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EDITORIAL

From Participation to Transformation.
Co-Creating Inclusive Urban Futures with Youth

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Abstract
This editorial introduces the *Safe and Sound Cities (S²Cities)* programme, a global initiative that engages young people as active agents in shaping safer, more inclusive urban environments. Through its implementation in the Global South, the programme combines participatory research, youth-led innovation, and placemaking to address urban safety, wellbeing, and social inclusion. Highlighting lessons derived from programme implementation and research initiatives in Bandung, Envigado, and Cuenca, the editorial discusses how youth perspectives reveal the subjective, relational, and socio-spatial dimensions of safety, challenging traditional enforcement-based approaches. Through trust-building, collaborative governance, creative communication and adaptive Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) frameworks, S²Cities demonstrates that youth engagement can transform public spaces, foster participation, and advance systemic change toward equitable and resilient cities.

Keywords: S²Cities, youth empowerment, youth engagement, urban safety, inclusive cities

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As cities across the globe grapple with complex urban challenges—from rising inequality to climate change and growing insecurity—young people emerge not only as a vulnerable demographic but also as critical agents of change. Unfortunately, often, the voices, needs, and aspirations of young people remain marginal in urban policy and spatial planning. The Safe and Sound Cities (S²Cities) programme was launched in 2021 to address this gap: to identify, understand and highlight the lived experiences of young people in relation to urban safety and wellbeing, and co-create safer, more inclusive public spaces through youth and locally led interventions. The S²Cities programme is a multi-year global initiative, led by the Global Infrastructure Basel Foundation, hosted by Swiss Philanthropy Foundation and supported by Fondation Botnar. The programme, as designed in Phase I, aims to empower young people (ages 15–24) in secondary cities of low and middle-income countries of the Global South[1] to actively co-create safer, more inclusive urban environments by bringing together youth, local governments, civil society, and the private sector in a five-step, iterative cycle:

1. systems understanding of safety issues,
2. capacity strengthening that addresses the needs of youth and decision makers,
3. innovation through co-ideation and prototyping of youth-led solutions,
4. implementing a select number of innovations appointed by local stakeholders and with the support of seed-funding;
5. scaling youth-led innovations with the support of local stakeholders.

The programme encourages the use of placemaking to empower young people to shape their environments through participatory, context-driven design.

The S²Cities Programme is now in its second phase of implementation. Phase I (2021–2024) engaged six rapidly growing secondary cities, beginning with pilot initiatives in Bandung (Indonesia) and Envigado (Colombia), and later expanding to Cuenca and Ambato (Ecuador), as well as Naga (Camarines Sur) and Baguio (the Philippines).

Figure 1. S²Cities. Fundacion Mi Sangre, Territorial mapping with youth, Envigado (2023).

Figure 2 (left). S²Cities. Workshop on Safety and Wellbeing for Youth, Cartagena (2025)
Figure 3 (right). S²Cities. We Solve, Youth Fellowship Capacity Building, Naga (2023).

By the end of Phase I, the programme partnered with 20 non-governmental, academic and social organizations working towards youth participation, inclusive cities and safety for young people; it engaged 1751 young people in skills-strengthening activities and 622 young people across nine innovation rounds and supported with the incubation of 28 youth-led initiatives targeting safety issues identified in each programme city. Phase II builds on the achievements of Phase I and is deepening engagement in most Phase I cities while also expanding to new locations, including Cartagena de Indias (Colombia) and Basel (Switzerland) in early 2025 – and, at the time of this publication, getting ready to expand to Africa. Programme activities are delivered locally by experienced partners in each city, and global activities play a complementary role—providing expert guidance, facilitating peer learning, and advancing advocacy.

Towards the end of Phase I, a research agenda was established to study practices related to youth participation and safety in three programme cities—Bandung, Envigado, and Cuenca—using both primary and secondary data to generate insights that inform and strengthen the programme as well as inspire other cities and practitioners on placemaking and youth participation in urban planning. A research consortium co-led by the University of Azuay (Ecuador) and City Space Architecture (Italy) was integrated into the S²Cities network, featuring research units in each of the research-focused cities, and involving local academic organizations. The consortium produced four research articles. Three of these articles look beyond the S²Cities programme to draw

insights from other practical and research initiatives focused on youth engagement and urban safety in Bandung, Envigado and Cuenca. The fourth paper synthesizes cross-cutting lessons on navigating youth empowerment, stakeholder engagement, and youth-led placemaking initiatives from the rollout of the S²Cities programme in the same cities. The four research articles offer a timely and critical rethinking of urban safety moving away from concepts of surveillance and control and toward approaches based on empathy, human connection, and the co-production of space.

This special issue of The Journal of Public Space, published by City Space Architecture, features these insightful S²Cities-sponsored academic articles, as well as a fifth research article, developed independently by the University of EAFIT, S²Cities' Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) partner, based on their experience developing a MEL framework for this programme. In addition, the issue also features three contributions from S²Cities' practitioners and implementation partners, who have documented insights derived from their experience promoting youth engagement in the exploration of safety and wellbeing in the built environment, and a viewpoint on the programme's origins on rethinking the intersections of youth, safety, and cities.

Academic Articles / Making Space for Safety: Youth, Belonging, and the Right to the City

The S²Cities programme works at the crossroads of urban safety, youth empowerment, and public space design. Its core belief is that safe cities emerge not just from infrastructure, but from inclusive governance, shared narratives, and everyday interactions. The four papers by the Research Consortium move beyond crime-prevention frameworks to explore how young people experience and navigate safety—whether walking to school, spending time in parks, or engaging in community life. Safety is shown to be shaped by physical space as well as gender, age, inequality, cultural norms, and a sense of belonging.

These academic contributions propose new approaches to addressing unsafety—centred on the right to the city, lived experience, and collective placemaking, especially through youth engagement.

Together, they reflect the S²Cities programme's commitment to bottom-up innovation and participatory governance. The featured cities—Bandung, Envigado, and Cuenca—offer diverse contexts but share a common goal: creating public spaces with and for youth to foster agency, inclusion, and wellbeing.

Cuenca: Understanding youth safety perceptions in urban parks

The article "Young People's Perception of Safety in Parks in an Intermediate Latin American City" by Coello et al., shifts focus to Cuenca, Ecuador, and explores how young people perceive safety in the city's public parks. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines spatial analysis, non-participant observation, and in-depth interviews, the study identifies key factors that enhance or diminish feelings of safety among young people.

While parks are among the most frequented public spaces for young people in Cuenca, they are also sites of exclusion, fear, and conflict. The presence or absence of lighting, vegetation density, street activity, and passive surveillance all play a role. Gender emerges as a particularly significant variable: while both young men and women relate safety to the absence of crime, female respondents highlight additional fears of harassment, sexual assault, and social stigma. The presence of other people, active edges, diverse land uses increase perceived safety, while isolated or poorly lit areas decrease it.

The study challenges the assumption that better spatial design alone can produce safer spaces and argues that spatial features intersect with socio-cultural dynamics and identities. For example, young women often avoid parks after dark or depend on male accompaniment, limiting their autonomy and access. The study's findings re-emphasize how spaces are experienced differently by people and call for the need for gender-sensitive planning as well as planning practices that take into account the perception and experience of vulnerable communities.

Moreover, the findings highlight the potential of parks not only as leisure spaces but as microcosms of urban inclusion or exclusion. The authors propose that when designing for safety, planners must consider young people's real and perceived vulnerabilities and engage them in the process.

Envigado: Narratives of everyday mobility

The article "Web-Based, Crowdsourced, First-Person Narratives of Young People's Daily Commutes as a New Method for Identifying Situations Impacting Their Subjective Wellbeing" by Perilla et al., develops an innovative methodology for understanding the subjective well-being of young people through the analysis of crowdsourced first-person narratives on commuting. Conducted in Envigado (a city that is part of Medellin's Metropolitan Area and one of the S^2Cities pilot cities), the study invited young people to share detailed descriptions of their daily commutes via a web-based storytelling platform.

This approach—called Targeted Mapped Crowd Sourced Story Telling for Wellbeing-Impacting Situation Identification" (YT-MCSST-4WISI)—reveals everyday experiences of discomfort, fear, resilience, and joy that might otherwise go unnoticed by planners and policymakers. The commutes become a lens through which young people articulate their urban experiences, bringing light to issues of street harassment, unlit alleys, broken infrastructure or urban elements that bring comfort and familiarity. The narratives also suggest how architecture, infrastructure, and human interactions shape young people's sense of safety and belonging.

In this paper, researchers promote empathetic listening and argue for a redefinition of safety and urban planning that begins with how young people feel and make sense of their environment. By collecting rich qualitative data and empowering young people to raise their voices and use their own words, the YT-MCSST-4WISI method becomes a form of advocacy.

Bandung: Digital inclusion and urban solidarity

Manfredini and Lo in the article "Urban Safety Via Digitally Augmented Relationality. Leveraging Gotong-Royong for Collaboration, Empathy, and Re-Enchantment in Indonesia's Public Space" investigate how indigenous relational practices in Indonesia—specifically the concept of gotong-royong (mutual aid, collective labour, voluntary cooperation)—can be reimagined and digitally enhanced to promote urban safety. This research unit's case study focuses on informal settlements in Bandung (Kampungs), showcasing how spatial justice and solidarity can be fostered through collaborative, place-based practices that go beyond safety based on control surveillance.

By leveraging digital technologies such as XR (extended reality) and participatory mapping, the authors co-developed a platform that allows young people living in informal kampung settlements to map, narrate, and reimagine their own environments, thereby enhancing collaboration across time and space. This research pilot fostered hybrid (physical-digital) forms of presence and interaction, illustrating how indigenous cultural practices and digital technologies in Bandung can be merged to regenerate trust, empathy, and spatial justice. The result is not only a tool for planning and advocacy, but a political, imaginative and relational infrastructure for "augmented safety" based on collaboration, community and young people's innovative thinking and their right to the city.

This project shows how when customized to local cultures and youth engagement, digital mediation can enable new forms of spatial engagement. The researchers call for a paradigm shift from security as surveillance to safety as solidarity, and from top-down interventions to bottom-up, collective urban transformations.

Cross-City Reflections: Bandung, Envigado, Cuenca

The academic article "Youth in Placemaking: Barriers and Benefits" by Cordero and Viese synthesises lessons from the Safe and Sound Cities programme in Bandung, Envigado, and Cuenca, offering a comparative reflection on how the programme was implemented across diverse contexts. It highlights the programme's adaptability across different cultural and urban systems while also tracing a common set of challenges: youth mistrust of public authorities, the politicisation of safety discourse, and the complexity of sustaining multi-stakeholder collaboration over time, as well as the challenges of operationalising a global initiative locally.

Across Bandung, Envigado, and Cuenca, the programme emphasised youth engagement as a fundamental design principle. Whether through digital tools, narrative inquiry (micro-narratives), surveys, or inter-sectoral guidance, the studies underscore that young people are experts of their own reality and know what makes a city feel safe (or unsafe). They know where they avoid, when they feel watched, judged or discriminated, or how space makes them visible or invisible. Moreover, the programme's experience demonstrates the meaningful youth inclusion is not only based on consultation but is a process of trust building between young people and governance institutions, bridge building between young people and local decision makers, capacity strengthening on listening and exchanging knowledge and ideas, and co-creating. When young people are genuinely empowered, they contribute not just feedback, but leadership, innovation, and vision. They question assumptions, test new tools, and prototype different futures.

This article also discusses practical considerations: the importance of institutional support, the role of local civil society actors, and the need for flexible, adaptive methodologies. It makes a case for investing in youth-led urban innovation, not only as a strategy for safety, but as a means to foster civic engagement, urban justice and sustainable futures.

Building Adaptive MEL Frameworks for Youth-Led Urban Change

The article "From Local Voices to Global Impact: Crafting MEL for Youth-Led Placemaking in Cross-Country Programs" EAFIT makes the case for designing an adaptive Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) framework to reflect the dynamic, context-specific realities of youth-led urban initiatives in the S²Cities programme. The paper proposes an integrated, participatory MEL (iMEL) approach that centres youth as co-creators of knowledge and combines evidence-based evaluation with real-time, context-sensitive feedback loops. By embedding youth in every stage of the evaluation process, from setting indicators to interpreting data, the iMEL framework empowers young people as active agents in shaping safer and more inclusive urban environments. Furthermore, the framework is supported by EMMA, an AI-powered tool that strengthens cross-city learning, real-time data integration, and participatory knowledge sharing.

From Practice to Impact / Lessons in Communication, and Placemaking from S²Cities

Alongside the core research articles from Phase I of the S²Cities programme, this special issue includes three non-academic practice-based articles by programme partners: Fundación Mi Sangre (implementation lead in Envigado, Colombia), Fundación Huasipichanga (implementation lead in Cuenca and Ambato, Ecuador) and City Collab (communications lead). Each shares key lessons from their unique roles, offering practical insights to support youth engagement and urban inclusion. Together, these contributions blend grounded research with real-world experience, advancing a shared commitment to co-creating safer, more inclusive cities through a growing community of practice.

The case study on Envigado, "Urban and Youth Transformations Through Connection with Oneself, Others, and the Environment", reveals how youth-led urban transformation becomes possible when trust—between young people, institutions, and communities—is cultivated not as a prerequisite, but as a product of intentional, collaborative action. Far from being passive recipients of public policies, youth emerge as strategic actors, reshaping their environments and governance systems through conscious and collaborative leadership. Across individual, relational, and structural levels, the programme demonstrates that young people can generate systemic change when empowered with the tools, spaces, and legitimacy to do so. From reclaiming public spaces to influencing municipal policy, the Envigado case and its youth-led innovations derived through S²Cities implementation, affirms that youth participation is not only transformative—it is essential. What begins with training and dialogue ends in institutional reform, cultural shifts, and a reimagined public realm. Most importantly, this

brief demonstrates how trust is both the pathway and the legacy of youth-driven urban transformation.

In the brief, "Between Perception and Reality: Socio-spatial Factors Affecting Youth Wellbeing in Public Space in Cuenca and Ambato" Huasipichanga exemplifies the importance of leveraging subjective and objective data to achieve a systemic understanding of urban safety. Looking at how socio-spatial factors influence youth well-being in Cuenca and Ambato, Ecuador, this study highlights the gap between young people's perceptions of public space and official urban safety data. Surveys reveal that subjective feelings of unsafety significantly reduce young people's use of urban spaces, leading to the suggestion that perceived threats like harassment and robbery are more influential on youth behaviour than statistically higher risks such as traffic accidents or suicide, indicating a disconnect between perceived and actual dangers. Placemaking is furthermore presented as a transformative tool to bridge the gap between perception and reality, showcasing several placemaking interventions in Cuenca and Ambato that show how the participatory aspect of placemaking not only enhances the physical and emotional quality of urban environments but also affirms young people as essential actors in shaping safe, inclusive, and mentally supportive cities.

In the article "Building Momentum for Youth-Driven Public Space Programmes. The Role of Creative Communication in S²Cities", City Collab presents how strategic communication has been a cornerstone of the Safe and Sound Cities (S²Cities) programme. Communication has played a key role in local engagement—mobilizing young people and stakeholders through creative methods like participatory mapping, theatre, and visual storytelling—and global outreach—forging partnerships and amplifying youth voices through international platforms, digital media, and immersive technologies like virtual reality. The paper argues that communication is not a peripheral function but a powerful enabler of youth agency, collaboration, and impact. By centring authentic youth narratives, building a consistent global brand, and translating data into accessible advocacy materials, S²Cities is strengthening its capacity to inspire policy shifts and social change.

To end with your journey into this journal's issue, Jens Aerts—global programme advisor on Placemaking—provides an insightful viewpoint, "Developing a global program for safer cities, from design to implementation". He traces the programme's origins, beginning with a 2020 workshop convened by Fondation Botnar, which brought together scholars and practitioners to rethink the intersections of youth, safety, and cities. As a result of this encounter, the S²Cities programme concept adopted a systems-thinking approach informed by Relational Wellbeing (RWB)—framing youth health through interconnected personal, social, and environmental factors— whilst highlighting linkages between urban form, safety and social cohesion. Placemaking is central to S²Cities, enabling youth to shape public spaces and build civic trust.

Concluding Remarks

To end with your journey into this journal, in the Viewpoint, Jens Aerts—global programme advisor on Placemaking—takes us back to the programme's origins, beginning with a 2020 workshop convened by Fondation Botnar, which brought

together scholars and practitioners to rethink the intersections of youth, safety, and cities. He recounts how this encounter, led to a programme concept that embraced a systems-thinking approach informed by Relational Wellbeing (RWB)—framing youth health through interconnected personal, social, and environmental factors— and Placemaking to enable youth to shape public spaces and build trust. By moving from enforcement-led responses to participatory, youth-driven approaches rooted in lived experience and relational wellbeing, the programme models systemic change for safer, more inclusive cities.

The contributions in this journal further challenge definitions of urban safety related to enforcement and control. They reframe safety as a relational and co-produced condition—shaped by trust, perception, belonging, and the everyday experiences of young people.

Several shared insights emerge across contexts:

- **Safety is subjective**: Young people's sense of well-being is shaped more by how they experience public space than by official statistics. Intersectional, systemic approaches are essential to address the root causes of (un)safety.
- **Youth are experts**: Their perspectives are not only valid but necessary to design inclusive and responsive cities.
- **Narratives matter**: Storytelling—through digital tools, maps, or ethnography—offers powerful insight into the lived realities of youth and their right to the city.
- **Trust is transformational**: When institutions, communities, and youth collaborate, trust becomes both the pathway and the outcome of sustainable change.
- **Public space is political**: Perceptions of safety reveal deeper dynamics of power, inclusion, and exclusion.
- **Relational infrastructures matter**: Safety and wellbeing grow through empathy, connection, and community.

Ultimately, building safe and inclusive cities is not just a question of physical infrastructure—it requires reimagining governance, participation, and design with young people as co-creators. On behalf of the S²Cities programme, we invite fellow advocates of safer and inclusive cities for the youth to explore the following contributions and join this growing community committed to co-creating more just and youth-responsive urban futures.

Figure 4. S²Cities. Huasipichanga, Experimenting public space as part of URBANO school, Cuenca (2024).