Adiba Chowdhury

Urban Politics

Professor Julia Payson

May 3rd, 2023

How Cities Can Shape Teenage Political and Personal Development

"Where do we hang out?" is a common refrain for teenagers, and a rather loaded question: in deciding on a location, one has to measure safety, access, budget, and interest, among other factors. In America's cities, as of late, there are few good answers. Among other options, malls are the usual response, but are seemingly on the verge of dying out, and friendly green spaces are hard to find and maintain. In addition, the question is complicated by a youth's identity and socioeconomic status, acknowledging the major impact that a space friendly to youth ("youth-inclusive") can have on their standard of living and upward mobility. This paper aims to explore what political decisions have led to the disappearance of youth-inclusive spaces in urban cities, analyze the consequences on vulnerable youth populations, and offer potential solutions given the constraints of modern urban politics.

The image of where teens spend their time used to be any shopping center, for good reason. The *Wall Street Journal*'s Rich Cohen notes, "In the 1980s, there were around 2,500 malls in America. We're down to 700 today. Forecasters expect there to be just 250 in a decade—killed by the internet, by recessions, by social media, Covid and computer games, by an accumulation of trends that's made many of us, in our darkest hours, long for mullets and acid-washed jeans." Teens are facing a lack of options when it comes to spending their time outside of school, and the ones remaining are struggling. On April 26th, the *New York Times* reported that "Mayor Eric Adams announced on Wednesday that he would exempt New York

City's public libraries from his latest round of threatened budget cuts, sparing them from closing many of their branches on weekends." The public library and the mall are both quintessential examples of what a youth-inclusive space can be: open on weekends and during school, (relatively) free, and equipped with Internet connection, entertainment, and accessible events. In turn, the budget fight that ensued over the NYPL is a snapshot of what the political battle for public space has looked like across the country. City leaders have focused their revitalization efforts on attracting new residents from outside of the city inwards, including reshaping what "downtown" looks like accordingly; this meant that businesses have gotten a larger say in how to attract new customers and employees, because municipalities have leaned on them to make up for what can't be paid for in stealth taxes. City space provision and management has thus been challenged by increasing privatization, "with developers, property managers and local business associations taking the lead in providing and maintaining parks, plazas and atriums," according to Professors Stephan Schmidt and Jeremy Nemeth.

Local laws restricting both behavior in and the creation of youth-inclusive spaces are also significant barriers, as depicted by the Network of Public Health Law: "For example, in Evanston, Illinois, skateboarding is highly restricted, making skateboarding illegal in almost all places where skateboarding is physically possible and popular among young people... Anti-loitering and youth curfew laws that are prolific in municipalities across the country can threaten a group of kids hanging out — engaging in normal youth behavior — with criminal fines and other penalties." The obvious racialized undertones of this criminalization compounds the feelings of frustration urban residents have in seeing public investment directed outward. For example, in a Brookings Institution study of downtown development in Buffalo and Albuquerque, "respondents questioned why such significant public and private investments were

directed downtown rather than "higher-need" neighborhoods, and reported concerns that these public spaces investments were primarily meant to serve suburban visitors from across the region or nearby states, rather than people within the city — particularly, people of color." Similarly, Schmidt and Nemeth expand on the impact of privatized urban planning in driving up how expensive it is to exist in a public space as well. They write, "Those who contribute by purchasing goods and services are welcomed in these spaces, while those who fail to contribute are discouraged; this latter group often includes children or youth, homeless persons, or just the general, non-consuming public (Turner, 2002, p. 543)." Since youth have limited financial resources, having to spend money to enjoy themselves in a city is undeniably problematic. Overall, the combined issues of prioritizing growth sourced from external stakeholders (people not belonging to the cities themselves), restrictive local policy, and a general existing lack of youth-inclusive space have set the stage for the current worrying state of said spaces.

The effect of not having a space for socialization and relaxation, especially as a young marginalized person, is devastating to their growth, health, and safety — and can heighten the institutionalized racism youth experience while living in a city. On April 6th, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported an incident in which police and teens clashed during a gathering of said teens, and which resulted in "dramatically contrasting [reports from police officials] of the level of disorder and whether rocks were thrown at cops." In the article, Marcia Hopkins, director of youth advocacy at the Juvenile Law Center, "cautioned against reacting to Wednesday's events by increasing security, or imposing ID requirements. [Hopkins added,] 'I don't actually think it will solve anything. I think that what it's gonna do is criminalize people more who don't have identification or who look young,' she said. 'To be honest, it, it reminds me of things like stop-and-frisk.'" The policies Hopkins refers to here as potential outcomes of the clash are

commonplace while businesses maintain the privilege to set restrictive policies about youth presence — and will grow increasingly so if the aforementioned trends of privatization continue. This association between youth crime and the lack of a youth-inclusive space is an evidently storied one, and so is the alternative. A study from the University of Arizona found that in the Phoenix metropolitan area, "Libraries/community centers and civic/social/membership organizations were associated with reduced likelihood of repeat drug or violent offenses, while proximity to school campuses reduced the relative risk of public peace and status offenses for more serious offenders." As aforementioned, though, libraries and similar community centers are facing the ax, and not just in U.S. cities. Across the pond, the *Guardian*'s John Harris reported in 2018 that "More than 600 such facilities in Britain have shut over the last six years, with the loss of 139,000 youth places and 3,650 staff. In our major cities, anxiety about this organised neglect is focused on gangs and knife crime." This anxiety from the public is reflected in today's reactive atmosphere in America's urban areas, but becoming aware of the correlation between youth crime and youth-inclusive space is key to understanding how urban design can function as a stopgap.

Additionally, limits on public spaces exacerbate the feelings of social exclusion young girls in cities experience during their adolescence. For example, research from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) explains, "Girls and young women are too old to use children's spaces, like playgrounds, and too young to use adult ones, like unaffordable retail. Simultaneously, while youth allocation money is meant to target this group of girls, investments into facilities are almost singularly funnelled towards skate parks, BMX tracks, and MUGAs (enclosed football pitches, basketball courts) – areas which are used practically entirely by boys and young men." In this way, even existing limited public spaces reinforce multiple

forms of discrimination. To be fair, this commentary is not to say public spaces that are traditionally more masculine are not appropriate for young women to enter, but rather, that these public spaces are insufficient to satisfy the health needs of young people at large. Researchers in the *Health and Place* Journal explain, "Natural urban spaces, meanwhile, are frequently associated with protective and developmental benefits. For example, bluespaces (e.g., rivers, ponds) and greenspaces (e.g., parks, recreation areas) can aid in emotional regulation (Djohari et al., 2018) and reduce stress (Feda et al., 2015) among adolescents, respectively." Incorporating blue and green spaces can substantially change how a youth experiences the urban world, in addition to the myriad of benefits public spaces offer to sustainable city development.

Fixing this shortcoming offers city youth an opportunity to gain, and reinforces their right to, political power. In a 2020 book by Ben Shirtcliff, associate professor of landscape architecture and urban design at Iowa State, reviewing youth-inclusive practices in cities, Shirtcliff explains the human rights aspect of occupying space for youth: "'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.'" Shirtcliff was inspired by having watched efforts to build a legally protected skatepark in New Orleans after an unofficially recognized one was shut down by police (Iowa State University). With the right type of space, youth also increase their political participation. After testing it in Nigeria, Somalia, Kosovo, Peru, Haiti, Mexico, Bangladesh, the Philippines and Solomon Islands, the UN Habitat Programme found that "using Minecraft [to simulate real-life construction projects and existing neighborhoods]

show that the game increases youth's interest in urban design and planning, enables them to express themselves in a visual way, provides new ways to influence the policy agenda and helps youth develop skills and network with other people from the community." This case shows that creating youth-inclusive space can be done in a way that recognizes the expanding definition of what counts as space itself — in cities with limited land, that is critical — and in doing so, raises their levels of civic engagement.

The Minecraft example also suggests that what America's adults remember with nostalgia about growing up in malls, libraries, and parks is not unwanted, despite warranted concerns that youth are buried in their screens. For example, the aforementioned LSE research about young women's feelings about public space found: "In children's playgrounds and retail spaces they felt targeted by adult users, security guards, and CCTV. High streets and retail centres were laden with disinteresting and unaffordable retail. They felt that they could not travel to spaces safely, reliably and cheaply. There were insufficient amenities like water bottle refill stations and inadequate spaces to just hangout with friends." In the study of Buffalo and Albuquerque, residents shared the same disadvantages, and frustrations with the prioritization of the downtown aesthetic (Love and Kok). The authors found, "East Side residents also attributed [avoidance of the downtown Canalside] to long-standing divides that exist between suburbs and city residents dating back to disinvestment and white flight last century." As such, in order to supply the youth-inclusive spaces desired, cities must battle histories of discrimination and clearly focus on improving existing public spaces, offering the desired basic amenities, and integrating residents, first and foremost.

However, it is also possible for city leaders to creatively resolve this problem moving forward, while tackling other community concerns, in the political process. Mara Mintzer, one of

the authors of the new book *Placemaking with Children and Youth: Participatory Practices for Planning Sustainable Communities*, suggests that participatory planning sessions are the first place to start. Mintzer said that "As an example, we just surveyed some of the sixth-grade kids who worked with us three years ago on the redesign of a specific area of the city, and 100 percent said that kids should always be included in processes like these, and 71 percent said they're more likely now to engage in civic engagement in the future—either in their home, their school, or their city—because of this work." Mintzer also suggests, "People worry about liability, but the research says adventure playgrounds are no more dangerous than a traditional playground. And yet cities are terrified to do it. There is a beautiful Risk Benefit Assessment that has been spearheaded by the Play Safety Forum out of the U.K. Organizations can use that assessment to help create precedents to help them limit liabilities." Both data-backed design and community involvement, rather than reliance on private interests, can allow city leaders to safely and adequately supply youth-inclusive spaces. In other words, an approach to urban policy and urban planning that encourages youth decision-making and community building is clearly possible.

The pandemic drew attention to the novelty of open streets, and expanded outdoor dining, for everyday urban residents — but even these changes were partly political decisions meant to keep restaurants and other businesses alive. While undeniably important, such political priorities have evidently had the effect of decentering the rights and access of kids and teens to a healthy city. It is also hard for city officials to present green spaces and community centers as ways to reduce crime, especially with the public anxiety mentioned above, but the potential is indisputable. The youth in America's cities are calling for spaces to come together — and in creating these spaces, cities offer a realm in which to realize democratic policymaking ideals.

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