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18 Perspectives on Designing Cities for All

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Designing Cities for All

DESIGNING
CITIES
FOR
ALL



The right to feel safe in urban space



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Racism is a problem for Dutch public safety. In designing for specific problems experienced at the intersection of gender and race in Amsterdam, **Laura Adèr** and **Ariana Rose** use co-creation and urban acupuncture to amplify the voices of Black women.

Everyone has a right to feel safe in public space. When people are afraid to be themselves or feel unsafe because of unwanted attention or discriminating behaviour from others, their freedom of movement and bodily integrity are violated. Universal access to safe and inclusive public spaces is a key target of the Sustainable Development Goals. But do we universally agree on what is meant by ‘safety’? **The livability of a city depends on everyone feeling safe and welcome.** Unfortunately for many people, especially women and girls, street harassment and other forms of violence in public spaces exist around the world, including in the Netherlands.

We need to understand how racism is experienced

Designing for public safety

Research has been done to understand safety from a gendered perspective, and the Netherlands is increasingly taking action to make its streets free from catcalling and sexual harassment. The initial response of policymakers has been to criminalise street harassment to increase safety. But who does this make the city safer for? Relying on police and the criminal justice system makes cities less safe for racial minorities. This includes minority women who are often excluded from decision-making processes regarding how and for whom to design public space.

So how do non-white women experience public space? Given the lack of intersectional data on (sexual) harassment in Amsterdam, Fairspace and Studio in Between, supported by the City of Amsterdam, led one of the Netherlands’ first-ever initiatives that focus on how Black women experience street harassment and what they need to feel safe in public space.

Experiencing Dutch public spaces as a Black woman

While most white women describe public safety as being free from physical violence and harassment,

black women additionally define safety as being able to navigate a city without being confronted by racism. One woman who participated in our participatory research said: ‘Black people are part of Dutch society, not apart from it’. This is critical to understand when designing for public safety.

For the women we spoke with, feeling safe would mean no longer being ignored, excluded, or problematised in ways that create emotional, psychological, or physical lack of safety. **With this in mind, it is critical to use anti-racist approaches when considering how to make our cities safer — for everyone.** Although there is no simple design solution to address the weight and complexity of the work that needs to be done, by understanding how racism is experienced in Amsterdam, we can thoughtfully and realistically contend with the ways Black

women are routinely othered (labelled as not fitting in with Dutch norms) in public spaces and left to cope with minimal structural support. This is the first step to designing for the specific problems experienced at the intersection of gender and race.

In addition to sexual harassment, Black women experience the effects of segregation and gentrification of neighbourhoods, increased surveillance, and criminalisation. They must endure *Zwarte Piet* celebrations, do not have much (positive) representation in Dutch spaces, the news, media, culture, or politics, and disproportionately experience the adverse effects of COVID-19 and related policies. As if this isn’t enough, they also experience racial gaslighting and lack of support from others when they speak up about how they are treated because of Dutch beliefs in colour-blindness.

'It's exhausting'

Overt and subtle racism manifest through even the most mundane interactions and trigger feelings of invisibility and hypervisibility that leave Black women feeling unsafe in public spaces. Dealing with racism regularly results in trauma, strain on the body, and mental health issues, consequences that are overlooked in conversations about safety.

When made to feel invisible, women in our workshops said it was like people didn't find them worth acknowledging, which was different than the way they saw others interact with white people: 'When you enter a space you're almost like a non-person, invisible within spaces. It's like you're not even part of the conversation, space, or part of the community. Like you're just there passing through.'

In addition to instances of feeling invisible, Black women also felt they attracted unwanted attention for being different. They are often rudely stared at, or interrogated by others who try to figure out what they're doing in any given space. This made them feel like they were being scrutinised as others determined how much respect to give them ('Where are you from?',

'Where do you live?', 'What kind of work do you do?'). Proving their worth was a constant reminder that others perceived them as different. Navigating others' perceptions of difference sometimes antagonised them in ways that could be dangerous; situations where others viewed them as out-of-the-ordinary, criminal, or free to harass or disrespect: 'When I feel eyes on me, I feel anxious, wondering if they're going to confront me or if I need to confront them. But if they do confront me, I just have to take some s*** and let it roll off of my back because I won't call the police. I just want to be treated equally and not stared at going places and seeing heads turn when I walk by, it's exhausting.'

Black women constantly need to manage the perceptions of others to create a safer environment for themselves. The spectrum between feeling invisible and hypervisible demonstrates that there is no room for Black women to 'just be themselves'. No matter what they did to increase their sense of personal safety (by becoming more visible, less visible, or visible in different ways), it wasn't enough since Dutch public spaces prioritise the comfort of other people.

We use urban acupuncture to solve global problems

Prioritising community-driven interventions

To solve global problems of safety, inclusion, and racism, small, localised and community-driven interventions can be powerful. One such tool is urban acupuncture. Instead of traditional urban planning — which is often restricted by rules and bureaucracy and usually applied in a top-down manner that upholds processes that exclude marginalised groups — urban acupuncture harnesses direct community engagement, creating sustainable neighbourhood features that are installed and cared for by the community who needs and uses them, leading to more inclusive urban planning. We used this concept, together with a co-creative approach, to guide our work.

Fairspace applies interventions that are driven by a co-creative approach, giving people whose

needs are often ignored key roles in defining the problem, imagining solutions, co-designing, and evaluating interventions that increase public safety. Their output includes educational materials, workshops, and policy recommendations. Studio in Between is a social impact design space focused on research that improves the well-being of Black people in Amsterdam. Studio in Between brought anti-racist and intersectional knowledge together by embedding anti-racist ways of working into the co-creation and design processes. This ensures the status quo is not reproduced.

Tackling exclusion through inclusion

Building inclusive public spaces means amplifying the voices of Black women who are often left out of conversations and making sure their voices continue to be represented at

the levels of decision-making that affect people's everyday lives. One participant in the co-creative workshops challenged the priorities of current urban planning: 'When you have influence, wouldn't you influence safety? When you're in a position of influence and have a say in how the city looks, wouldn't safety be intrinsically involved?'

We need to start having honest conversations about whose safety is prioritised. **A step forward to making sure issues of safety are addressed for everyone is to ensure Black people and people of colour are represented in paid advisory boards and decision-making roles in the city.** They have lived experience with the ways current initiatives toward increasing public safety are falling short.

One idea to improve safety that came out of the workshops was to invest in Black businesses and cultural initiatives. This could look like franchising or moving businesses outside the city to the city centre so they can take up a larger role in Amsterdam's cultural and business sector. This could make popular districts in the city's centre safer for Black women by increasing the diversity of foot traffic and wouldn't force them to find businesses, community, comfort food, or art to support in the periphery of the city. It would also make Black culture more accessible to the public, honouring Black people's presence and contributions to Dutch society.

Secondly, local interventions should be supported by structural changes to end racism and sexism. This requires long-term investments to change societal perceptions. An undertaking of anti-racist and colonial history campaigns around the city would educate the general public to reduce discrimination to increase safety for those who experience racism. 'For us to feel safe, we have to think bigger about fixing issues around Black visibility, representation, and anti-racism. That's the reason why we don't feel comfortable in public space', one participant said.

We need to start having honest conversations about whose safety is prioritised

Unfortunately, segregation, educational disparities, police brutality, and criminalisation are very much alive and well in the Netherlands. **Ensuring impactful diversity and inclusion efforts at organisational and institutional levels must be at the forefront of government and community agendas, which means stepping beyond performative measures in order to create a safer city for Black women.** Urban planning that aims to improve safety for women can't reproduce inequalities that oppress Black women. Given the urgent need to address specifically anti-Black racism around the city, we need more radical shifts in how we approach safety moving forward to make sure cities are safe for everyone.

CURIOUS FOR MORE?

Fairspace speaks about using co-creative approaches to building inclusive public space in the Netherlands in the DCFA Livecast *Designing from Inclusion: Spaces*.



ADDITIONAL BITS AND BITES



BOOK: UNDERSTANDING EVERYDAY RACISM

This book by Philomena Essed compares contemporary racism in the Netherlands and the US through in-depth interviews with fifty-five black women.



BOOK: OUR CITY?

How can we ensure that public spaces truly represent and serve the people who live near them and use them?