics

Suicide was the second-leading cause of death for people aged 10 to 24 in 2017.

Source: [CDC: The suicide rate for young people rose 56% this decade](#)
Community engagement activities. Community engagement is an aspect of social capital. Community engagement approaches may involve residents participating in a range of activities, including religious activities, community clean-up and greening activities, and group physical exercise. These activities provide opportunities for residents to become more involved in the community and to connect with other community members, organizations, and resources, resulting in enhanced overall physical health, reduced stress, and decreased depressive symptoms, thereby reducing risk of suicide.” Information from: https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/suicideTechnicalPackage.pdf

Graph Credit: https://afsp.org/suicide-statistics/
“The ability of youth to freely enjoy public spaces, and to develop a sense of belonging and attachment to these environments, is critical for their physical, social, cognitive, and emotional development,” according to the book. “Young people represent a vital citizen group with legitimate rights to occupy and shape their public environments, yet they are often driven out of public places by adult users, restrictive bylaws, or hostile designs.”
“For many readers it may come to a surprise that young people are among the most frequent users of public space (Travlou et al. 2008). This is partly due to the fact that, as minors, they have no formal (legal) rights to spaces of their own (Childress 2004), something that makes them to depend on public space both for their isolation and social interactions (Lieberg 1995; Worpole 2005). Thus, parks, squares, alleyways, sidewalks, and the like, become the appropriated places whereby adolescents resort to stay private, as well as to meet and to interact with their friends and peers (Matthews 1995; Depeau 2001). As a result, these places are imbued with their own cultural values and meanings. This suggests, at least, the need to examine public space in the way young people understand, approach and appropriate it.”
Studies suggest teens need to occupy the public realm for social, mental and physical health and development. This demographic also constitutes a large public-space user-group, but they are largely ignored (or banned) from design consideration.
As this research evolves, four areas of inquiry are being pursued:

- Surveys
- Interviews with organizations that work or are affiliated with teens
- Case Studies
- Informal Observation
Online Survey
Survey Notes: Distributed primarily via social media to a nation-wide platform including design-oriented social groups, parks and recreation departments, parent groups, and general facebook and instagram platforms.

The survey was intended to provide a preliminary platform for public feedback. It is not scientific research and it is not focused on obtaining opinions and statistics from minors.
Survey Results

Question #1
Utilize play equipment in public parks?
Survey Results

Question #2
Utilize skate parks?
Survey Results

Question #3
Utilize basketball courts?

Answered: 73    Skipped: 0
Question #4
Utilize trails and/or walking paths?
Survey Results

Question #5
Utilize swim public beaches or pools?
Survey Results

Question #8
Participate in mountain biking or biking activities?
Survey Results

Question #9
Out of the following list of activities, which do you think would gain the most participation by teens?

[Bar chart showing the percentage of participation for different activities]
Additional Feedback

What else do Teens want to do?

- Teens want to be seen and be seen.
- “Hanging out” is a highly sought activity.
- Access is important, being able to walk to a destination is critical.
- Commercial opportunities such as coffee shops and stores offering small purchases attract teens.
- Perceived risk is desired.
Dr. Laura Fox  
Family Care Network  
Bellingham, WA

Wa’Lynn Sheridan  
Whatcom Family and Community Network, Mt. Baker Community Coalition

Kai Schwartz  
City of Redmond  
Youth Program Administrator
Answers reflected survey with emphasis on:

- Accessible (walking distance)
- Risk play
- Places to gather (see and be seen)
- Opportunities for small-purchases shopping opportunities
- Social/Private
- Seating

Questions:

The interview included several questions, with one key question that is pertinent to this presentation:

*What type of opportunities do you think would benefit teens to get them engaging socially and recreationally in a positive fashion? (High risk play, social spaces with phone plug-ins, coffee shops)*
Fairhaven Green, WA
Bellingham, WA

- ½ mile walking distance from Fairhaven Middle School
- Small purchases opportunities
- Square shape allows for “see and be seen” opportunities
- Ample seating + seating choices, including covered seating.
- Tolerant businesses
Fremantle Esplanade Youth Plaza, AU
Photo via City of Fremantle

- A world-class skate park with facilities to cater for all ages
- A parkour park, fit for all skill levels
- A shipping container turned mini rock climbing wall
- Ping pong tables
- A stage for presentations, music, and performances
- Shelter from the weather (both heat and rain)
- Plenty of seating
- Lighting and access to power

Text (left) from article: Young People and Placemaking: Engaging Youth to Create Community Places
Factoria Joven Skate Park, Spain

Photo Credit: Design Milk: Interior Design, Modern Furniture + Home Decor

- Graffiti walls for urban art workshops
- Shelter from the rain and heat
- Skate and bmx ramps, bowls and rails
- A rock climbing wall
- A stage for performance
- Lighting throughout
- Facilities for tightrope walking
- Group counseling sessions
- Internet access
- Music and dance workshops

Text (left) from article: Young People and Placemaking: Engaging Youth to Create Community Places
Artists at Play, Seattle

Photo Credit: Wikimedia Commons

- Access, centralized location accessible by foot or public transit
- Perceived risk taking with height of equipment
- Places to gather/variety in seating.
- Close proximity to small-cost food items/retail opportunities
- Part of a larger public/private space area that is iconic to Seattle.
- High volume of people - lots of opportunities to see and be seen!
Parasite DIY Skatepark, New Orleans

Photo Credit: Parasite DIY Skatepark: Home

- Originally designed and constructed by teens
- Initial build destroyed by local authorities
- Rebuilt by community support gained worldwide support through social media
- Demonstration of a positive shift from exclusionary practices to embracing the ideas and visions of the youth.

Points summarized from Shirtcliff’s article: Research explores how youth are excluded from public spaces, design practices • News Service • Iowa State University
Suggestions of teenage appropriate elements

Project for Public Spaces

- Basketball courts
- Legal graffiti walls
- Rock climbing walls
- Access to local transport
- Parkour park and facilities
- Skate ramps, rails, half-pipes and bowls
- A stage, or area that can be converted into a stage
- Ping pong tables
- Wi-Fi connectivity
- Access to power,
- Shelter from the weather
- Lighting
- BBQ facilities
- Frequent youth events
- A blackboard and chalk available
Equipment Ideas

Reference article of Wicksteed + LSI Images:
https://www.activeoutdoors.info/playground-equipment-for-teens/
SITE: Configure space to allow teens to gather in small groups, but to have views of the other small groups/public action. Opportunities to “see and be seen.”

URBAN/RURAL DESIGN: Consider access, how do teens who can not drive or don’t have access to a car get to places to “hang out?”

CHOICE + SAFETY
Work with local businesses, police forces and organizations to encourage teenager to gather near the shops and make small purchases. Offer demographic specific programming and events.

Spatial + Community Ideas
SOCIAL MEDIA: Today’s teen is fluent in technology and social media. When conducting online surveys and engagement, heavily utilize apps and social media.

ACTIVELY CONSIDER: With public perception barriers discouraging or ignoring teens in design feedback, actively engage the topic and engagement efforts with public education.

GO TO THEM
As cool as we designers think we are, we are NOT cool to teenagers. Work with local middle schools and high schools to create design charrettes to gain feedback. Incorporate their ideas and insight into the design process.

Engage in the Design Process
Next Steps in Research

- Secure funding
- Additional Interviews
- Gain a better understanding of the implications of race, religion and gender in the encouragement (or discouragement) of teens in public space.
- Apply and gain approval to study human subjects under the age 18 to talk with teens directly.
Comments?
Questions?
Ideas?

I would love to hear from you: kpark@biodesignstudio.com