

EDITORIAL

Young Gamechangers. Amplifying Youth Voices for Healthier Public Spaces

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Abstract

On the occasion of the 12th World Urban Forum, taking place in Cairo on 4-8 November 2024, City Space Architecture and UN-Habitat will launch this thematic issue of The Journal of Public Space dedicated to the Young Gamechangers Initiative (YGI), during a side event at the Urban Library. The Journal of Public Space is committed to diversity, inclusivity, and open access and provides an exemplary platform for such an issue featuring emerging scholars, young practitioners, and storytellers, **often underrepresented in mainstream academia**. Each research article, case study, and creative submission included in this thematic issue focuses on public spaces in diverse urban spaces, primarily in the Global South, and **explores the nexus between governance, youth participation in placemaking, digital tools, and implications for youth health and well-being**.

Keywords: youth health and well-being, gamechangers, digital tools, Global South

To cite this article:

Lahoud, C. and Enns, C. (2024) "Young Gamechangers: Amplifying Youth Voices for Healthier Public Spaces", The Journal of Public Space, 9(2), pp. 1–8. doi: 10.32891/jps.v9i2.1826.



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In September 2023, City Space Architecture and UN-Habitat opened a call for papers of *The Journal of Public Space*, targeting those under 32 years of age who wanted to publish research, case studies, or creative stories on how the process of creating public spaces and digital engagement can enhance the health and well-being of young people. The Young Gamechangers Initiative (YGI), a three-year project funded by Fondation Botnar and led by UN-Habitat's Global Public Space Programme, is dedicated to harnessing innovative digital tools to amplify young people's voices and empower them to express their opinions on creating fair city systems for the future. YGI is based on a global agenda that emphasises the importance of public spaces in promoting inclusivity, well-being, safety, and sustainability, as highlighted in SDG 11.7.1 (UN-Habitat, 2018). YGI is being piloted in three intermediary cities: Bargny (Senegal), Armenia (Colombia), and Jatni (India). The project demonstrates how digital tools can empower young people to design, propose, and contribute to better public spaces and city youth-centred policies.

This special issue focuses on public space for youth health and well-being and expands the learning of YGI through **seven academic papers, seven applied case studies, and four visual photo essays or creative expressions**. This issue highlights how public space design, exclusion from city planning decisions, and other urban health issues affect youth well-being. The studies go beyond the three cities of YGI to include a global perspective of youth challenges worldwide.

Given the current global demographic trends, understanding young people's roles and perspectives concerning urban health and public spaces is crucial. The global population of adolescents and young adults has exceeded 1.8 billion, with over 85% concentrated in developing countries (United Nations Population Fund, 2022). It is important to note that over 90% of urban expansion is driven by cities in the Global South, with young people making up a significant portion of this growth (UN-Habitat, 2020). Projections suggest that by 2030, up to 60% of urban dwellers will be under 18 years old (UN-Habitat, 2024). One in every three people is expected to live in slums by 2050 (UN-Habitat, 2022), indicating a pressing need to address youth problems in urban environments. The World Health Organisation (WHO) recently highlighted the crucial link between health and well-being in urban environments (2024). WHO underscores the negative impact of poorly planned cities on urban health and offers strategies for policies and plans to address health issues (WHO, 2024). **Demographic shifts and the rise of the burden of disease problems require decision-makers, policymakers, and planners to prioritise and commit to a healthier, more inclusive, youth-focused urban environment** (Huang et al., 2023; UN-Habitat, 2020).

Scholars have documented the relationship between the health and wellness of young people and their inclusion in public space, placemaking, and city planning (Kenrick, 2023; Lundy, 2023; Cahill, 2023). Prioritising the health and well-being of young urban dwellers, as defined by Fondation Botnar (2023), also entails granting youth autonomy over their lives, experiences, and emotions. Many international, regional, and local policy instruments recognise the importance of engaging youth in public space and urban policy design. For example, the rights of youth to have a voice in decisions that affect their lives are clearly outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). The UN Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 also acknowledges children and youth as agents of change through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For instance, SDG Goal 11 calls for cities to consider the interests and welfare of groups in vulnerable situations, including

youth (Enns et al., 2023). The New Urban Agenda, backed by the Habitat III Children's Charter, reflects the inclusion of youths' rights in urban issues related to their well-being and advocates for including youth in dialogues with urban stakeholders.

A scan of city policies and a literature review confirms that the perspectives of young people regarding the connections between urban design and their health and well-being are not given sufficient consideration in formal official planning processes (Enns et al., 2023; Tuhkanen et al., 2022; Abebe, 2019). When urban planners attempt to engage young people in design processes, the activities are often tokenistic or superficial, co-opting young people without allowing for meaningful debate or influencing decision-making (Lundy, 2023; Pridmore, 2010; Arnstein, 1969). Nevertheless, youth perspectives have proven to be fundamental in addressing urban challenges and advocating for climate justice (C40, 2024)), potentially leading to policy changes and inclusive urban designs (Enns et al., 2022). Drawing on more than 10 years of experience at UN-Habitat's Global Public Space Programme (Bravo, 2020), it became clear how creative and innovative young people's ideas can be. They know their issues and have innovative ways to address them (UN-Habitat, 2023b). Lack of inclusive participation in planning processes and limited consideration of youth intersectionality and aspirations in public space design further harms youth health and well-being and constrains their transformative potential in urban settings (Tuhkanen et al., 2022; Enns et al., 2023).

Young people tend to be excluded from formal urban governance frameworks (UN-Habitat, 2023c), which may present barriers to effectively and naturally engaging them in formal planning processes. This lack of inclusion in formal urban planning highlights the need for research on tools and approaches for involving youth in creating better urban environments. Most of the literature on this topic originates from northern countries, so it is crucial to give special attention to authors from the Global South (Tuhkanen et al., 2023). Therefore, this journal's issue presents an opportunity for policymakers and practitioners to gain insights from young people through academic papers, case studies, and creative submissions, primarily from the Global South. These insights will focus on the tools and support needed for young people to more actively participate in the planning and management of public spaces, taking into account their health and well-being. We received more than **160 abstracts** from research articles and case studies. After the review process, **45 were invited**; ultimately, only 14 were published.

We also reviewed over **100 creative submissions**, primarily from a younger demographic (15-24 years old), with 4 to be included in this special issue. The final submissions represent diverse countries, including **Kenya, Myanmar, Bolivia, Italy, India, New Zealand, Indonesia, Egypt, Botswana, Vietnam, Scotland, and the Philippines**. The themes woven through this issue include the role of digital technology in participation, the linkages between health and well-being and the design of public spaces. **The call gained over 30,000 impressions on social media and earned 1,857 engagements, reaching around 29,000 accounts, reflecting the high degree of interest and relevance in the issue.**

The diversity of the articles, gathered from various parts of the world, allows us to gather different perspectives on the needs and priorities of young people. Many of the articles and case studies focus on the relationship between digital tools, technology, and the health and well-being of youth. The authors provide insights for more equitable and youth-centric planning principles. They also highlight the importance of integrating climate actions into the design of public spaces to help maintain a sense of home, especially

during resettlement. The leading research article on this issue examines how public spaces impact the physical activities and social interactions of vulnerable groups, such as young women in Cairo. The study found that these areas are not easily accessible to young women due to cultural norms and safety concerns. The authors used digital ethnography to demonstrate how social media can serve as a research tool for collective action, helping in the understanding of young women's engagement with urban space. The case study on Mya Malar community park in Yangon, Myanmar, demonstrates the value of youth-led placemaking by showing how engaging with girls through participatory design can improve their health, wellness, and civic involvement. The case study of Lallubhai Compound in Mumbai offers a model for scaling up climate adaptation actions, incorporating nature-based solutions, and advocating for systemic change towards climate justice while addressing social issues such as substance abuse. A creative submission titled 'Where it Should Always Be' discusses public places as sites of collective youth action and contestation. It serves "as catalysts for change, embodying the hopes, fears, and aspirations of a community yearning for a more just and equitable society."

The research on the Carpi Campus, Italy, offers valuable insights for planning practitioners and youth organisations, highlighting placemaking as a multipurpose strategy to engage youth in urban planning by fostering community identity and a sense of belonging. Several submissions emphasise the growing reliance on digital connections over connecting in physical spaces, showing how blending digital and physical realms can improve youth health and well-being, and employability. The case of Govandi's resettlement community in Mumbai illustrates how digital tools, technology, and the arts can enhance placemaking by supporting young people in defining a sense of place, identity, and community significance. This diversity of cases from young scholars worldwide demonstrates innovative ways to empower youth in urban environments and has inspired us to look at how we can better improve health and well-being through technology and creative expression.

Our reflections and takeaways from youth submissions

UN-Habitat worked on various projects that engaged youth in planning processes and utilised digital engagement tools. These projects have consistently received testimonies from young participants about their improved **well-being** following the engagement workshops. Many have shared that they learned to code, felt happy from contributing ideas, and enjoyed seeing their digital designs become a reality. However, UN-Habitat has yet to measure and quantify whether technology is improving young people's **health and well-being**. The Young Gamechangers Initiative's goal is to continue gathering evidence to demonstrate that digital engagement significantly enhances youth well-being and contributes to their development. This journal issue is also a testimony written by young scholars who have identified, through various case studies and work, that technology plays a crucial part in improving their well-being.

Based on the literature review of public space design, youth health and well-being, and youth participation, insights from the participants in the Young Gamechangers project and submissions for this issue, we have identified three main recurring and overlapping themes: **"Balancing digital and physical spaces"**, **"Integrating Health and Well-being"**, and **"Becoming the true gamechangers in the public realm"**.

Balancing digital and physical spaces

Public spaces now integrate physical and digital elements, enabling people, especially young individuals, to be physically present while connecting to the digital world. This idea of being in “two spaces at once” – being physically in a local environment while digitally connected to a global network – is becoming a prominent feature in urban design. The articles discussing this concept highlight the significance of incorporating unseen digital elements such as QR codes, digital projections, interactive apps like Pokémon Go and Minecraft Earth, and social media platforms that facilitate a blended experience between physical spaces and digital interaction, such as TikTok. These elements help to expand small physical spaces into broader social and interactive realms.

For young people, having access to this digital layer in public spaces is crucial and has been mentioned in various articles. It expands their opportunities, providing avenues for skill-building, employability, and creative expression beyond the immediate physical environment. For example, the article “Digital Spaces for Public Participation in Informal Settlements” from Mathare, Kenya, explores how a government’s strategy for digital hubs in public spaces promotes employment and creativity. Similarly, the “Digital Blueprint of Breathing Spaces in Mumbai” highlights the role of technology in allowing youth to monitor and interact with their environment. The photo essay on Mumbai reflects on the concept of ‘dis’connection between digital and public spaces, underscoring the need to harmonise the two for a more cohesive urban experience.

Digital engagement in public spaces can improve urban experiences, but it also brings potential risks, especially related to sedentary behaviour. Using phones or digital devices in public spaces can reduce physical activity and disrupt face-to-face social interactions. At UN-Habitat, we acknowledge these risks and promote a balanced approach. Our strategy involves incorporating elements that promote movement and activity, preventing people from exclusively socialising in the digital world and neglecting their physical environment. Striking a balance between digital and physical interaction in public spaces is important for promoting well-being and social connection among youth.

Integrating health and well-being

In 2023, the Global Youth Development Index (YDI) Report emphasised the significant impact of supportive environments on enhancing young people’s health, well-being, and productivity (Commonwealth, 2023). Despite this, health and well-being are still not directly integrated into planning policies and practices concerning youth. Many articles and case studies in this issue highlight the importance of bridging this gap. For instance, ‘The Roots and Vaccine of the City: African Youth as Catalysts for Urban Vitality and Well-being’ creatively illustrates how youngsters in Nairobi are revitalising urban spaces, offering “vaccinations”—metaphors for urban improvements—against health challenges and social decay. Similarly, the article ‘An Empirical Case Study on Public Spaces and Youth Health and Mental Well-being in Botswana Cities and Major Urban Villages’ discusses how colonialism and urbanisation have shaped public spaces, underlining the need to monitor the health and well-being of youth in these environments. Another article on alternative transportation in Indian cities, focusing on the role of cycling and ‘pedalling’, highlights the youth’s valuable understanding and insights into policy changes that could improve urban health and promote healthier lifestyles. Several other contributions explore how innovative approaches, such as applied arts and co-design digital tools, can be embedded in

city planning systems to address the issue of expression.

This collaborative journal issue presents a strong call from youth for the inclusion of digital skills in urban planning, not only to formalise their participation but also to support youth-led research that examines health considerations in public space design. Importantly, it also advocates incorporating participation metrics to assess better how public spaces contribute to youth well-being.

Public spaces also hold emotional and symbolic significance, often serving as sources of comfort and resilience in challenging times. In today's world of uncertainty, the co-design space and reconstruction of public spaces provides hope, a sense of belonging, and improved well-being for youth, especially those temporarily displaced or resettled. This sentiment is powerfully expressed in the imaginative work "Where It Should Always Be," where the author views public spaces as catalysts for social change and calls for decision-makers to centre youth values and health in urban planning.

Becoming the true gamechangers in the public realm

The article "The Interplay between Youth Activities and Built Environment Design in a Philippine Public Park", alongside many others in this issue, sheds light on youth-led policy directions that local governments often overlook. Despite the uncompensated and informal roles youth already play in improving public spaces, these contributions often go unrecognised (Enns, 2022). This oversight is addressed in the Natwar Parekh Compound case study in Mumbai's Govandi, which beautifully illustrates how youth are reshaping urban spaces and contributing to urban health.

The articles and photo essays focusing on Asian cities also acknowledge the significant challenges and barriers young people face in governance and planning. In the case of Mumbai, for example, the authors recognise that specific systemic issues may not be resolved in their lifetime. However, this reality does not deter youth from stepping up to improve public spaces and from pushing to measure the impact of these interventions on their health and well-being. The case studies underscore the emerging roles of young people, who are eager to become part of a movement that integrates their voices into nature-based public space designs and city governance, aiming for more substantial outcomes in terms of health and well-being.

Importantly, when local governments fail to address pressing urban challenges, it is often youth who take the initiative. We have seen this through numerous UN-Habitat projects, where youth-led organisations and groups have mobilised themselves to innovate and create better environments. Their transformative impact is a testament to the potential for change. Whether through placemaking initiatives, activating public spaces, or programming creative activities, young people are far more than passive participants. Their role transcends the checkbox of engagement or consultation—they are **becoming the true gamechangers in the public realm**. As the Makanuna creative submission captures:

*Look there! Do you see the light? These are our triangles, shining with all our might.
Here is our place and our story:
So what do you think of our idea, in all its Glory?*

The response to the call for papers and youth submissions in this special issue highlights

an escalating need for platforms where young researchers can publish their work and showcase their insights. The analysis demonstrates how youth contribute to improved planning and policies for public space design and voicing critical concerns about their urban environments—such as the impact of commercialisation and the dominance of automobiles in public spaces. As the WHO has pointed out, open spaces are becoming increasingly vital for improving urban health during rapid urbanisation (WHO, 2023). International agencies, academicians, urban professionals, policymakers, and young people should continue co-creating knowledge, exploring best practices, and integrating digital technology into governance to foster healthier, more inclusive urban environments. The future of urban health and well-being depends on this collaborative effort.

A statement acknowledging the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

While preparing this work, Cherie Enns used ChatGPT to identify a composite of shared themes in the papers and cases. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and took full responsibility for the publication's content. **It is worth noting that for many of the cases and articles in this issue, AI was used by youth for translation and editing purposes, highlighting the critical role of technology and relevance of this issue.**

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