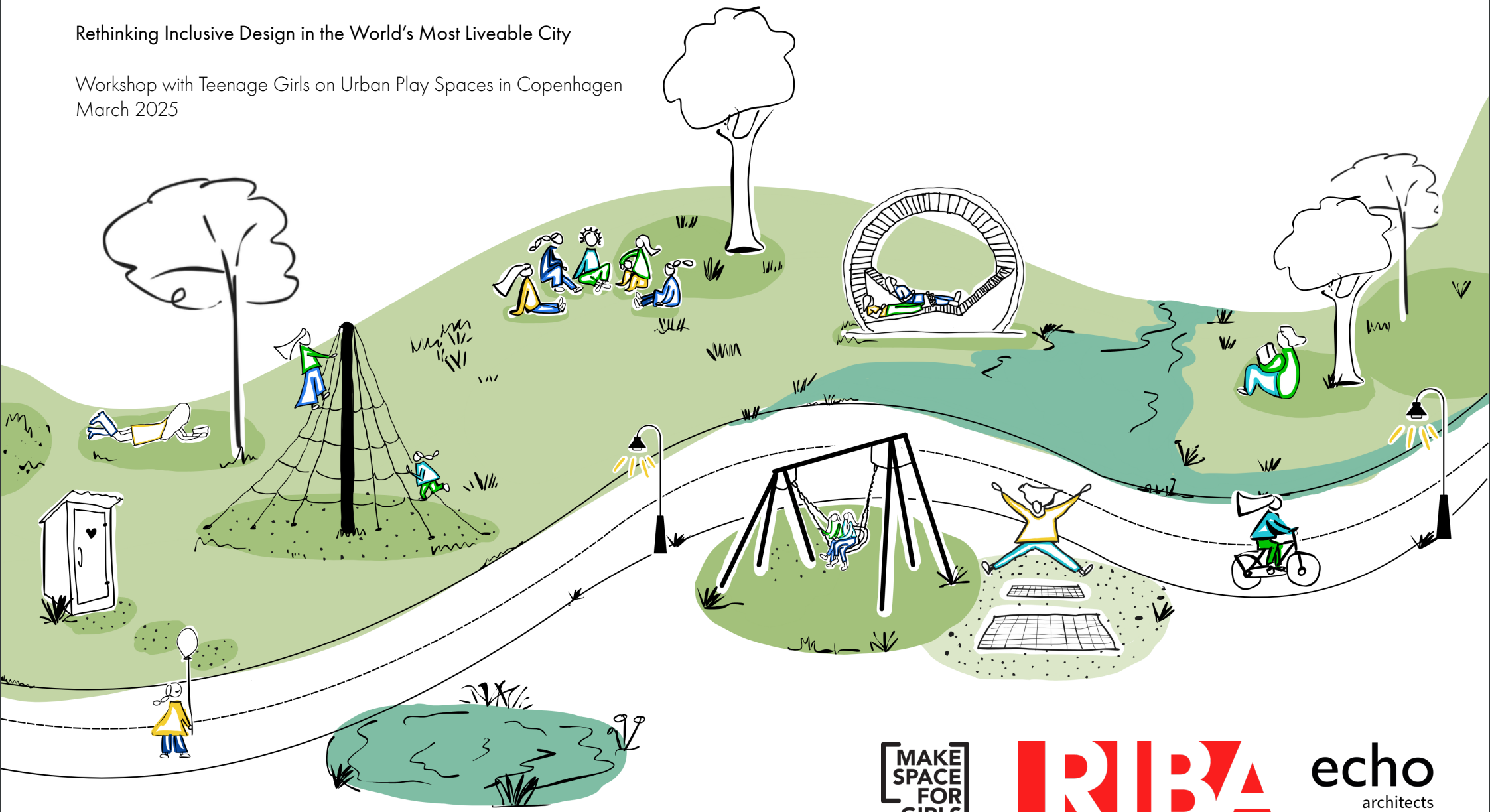
Where Are All the Girls?

Rethinking Inclusive Design in the World's Most Liveable City

Workshop with Teenage Girls on Urban Play Spaces in Copenhagen
March 2025



MAKE SPACE FOR GIRLS

RIBA

echo architects

Executive Summary

In March 2025, a workshop and panel event in Copenhagen brought teenage girls, architects, urban designers, and policymakers into a shared conversation about inclusion in public space. Teenage girls are one of the least visible user groups in public space. In Copenhagen - often celebrated as one of the world's most liveable cities - this absence is easy to overlook.

To explore why this happens, and what could be done differently, **Echo Architects** partnered with **RIBA Europe** and **Make Space for Girls** to host a workshop and panel event marking International Women's Day 2025. The event combined a morning workshop with 30 teenage girls from a local international school and an evening panel discussion with urban professionals, reflecting on the girls' insights the broader question of inclusion in urban design.

The aim was simple: to listen and to take teenage girls' experiences of public space seriously as design knowledge. The event revealed consistent patterns of exclusion, alongside clear, actionable insights into what more inclusive public spaces could look like. The findings reinforce the value of participatory design and highlight the urgent need to better integrate teenage girls' perspectives into urban planning practice.

A warm thank you to:

- **RIBA Europe** for convening the event
- **Make Space for Girls** for leading the workshop and sharing their research
- **The British Embassy Copenhagen** for sponsorship and support
- **Abigail Gaines** (Make Space for Girls), **Yalda Pilehchian** (Ramboll) and **Mads Birgens** (Cobe) for joining the panel and providing insightful dialogue
- **Andrea Pražienková** for photography
- And most importantly, the **30 teenage girls** who shared their experiences with honesty and care.

"Flickrum - Places for girls", Stockholm, Sweden
Project by White Arkitekter (2017), image by White Arkitekter

A City That Works - But For Whom?

Despite Denmark's reputation as one of the most gender-equal countries in the world, research shows that girls and young women spend significantly less time in public space than boys and young men, which is a pattern mirrored across the UK and Europe.[1]

This absence is not accidental.

Public spaces are often designed around competitive sport, visibility, and performance - conditions that tend to favour teenage boys. Girls frequently describe feeling watched, unsafe, or uncomfortable, particularly as they grow older. As a result, many withdraw from public space altogether.

This tension between a progressive city and patterns of everyday exclusion became the motivation for a workshop in Copenhagen focused entirely on teenage girls' experiences. This workshop sought to make their experiences visible, audible, and relevant to those shaping the built environment. By combining direct engagement with teenage users and reflective discussion among professionals, the event created a feedback loop between lived experience and design practice.

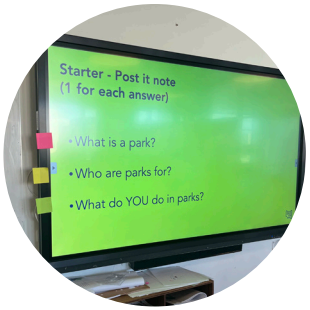
The Workshop

Before we can design cities that work for everyone, we need to listen.

Teenage girls are frequently overlooked in urban planning. While public parks are often shaped around sport and visibility, many girls experience them from the margins or avoid them altogether. This workshop led by **Make Space for Girls** set out to change that by placing teenage girls' voices at the centre of the design process.

The session was structured as a series of hands-on exercises, creating an open and reflective atmosphere where experiences and ideas could emerge naturally. Together, these exercises created a clear picture of how teenage girls experience public space and how it could be designed differently.

WORKSHOP PROCESS



Defining parks

Using post-it notes, the girls shared what parks mean to them, who they are for, and how they usually use them.

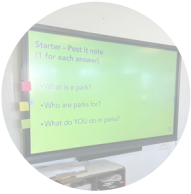
The session began with a simple question: Are parks for you?

Most participants initially responded yes, parks are for everyone. However, when the discussion shifted to comfort, safety, and belonging, responses became more nuanced. The girls described wanting:

- Privacy combined with safety and passive supervision
- Calm environments rather than highly performative spaces
- Informal places to sit, talk, and spend time together
- Spaces not dominated by organised or competitive sport

One participant captured this succinctly as wanting "a place you can't play sports."

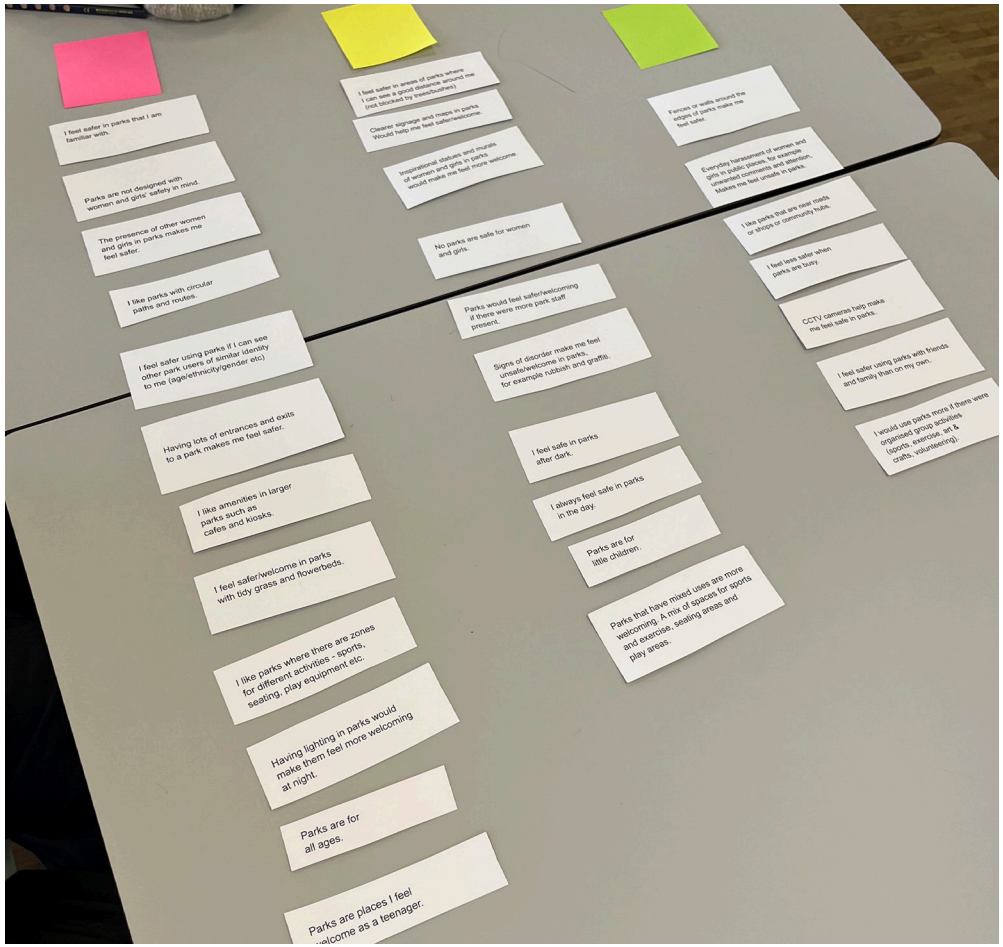
WORKSHOP PROCESS



Prioritising experience

In small groups, they ranked statements about comfort, safety, and use, revealing what matters most in everyday encounters with public space.

Pink stood for “agree/most like how I feel”, yellow for “maybe”, and green for “not really how I feel or something I consider”.



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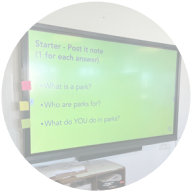
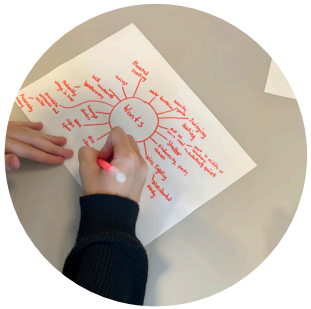
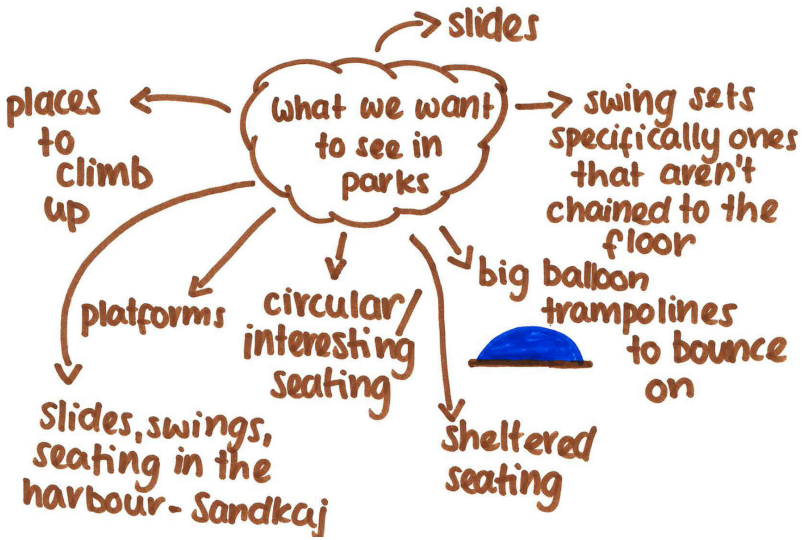


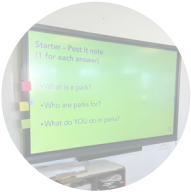




Imagining better parks

Through spider diagrams, the girls mapped out features and atmospheres they want to see in parks for teenage girls.

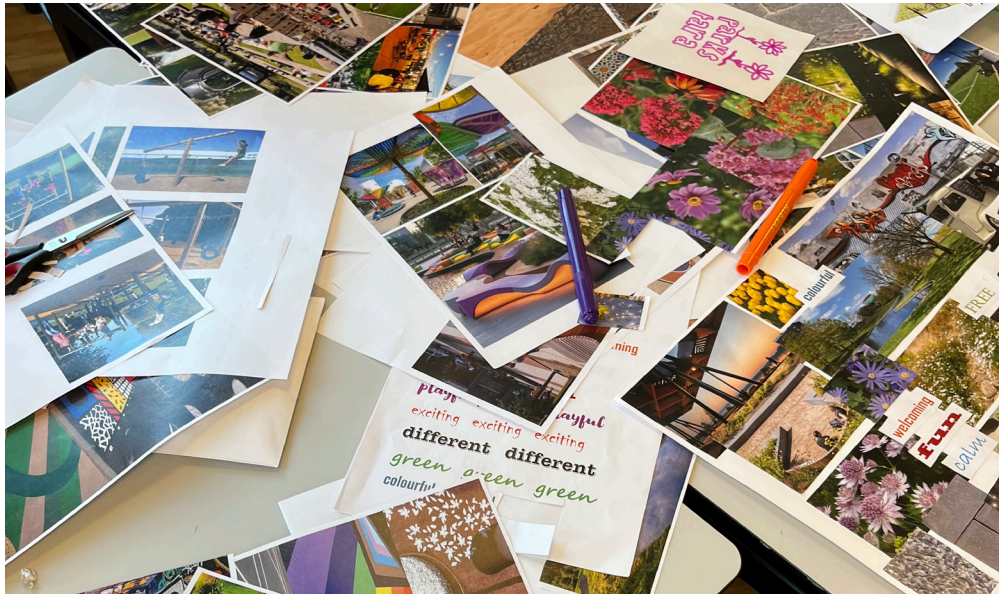
WORKSHOP PROCESS



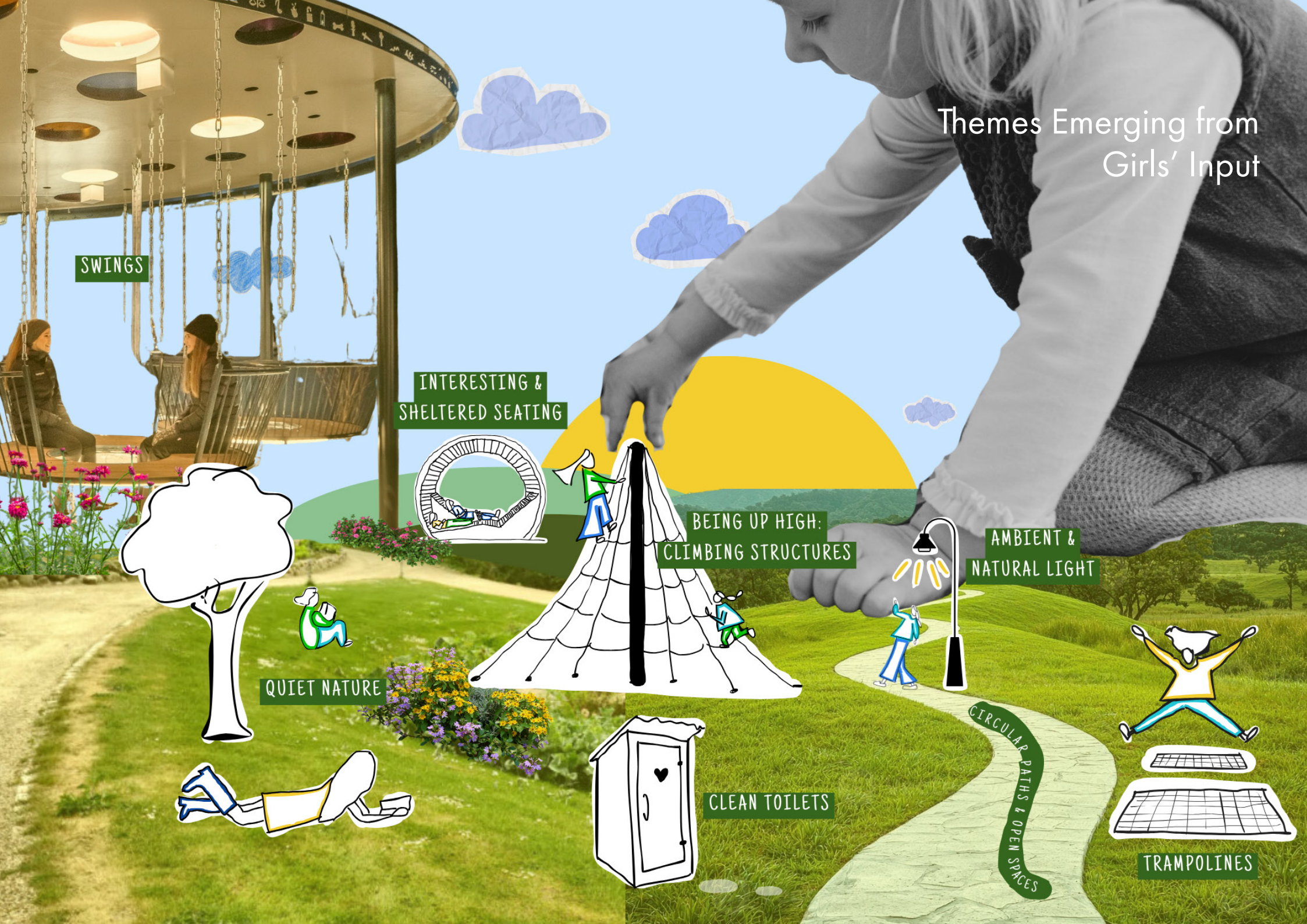
From ideas to space

The workshop concluded with mood boards and simple layouts, translating personal experiences into spatial proposals.

Their designs included planted areas, hammocks, swings, covered seating, spaces to socialise, surrounded by nature and biodiversity. The ideas closely echoed findings from Make Space for Girls workshops in the UK.[2]



Themes Emerging from Girls' Input

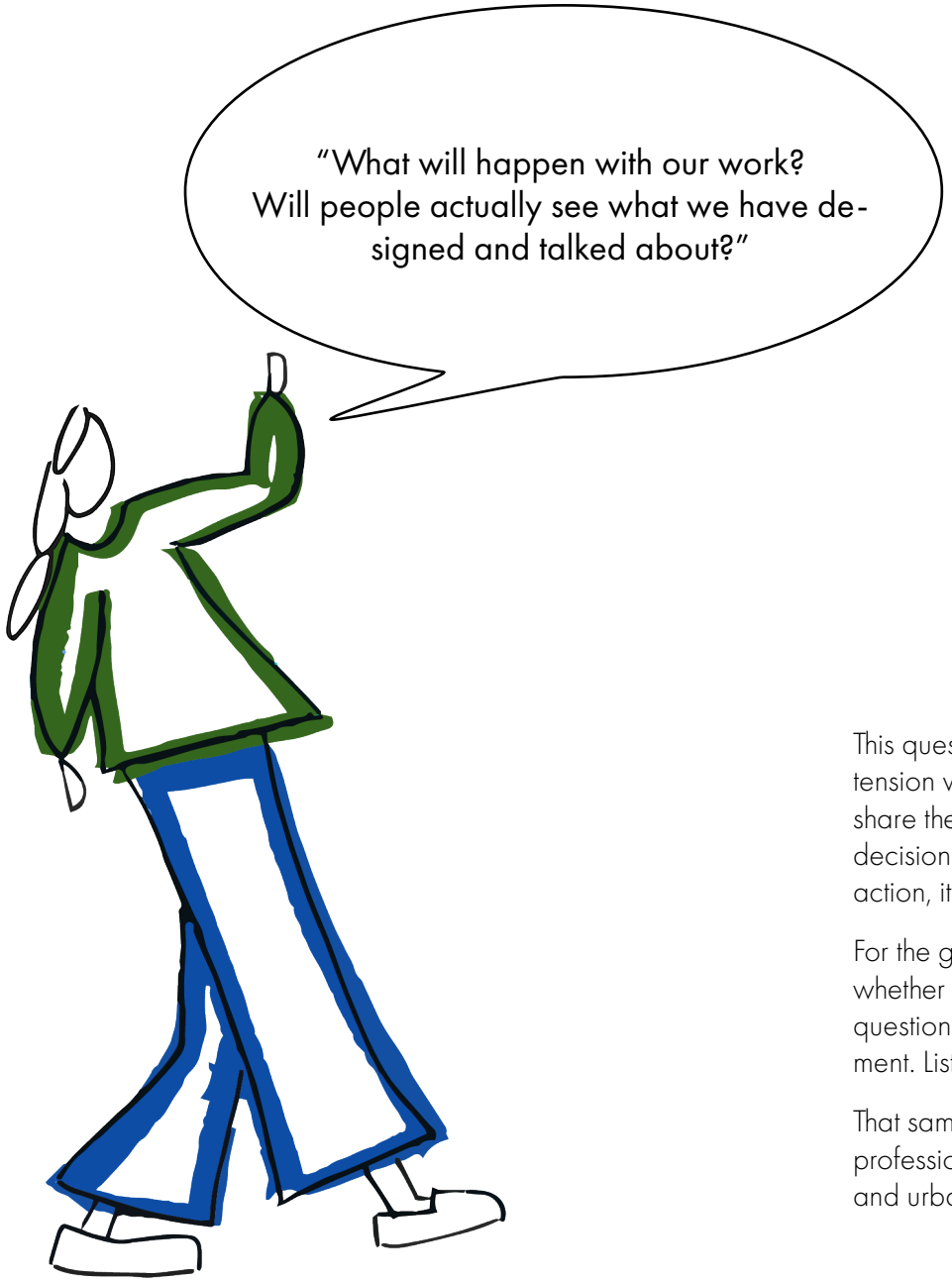


Konditaget was frequently mentioned as one of the girls' favourite parks to hang out, often referred to as "the red roof".

Key Insights

- Safety: Parks feel safe during the day, but not at night.
- Lighting: Girls preferred soft, natural lighting over harsh artificial sources.
- Social Space: They want informal spaces to sit, relax, and talk, not just structured or sport-based zones.
- Design Aesthetics: Soft colours, natural materials, and greenery made spaces feel more welcoming than cold, stark urban materials.
- Play Preferences: Swings, hammocks, trampolines, climbing structures, and wide paths were all popular, particularly for their adaptability.
- Public Toilets: More clean, gendered, and well-maintained public toilets were a consistent demand.
- Overwhelming Architecture: Some felt modern design felt too stark or intimidating, spaces that "looked cool" didn't always feel comfortable.

A CRITICAL QUESTION



This question surfaced towards the end of the workshop. It revealed a familiar tension within participatory design processes: young people are often invited to share their experiences and ideas, yet rarely see how these contributions influence decisions, designs, or outcomes. When participation is not followed by visibility or action, it risks becoming extractive rather than empowering.

For the girls in the workshop, this question was not abstract. It was about trust. About whether their time, creativity, and honesty would matter beyond the room. Taking this question seriously means recognising participation as a responsibility, not a moment. Listening must be paired with follow-through, feedback, and accountability.

That same evening, the girls' work moved beyond the workshop space and into a professional forum, forming the starting point for discussion with architects, planners, and urban designers.

The Panel Discussion

The evening panel discussion brought together over 40 professionals from architecture, planning, and urban design. The girls' workshop outputs were exhibited and used as the starting point for discussion. The panel consisted of **Abigail Gaines** (Associate of Make Space for Girls), **Yalda Pilehchian** (Senior Urban Designer at Ramboll), and **Mads Birgens** (Head of Urbanism at Cobe), and **Rebecca Halstead** (Founder of Echo Architects) as moderator.

PANEL DISCUSSION & EXHIBITION OF THE GIRLS' WORK

Several themes emerged:

- The invisibility of teenage girls in urban planning.
- The need for co-creation and direct engagement in design processes.
- Moving beyond rigid programming to support unstructured play and social use.
- How lighting, seating, and aesthetics can transform accessibility and comfort.

This was not just a symbolic conversation, the girls' ideas generated real discussion among professionals. In a small but meaningful way, their voices reshaped how public space was being thought about.

One insight reframed a common assumption: teenage girls often gather in shopping centres or high streets not because of consumption, but because these spaces are clean, well-lit, semi-private, and have reliable toilet facilities.

Another key point challenged the idea that girls simply lack interest in sport. Data from the Parkwatch report (Make Space for Girls, 2023) shows that 92% of users of multi-use games areas (MUGAs) are boys or young men. This aligns closely with what the girls described in the workshop: it is not that they reject movement or activity, but that they do not feel comfortable in spaces dominated by competitive sport.

If teenage girls are to feel more welcome in public space, we must broaden what is offered beyond sport-led environments.

Absence is a response

Girls' absence is not disinterest.
It is a reaction to design cues.

Girls are experts

Teenage girls understand public space.
They live it every day.

Comfort matters

Atmosphere shapes who stays.
Comfort is not secondary to use.

Participation needs follow-through

Listening is only the first step.
Trust is built through action.

Beyond sport-led spaces

Not everyone wants to perform.
Public space needs alternatives to competition.

Designing for girls benefits every-one

If a space works for teenage girls, it often works better for all.

What this day made visible

The workshop and panel discussion highlighted the importance of positioning teenage girls not as a niche group, but as a critical indicator of spatial inclusion. Inclusive design is not only about meeting technical standards, it is about who feels welcome, safe, and confident enough to take up space. If a teenage girl feels welcome in a public space, it is often a space that works better for everyone.

Looking ahead, the insights point towards a simple shift in practice: from designing for users to designing with them.

We acknowledge that spatial experiences are complex and shaped by intersecting social categories. Teenage girls cannot be understood as a homogeneous group defined solely by their gender; their experiences of space are also influenced by factors such as bodily ability, socio-economic background, religion, age or ethnicity. For this day, we focused primarily on gender and age as key dimensions for insights, while recognizing the value of extending future work to include additional social markers.

References
1 Ibsen et al. (2015). Pigers idrætsdeltagelse.
2 Make Space for Girls (2023). Parkwatch Report.

About

This project was a collaboration between **Echo Architects**, **RIBA Europe** and **Make Space for Girls**. The project was funded by RIBA Europe and the British Embassy Copenhagen.

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Panel

Rebecca Halstead, Moderator, Echo Architects

Abigial Gaines, Panelist, Associate of Make Space for Girls

Yalda Pilehchian, Panelist, Senior Urban Designer at Ramboll

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