



Municipal Department 42
Parks and Gardens



Co-ordination Office for Planning and Construction Geared to the Requirements of Daily Life and the Specific Needs of Women

Planning recommendations for the gender-sensitive design of public parks

Open space design may indirectly influence the behaviour of different user groups. It can extend but also restrict the action and communication opportunities of individual groups. The following recommendations are primarily geared towards the requirements of **children and young people**, as access to open space for exercise and play with peers promotes a healthy physical and mental development, and public parks are one of the most important recreational facilities which can be used free of charge.

As has been revealed in several studies, the number of 9- to 13-year-old girls using public parks is considerably smaller than that of boys in the same age group. The same applies to adolescent girls (14-18 years), who also make less use of parks than their male peers. The reason for girls' reluctance to take possession of a park's spaces lies in a complex interrelation of spatial and social factors. The problem becomes particularly obvious in places which lack space for play and exercise and which are subject to strong displacement mechanisms among the park's different user groups.

In order to offer girls and boys equal opportunities in the use of public spaces and to increase the presence of girls and their range of activities in the parks, park design efforts have to give equal consideration to girls' and boys' different behaviour patterns and to the different strategies girls and boys pursue to take possession of space. The aim is not to create parks for girls and/or parks for boys, but to make public spaces equally attractive to girls and boys. In so doing, different gender-specific interests and needs concerning facilities for exercise, activity and recreation will be taken into account. In this context, particular emphasis has to be placed on the needs and requirements of girls, which in many cases have been inadequately considered in conventionally designed parks so far.

These recommendations supplement the existing playing rules and the guidelines for parks/playgrounds issued by the City of Vienna, Municipal Department 42 – Parks and Gardens.

Spatial structure

Interlinking of open spaces

The spatial and functional interlinking of open spaces and major locations used by children and young people is an important aspect of urban development, since it allows a more equal distribution of the utilisation pressure across the existing open spaces.

Network of pathways

A park's network of pathways has to provide users with an opportunity "to do laps" (e.g. with a scooter) and offer a connection to other open spaces (walkways).

Differentiated spatial concept

In order to meet the changing requirements placed on parks in the course of a day and of a year, the aim is to create a diverse space which is a combination of small- and large-scale open spaces as well as functionalised and flexible, open-use sub-spaces.

Division in sub-spaces

- Particularly in parks which are subject to high utilisation pressure it is of great importance to divide large areas and ball-game areas into smaller sub-spaces, in order to prevent large areas from being occupied only by the strongest and most assertive group and ensure their simultaneous use by several groups.
- The individual sub-spaces should be readily accessible to make it easy for users to change between the different sub-spaces.
- Larger parks need to have a few "focal or contact points" in non-functional areas, from where less dominant groups can set out to take possession of the space.

Design of boundaries

- Particularly in smaller parks the differentiated design of boundaries between sub-areas is of great importance. The aim is to create multifunctional boundaries, which, as far as possible, constitute a play object in themselves. As boundaries may enable or prevent interaction between sub-areas, the design should be carefully chosen (possibility of using boundaries as a play object, transparency, recreation area, etc.).
- The design should enable boundaries and transitions from more functionalised areas to be used as play, retreat, recreation, circulation and/or communication zones. Attractively designed boundary areas allow users to make first attempts at taking possession of the space.
- Soil modelling creates sub-spaces and may enrich the available facilities for play.

Flexibility

Parks should be flexible in their design and offer possibilities for change, among other things, in order to cater to current trends in recreational activities and provide room for temporary activities (events).

Feeling of safety

Since clearly laid-out spaces offering a good overview and being subject to social control are experienced as safe, these criteria should be met by the major recreation and circulation zones (main pathways, important access ways, e.g. to the public toilet, entrance areas, etc.) of a park.

The feeling of safety is particularly important to girls and their parents and to elderly women. Places which are perceived as safe are also frequented by unaccompanied girls.

Orientation

An open space is clearly laid out, if the organisation of the pathway system is easy to grasp and facilitates orientation. Main pathways should be laid out in such a way that the users are provided in time with a good insight into potential hiding places like niches, recesses and edges of shrubs.

Visibility and social control

- Frequently used main pathways and good sightlines to busy spaces (e.g. neighbouring streets) increase the feeling of safety. Sightlines between the individual sub-spaces of the park, and from these sub-spaces to the main pathway, also increase possibilities of social control.
- Attractive, clearly laid-out entrance areas constitute sub-spaces of the park which are especially well visible from outside (strong social control) and are important as short “stop-over” for passers by.
- The presence of persons accompanying small children also improves social control in the surrounding areas. Therefore toddlers’ playgrounds should feature attractive (and shaded) seating facilities and recreation areas for adults.
- With increasing age, children’s need for social safety through the presence of adults diminishes. Depending on their age and mobility, children and young people are entitled to both: safety and support on the one hand and retreat facilities on the other. A mixture of visible and less visible areas provides both social safety, which is highly important to younger girls and boys, and retreat facilities, which are of great importance to adolescents.

Lighting

Main pathways, important access ways and heavily used sub-spaces are to be particularly well lit in order to improve users’ objective and subjective feeling of safety (also see “Richtlinien für eine sichere Stadt” [Guidelines for a Safe City], “frauen” [women] publication series, Volume 1, Municipal Department 57 – Women’s Office of the City of Vienna).

Well-maintained toilets

Well-maintained toilet facilities contribute to a clean environment and particularly enable women, girls and elderly persons to stay in the park for a longer period of time.

Phone booth

The installation of a phone booth may increase the feeling of safety for parents and children.

Elderly persons

Elderly persons should be provided with protected, shaded areas offering good sightlines to busy zones.

Girls' range of activities

As previous planning efforts tended rather to consider boys' exercise patterns, the following sections will place particular emphasis on the activities of girls.

Play (movement-oriented play, construction games, role play, rule games, exploration games)
Sports-based rule games
Communication, meeting friends
Recreation
Strolling through the park
Looking after children

The available spaces and play facilities should encourage girls to engage in these activities. A **coherent overall spatial concept**, which coordinates the functional and spatial interrelations between the available spaces and facilities for play, is an important prerequisite for an attractive, gender-sensitive park design.

The following design requirements should be met to the best possible extent:

Ball-game areas

- should be designed in an open and multifunctional way and should be combined with recreation zones along the boundaries of the ball-game area which can be used for playing, watching and communicating. (Fences should only be installed in places where they are absolutely necessary.) This will facilitate the use of the areas and enable visitors to cross the field or to play for a short period of time. The areas surrounding sports facilities should also offer opportunities to communicate with others.
- There should also be an increasing number of facilities for volleyball, as this game is equally popular among girls and boys and promotes social integration.

Arrangement of play areas

- The arrangement of functionalised play areas should take account of the interactions between the different groups of users.
- When choosing the location for different play areas, planners should consider the need to equip the area near the toddlers' playground with attractive play facilities for older children and adolescents, in order to enable them to look after their younger siblings and simultaneously engage in play themselves.
- Areas which are intended to be particularly appealing to girls (e.g. sports areas, volleyball field) should be located in places which offer good sightlines to girls' favourite recreation areas (e.g. play equipment area).

Play equipment

- Play equipment should be multifunctional, i.e. it should not only fulfil an exercise- or skill-related function but also have a high communicative value (allowing users to sit / lie down – observe – move).
- A scattered installation of play equipment in open-use areas encourages girls to expand their room for play and exercise, since equipment-based exercise games may be easily integrated into large-scale play activities.

- The facilities offered should also include integrative play equipment, i.e. play equipment which can be simultaneously (jointly) used by several persons (e.g. bird's nest swing, climbing towers, roundabout, etc.). Play equipment which can be used by several children at the same time and which combines the interests of younger and older children facilitates older children's task of supervising their younger siblings. These facilities should always leave children enough room to get past each other, so that it is not possible for an individual person to prevent others from getting by.
- Further play facilities promoting motor functions and sensory experiences (e.g. balancing bars, sound elements, etc.) should also be provided along the pathways and near the park entrances. In this way, children passing by the park on a daily basis can be motivated to use these facilities and incidentally stay in the park for a longer time.

Furniture

- When furniture which is expected to be particularly attractive to park users is installed in a park, it is likely to be used by the most dominant group. Therefore several pieces of it should be available or it should be supplemented by well-tried alternatives.
- The available seating facilities should be of different quality (wooden decks, platforms, seating walls, table-bench combinations, etc.) and at least partly designed as movable seating.
- Plans should also include a covered area which may act as a weather shelter and meeting point for young people.

Retreat areas

Retreat areas, which will also support role-play, should be created in quiet parts of the park.

Exposed areas

Parks should also feature exposed areas which provide a good overview and act as meeting points and see-and-be-seen spots.

Recommendable basic conditions

Public participation in planning

- During the initial stages of a park design or re-design project it is highly recommended to involve the children and young people concerned in the planning process, not only to meet the expectations of the children and adolescents using the park to the best possible extent, but also to optimise this group's identification with the intended measures and to ensure the highest-possible level of satisfaction with the design. In addition, such a process shows the particular appreciation paid to the participating groups by those in charge of the project and strengthens the self-esteem of these groups.
- Such a procedure requires a gender-sensitive technical support of the participation process.
- Ideally, the planning office tasked with the planning activities should already be involved in the public participation process, in order to avoid communication errors, provide as realistic as possible a framework for ideas and meet the expectations of the children and young people participating in the process to the greatest possible extent. Also, children and youth work organisations active in the relevant district (park-based youth work, youth centres, etc.) should be integrated into the planning process at the earliest possible stage.

Quality assurance

A regular review of the above-mentioned functions of a park should consist either of evaluations of the relevant factors or of a periodic exchange between the entities responsible for the maintenance of the park and the support/representation of the users (Municipal Department 42, park-based youth work, local urban renewal offices, etc.).

Gender-sensitive on-site work

A reasonable way to change existing behaviour patterns and encourage girls to increasingly take possession of a park's different spaces is the provision of leisure-educational support (park-based youth work, mobile youth work, etc.) following a gender-sensitive approach. Such support may enhance the acceptance of the "new playing rules", particularly immediately after completion of a park design or re-design project. This kind of support provided to children and young people is especially important in parks which are subject to high utilisation pressure. The aim is to strongly increase girls' presence in parks independent of any support programme offered.

Care and maintenance

Well-maintained (clean, intact) and aesthetically pleasing surroundings have a positive effect on users' feeling of safety. Thus, spaces which meet these requirements are also better accepted by girls. Therefore, planning should also consider the criterion of easy maintenance.

Indoor meeting points

Separate meeting points and retreat facilities for girls and boys should be additionally provided near the park (but not at the expense of green space), in order to increase the range of activities.

Safe access

Safe access ways to the park – ensured by means of kerb extensions and street-crossing aids – increase user comfort and safety.