Analysis of the Weak Position of Women in European Countries from the Perspective of Park Design and How Could Park Management Improve the Situation —- in a Case Study of Whiteley Woods in Sheffield

Jiani Guo

Landscape department, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK, S10 2JA
jguo51@sheffield.ac.uk

Abstract: Park is an important space where people could get close to nature in urban space. However, at the time when European parks were first built, gender dysphoria led to park design and management that left a hidden sense of security for women. This paper explores the factors that restricted women's access to the naturalistic style parks that emerged in Europe in the late 20th century, and suggests ways to improve them. The purpose of this study is to allow the public and related departments realize that women in Europe still face the same fear in the park as women in other parts of the world. Knowing that point may help not only to improve the participance of women in public life but also improve the concept of a safe city by considering the park space. The subject of this study is women living in Europe and their feelings when they go to the park, especially with a naturalistic style. The research is conducted by reviewing literature and doing a case study in Sheffield, a city in England. Most references are peer-reviewed journal articles while some data about crime was gathered by UK's official statistic department. Finally, study found that park with features, such as darkness, empty and enclosed woodland, would not be an enjoyable space for women and the more vulnerable position of women in violent crime may worsen women's fear in such space. Corresponding to the unsettled factors in a park, park management could be supplementary for the design.

Keywords: Public park, Women, Perceived safety, Park management, Park design

1. Introduction

Public Park and its users have a mutual influence [1]. Public parks as a space in the city that copies, creates and challenges the time change, would become a focus of city culture [1]. That means those who use parks may indirectly influence the urban space and culture, even public life. Therefore, it is important to discuss the users of public parks and their perceptions, especially for female visitors. Among several factors that obstacle people to enjoy parks, worries about safety as an intrapersonal barrier usually be argued to be a vital reason why public open space is not used by people [2]. Many surveys have found that women have more concerns about safety in parks, so it would reduce women's participation in public park and public life. Most recent studies and published principles focus on safe city planning, such as the CPTED principle, but there is limited research minimizing their sight on the public park which is on a smaller scale but is still an important public space in the

city, especially in European areas. It seems like researchers assume that Europe is a more equal and safer place for women. However, more than half of Europeans would not be able to enjoy certain spaces because of fear of crime [3]. The study also found that more harassment of women is reported in the most equal countries [3]. It may be explained as the more equal social environment encouraging more women to speak out about their suffering, but they also reported that they are more afraid of being attacked [3]. This paper aims to explain the reasons women are in a weak position objectively and subjectively in Europe, discuss the features which threaten women's perceived safety in the park and finally explore how landscape architects could contribute to improving the perceived safety of female visitors. To achieve this, both literature review and case study would be used as a combination of theory and practice. Improving the perceived safety of women in the park would help them truly gain the right of enjoying such a public space and become a user at any time of the day. Therefore, women would participate in public life and city life more actively on any time scale, which would rich the urban culture and safe city planning.

2.   The Weak Position of Women in Public Parks

The design and management of public parks lack the consideration of women's participation from the very beginning since Victorian times. Park as a spatial reaction to problems caused by rapidly developing industrial cities, weakened women's existence in park management and use because they are not seen as a city problem. The swimming pool is a common design in the 19th century for a public park, however, when swimwear is not spread, as daily telegrams in 1874 point out, the naked body excludes women from the park. Examples in Birmingham and London's parks also show that women's right to enjoy the swimming pool is restricted as it is only open once a week for women and it would be given back to men when the weather gets colder [4]. In fact, in 1913, the bishop of London complained about the immoral behaviour in the park and reflect a strong and increasing public opinion on such issue [4]. The conflict in the public park which is difficult to comprise and solve at once may leave hidden trouble on perceived safety for women.

Nowadays, females' perceived safety in the park has been reported to be much less than male, while female has higher fear of crime. A survey discussing the perceived safety between gender found that even if having the same familiar level as males, females' fear and anxiety still increased dramatically [5]. Another research found that 70.4% of female participants feel unsettled in empty parks and woodland, following the unsafety of dark underground and walking alone in the empty street at the night. It is even higher than passing abandoned buildings and places. 57.9% of females never go to the empty park and woodland alone [6].

Figure 1: Victims of violent crime [7]

The concern from women users could worsen according to the crime data. Women are more vulnerable to violence against the person and without injury [7] (Figure 1). From Crime Survey in England and Wales until 2020, between 16 and 74 ages, 2.9% of females (618,000) have suffered from sexual abuse compared with males in 0.7%(155,000) [8]. More importantly, around 9% of crimes happened on the street, parking, public park and other open public spaces [9].

The relationship between the rate of crime in the park and the lack of consideration for women's feelings are not clear. However, the fear of women in parks urges changes in the design and management of the park. Park, indeed, plays a significant role in reducing crime based on its feature and attraction to the public, according to an opinion from the environmental criminology and crime model [10].

3.   Case Study on the Naturalistic Park: Whiteley Wood

Whiteley Wood is a part of Porter Valley Park designed by William Goldring, the landscape architect and naturalist. Located in north-western Sheffield, it is a linking corridor between the urban area and rural areas. The valley is covered by dense woodland and William Goldring is asked to keep this area as original as possible, so the natural environment has been preserved to the maximum.
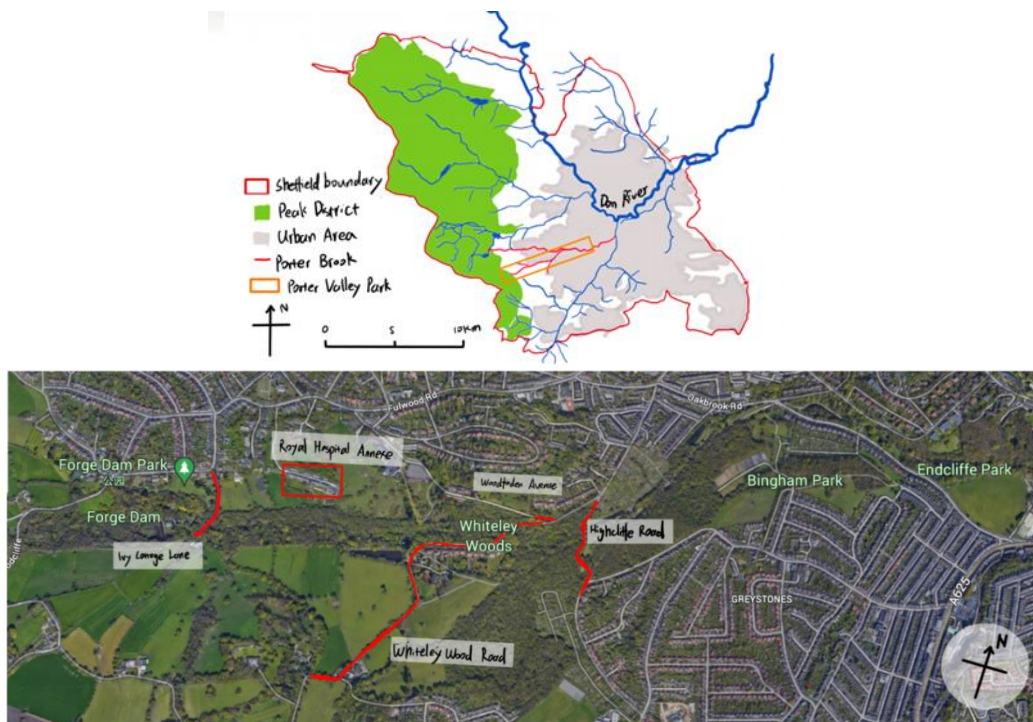

Figure 2: Map of Porter Valley Park

Sheffield has many valley parks which hold a naturalistic style, such as rivelin valley. Naturalistic design became popular in European cities in the last decades of the 20th century, with the attitudes changed toward nature in the urban landscape [11]. Focusing on the situation in the UK, the low maintenance cost of naturalistic landscape style would be more appealing to local authorities because the budget for parks and green space has dropped between 2016 and 2019 in 59% of places [12]. In contrast, it is found that geometric scene has a higher safety for each gender than naturalistic scene [13]. However, the location and features of this park reflect some factors which have been found that could reduce the perceived safety of women.

3.1. Empty Woodland

Figure 3: Whiteley Woods is empty on Saturday afternoon

The park is observed that it has much fewer people than Endcliffe park which is located on its east side. Based on the feedback from women shown above, when a place is empty, many female visitors would feel threatened or they would avoid this space. Therefore, although the enclosed space and naturalistic scene have a higher possibility to concern women, it does not mean the designer and planner should delete or avoid all naturalistic parks. The open view could be helpful, but it may still be limited if there is nobody around. What is similar to the open view is the CCTV, checking what is happening around. However, studies have shown that women prefer the appearance of a security guard rather than CCTV [14]. Therefore, same with the finding, other people in the park are a significant factor to adjust the safety [13].

3.2. Quiet Woodland

In Whiteley Wood, as the result of having few visitors, it is a quiet natural space. The landform and woodland block the sounds from the traffic road as well. However, a simple contrast shows that no sounds cause the lowest perceived safety [15]. It is possible to hear the river or bird sounds from time to time during walking in Whiteley Woods, it is helpful to improve safety but does not have an obvious influence [15]. Human vocal sounds are the strongest tool to improve perceived safety apparently [15]. Therefore, attracting more visitors at any time is still the most important thing. However, in the factor of sounds, more improvements under the situation without other people would be discussed later.

3.3. Blocked View and Accessibility

In general, an open landscape is more popular than an enclosed space as the latter one could arouse fear feeling and a sense of danger. Blocked views reduce mobility and the escaping ability[16]. The feature of a path in Whiteley Wood would also make it be defined as a risky area because the meandering path, especially when it is surrounded by woodland would increase people's fear [13]. Also, there is a lot of formal and informal access point in Whiteley Wood. The unpaved and uncertain road and the undefined area may pressure and confuse visitors [13].

3.4. Dullness and Darkness

The attitude in the park is different day and night, participants both men and women in a study report that the green space is a positive environment in the daytime while becoming an avoiding place at the night. Therefore, darkness is an important feature that could trigger fear. Whiteley

Woods does not have any light facilities and it is dull in the daytime as the woodland canopy would provide a large shade.

4.   Park Design and Management Suggestions on How to Improve Women's Perceived Safety

All four features, including empty, quiet, enclosed and darkness, are not isolated, in contrast, improving one element may help the improvements in another. To demonstrate the suggestion clearly, four aspects would be given, each would associate with one feature above, but they may have some interwoven sections. First, the park could increase perceived safety in two ways. The low budget reduces the possibility to add more employees to the park. So, perhaps some small stalls would help. Provides more safety feeling as visitors could find someone around while offering more services to visitors. Currently, if people choose to walk through the route of Porter Valley Park, they have to either take some food or drink or buy it from the Forge Dam cafe after passing the whole Whiteley Woods. However, to make sure the park could give good safety all the day, after closing time of each store. Attracting more visitors during the day and the night is more important. Many people come to the park today for exercising and walking dogs. As a starting point, the park could organize events such as running a competition or party for dogs. By having more good activities, it may help nearby residents and more local people recognize this place. Second, the sound facilities would become an extra method when there are fewer visitors considering the scale of the park. Then, naturalistic landscape design is applied in the park often based on natural woodland. Therefore, it may not be possible to cut down trees or change the height of many vegetation, especially when it is in a valley. What the path looks like is not what triggers people's fear. The real reason behind it is impossible to predict the destination on a wild road. So what a designer or planner could do is to provide clear maps and directions at regular intervals and the telephone number of the park management office is provided so that people can seek help at any time, similar to what they see in the building at any time. It would also be good to provide clearer directions to the entrances and exits, and signposting the distance and time from the signposted location to the entrance would provide a clearer structure in people's minds, thus increasing accessibility. Finally, the whole park would be improved a lot if it could be lit at the night. Also, it is a facility park that could not be ignored if they want to attract people at the night. However, the linear light alongside the road would have a better effect than traditional road light, given that people prefer to have a light in their surroundings instead of in front of them [18].

5.   Conclusion

This paper discussed that women's rights in the park is ignored in Victorian times, and the unsafe feeling is worsened in some parks with a naturalistic style. Also, by examing the design and environment of Whiteley Woods, the emptiness, quiet, darkness or dullness and being restricted is listed as unsettled factors in the park space. It will take one small step toward understanding women in Europe has similar low perceived safety and how a park, especially the naturalistic park which is popular nowadays, would threaten their safety. Summarizing these findings, it would be found that women have a greater sense of insecurity in park spaces and this can be influenced by factors such as light, the number of people in the vicinity, obstructed views and sound, which are some of the characteristics of naturalistic planning designs such as Whiteley wood. Recommendations are therefore made for these four qualities. The focus on naturalistic planning design has often been on private gardens, but the style does apply to parks, especially in areas where natural environments originally existed. However, as research in this area is limited, there is still a high degree of uncertainty as to whether all of these styles exhibit the same insecurity factors. Future research

could look more into the effects and psychological impact of parks based on the transformation of the natural environment and whether all green spaces have a more positive effect. Furthermore, there are individual differences in perceptions of safety, and minority women and white women living in the same area may perceive safety differently. Therefore, there are more details to explore when we look at how women feel safe in parks.

References

[1] Piercey, N. (2020). A Brief History of British Public Parks before 1870. Available at: <https://www.playingpasts.co.uk/articles/the-great-outdoors/a-brief-history-of-british-public-parks-before-1870/> [Accessed 15 July 2022].

[2] Pérez-Tejera, F. et al. (2022) 'Examining perceived safety and park use in public open spaces: The case of Barcelona', Journal of environmental psychology, 81. doi:10.1016/j.jenvp.2022.101823.

[3] Moreno, M.J.G., Prados, J.S.F. and Cuenca-Piqueras, C. (2022) 'Fear for All Women: European women's fear of harassment and aggression in public spaces', Journal of interpersonal violence, 37(7-8), pp. NP4160–NP4186. doi:10.1177/0886260520958390.

[4] Dreher, N., 1993. Public parks in urban Britain, 1870-1920: Creating a new public culture. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania, pp.87-154.

[5] Jiang, B. et al. (2017) 'Minimizing the gender difference in perceived safety: Comparing the effects of urban back alley interventions', Journal of environmental psychology, 51, pp. 117–131. doi:10.1016/j.jenvp.2017.03.012.

[6] Tandogan, O. and Ilhan, B.S. (2016) 'Fear of Crime in Public Spaces: From the View of Women Living in Cities', Procedia engineering, 161, pp. 2011–2018. doi:10.1016/j.proeng.2016.08.795.

[7] Violent crime victims by gender. (2021). Available at: <https://bradshawadvisory.com/data-insights/violent-crime-victims-by-gender> [Accessed 15 July 2022].

[8] Office for national statistics (2020) Sexual offences victim characteristics, England and Wales: year ending March 2020. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/sexualoffencesvictimcharacteristicsenglandandwales/march2020> [Accessed 15 July 2022].

[9] Office for national statistics (2020) Nature of sexual assault by rape or penetration, England and Wales: year ending March 2020. Available at:<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/natureofsexualassaultbyrapeorpenetrationenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2020> [Accessed 15 July 2022].

[10] Boessen, A. and Hipp, J.R. (2018) 'Parks as crime inhibitors or generators: Examining parks and the role of their nearby context', Social science research, 76, pp. 186–201. doi:10.1016/j.ssresearch.2018.08.008.

[11] Özgüner, H. and Kendle, A.. (2006) 'Public attitudes towards naturalistic versus designed landscapes in the city of Sheffield (UK)', Landscape and urban planning, 74(2), pp. 139–157. doi:10.1016/j.landurbplan.2004.10.003.

[12] Nam, J. and Dempsey, N. (2019) 'Understanding Stakeholder Perceptions of Acceptability and Feasibility of Formal and Informal Planting in Sheffield's District Parks', Sustainability (Basel, Switzerland), 11(2), p. 360. doi:10.3390/su11020360.

[13] Baran, P.K. et al. (2018) 'An exploratory study of perceived safety in a neighborhood park using immersive virtual environments', Urban forestry & urban greening, 35, pp. 72–81. doi:10.1016/j.ufug.2018.08.009.

[14] Cho, J.T. and Park, J. (2017) 'Exploring the effects of CCTV upon fear of crime: A multi-level approach in Seoul', International journal of law, crime and justice, 49, pp. 35–45. doi:10.1016/j.ijlcj.2017.01.005.

[15] Sayin, E. et al. (2015) '"Sound and safe": The effect of ambient sound on the perceived safety of public spaces', International journal of research in marketing, 32(4), pp. 343–353. doi:10.1016/j.ijresmar.2015.06.002.

[16] Stamps, A.E. (2013) 'Effects of Multiple Boundaries on Perceived Spaciousness and Enclosure', Environment and behavior, 45(7), pp. 851–875. doi:10.1177/0013916512446808.

[17] Rahm, J., Sternudd, C. and Johansson, M. (2020) '"In the evening, I don't walk in the park": The interplay between street lighting and greenery in perceived safety', Urban design international (London, England), 26(1), pp. 42–52. doi:10.1057/s41289-020-00134-6.

[18] Haans, A. and de Kort, Y.A.. (2012) 'Light distribution in dynamic street lighting: Two experimental studies on its effects on perceived safety, prospect, concealment, and escape', Journal of environmental psychology, 32(4), pp. 342–352. doi:10.1016/j.jenvp.2012.05.006.