Bulletin:
Gender Informed Design

June 24 , 2025

About the Speaker

Ruth Lin Wong Holmes, BEng MAUD MA MSc CPP–I FLI RSA RICS, leads Landscape and Public Realm at London Legacy Development Corporation, managing Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park's transformation, including 6,000 homes, better transport links, and 560 acres of parkland. She's authored guidance for LLDC and the Mayor of London, such as Safety in the Public Realm for Women, Girls, and Gender Diverse People. With 30 years across public, private, and charity sectors, Ruth champions inclusive design and community–led placemaking.

LONDON LEGACY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

QUEEN ELIZABETH OLYMPIC PARK

Creating places that work for Women and Girls

Handbook for Local Authorities, Developers and Designers

Key Takeaways

- **Community Engagement:** Engaging communities is essential to creating truly inclusive spaces. Ruth highlighted the use of disaggregated data to understand the specific needs of women, girls, and other user groups. Co-design processes enable communities to raise concerns and shape solutions from the start, ensuring lived experience is reflected in final outcomes. Appointing gender champions within planning teams helps maintain focus on inclusion throughout the project lifecycle.

- **Case Studies and Practical Tools:** The session shared examples of gender informed design in action. The Red Path Project transformed unsafe routes through co-design with local women. The Hackney Bridge Playbook offered practical interventions across lighting, mobility, and public realm design. Ruth noted that sharing success stories, data, and feedback strengthens stakeholder confidence and encourages broader adoption of inclusive strategies.

- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Inclusive design must be continuous. Embedding monitoring tools, collecting disaggregated data, and maintaining feedback loops from the planning stage through implementation ensures public spaces remain safe, inclusive, and continually responsive. This is particularly the case for women, girls, and gender-diverse users. This session highlighted key principles and practical strategies to support this.

- **Gender Inclusive Design Principles:** Designing with the specific needs of women and girls benefits all users. The session underscored that gender inequality intersects with race, disability, age, and economic background. As such, truly inclusive design must address these overlapping realities. This calls for fundamental shifts from siloed approaches to integrated planning that places equity at its core. Direct engagement with women and girls throughout design and decision-making processes ensures spaces reflect lived experience, promote dignity, and build a sense of shared ownership. Inclusive public spaces avoid harm, and they enable joy, safety, and opportunity. Local authorities and developers are central to this agenda and process, as illustrated in the figure below.

- **The Role of Policy and Handbooks in Shaping Practice:** A key output of the work to date was the creation of practical resources, such as the "Creating Places that Work for Women and Girls" handbook, offering clear guidance from policy to implementation. outlining steps from policy formulation to on-the-ground implementation. Their adoption by local planning authorities has led to tangible changes in planning policy and practice, embedding gender inclusivity in every stage of development.

Local Authorities
A) Corporate Function
B) Project Board Approach
C) Planning Function
Developers
D) Project Approach
E) Design Function

- **Lighting and Safety:** Lighting is a critical design element that shapes how people experience safety and visibility in public spaces, especially at night. Well-distributed, consistent lighting reduces fear and improves orientation. Ecological concerns should be addressed with appropriate lighting in sensitive areas. Behavioral lighting that adapts to usage patterns offers an energy-efficient, user-focused solution. Features like illuminated landmarks and artworks enhance visual interest and improve wayfinding, particularly for women, children, and other vulnerable users. The goal is to create environments that feel both physically secure, emotionally comfortable, and welcoming.

- **Security and Surveillance:** Safe public spaces require a balance of active measures (staff presence, events, CCTV) and passive strategies (clear sightlines, natural surveillance, and open spaces that discourage hiding or entrapment). These interventions reduce feelings of isolation and vulnerability, particularly in areas with limited foot traffic or restricted access. Security features should be subtle, integrated with care to support comfort and wellbeing without feeling intrusive.

- **Mobility and Movement Networks:** Mobility infrastructure must reflect how women and girls move through cities. This includes ensuring that transport hubs (bus stops, train stations, and pedestrian routes) are well lit, visible, and designed with safety in mind. Supporting infrastructure (underpasses, overpasses, and bridges) needs special attention to ensure it is an extension of the hub. Informal routes such as shortcuts or ecological trails must be designed to balance environmental goals with personal safety and access. Seamless, safe, and predictable movement networks are essential for enabling freedom of movement and supporting active travel choices.

- **Public Realm Features:** Inclusive public amenities such as toilets, seating, shade, and shelter are essential to make places feel welcoming and usable for longer. Design should support varied needs from those passing through to those pausing, waiting, caring for children, or engaging socially. Active ground floors with retail, services, or community uses help create vibrant, eyes-on-the-street environments and reduce feelings of emptiness or exposure. Blank walls and dead edges should be avoided to create a sense of presence and community.

- **Nature and Planting:** Green elements are vital to inclusive public spaces, improving air quality, aesthetics, and emotional well-being. Trees, vegetation, and water features encourage rest, reflection, and reconnection with nature. Involving residents in planting fosters stewardship and pride. Green infrastructure must be designed with safety and accessibility at the core to enhance spaces without obstructing visibility.

- **Wayfinding and Signage**: Wayfinding should empower all users to navigate confidently and independently. Signage systems must be clear, legible, strategically placed, and understandable across language, literacy, and ability levels. Both physical signage and digital tools can play a role in enhancing inclusive navigation. Cultural and artistic integration can help local identity and orientation. Special attention must be given to wayfinding in complex areas such as transit interchanges, large parks, or areas with low visibility. Good wayfinding reduces anxiety and builds confidence, especially for women navigating alone.

- **Maintenance and Monitoring:** How a space is maintained speaks volumes about who it is for. Regular upkeep, visible maintenance staff, and prompt responses to issues like broken lighting or overflowing bins foster a sense of care and respect. A well-maintained space is more likely to be respected in return. For women and girls, visible maintenance and cleanliness directly impact perceptions of safety and comfort. Public realm management and monitoring systems should be transparent, responsive, and guided by user feedback.

Questions ?

How does designing for women and girls make spaces more inclusive for others, such as ethnic minorities and people with disabilities?

The approach is intersectional, not just gender focused. Using inclusive design standards and disaggregating data helps address ethnicity and disability. Research shows that spaces with more women, girls, and children feel safer and more welcoming for everyone, including men and boys. The design process considers not just technical specifications, but also how spaces feel and function for all.

Do you get much oppositional pushback to these inclusive design initiatives?

No significant pushback has been encountered. Most people understand the benefits, either personally or through family connections. When asked to support or use the handbook, no one has refused, and objections about cost or feasibility have not arisen.

How do you demonstrate the value of these initiatives to developers or clients? Is there quantitative data, or is it mainly qualitative?

While some organizations use quantitative data, the team has not needed to rely on it. They have some data-driven reports, but usually, showing real-world examples and precedents is enough to make the case. Books like "Invisible Women" provide additional data for those interested.

Is the handbook publicly available?

Yes, the handbook is available on the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park website. It can be found by searching for "Creative places that work for Women and Girls, Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park."