Understanding Adolescent Women's Spatial Appropriation in Stockholm

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Abstract

This study explores how adolescent girls in Stockholm engage with and claim public spaces, highlighting the social and environmental factors that shape their experiences. Using a qualitative, multimethod approach grounded in environmental psychology and feminist geography, guided and go-along interviews with 22 girls aged 13–18 employed participatory tools such as photo elicitation and emotion wheels to capture spatial patterns. Findings reveal that girls construct expanding networks of appropriated spaces—from neighborhoods to transport hubs, malls, and parks—reflecting growing autonomy influenced by peers, family, and familiarity. Safety emerged as relational condition, negotiated through companionship, mobility, and selective visibility, while private spaces like bedrooms offered contrastive zones of security and self-expression. The study argues that girls' spatial appropriation is dynamic and relational, linking identity, safety, and belonging. Recognizing these everyday negotiations is vital for gender-sensitive urban planning that values adolescent girls as active co-producers of an inclusive city life.

Introduction

In the context of rapid urbanization, globalization and population growth, Western cities and their planning are assigned with the pressing challenge of ensuring environmental and social sustainability. In the pursuit of just, inclusive, and liveable cities, the well-being lens as well as participatory approaches to urban planning are gaining ground. However, urban planning efforts often struggle to incorporate underrepresented voices due to rigid structures and lack of planners' knowledge (Cele & Van Der Burgt 2015).

Children and adolescents, despite being a significant urban demographic, are particularly overlooked. They experience decreased outdoor life and spaces, which are tied to significant social skills building through unscripted play time. Girls, in specific, start withdrawing from public spaces around ages 9–12 (Helleman et al. 2023), which may have long-term effects on both their personal well-being and societal cohesion (Tonucci 2001; Listerborn 2015; Gehl 2010). While this age-related withdrawal is documented in several European contexts (ibid.), the extent and timing likely vary across cultural and planning traditions. Trends of neglect are widespread across Western contexts, but certain variations exist. For example, Scandinavian counties strive to encourage child-friendly planning traditions vs. Southern European contexts with more intergenerational streetscapes (Skelton & Gough 2013). However, adolescents are rarely explicitly addressed in planning processes. The growing overlap of physical and virtual spaces has also raised concerns about youth's mental health, especially among adolescent girls (Karolinska Institutet 2023).

Table 2. Who plays outside according to gender and age (in percentages and numbers)?

	Girls % (n)	Boys % (n)	Total % (n)
0-4 years old	59 (106)	41 (74)	100 (180)
5-8 years old	42 (237)	58 (327)	100 (564)
9-12 years old	29 (90)	71 (216)	100 (306)
13 years or older	35 (27)	65 (50)	100 (77)
Total	41 (460)	59 (667)	100 (1,127)

Figure 1: *Table showing the numerical and percentage differences among children who play outdoors* by Helleman et al. 2023.

The adult gaze often perceives adolescents as disruptive or inappropriate users of public space, viewing their presence through a lens of control and exclusion rather than understanding that adolescents' spatial behaviour contributes to their identity development (Matthews et al. 2000; Travlou et al. 2008). Research usually focuses either on formal play spaces or safety concerns such as crime and traffic (Van Der Burgt 2015), rather than informal spaces or everyday behaviours (Helleman et al. 2023). Thus, adolescents' developmental and emotional connections to space are often overlooked or treated reductively within a childhood frame (Cele 2013). While adolescents are still legally minors, they are spatially granted increased autonomy, and are expected to navigate spaces that often do not accommodate or welcome them (Childress 2004; Loebach 2020). Despite negative adult perceptions, unsupervised exploration of space can support adolescents' self-regulation and creativity (Wales et al. 2022; Cele 2013). The lack of designated adolescent spaces reflects a research gap and a societal discomfort with this demographic (Valentine & McKendrick 1997).

Public space, nevertheless, plays a crucial role in identity development. It serves as a social arena and a stage for political presence (Valentine et al. 2009; Cele 2013). However, with its increasing commodification, adolescents often rely on semi-public or consumer-oriented spaces like malls or cafes, especially frequented by young women (Matthews et al. 2000; Thomas 2005). These environments both shape and constrain identity, often along racial and class lines (Bettie 2014).

Technology and media further complicate adolescents' spatial engagement. Social media contributes to body image issues and reduces time spent on physically and socially engaging activities that typically occur in public spaces (Tiggemann & Slater 2014; Primack et al. 2009; Morris et al. 2021). Protective experiences such as team sports, civic involvement, or having close friends are deeply tied to public spaces and critical for healthy development (Loebach 2020).

Despite the rise of digital environments and 'non-places' (Augé 2006), adolescents still form strong attachments to traditional spaces, underlining their developmental significance (Gustafson 2002). Planning that considers adolescents' emotional, social, and spatial experiences can enhance well-being and identity (Owens 2002; Bonnes 2003). In Sweden however, gender-indifferent policy frames and a fear of reinforcing stereotypes have slowed gender-responsive planning (Listerborn 2007; Valentine 2019b), as illustrated by inequitable investments in youth infrastructure (Bäckström & Nairn 2018). For example, the emergence of skate parks as a space for activity and play among youth, has proven challenging for young females

to appropriate, even if they already know how to skateboard (ibid.). One potential alternative approach proposed by environmental psychologists is for research to shift its focus from places to their meanings and interpretations (Lewicka 2011) focusing less on *where* and more on *why* and *how*. This way we may better understand how to plan and design places *where girls feel comfortable to skate* rather than spaces we call 'skateparks for girls'. Our interest is not in pinpointing locations, but in understanding the conditions under which girls appropriate space.

Environmental psychology and children's geographies have highlighted adolescence as a key phase where identity, autonomy, and spatial connection are shaped (Dahl et al. 2018; Cele 2013; Wales et al. 2022). In Sweden, there is a recognized gap in gender-sensitive planning, particularly regarding adolescent girls' spatial needs (Strategy for Public Spaces 2021). Thus, the purpose of this study is to identify the networks of adolescent women's appropriation of public space and gain insights on the factors that shape them.

The research addresses two main questions:

- RQ1: How do adolescent women establish and expand a network of appropriated places across the city of Stockholm?
- RQ2: What social and environmental conditions enable or obstruct movement between nodes in that network?

The focus on social aspects of appropriation results from the knowledge that psychological changes (perception, attitude) can transform an environment more profoundly than physical changes (Tuan 1991a).

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts an interdisciplinary approach to explore how adolescents engage with public space, focusing on concepts of space appropriation and the spatial dimensions of identity. Rather than adhering to one theoretical model, we borrow from urban studies, geography, sociology, and environmental psychology to analyse how young people navigate and shape their appropriated urban environments.

Appropriation

Appropriation involves claiming space through presence or behaviour, often without formal permission (Moles & Rohmer 1978). Youth frequently engage in 'voiceless politics' by informally asserting their right to space, sometimes by defying restrictions e.g., graffiti (Kallio & Häkli 2011). Such

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acts challenge design-led exclusion and underscore that public space is contested and socially produced rather than neutral (Mitchell 1996; Lefebvre 1991). Appropriation is therefore not an isolated act but part of a broader network of appropriated places, continually shaped by social and material conditions.

Relational Conditions of Appropriation

The ability to claim and sustain space depends on relational dynamics that make some sites accessible while restricting others. Massey (2005) describes place as constituted by 'articulated moments' of social interaction, meaning that access depends on who else is present, when, and how spaces are perceived. For young people, belonging and the capacity to 'make space one's own' are contingent on these dynamics. Dixon & Durrheim (2004) show how encounters with others co-construct identity and place, while Kallio and Häkli (2011) highlight the informal politics of youth presence shaped by adult surveillance. Urban design research similarly notes that visibility, density, and rhythms of occupation influence whether spaces can be collectively claimed (Gehl 2010; Carmona 2010). In this study, we therefore treat conditions such as companionship, crowd composition, and temporal cycles not as peripheral, but as integral to the network of appropriation: they regulate whether particular nodes are activated and how links between them can be sustained.

Spatial identity

Spatial identity is here understood as an intersection of personal and social identity shaped by place (Proshansky 1978; Hauge 2007). Hauge (2007) argues that all aspects of identity have place-related implications, while Casey (2001) emphasises that identity forms through bodily and emotional engagement with space. Processes such as familiarity, attachment, and symbolism link place with self-concept (Tuan 1991; Dixon & Durrheim 2004). For adolescents, both external perceptions and lived experience influence how they see themselves and imagine their future (Prince 2014). We therefore conceptualise the link between appropriation and identity as a feedback loop: appropriated places shape identity and evolving identifications in turn enable the expansion of the network of appropriated territories.

Methodology

Research Design and Rationale

This study employed a qualitative, multimethod design to explore how adolescent girls engage with and appropriate public spaces in Stockholm. A combination of site observations, semi-structured walk-along interviews, and participatory tools was chosen to capture both the situated practices of presence in space and the narratives through which participants described connections to personal and social identifications. Initial observations of central Stockholm sites revealed a striking absence of adolescent girls, prompting the focus of the interviews. Guided walk-along interviews in central public spaces provided a first overview of how girls navigate everyday environments, while longer go-along interviews in suburban and central areas enabled more in-depth exploration of habits and situated perspectives in participant-chosen sites. Participatory tools such as photo elicitation and an emotion wheel were incorporated to externalize perceptions and to encourage active involvement. Together, this design offered complementary perspectives that addressed the research questions while also testing the effectiveness of different methods.

Figure 2: *Simplified template emotions wheel, Source: Anya Dvornikova, Edited by author*

Sites and Participants

A total of 22 girls aged 13–18 took part in the study. Nineteen were recruited opportunistically in central Stockholm for short, guided walk-along interviews at Odenplan square and Vanadislunden park, and three were recruited through a local tennis club in the suburban area of Vega for longer go-along interviews. All participants were interviewed in their friendship groups (2–4 members per group) to reflect the social nature of adolescents' use of space and to ensure feelings of comfort. Although Swedish was the participants' first language, all reported confidence in conducting the interviews in English, which was necessary since the researcher did not speak Swedish. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and parental consent was secured for the group we recruited for longer interviews.

Walk-Along Interview Variations

Two variations of walk-along interviewing were employed: guided walks and go-alongs.

Guided walks were conducted in two central locations, Odenplan square (a major mobility hub) and Vanadislunden park. Groups of girls passing through these sites who met the inclusion criteria and identified as girls were invited to join a 15-20-minute walk with predetermined stops. A semi-structured interview guide ensured consistency while allowing space for participants to discuss their own routines and preferred places. At each stop, girls completed a simplified emotion wheel and elaborated on the feelings it elicited in relation to their surroundings. At the end of the walk, they were presented with a role-play scenario e.g., *If you were waiting 15 minutes for a friend, where would you choose to stand or sit?* and asked to photograph the chosen spot. These prompts provided concrete anchors for discussion about visibility, crowding, and other situational conditions.

The second method consisted of longer go-along interviews with one suburban friendship group of three girls, aged 15–16. In line with Kusenbach's (2003) approach, the participants determined the routes and sites, which included their local train station and parts of central Stockholm. Each walk lasted approximately two hours, and the group met twice over the course of a week. This longer format allowed for rapport building and the inclusion of autobiographical narratives as girls reflected on how particular places related to their routines, memories, and identities. As with the guided walks, emotion wheels and role-play prompts were used, but the additional time made it possible to explore themes in greater depth.

A comparative table outlines the two interview versions: `

Aspect	Guided walking interview	Go-along interview
Sampling	Randomised sampling of groups fitting the age and gender criteria. (Living or attending school in city centre)	Preselected group of friends recruited through their local tennis club. (Sub-urban residents)
Location	Interviewer familiar with area Preselected central public spaces (Odenplan square and Vanadislunden park)	Interviewees familiar with area Participant-chosen locations within their neighbourhood and places they visit in the city (Vega and city centre)
Duration	15-20 min. Once	4 hours. Meeting twice for 2 hours/ walk
Walk-along typology	Guided walks (Paulos & Goodman 2004; Reed 2002) Interviewer guides the group on a walk with predetermined stops	Natural go-alongs (Kusenbach 2003) Interviewer follows along the group in a route of their choice
Interactive Tools	Photo elicitation (Russell 2007) and emotions wheel	Photo elicitation (Russell 2007) and emotions wheel
Group Composition	Groups of 2-4 friends Age: 13-18	Group of 3 friends Age: 15-16

Participatory Tools

Several participatory methods were integrated across both interview types. Participants first completed a short survey, either digitally or in print, that captured age, mobility to the site, familiarity, and characterizations of the location e.g., calm/busy, meeting spot/destination. This ensured basic demographic comparability and provided prompts for discussion. Role-play scenarios encouraged participants to consider concrete practices of spatial appropriation e.g., waiting for a friend, choosing a picnic spot, while photo elicitation allowed them to capture elements visually and reflect on their significance (Russell 2007). The simplified emotion wheel served to link environmental features to affective states, encouraging non-verbal expression before group discussion. These tools were chosen to be age-appropriate, engaging, and to provide multiple entry points into the conversation, following research that stresses the value of child-friendly, multimodal elicitation in urban and planning studies (Glenn et al. 2013).

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Data Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized through pseudonyms chosen by the participants themselves. Analysis combined inductive and deductive strategies. First, transcripts were coded thematically to identify emergent categories of attachment/belonging, avoidance/safety, and habits/patterns. These were then mapped conceptually onto the theoretical framework, focusing on appropriation, relational conditions, and spatial identity. This reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006) was iterative, with comparisons made across guided and go-along datasets to identify both commonalities and contextual differences. The approach ensured that analysis remained grounded in participants' own accounts while also engaging with the conceptual lens.

Ethical Considerations and Positionality

Ethical approval followed principles of informed consent, anonymity, and voluntary participation. Parental consent was obtained for minors where required. When a sensitive topic emerged, it was handled by pausing the recording, issuing a content warning, and reminding participants of their right to skip questions or stop. No participant showed ongoing distress, and discussions resumed smoothly.

Reflexivity was central to the research process. The researcher's positionality as a young woman shaped both access and interpretation. Shared gender and age proximity likely facilitated rapport and candid discussion, while conducting interviews in English (rather than the participants' native Swedish) may have limited nuance in expression. This limitation is acknowledged as both a constraint and a reflection of the researcher's situated knowledge. More broadly, the study followed a feminist approach that treats participants as active collaborators rather than passive informants, for example by allowing them to choose routes and co-construct data through visual and affective tools.

Analysis

The findings are organized into three interrelated themes aligned with the research questions: (1) Territories Appropriated; (2) Relational Factors; and (3) Negotiating Safety. Although the third theme includes mentions of bedrooms and friends' rooms—spaces not typically considered public—we include them here because they were repeatedly invoked by participants as meaningful reference points for how they navigate and compare public space.

1. Territories Appropriated

Adolescence is a developmental phase marked by expanding autonomy and mobility, providing opportunities for place attachment and unscripted social interactions that are essential for well-being (Wales et al. 2022). The girls in our study described how they gradually expanded their 'territories', ranging from immediate neighbourhoods to transport nodes, shopping malls, and central city spaces. This expansion was rarely linear; rather, it was mediated by parental restrictions, peer networks, and their own confidence.

Some participants described dual living environments due to parental separation, highlighting how identity formation is embedded in multiple geographies. One noted: *"I ride my bike to my summer job when I stay at my dad's"*. The sense of 'home' thus extended across more than one neighbourhood, each carrying distinct habits and modes of appropriation. Such cases illustrate what Lalli (1992) describes as *"appropriating settlements as living environments"*, a process foundational to positive self-definition and congruity (Moser 2009).

Mobility was often narrated as a sequence of thresholds, each station or centrum acting as an entry point into new appropriated territories. Dia recalled: *"When I was 6, I started exploring Vega, walking alone... later at 9, I could go to central Handen... at 11 we could go to Farsta centrum... we started going to the city centre around 12"*. This expanding cognitive map exemplifies how familiarity, gained through repeated use, embeds spatial connections into identity (Prince 2014).

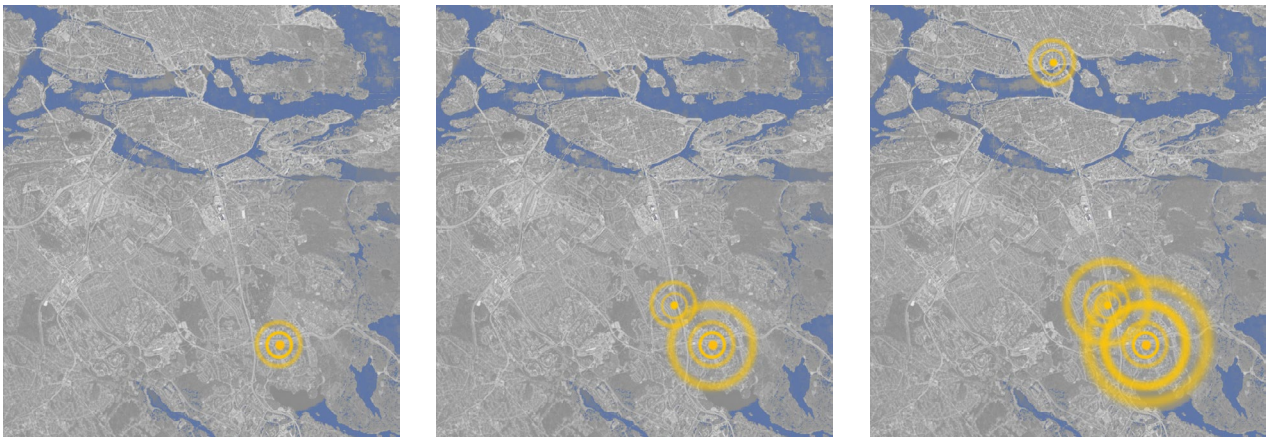

Figure 4 a,b,c: *Diagrammatic map showing the fragmented appropriation and how it grows,* Google Earth, edited by author, 2024.

Transport hubs such as T-Centralen were repeatedly mentioned as strategic meeting points: *"I have one friend that I always meet here because we don't meet very often, so we just like to walk and walk and walk so we can talk as much as we can"*. Here, the station was not only a mobility node but also a symbolic space of social maintenance. Consistent with Matthews et al. (2000), participants highlighted how increased independence from parental surveillance was experienced through mobility, with former appropriated spaces like school playgrounds taking on new meanings when visited at night: *"more carefree"*, nostalgic, and explicitly independent.

Shopping malls emerged as particularly significant nodes of appropriation. For suburban participants, malls functioned as safe, weather-protected 'winter versions of the public square', conveniently located near transport hubs. As one explained: *"When I think of the city in winter, I mostly think of slask [slippery snow] everywhere so it's not very nice... then I like being inside"*. Shopping was not only a social activity— *"we also like shopping, usually with friends"*—but also a medium of personal identity exploration: *"I like a lot of second-hand stores because clothing is a big interest of mine... it brings out my creativity!"* This echoes Pyyry's (2016) argument that 'hanging out' in malls enables creative encounters with things and spaces.

For urban residents, local parks often played a similar role to malls for suburban peers, providing nearby social spaces embedded with meanings of both sociability and 'escape'. Lili described *"Rosenlundsparken, a park near our school"* as her favourite place, while Latvia emphasized the sense of discovery in a garden area that *"doesn't feel like you're in the city but you're still very central"*. These accounts align with Guite et al. (2006) and Birch et al. (2020), showing how urban green spaces serve metaphorical escapes not only from urbanity but from rules, routines, and technologies.

Overall, adolescents appropriate territories in ways that are deeply entangled with their identities. Suburban participants viewed malls as social and creative nodes, while urban participants described parks as dual spaces of sociability and restoration. In both contexts, mobility thresholds (stations, centrums) structured the cognitive maps of familiar territories. Appropriation, then, is not only about claiming physical ground but about embedding places into identity through familiarity, habit, and social practice (Rose 2012).

2. Relational Factors

Across groups, participants consistently described natural environments as meaningful spaces, often in response to questions about favourite places or where they go to calm down. Water in particular, held restorative value:

"I would say, where water is. I don't know why, there's something that makes you calm… if I want to be alone or with my thoughts I would go where there's sea or water". Such statements resonate with Van Den Berg et al. (2007) and White et al. (2013), who found that blue spaces have especially positive effects on emotional state.

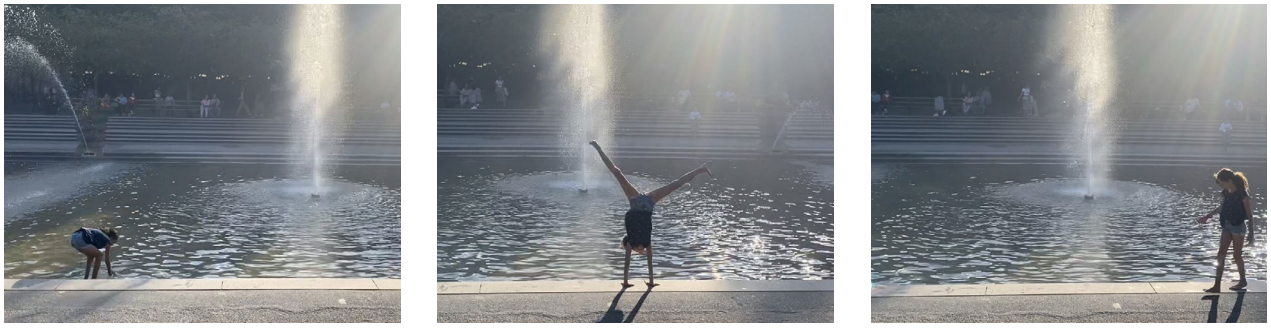

Figure 5 a,b,c: *Interactive play with water in urban fountain - making of temporal hand imprints, Kungsträdgården,* Images captured and edited by author, 2024.

Yet these restorative meanings were often tied to familiarity. Emelie described a forest near her neighbourhood with ponds and ducks, where she walked her dog: *"It feels like home next to my home… even if you want and like to be alone, it feels bad to be seen by yourself".* Familiarity here accelerates comfort and calm, not only through positive memories but also through a sense of appropriated presence (Kaplan & Kaplan 1983; Dixon & Durrheim 2004).

Animals also mediated appropriation. Walking a dog, for example, provided both companionship and legitimacy: *"With my dog I can be alone without being alone you know?"* This resonates with Johansson et al. (2012), who noted how such practices counter the gendered image of vulnerability. Similarly, rural participants highlighted spontaneous encounters with wildlife— *"at night there are usually bats flying!"*—linking appropriation to observation of the life cycle (Lutz et al. 1999).

However, when discussing public space more broadly, participants repeatedly emphasized that 'people matter more than place'. Sofia explained her favourite park was such because *"there are teenagers, like us, our age".* Emelie stressed: *"We always hang out in places where there's people. If you're out late it's more comfortable to know there's people there".* The surrounding crowd thus emerged as a decisive factor in whether a space could be appropriated.

Two dimensions of crowd mattered: scale and composition. Participants preferred medium-sized crowds, avoiding both deserted areas and overwhelming gatherings. Lotta summarized: *"Generally, you want to be around people but not big crowds either, because they can get messy. So somewhere in the middle".* Composition was equally critical: spaces frequented by

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peers were favoured, while those dominated by older men or *"weird people"* were avoided. Josefine stressed: *"We stick to our familiar places since we know what kind of people are going to be there"*.

These findings illustrate how familiarity operates at multiple levels: habitual familiarity with place, emotional-cognitive familiarity through memories, and social familiarity with companions or crowds. Together, these forms of familiarity condition whether nature and public spaces are appropriated. As Tuan (1991a) observed, warm interactions can make a place itself feel warm, while hostile encounters can destroy a place's reputation. For adolescents, then, familiarity is not only about knowing a space but also about knowing who will be there and under what conditions.

3. Negotiating Safety

Although our study did not explicitly foreground safety in its research questions, participants' narratives made clear that perceptions of safety—and the strategies developed in response—were deeply interwoven with their appropriation of space. Carr's (1992) principles of democratic space are helpful here: presence of peers underscores the girls' right to a space, while the composition of crowds can either affirm or undermine that right.

Many participants described spaces they avoided, often at night: *"Sometimes I avoid subways because they feel creepy"* (Nora); *"I normally don't go somewhere enclosed… lonely roads or if I'm alone and see a man, then I would switch sidewalks"* (Latvia). Such accounts echo feminist geographies documenting gendered perceptions of insecurity (Koskela 1997; Riley et al. 2016).

Precautionary strategies were common. Emelie explained: *"When you see someone suspicious or scary… a group of boys standing in the middle of the road, you don't usually go by them"*. Sofia noted in response to a scenario given, that benches arranged in groups were preferable so as not to *"look like you're sitting alone inviting someone to talk to you"*.

Conversely, mobility itself was seen as protective: *"With one of my friends, we just walk and talk… it feels comforting to walk. No one can come up to me and make me uncomfortable"*. These practices demonstrate how adolescents negotiate the tension between claiming space and avoiding unwanted attention, often appropriating 'by proxy' through group presence.

Crucially, safety was not only an external condition but negotiable through social familiarity. When a group of young men approached three girls on a public staircase at night, Josefine reflected: *"It's good that we had each other"*. Alone, the same space would not have been appropriable. This highlights safety as both a satisfier of the need for security and a facilitator of the right to access space, constantly recalibrated in relation to group dynamics.

Figures 6 a,b: *Pictures taken by participants for their scenario answers: Odenplan square* 2024, Photographs by: anonymous participant

In addition to public places, participants repeatedly mentioned their own or friends' bedrooms as spaces of refuge, relaxation, and self-expression. Although not public, these rooms serve as important comparators for understanding appropriation. Yllen explained: *"I would go to my room. Because you can be alone then. It's my comfort place. If I go out in public even if it's nice, I would always see a person, and I don't want anyone to see me upset"*. Privacy, here, was central.

Finally, the go-along interviews ended on a conceptual note when the participants were asked to imagine the design of a public space specifically for adolescent girls. Their ideas encapsulated many of the themes identified in this study, including accessibility, restorative environments, playfulness, and the negotiation of visibility. Drawing inspiration from women-only gym spaces, they proposed spaces that *"only girls would want to go"*, stressing the need for gender-specific places in contrast to football fields, which they felt excluded them: *"Boys have places where only boys go… but girls don't have that, and I think we should also have these spaces"*. In this imagined design, accessibility was to be regulated either by policy or by the nature of the activities offered, suggesting a reversal of existing gendered power dynamics in public space (Koskela 1997).

Nature—and especially blue space—was central to their vision. They described *"a bathing place close to nature"* with opportunities for kayaking and stand-up paddling, highlighting water's restorative and playful qualities (White et al. 2013). Place memories were woven into the design: artifi-

cial grass and hammocks were associated with childhood play and holiday relaxation, illustrating how spatial characteristics evoke familiarity and encourage appropriation through past positive experiences (Tuan 1991; Dixon & Durrheim 2004).

A small stage was imagined for dancing and choreography, but crucially *"not very open and exposed to judges"*. This reflected concerns with situational body image (James 2001), whereby confidence in physical expression is contingent on audience and design. To control crowd presence, they emphasized that the space should be *"hidden and cozier"*, provoking a sense of discovery and enchantment (Pyyry 2016b). Finally, interactive musical elements— *"so anyone can connect and play their own music"*—were envisioned as ways to personalize the sensory experience.

Through these conceptualizations, we see how adolescent girls aspire to spaces that balance sociability with privacy, foster creative expression without exposure to judgment, and allow multisensory engagement with the environment. These imaginaries not only reveal unmet needs in existing provision but also highlight how privacy and control are fundamental dimensions of appropriation. In public spaces, adolescents negotiate visibility and exposure, often seeking design features or social contexts that mitigate judgmental audiences, while in private spaces they assert dominance through ownership and exclusion of others. Both realms are connected: the bedroom functions as a 'control case', helping us interpret what is lacking in public space design and clarifying why girls imagine alternative environments where they can appropriate space on their own terms.

Synthesis

Across these themes, we see that adolescent women's appropriation of space is shaped by a complex interplay of mobility, familiarity, social dynamics, and perceptions of safety. Territories expand through mobility but are anchored in familiar nodes. Nature and crowds provide both restorative and social meanings, but only under certain relational conditions. Safety and privacy, though often framed as barriers, are in fact integral to the processes by which adolescents claim and negotiate their right to space. Consistent with Mitchell's (1996) view of public space as contested and socially produced, our findings show adolescents are not merely present in the city but actively co-construct its meanings (Skelton & Gough 2013). Appropriation, in this sense, is both a practice of autonomy and a relational negotiation, deeply embedded in the spatial dimensions of identity.

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Conclusions

This study set out with the purpose of identifying the networks of adolescent women's appropriation of public space and gaining insights on the factors that shape them. Building on concepts of appropriation, relational conditions, and spatial identity, we have shown how adolescent girls in Stockholm construct, expand, and negotiate their spatial networks. Our integrated analysis demonstrates that their experiences of public space are not reducible to safety concerns, nor to simplistic narratives of exclusion. Instead, appropriation unfolds as a dynamic interplay between mobility, familiarity, crowd composition, and social identifications.

First, we find that adolescents expand their networks of appropriated spaces through sequences of thresholds and nodes—playgrounds, transport hubs, malls, and parks. These nodes provide the scaffolding for a layered geography of appropriation, stretching from hyperlocal sites of routine familiarity to metropolitan centres of sociability and consumption. The process is neither linear nor uniform, but deeply entangled with parental arrangements, residential mobility, and peer companionship. In line with Matthews et al. (2000) and Skelton & Gough (2013), we show that adolescents are not merely in the city but are actively of the city, constructing spatial biographies that shape both present practices and future imaginaries.

Second, our findings highlight that relational conditions are central to appropriation. Accessibility and meaning are never properties of the built environment alone but emerge from encounters between individuals, companions, and surrounding crowds. Familiarity functions on several levels: habitual routines, affective associations, and social predictability. Whether a park, mall, or transport node can be appropriated depends on who else is present, when, and how they behave. This reinforces Lefebvre's (1991) and Massey's (2005) insistence that space is relationally produced, as well as Dixon & Durrheim's (2004) argument that identity and place are co-constructed through encounters with others.

Third, we demonstrate how spatial identity is both produced through appropriation and productive of it. Appropriated places provide adolescents with resources for experimenting with self-expression—through clothing, creative uses of malls, or rituals of hanging out. Conversely, particular identifications e.g., gendered vulnerability or peer solidarity, regulate which spaces can be claimed and under what conditions. The imagined 'girls' space' articulated by participants underscores a perceived lack of safe and expressive environments for adolescent women, echoing feminist scholarship on the gendered exclusions embedded in urban design (Koskela 1997; Riley et al. 2016).

Together, these contributions complicate reductionist framings of young women's urban experience as defined by 'safety versus danger'. Safety is indeed an important satisfier of needs, but more fundamentally, it is a relational condition that mediates appropriation and identity formation. By tracing the interweaving of territories, relational dynamics, and self-concepts, this study adds empirical depth to debates on youth geographies and contributes to urban studies by foregrounding how adolescent women co-produce the city through everyday practices of negotiation.

Limitations

While our findings shed new light on adolescent women's spatial practices in Stockholm, several limitations must be acknowledged.

First, the study is based on a relatively small, qualitative sample drawn from Stockholm and its suburbs, and the findings should not be generalized to all urban adolescents. The aim was not representativeness but depth of understanding. The sampling method of both versions of the methodology sets further limitation for the results since it did not control socio-economic background and other categories of identification e.g. ethnic, gender. Further research could shed light into how diverse groups within this category appropriate spaces differently. Although some results hint to differences between sub-urban and urban residents' perceptions, they should also not be generalized for these populations.

Second, the use of English for interviews—a necessity since the researcher did not speak Swedish—may have limited the nuance of participants' expressions. Although adolescents were fluent, linguistic choices in a second language may not fully capture their emotional registers.

Third, while the insights gathered are valuable for our understanding of adolescent girls' appropriation, they should be interpreted with caution when considering their applicability to other e.g. non-Swedish or rural contexts. Context is relevant in perceptions of police, crowds, and urban fabric as well as weather conditions. Further research could therefore explore the impact of more contextual characteristics that affect the perceived safety or inclusion to public spaces.

Finally, our focus on adolescent women foregrounds gendered experiences but does not allow for comparative claims across genders. Including boys, non-binary, or mixed groups could illuminate additional dynamics of appropriation and identity.

Concluding Reflections

Adolescent women's experiences of public space cannot be reduced to simple dichotomies of safe versus unsafe, public versus private. Their narratives reveal a complex network of appropriation, grounded in layered territories, relational conditions, and evolving identities. In these everyday negotiations, young women are not passive users but active producers of urban life. Recognizing their practices of appropriation—whether in walking together through city centres, inventing rituals in parks, or imagining alternative futures—is crucial for creating inclusive cities.

By situating these practices within the theoretical framework of space as relational and contested (Lefebvre 1991; Massey 2005; Mitchell 1996), we contribute to understanding how the city is not simply a backdrop for adolescent life but a co-produced environment shaped by and shaping young people's identities. Ultimately, to support adolescent women's right to the city is to acknowledge their everyday politics of presence, creativity, and belonging.

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