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Women and Downtown Open Spaces

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7jd71866>

Journal

Places, 6(1)

ISSN

0731-0455

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Publication Date

1989-10-01

Peer reviewed

Women and Downtown Open Spaces

A variety of users participate in the public life of downtown open spaces: the employed and the homeless, young and old, shoppers and tourists, and men and women. My interest is in how men and women perceive and use public space differently; my focus here is on issues designers should consider in order to make downtown open spaces more acceptable to women users.

I shall examine these issues in three ways: by reflecting on the historic division of the city into separate sexual realms, by reviewing the literature discussing psychological factors that effect the perception and behavior of women in public settings, and by reporting on survey and observational research designed to reveal any differences in men's and women's attitudes towards downtown open space.

The Sexually Divided City

To appreciate the cultural context of women in downtown public environments, we must look first at the forces that have shaped the American city—a city divided into male and female realms. Women in downtown public spaces are in the midst of a cultural environment that is the product of a powerful historic dichotomy.

In the late nineteenth century the orientation of American society and economy changed from rural and agrarian to urban and industrial. Cities of a few square miles, “walking cities,” evolved into cities of 20 to 50 square miles or larger. As cities grew, land uses became specialized into residential, commercial, and industrial zones.

One by-product of this sorting out was the central business district, which was the center of the new industrial economy. An equally specialized area was the residential district, or suburb. Homogenous residential neighborhoods were built at the edge of the city, initiating a housing pattern that remains dominant to this day.

A perhaps unconscious but not (to nineteenth century Americans) unwelcome result was the sexual segregation of the American city. In the walking city, the jumble of commercial, residential, and industrial uses, all proximate to each other, did not establish clear definitions of separate sexual realms. But the central business district, public, and powerful, was a place by and for men.



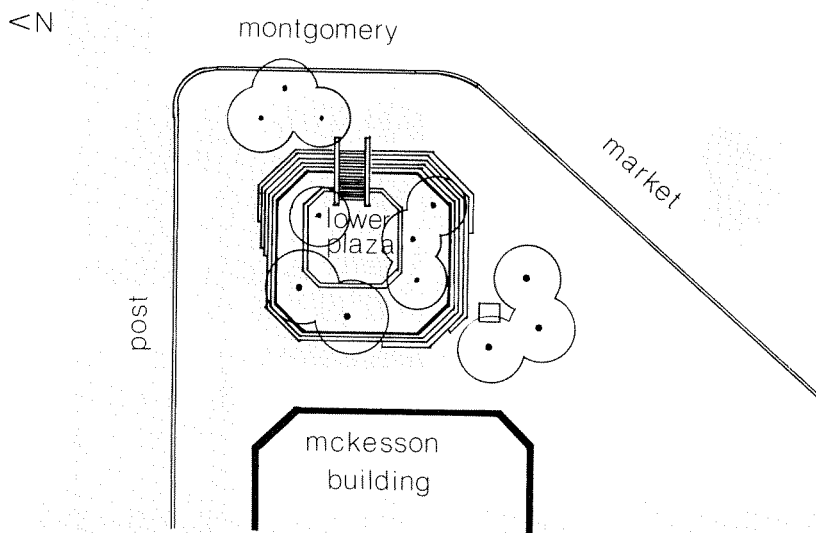
Moreover, the growth of the suburbs coincided with societal and institutional support for what Rothman calls the concept of “educated motherhood.”¹ A myriad of social reformers, municipal agencies, and settlement houses, armed with new knowledge of germ theory and nutrition, set out on a crusade to ensure the well being of the urban mother and child. The gist of this social movement is the clichéd but apropos phrase, “a mother’s place is in the home”—a home that was in the suburbs, away from the germs, congestion, and moral corruption of the central city.

The 1950s and 1960s suburban explosion and reciprocal “Manhattanization” of the central business district built walls where there had been fences of sexual segregation. Even the one enclave of women downtown—the department store—moved to the suburban shopping mall.

Seagert states: “Urban life and men tend to be thought of as more aggressive, assertive definers of important world events, intellectual, powerful, active, and somewhat dangerous. Women and suburbs share domesticity, repose, closeness to nature, lack of seriousness, mindlessness, and safety.”² The

downtown and the suburb became more than manifestations of sexual segregation and a male-empowered society; they became sexual symbols.

Crocker Plaza site plan.

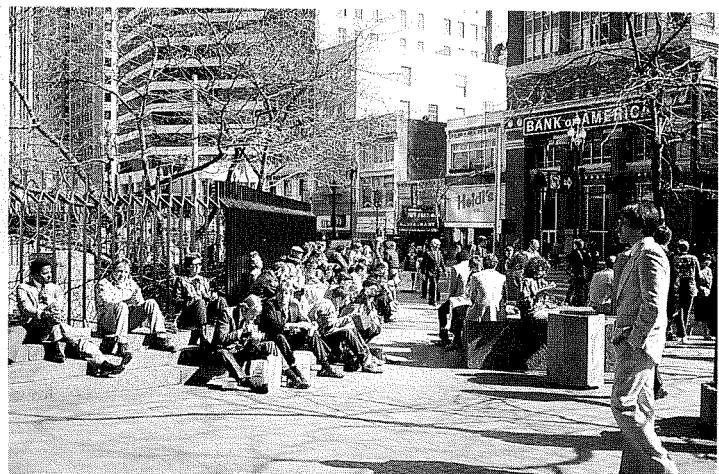


The Psychology of Women in Open Spaces

Little research on people’s behavior in or reactions to public space has used sex as a primary differential, and specific studies on women and environments are limited. Nevertheless, some general conclusions have been made: women have smaller personal space bubbles than men do (people stand closer to women), women find crowded situations less stressful than men do (and may even find some crowded situations pleasant), and groups of women have smaller territories than groups of men do.

Crocker Plaza, San Francisco.
A rise with steps provides an area for viewing the action on the street. This row of steps is favored by men.
Photos by Louise Mozingo.

Graphics by Louise Mozingo.



Henly, researching women's personal space, noted that women move out of the way of other pedestrians more often than men. Women in public environments are touched more often than men, and, quite predictably, usually do not reciprocate the touching when it is initiated by men.³

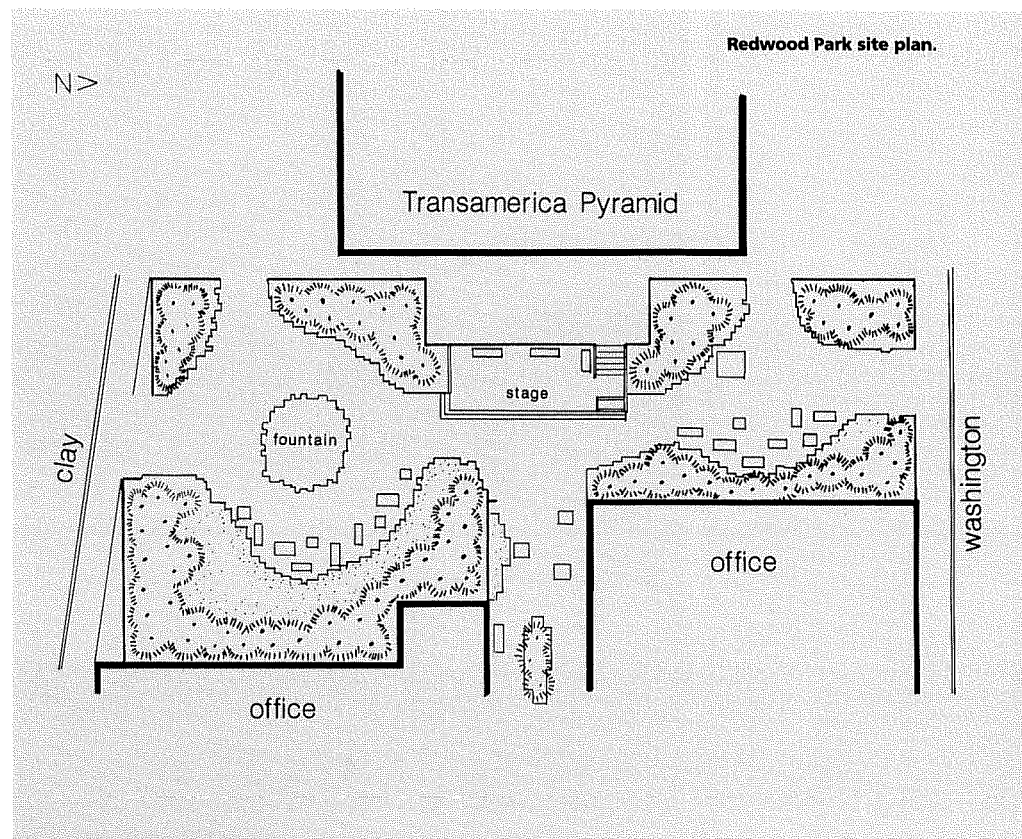
Nager and Nelson-Shulman found that women's personal space and anonymity are invaded twice as often as men's. Moreover, men are approached with requests for information (what time is it?) while women most often are encroached upon with intrusions of a sexual nature. They found that "gaze aversion, stiff carriage, susceptibility to invasion, and the tendency to condense space by holding one's arms close to the body are signs of deference and submission communicated non-verbally" by women.⁴

These results make it difficult to say whether women indeed have smaller personal space bubbles and territories, or whether, through constant violations of these psychological boundaries, women learn to adapt while remaining fundamentally uncomfortable. Their personal psychological boundaries are uneasy and undefined.

Proshansky, Ittelson, and Rivlin propose that comfort in regard to these boundaries involves maximizing people's "freedom of choice"—that is, environments with a range of physical settings can provide varying degrees of privacy, territoriality, and crowding.⁵

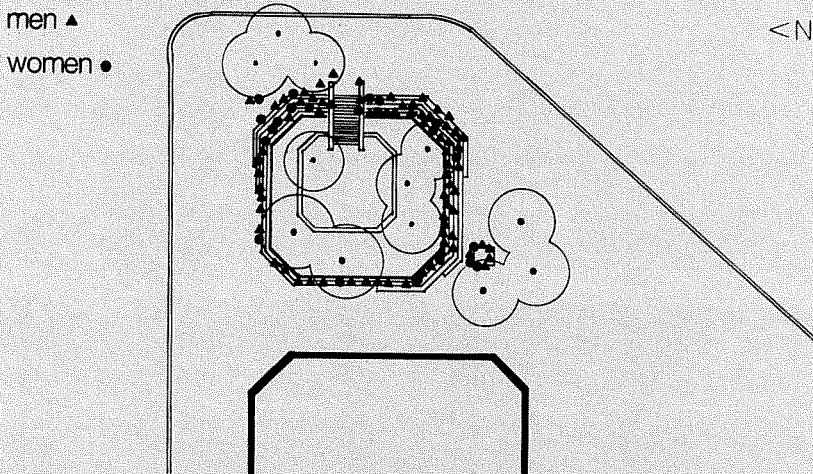
The small numbers of women in downtown open spaces suggests these environments do not provide women with range of settings that make them psychologically comfortable.

This research leads to two questions about sexually integrating downtown open spaces: How do we manipulate the physical environment to acknowledge appropriate degrees of privacy, territoriality, and crowding? What kind of environments reinforce the psychological boundaries of women?



Redwood Park, San Francisco.
Trees create a physical barrier between the park and the street while the rumble of the fountain overwhelms the noise of traffic. This secluded place is favored by women.

Men established a 100 percent corner at the southeast edge of Crocker Plaza. Women established a 100 percent corner at the northeast edge.



Market Street side and only one step on the side nearest the McKesson Building (which defines the plaza's western edge).

Redwood Park, six blocks north of Crocker Plaza and at the base of the TransAmerica pyramid, is a mid-block open space enclosed by skyscrapers and surrounded by large, mature redwood trees. The principal entrances lead from Washington and Clay streets, although the little-used Merchant Street alley, which terminates in the park, also serves as an entryway. The entire park is unobtrusively fenced with gates at each entrance.

Twenty-three backless benches, three park benches, steps, and an irrigated lawn provide places to sit within a backdrop of tall redwood trees. A splashing fountain is located at the south end of the park and a raised stage is located in the middle, at the base of the pyramid. The edges of the park are densely planted with redwood trees, which soften the visual impact of the surrounding high rises, provide human scale elements, and add visual richness to the park.

The combination of gated entrances, dense vegetation, and mid-block siting removes Redwood Park from the street, unlike Crocker Plaza, which accepts the street as part of its essence. This lends Redwood Park a more intimate quality than Crocker Plaza, even though it is considerably larger—23,850 square feet, compared to 3,725 square feet.

I casually observed the users of Redwood Park and Crocker Plaza numerous times over a year and a half.

Two things became very obvious after spending time there. First, women tended to come in groups, rather than alone, and if they did come alone they clustered together. Second, women had an extremely difficult time sitting comfortably and modestly on the steps.

I also systematically observed and surveyed users of Redwood Park and Crocker Plaza. At each of these open spaces I conducted detailed behavior observation (15 minute behavior mapping, noting sex, location, and activity of each user) between 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. on two warm, sunny weekdays in October (San Francisco's "summer"). I also distributed questionnaires during warm and sunny weekday lunch hours in October and the following March. The questionnaire included both multiple choice and open-ended questions to

Case Study: Crocker Plaza and Redwood Park

To understand the factors critical to women's use of downtown parks and plazas, I studied two specific places: Crocker Plaza and TransAmerica Redwood Park, both in San Francisco's Financial District. Skyscrapers are the dominant building type in this area, with concomitant high density and crowding.

Crocker Plaza,⁶ situated in an odd, leftover wedge of space created by the intersection of north San Francisco's grid system and diagonal Market Street, is very much part of the street. The main feature is a forty by forty foot octagonal arrangement of sitting steps, which surround a sunken plaza that functions as a Bay Area Rapid Transit station entrance. Because of a slope on the site, there are six steps along the

obtain as wide a range of responses as possible.

Finally, I surveyed 32 men and 47 women employees of one of the corporate office towers of downtown San Francisco, some of whom used downtown spaces, some of whom did not.

These observations and surveys yielded the following results:

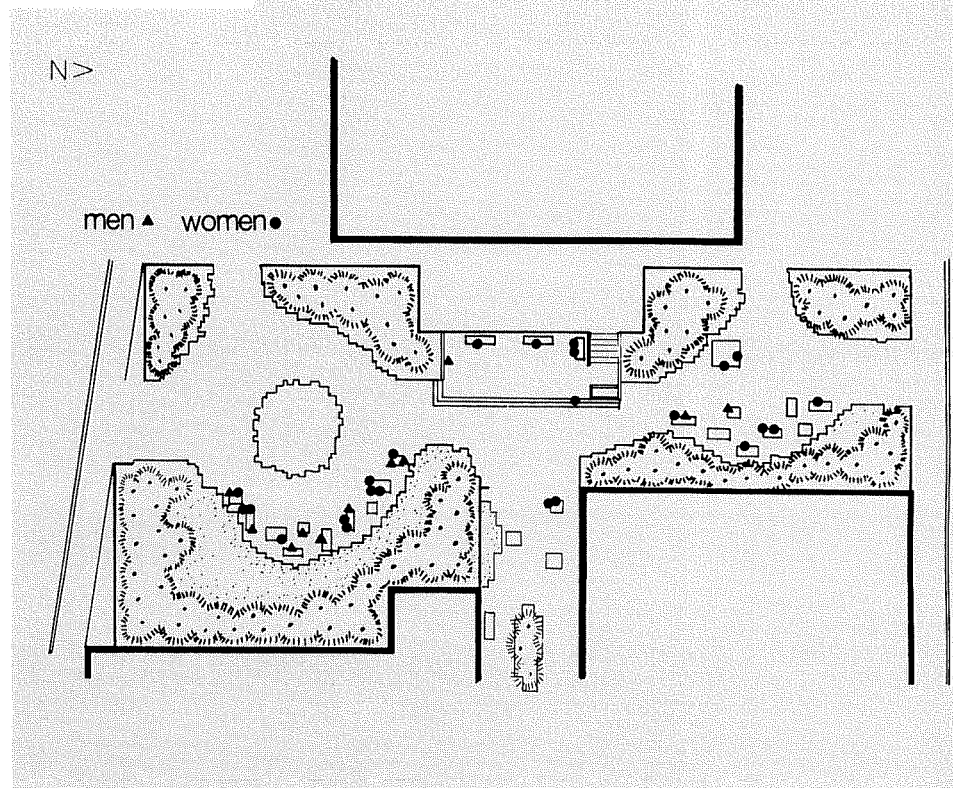
Number of users: These spaces differed dramatically in their use by women. At best, 20 percent of the people using Crocker Plaza were women, compared to at least 40 percent, and sometimes 70 percent, of the people using Redwood Park. Peak use at Crocker Plaza was at 12:45 p.m., but at Redwood Plaza there was a double peak. During the first peak, at 12:15 p.m., there were one third more men than women in the park; however, during the second, peak at 1:30 p.m., there were twice as many women as men in the park.

User distribution and location: People filled Crocker Plaza from its southeast corner back towards the north side and the McKesson Building. The southeast corner of the plaza is what one might call the “100 percent corner,” the area where pedestrian traffic is heaviest and which (designers might say) is the most desirable sitting space. However, this is a male “100 percent corner.” Women distribute themselves evenly around the plaza and, if anything, seem to have a separate “100 percent corner” of their own towards Montgomery Street.

At Redwood Park, behavior mapping showed no “100 percent corner,” no discernable center of people and activity for either men or women. People sprinkled themselves throughout the benches and steps.

Liked areas: Users of Crocker Plaza, asked to circle their preferred areas of the plaza on a map, reinforced the results of the behavior observation. Men more often chose the “100 percent corner” near Market Street, and women more often chose the corner towards Montgomery and Post. Explaining their reasons for choosing this area, women stated “sun, not too windy,” “quieter,” “great view,” and “fewer weirdos on this side.” The men consistently stated that they chose their corner because it was the best place to watch people.

Both men and women are evenly spread throughout Redwood Park.

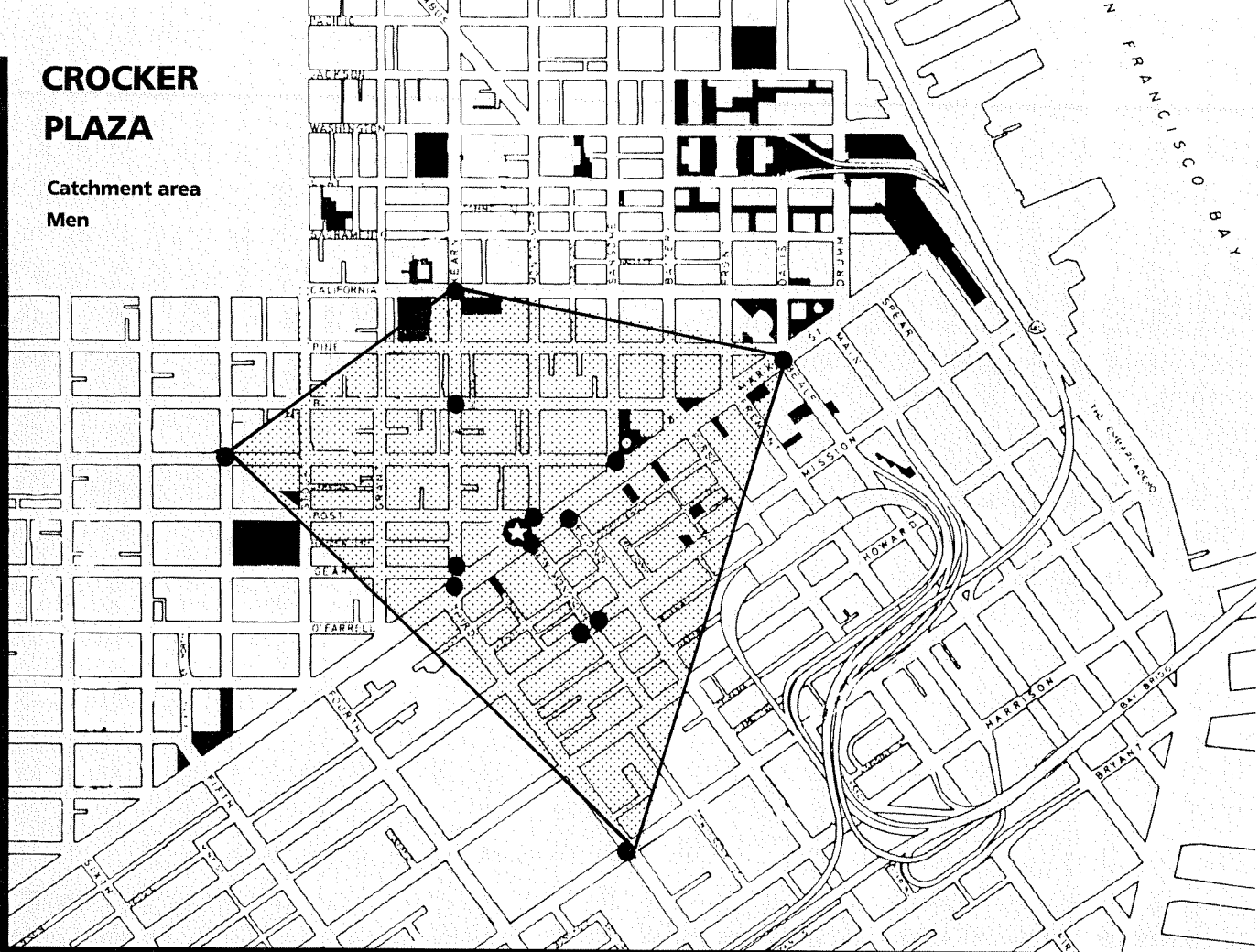


Women users of Redwood Park revealed preferences that were not manifested in the behavior observation. They clearly preferred sitting near the fountain, stating reasons such as “the fountain,” “come watch people, yet private, kind of secluded,” and “partial sun, some seclusion.” Women may prefer the plaza’s combination of noise mitigation, sun, and the chance to watch people from a secluded vantage point. Men at Redwood chose areas all over the park and consistently stated what they liked about the park was the sun.

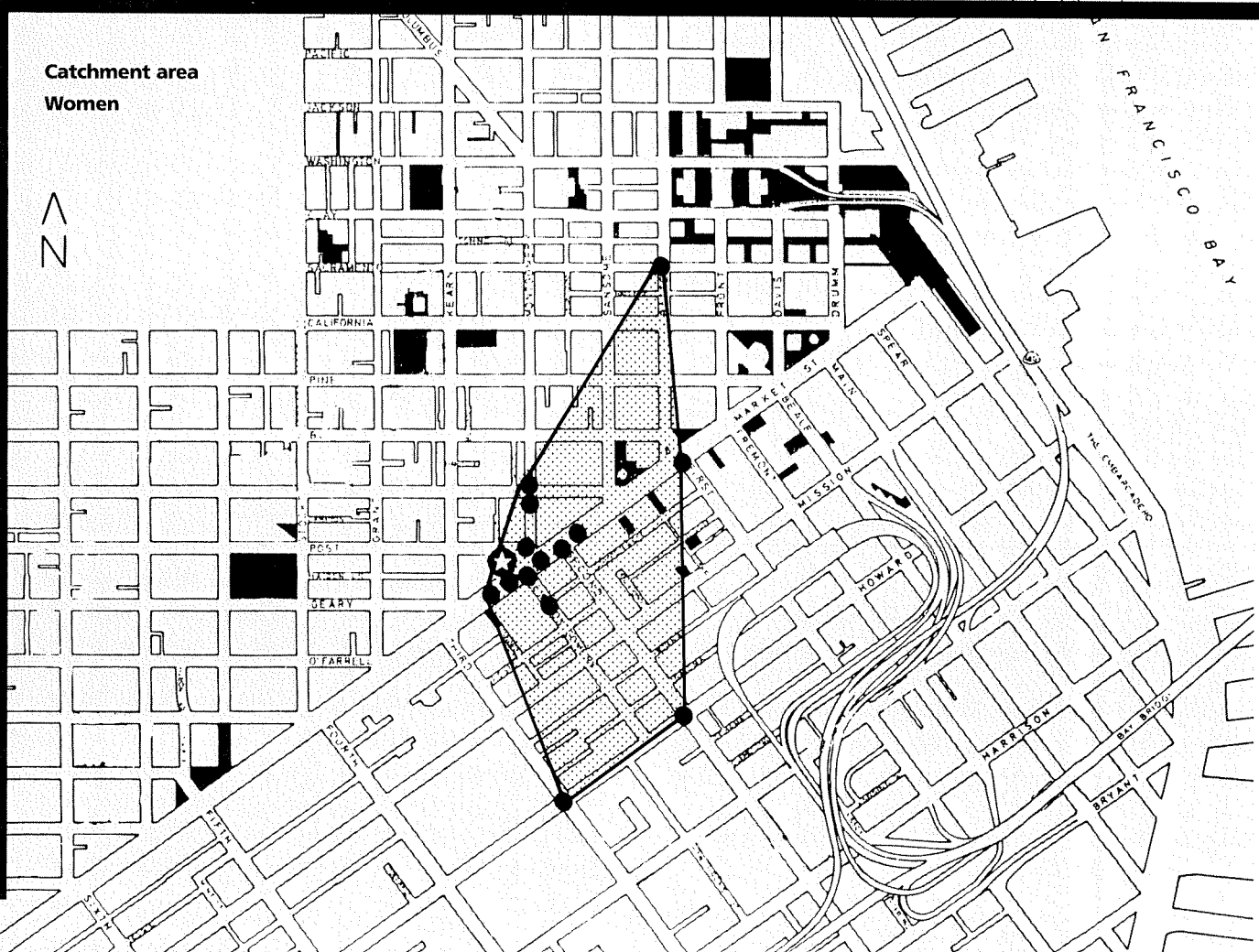
Disliked areas: At Crocker Plaza, both sexes disliked the side nearest the McKesson Building, and each disliked the area corresponding to the “100 percent corner” of the opposite sex. To a more subtle extent, this was the case at Redwood Park. Men dis-

CROCKER PLAZA

Catchment area
Men



Catchment area
Women



Men were able to travel further than women were to visit Crocker Plaza at lunch time.

liked the fountain area, considering it noisy. Women disliked the raised stage with park benches, declaring it “too conspicuous” and “uncomfortable,” even though behavior observation showed they sat there regularly. This is the only place with park benches, so women may be trading off psychological comfort for the physical comfort afforded by benches with backs.

Catchment Areas: In both open spaces, the catchment areas of women were significantly smaller than those of men. Women, apparently, are unwilling or unable to travel as far as men.

Preferred activities: Users of both open spaces indicated their principal activities there were eating, talking, and watching other people. However, more men than women said they preferred watching people, and more women than men said they preferred eating and talking. This seems to support the results of the behavior observation, which indicate that women tended to come in groups with whom they socialized.

Disliked factors: Male and female users expressed clear differences about factors they disliked in and around Crocker Plaza. Women were more annoyed by noise, traffic, litter/dirt, and crowded conditions than men were. Men, however, were more annoyed by the presence of derelicts than women were. At Redwood Park, both men and women cited far fewer disliked features, indicating a higher degree of satisfaction with their experience there.

Lacked features: Both men and women using Crocker Plaza said they would have wanted more trees, sun, and grass there. Most of the women noted the lack of benches while only about one of four men did. A similar number of men even said the plaza was “just right,” while no women did, and in general had fewer responses to the question, indicating men had a higher degree of satisfaction with the plaza. At Redwood Park, the most frequent answer for both sexes was “just right,” indicating again that the park provided a great deal of satisfaction for people of both sexes who use it.

Alternative lunchtime destinations: Women at Crocker Plaza, asked where they went when they did not come there during lunch hour, said they either stayed in their office, went to restaurants, or went to other open spaces. Women at Redwood Park said they either stayed in the office or went to restaurants. Men in both spaces said they went to restaurants or to other open spaces; none opted to stay in their office.

A common assumption is that women do not go to downtown open spaces at lunch because they have errands to run. But women said this was the least of their reasons for not coming. In fact, more men than women stated this as a reason for not coming to the plaza. The primary reason all users gave for not coming to the spaces was weather.

Office survey

The results of the survey of office workers reiterated many of the behavior observation findings and the survey of open space users.

More men said they were habitual users of open spaces than did women. Fewer women went to open spaces alone, and more went to an open space with a friend or a group.

Women said the primary reason they did not go to open spaces during their lunch hours was that their jobs (generally lower-echelon) allowed them only short lunch breaks. They do not have time to travel as far as men do.

Women said they preferred to use open spaces for eating, talking, and, to a lesser extent, watching others. Men said they preferred watching others and, secondarily, talking. Again, women tended, more than men, to say they use open spaces as places to interact socially with friends. These results are similar to the results of the surveys of open space users.

Both men and women said litter and dirt were the most annoying characteristic of open spaces, but they differed about other factors they did not like. Men expressed annoyance at derelicts, crowding, pigeons, lack of sun, and too much concrete. For women, annoyances were crowding, no comfortable seating, and, to a lesser extent than men, derelicts. Many more women than men thought San Francisco needed more downtown open space.

Conclusion

To begin creating downtown open spaces that are more woman-friendly, designers and planners must consider what experiences women are seeking in open spaces, and they must determine which design features support these sought-after experiences. While the scope of this study is limited, it does indicate that men and women perceive and appreciate public open space in different ways. The differences suggested by the results of this research are indicative of other areas for study and exploration.

The difference in character of Crocker Plaza and Redwood Park may be a paradigm for the different kind of open space experiences women and men accept and prefer. Crocker Plaza overwhelmingly accepts the dynamic yet inherently noisy and distracting urban environment. To be there means to appreciate and want to be a part of this type of urban expression. Redwood Park rejects the dominant urban environment, its stress, and its ever-changing, unpredictable nature. Crocker Plaza is outward reaching, socially interactive, and enmeshed in urban life. Redwood Park is enclosed and self-contained, inwardly oriented and far less interactive.

Men and women may have not only different preferences in downtown open spaces but also different concepts of optimum open space experiences. Men may be seeking environments that

provide intense and unpredictable social interaction, connectedness to the street and its activity, urban stimuli, and publicness. They are not as bothered by stresses that usually accompany such an environment, and, perhaps, consider such stress as part of the exciting urbanness they seek.

Women may be looking for relief from environmental stress, and view downtown plazas and parks as places that should be removed from but not isolated from the dominant urbanness of downtown. Women seem to prefer open spaces that emphasize a filtering or mitigation of negative factors, psychological familiarity and comfort, places to socialize with friends, and spatial control. In a sense, women may be seeking “back yard” experiences and men may be seeking “front yard” experiences.

Although this study confirms some of Whyte’s findings in *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*,⁷ it raises some fundamental differences. Whyte’s model of urban open space advocates business, activity, and connection to the street. It is steeped in the historic precedents of the male-dominated downtown. The model creates forums for stranger interaction, where it is more likely that women’s psychological boundaries would be violated.

I would suggest this model represents only one part of a range of valid and successful forms of open space. Although Whyte states, “A good plaza starts at the street corner” and advocates designs in which “it is hard to tell where one ends and the other begins,” the results of this study suggest otherwise: spaces that are distinctly removed and oriented away from the street can be particularly successful for women. By their less public and less connected nature, these spaces help women more easily maintain their vital psychological boundaries.

This research suggests several specific issues designers and planners must consider if downtown open spaces are to become more woman-friendly:

The assumption that women use downtown open spaces less frequently because they are not interested is not true. For both men and women, going to an open space is important—it can provide relief from the office environment and a chance to be outside.

Women are more sensitive to urban annoyances and environmental stresses—noise, crowding, dirt, and traffic—than men are. Features that mitigate these stresses will make downtown open spaces more amenable and attractive to women.

Women often go to downtown open spaces with friends with whom they socialize. People-watching forums suitable for strangers sitting side by side, such as Crocker Plaza, are not well suited for the experiences women tend to seek in open spaces.

Women do not prefer to be “on display” in downtown open spaces. They probably perceive that their personal or psychological boundaries may be more easily violated in such a situation.

The perception of both physical and psychological safety is important to women. Women may perceive safety not merely as a lack of

“undesirables” (an issue that has risen to the forefront because of Whyte’s work) but also in the degree of spatial control they feel: the maintenance of territoriality, lack of crowding, and degree of group control.

Getting to an open space is a problem for women. People of lower employment status, mostly women, are unable to travel as far during their lunch breaks as men are. Providing access for women will mean a re-evaluation of the usefulness of larger open spaces intended to serve larger catchment areas. Clearly, open spaces need to be distributed much more frequently throughout downtown.

Steps, sculptures, and sitting blocks of other than standard height will produce in many women an unsolvable conflict between standards of propriety, physical comfort, and the desire to be in open space. For whatever historical and cultural reasons, women wear skirts; therefore, considering a six-inch riser and 14-inch tread as adequate seating space is an insult to them.

By building downtown open spaces that are woman-friendly we would go much further in building spaces that are people-friendly. The key is viewing preferred open space experiences of women and men as taking place not in separate spheres but on a continuum. Designers and planners tend to classify types of downtown open spaces into rigid categories that imply uniform degrees of publicness. For example, the San Francisco Downtown Plan equates plazas with being “very public” and parks with being “less public.” We need to re-evaluate such classifications in favor of more integrated concepts.

Such concepts would permit design flexibility and allow people to choose the comfort level they prefer in urban settings. Such concepts recognize that both men and women have preferences along a *continuum*, and allow for the transformation of stereotypical sexual roles as socialization patterns change. The next generation of women may well move farther into the “front yard” of downtown open spaces.

The downtown environment is, by and large, a grim, alienating place. Open spaces are so vital to rehumanizing downtown that it is essential they be places for all people. Designers and planners must become aware of the “mass of social images and symbols” that are imbued in our culture and which pervade the process by which our cities, and the open spaces within them, are built. We must look forward to environments that accept and acknowledge both men and women.

Notes

1. Sheila M. Rothman, *Women's Proper Place* (New York: Basic Books, 1978).
2. Susan Saegert, “Masculine Cities, Feminine Suburbs,” in *Women and The American City* (1981).
3. Henly, from Anita Nager and Yona Nelson-Shulman, “Women in Public Places,” *Centerpoint* (New York: City University Graduate Center, 1979).
4. Anita Nager and Yona Nelson-Shulman, “Women in Public Places,” *Centerpoint* (New York: City University Graduate Center, 1979).
5. Harold M. Proshansky, William H. Ittelson, and Leanne Rivlin, *Environmental Psychology* (San Francisco: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1976).
6. Since this study, Crocker Plaza has been given an official name, McKesson Plaza, reflecting the name of the building in front of which it sits. Many people still use the name Crocker Plaza to refer to the plaza.
7. William H. Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (Washington, D.C.: The Conservation Foundation, 1980).