



Abstract

Purpose To investigate the perceptions and emotional response of women to the built environment of urban public spaces, in order to inform design excellence so as to make future public spaces responsive to women needs.

Design/methodology/approach Qualitative Interviews were conducted with four women of who associate with urban public space daily.

Findings Three major emotional responses of space were raised, sense of isolation, sense of unpredictable and sense of constrain. The study found that there was much similarity in priorities, issues and concerns raised by interviewees. However, interviewees' account did reveal that in any emotional response expressed within the spaces, individuals attached more significance to those factors that immediately impacted on them personally. An overview will be presented from each of the three major emotional responses identifying women's reported attitudes and perceptions of the public space and major themes, which have emerged from the data will be identified and discussed.

Research limitations/implications The research is limited by both the relatively small sample size and non particular same urban public space that interviewees had described on. However, similar findings emerging from wider standards of this research appear to support the findings discussed here.

Key words women's emotional response, public spaces, space vs. body



Introduction

The relationship between women's fear of crime (Loukaitou-Sideris & Fink, 2009) and public spaces (Tulloch, 2000) has been the focus of considerable research over 35 years. The feminine awareness in society have been gradually risen from the time of The Fifth Street Women's contest in 1971 on women's right in city (Weisman, 1994). Yet, despite the well-publicised equal gender, there are still serious attempts on women's safety in urban space, such as, physical/sexual violence and assault, harassment, stalking and any other activities which could place women in threatening danger. With studies finding that two thirds of women never walk alone at night due to fear of crime (Tulloch, 2000). This is a frightening statement when considering that 81% of women who experienced physical assault said that the perpetrator was male and only 15% of women felt safe using public transport at dark. (ABS, 2005)

A meaningful environment is necessary and essential to a meaningful existence. Women must demand public buildings and spaces, which support our lifestyles and incomes and respond to the realities of our lives. Thus, this paper explores how women perceive the fearful public spaces in urban context, focussing on women's emotional response, experiences and expectations based on the qualitative data generated through face-to-face interviews with women. The study will tease out potential beneficial research outcome that would possible generate an architectural or interior solution.

Aims and objectives

The main aim of this research was to explore women's emotional response about the public spaces and how space in relation to the body. Using Brisbane city as a case study, in order to gather information about what is best for women using the public space and to identify what they and other women really need. The objective of the research was to help to develop design excellence, to improve the built environment of public space so as to make future public space responsive to women needs. The study focused on the following question areas:

1. What are women's understandings of what makes a fearful urban environment?
2. What is the nature of their experience of the public space and what is their emotional response, how does it affect to them?
3. In their experience, what are the most important aspects of the built environment that support or hinder their feeling of fear?
4. What are their suggestions for making future urban space designs more women-friendly?



Literature survey and research review

To date, only a limited amount of research has been investigated how the psychological and physical quality of space can affect women's fear emotionally (Rendell, 2000) and little has been mentioned that space is understood by body, mind, inside and outside (Grosz, 1992; Panelli, Little, & Kraack, 2004; Starkweather, 2007).

The studies have discussed in general either broad range of public spaces (ABS, 2005; Burke, O'Campo, Salmon, & Walker, 2009; Lind & Farmelo, 1996; Munson, 2002; Panelli et al., 2004) or narrow specific public spaces (Anthony & Dufresne, 2007; Loukaitou-Sideris & Fink, 2009; Starkweather, 2007; Tulloch, 2000; Woolnough, 2009). In consequent of these varies, the broader context may effect the findings in terms of urban or rural, male or female and so on. To be specific focus of group and gender could also identify their rituals. Further comparison of different public spaces is potential to explore within this research. A number of studies have revealed that through developing an understanding of women's fear in private use of public space and behavioural research on gender difference can approach the awareness of gender and space in relation to the public. Majority of them sooner or later came to the conclusion that existing crime, political policy and community make a significant impact upon the level of feeling safe. Ultimately impacting on how privacy can be achieve, how fear can be reduced, how social behaviour can occur effectively and therefore decrease fear, anxiety, and isolation in the public space. It is contentious whether or not these conclusions have improved condition on proposing a solution (Leiker, 2003; Loukaitou-Sideris & Fink, 2009; Starkweather, 2007; Tulloch, 2000).

Despite the majority of conclusion still lack of investigation on the physical space in relation to the body, especially women. Furthermore, there are only 2 researches that focus particular age group and rest of the studies dealt with a wide spectrum of ages (Burke et al., 2009; Leiker, 2003; Lind & Farmelo, 1996; Loukaitou-Sideris & Fink, 2009; Woolnough, 2009), dealing with their results as a collective entity rather than age groups with specific differences and feeling of space. Lastly, the fear of crime has been overlooked despite all age of men and older people are not afraid of crime in public space due to the characteristic and life style they have (ABS, 2005; Tulloch, 2000).

This emerging body of literature suggests that the perception of behavior of other people, such as social incivilities can make women feel less confident and prefer not to go out on street or even to stay home and lock the door (Burke et al., 2009; Leiker, 2003; Lind & Farmelo, 1996; Loukaitou-Sideris & Fink, 2009; Panelli et al., 2004).



Even more alarming that gender difference (Anthony & Dufresne, 2007; Burke et al., 2009; Lind & Farmelo, 1996; Munson, 2002; Starkweather, 2007) can also result fear in public space in terms of the private use of public spaces. In the study carried out by Anthony & Dufresne (2007) on public toilet, women have greater fear than men due to women have more physical contact to toilet fixtures. These all help to determine whether women's fear is triggered by imaginary of 'other', refers to conjecture of possible attack by men (Tulloch, 2000), or physical element in private use of public space.

Research methodology

The studies on women's fear were ranging from wide spectrum of ages and gender. This study will focus only on women's point of view. The research was qualitative and analytical in nature. The target interviewees for the project were two university females and two work-force female who associate in the urban space daily and have been to public spaces. For the interviews, it was important that the women and their experience had the opportunity to raise issues of relevance. For this reason, the interviews held with women were both confidential and flexible. This allows each interviewee to give their own accounts so that their perspectives would emerge through informal one-to-one discussions.

Sample selection

Women were selected to provide diversity both in terms of their detailed experience within public space as a user and the emotional response. At the beginning of this research, The Office for Women (The state of Queensland, department of community) was informed this research and only one volunteer member agreed to proceed to interview. However, the interview was conducted a range of women comprising the young and middle aged; white and non-white; student and work-force. The particular characteristics of the group of patients actually interviewed were periodically reviewed throughout the fieldwork process to help to ensure an appropriate sample structure. Their ages ranged from 22 to 40 years.

Procedure

The first question began with the regular journey of interviewee, hence to recognise their familiar public spaces then to further interactive in depth. Considering the ability of interviewees to critic and sense the space, due to the unfamiliar thinking process to them. The interviews were used a supportive diagram (*Appendix 2*) which help them



to think how body can relate to the space. The interviewees were asked to visit public spaces before the interview, consequently the fail attempt of describing space from one interviewee. The intention was to conduct the interviews at the interviewees' office and university using voice recorded sessions for subsequent transcription and analysis. All the interviewees were please about the use of voice recorder except one interviewee were apprehensive. To reduce the anxiety of interviewees, interviews were taken in place privately and they were explained about the purpose of this research. This had the advantage of allowing free-flow conversations and importantly reduced the danger of loss detail in the data recorded.

Analysis

Interview notes were written up as soon as following interview and analysis was undertaken from these written transcripts. The text was systematically into a thematic framework for documentation, as described by Ritchie and Spencer (1994). The first question of the interview was mapping into 2D diagram in order to compare the lifestyle of each interviewees (*Appendix 1*). Moreover, the thematic framework were identified into patterns and emerging themes. This revealed the breadth and complexity of interviewees' views on the spatial surroundings they found themselves in and emphasised that they attributed to the setting.

Research findings

Across all interviews, three major emotional responses of space were raised, sense of isolation, sense of unpredictable and sense of constrain. The study found that there was much similarity in priorities, issues and concerns raised by interviewees. However, interviewees' account did reveal that in any emotional response expressed within the spaces, individuals attached more significance to those factors that immediately impacted on them personally. An overview will be presented from each of the three major emotional responses identifying women's reported attitudes and perceptions of the public space and major themes, which have emerged from the data will be identified and discussed.

Fearful public spaces

Interviewees were asked how they would describe a fearful public space or their experience of being a fearful public space. Their accounts reveal that, from women's perspective, the fearful factor of a space has more to do with what the place is like to be in, how it feels, how it functions, rather than how it looks like per se.



Sense of isolation

All respondents stated their overall fear was come from being alone. Causes of isolation tended to centre on difficulties encountered with maintaining a sense of belonging, and the sense of identity that they felt due to having a lost of contact.

Typical comments were:

Sometimes I get really scared if I am alone in the car park, when it is so quiet and only have 1 or 2 cars, at night times especially. Even at the uni car park which underneath the motorway, it is not so dark, but I feel isolated and away from everything. It's just more being alone I think.

(29-year-old Australian female, university student)

Individuals who felt the sense of isolation can consequent an attempt to search for a comfort zone which Shands (1999) described as the personal space.

Interviewee exposed:

If you talking about at night, I'd say I will feel a little bit uncomfortable and if plus thunderstorm, I'm scared of the sound and the echo in the space, if at night...I would be pretty scared. I'd quickly jump into car and want to leave this place.

(45-year-old Australian female, accountant)

Sense of unpredictable

A number of the women interviewed had been involved in physical /sexual violence when using the public spaces. There are also a number of women who have heard violence from friends. Most of the incidents were happened unexpected and unpredictable. One interviewee described the incident:

One dark night, I was waiting for bus in city, that was few years ago when I just came to Australia (from Japan). There was a young man riding a bicycle passing where I was sitting and he pull out his hand and then touched my breast... I couldn't see him, where did he come from? I was so chocked and I couldn't speak English then, I didn't know what to do I was crying and crying. I didn't expect anything would happen to me.

(34-year-old Japanese female, cloth sale)

Similarly, one interviewee had been told an incident happened to her friend, as a result, she starts to be paranoid when she in a space that is out of her control (of view



and awareness).

It was late at night, she went into a lift of a car park by herself and a guy came in after her, pressed the stop button so she was trapped in there with him then advanced on her, luckily he must have had a change of heart because he suddenly decided against attacking her and jumped out of the lift. But since hearing that story I'm pretty stressed out whenever I enter a lift. I have no idea what is going to appear behind a door/space or someone might be hiding behind the wall. (22-year-old Australian female, university student)

Sense of constraint

Several women spoke of difficulties being in the public spaces with sense of constraint. They feel their behaviour was limited by the space and to force the circulation and mind. Typical examples can be found in the following extracts:

Since I was a child, I leave bedroom door open a crack to see out side of my room and try to hear my mother cooking. As a child, this was my only safe time because I felt someone besides me. In the public toilet especially the one in the park, you can't see what is going on out side of the door, but you can't open the door or you'll lost privacy.

(22-year-old Australian female, university student)

Some places like public toilet and stair case in the building you have to go and pass but those spaces can really freak me out cause the echo and some unknown fixtures on the wall. It's like I'm forcing myself to go into the space but actually it's the space forcing me to.

(34-year-old Japanese female, cloth sale)

Effect of physical public space actions/concerns

Several interviewees provide reflections of how particular design features or elements had an effect on their personal behaviour and reaction to remain comfortable during their time in public spaces. For example, one interviewee explained:

I had quite a few times that I think I'm the target, I was actually standing right under the light but apart from there was dark as hell. I had to stand there waiting for bus but at the same time you feel you are targeted. I could feel myself under in the filter of someone whose eyes I did not even see. I was



thinking that there's someone outside my filter, behind me. For that moment, I felt myself becoming a target for that filter of others.

(22-year-old Australian female, university student)

I feel really safe and space is really normal. Aren't all the public spaces the same? It's just because I am a mommy, I have to take care 3 kids, job, cooking and washings, I don't pay attention too much when I go out, I am more worried about our home. ...But I do feel the public spaces are very male-like, you see, the car park, bridge, buildings and they are built by men! But I think shopping malls are for women (laugh).

(45-year-old Australian female, accountant)

Material from all interviews were identified within the broad categories and were then use to construct thematic charts for each emotional response. These charts have been assembled together and are presented in Table 1 (*Appendix 3*).

Discussion and Further Directions

The researches have explored the effects of the built environment upon the safety. Moreover, research has focused almost largely upon the existing crimes and gender difference and how this impacts upon the feeling of women, although the research has revealed that the spatial and interior quality can justify the level of women's fear at some point, but little has been done on extensively identify the use of public space in relation to body and mind. Findings from this study suggest that the element/design of the built environment of the public space can have a major effect on the degree of 'fear' that takes place. Some interviewees describe this in relation to the sense of constraint that makes them being under obligation. For others, it meant sense of unexpected that could under dark condition or unclear view. For many, this fear was defined by the sense of isolation. The fear of crime is also a major aspect that co-exists with women's emotional response side by side. Some interviewees have stated that they do not have desire to see the change of public space due to they have already disappointed and expressed all the public spaces are all one of a kind. The analysis of their experiences can be generated for how this could be addressed in future design models included provision of bust stop, public toilets, tunnel, clubs, train station and any public or private use of public urban spaces that they could use daily.

In this study, the need to have a sense of control over their view and position was raised by interviewees expressed their desire to be able to have a sense of control over their actions, facilitated by good design to enable them to move around the



waiting area, be able to see what is behind them, control lights, and access the space with clear circulation of the public spaces facilitated by good design which aided rather than hindered women's ability to retain a sense of fearless and comfort. This finding supports previous studies, which have reported how fostering a sense of control, providing information and allowing women to reduce fear and improves urban spaces. This is an area requiring further research in respect of the potential to improve women's mind through introducing innovative design ideas that support and increase women personal control.

For most of the interview respondents are in similarity, but the results were influenced by life style they have. For example, student females who potentially go out at night have more feelings of fear then work-forced females who have to stay home take care of kids. However, the feeling of fear in public space has different a result within the work-forced group in this study. The cause is due to on interviewee was from international, non-local, therefore, she pays more attention then other same aged women in this country.

A further finding from this study was that women subconsciously behave in certain way but without knowing it is caused by their mind and past. Some women realised why they chose to act that way after describing the bad experience and memories. This finding concurs with the result from Anthony & Dufresne (2007)'s gender difference and also earlier work by Lind & Farmelo (1996). Another finding was that women in deed think space as body and mind, some interviewees' statement were able to tease out their emotional responses, as a result of this, body and space exchanged places.

A central aim of this study was to explore women's perception and emotional response to public spaces and to determine the factors that contributed to their experience. Findings revealed the breath and complexity of women's views on the environmental surroundings and emphasised the importance that they attributed to the setting. The research also pointed to the vital link that exists between the environment and the body and mind. Urban public spaces include a coalition of public transportation and social patterns that reflect the functional norms at typology levels across usages. It is necessary to recognise the critical importance of this boarder context within which comfortable private use of public spaces need to be situated. The findings from this research pointed to the similarity of priorities and issues raised by all interviewees but also highlight the importance of specific factors that immediately impacted on women personally. Of particular interest is the finding that women



perceived the public space as their own body.

The research is limited by both the relatively small sample size and non particular same urban public space that interviewees had described on. However, similar findings emerging from wider standards of this research appear to support the findings discussed here. These findings add to the growing body of evidence that will inform the development and design of women's private use of public spaces for the future and if linked to supportive government based organisations can contribute to desired fear-free environment for women, and their family satisfaction.

Reference



- ABS. (2005). *Personal Safety Survey*. Canberra.
- Anthony, K. H., & Dufresne, M. (2007). Potty Parity in Perspective: Gender and Family Issues in Planning and Designing Public Restrooms. *Journal of Planning Literature*, 21, 267.
- Burke, J., O'Campo, P., Salmon, C., & Walker, R. (2009). Pathways connecting neighborhood influences and mental well-being: Socioeconomic position and gender differences. *Socail Science & Medicine*, 68(7), 1294.
- Grosz, E. (1992). Bodies-Cities. In B. Colomina (Ed.), *Sexuality & Space*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.
- Leiker, J. J. (2003). *Fear of crime in the city: A multivariate analysis of perceptions of community safety in the twelve United States cities* (<http://gateway?.library?.qut?.edu?.au?.ezp02?.library?.qut?.edu?.au/login??url=http://proquest?.umi?.com?.ezp02?.library?.qut?.edu?.au/pgdweb??did=765268531?&sid=8?&Fmt=2?&clientId=14394?&RQT=309?&VName=PQD>) Retrieved March 28, 2009, from Dissertations & Theses: Full Text database. (Publication No. AAT 3120549): Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.
- Lind, A., & Farmelo, M. (1996). *Gender and Urban Social Movements: Women's community responses to restructuring and urban poverty* (<http://www.unrisd.org/unrisd/website/document.nsf/0/C59D935EC5987D6180256B65004FF007?OpenDocument> (Accessed March 22, 2009)): United National Research Institute for social development.
- Loukaitou-Sideris, A., & Fink, C. (2009). Addressing Women's Fear of Victimization in Transportation Settings: A Survey of U.S. Transit Agencies. *Urban Affairs Review*, vol 44(4), 554.
- Munson, E. (2002). Walking on the periphery: Gender and the discourse of modernization. *Journal of Social History*, 36(1), 63.
- Panelli, R., Little, J., & Kraack, A. (2004). A Community Issue? Rural Women's Feelings of Safety and Fear in New Zealand. *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, 11(3), p445-467.
- Rendell, J. (2000). Introduction: 'Gender, Space, Architecture'. In J. Rendell, B. Penner & I. Borden. (Eds.), *Gender space architecture : an interdisciplinary introduction* (pp. 225-239). New York: E & FN Spon.
- Ritchie, J., & Spencer, L. (1994). Qualitative data analysis for applied policy research. In A. Bryman & R. Burgess (Eds.), *Analysing Qualitative Data*. London: Routledge.
- Starkweather, S. (2007). *Gender, Perceptions of Safety and Strategic Responses among Ohio University Students* (Retrieved March 21, 2009, from Academic Research Library database. (Document ID: 1296058901)). Ohio: Ohio State



University.

Tulloch, M. (2000). The Meaning of Age Differences in the Fear of Crime: Combining Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 40(3), 451.

Weisman, L. K. (1994). *Discrimination by design : a feminist critique of the man-made environment*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Woolnough, A. D. (2009). Fear of crime on campus: Gender differences in use of self-protective behaviours at an urban university. *Security Journal*, 22(1), 40-56.