

RETHINKING
URBAN SPACES:
GENDER PERSPECTIVES
IN HOUSING AND
URBAN PLANNING



Authors

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About IDB Invest

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GENDER-SMART HOUSING

Urban Planning and Housing from a Gender Perspective

An awareness of gender dynamics in urban planning can lead to more inclusive and equitable spaces, contributing to safety, mobility and access to essential services and helping women and other marginalized groups feel confident in taking an active role in urban life.

Intra-urban travel patterns vary consistently between men and women, reflecting their roles in the domestic sphere. While some care tasks are shared, men are still more likely to assume the role of breadwinner. Consequently, their travel patterns are more linear, as they move from home to the workplace and back again. Women, as well as being economically active, remain primarily responsible for maintaining the home. They tend to make more journeys to schools, supermarkets, health centers, local services, etc.

Women make more journeys overall, at different times and using different routes, and they generally follow a zig-zag pattern. It is essential that they have access to safe, well-lit streets where they feel comfortable at all hours of the day, planned with gender differences in mind.

This requires a strategic approach to planning and urban design, in terms of both housing and local infrastructure. Women should be able to move through the city safely and efficiently in ways that help their lives run smoothly and lighten the caregiving burden.

This guidance note offers a series of general recommendations for approaching planning, urban design and social housing architecture from a gender perspective.

Gender-Smart Housing is grounded in a gender-conscious urban planning strategy that seeks to create cities and spaces embodying the following principles:

1 | Putting urban safety first:

Planning and urban development projects should be backed by a local urban safety assessment, which can inform decisions about how new housing should be designed, planned and built.



2 | Fostering vibrant, intergenerational spaces:

This means designing spaces to be used and enjoyed by people of all ages, promoting social mixing, a sense of community and an active street life.



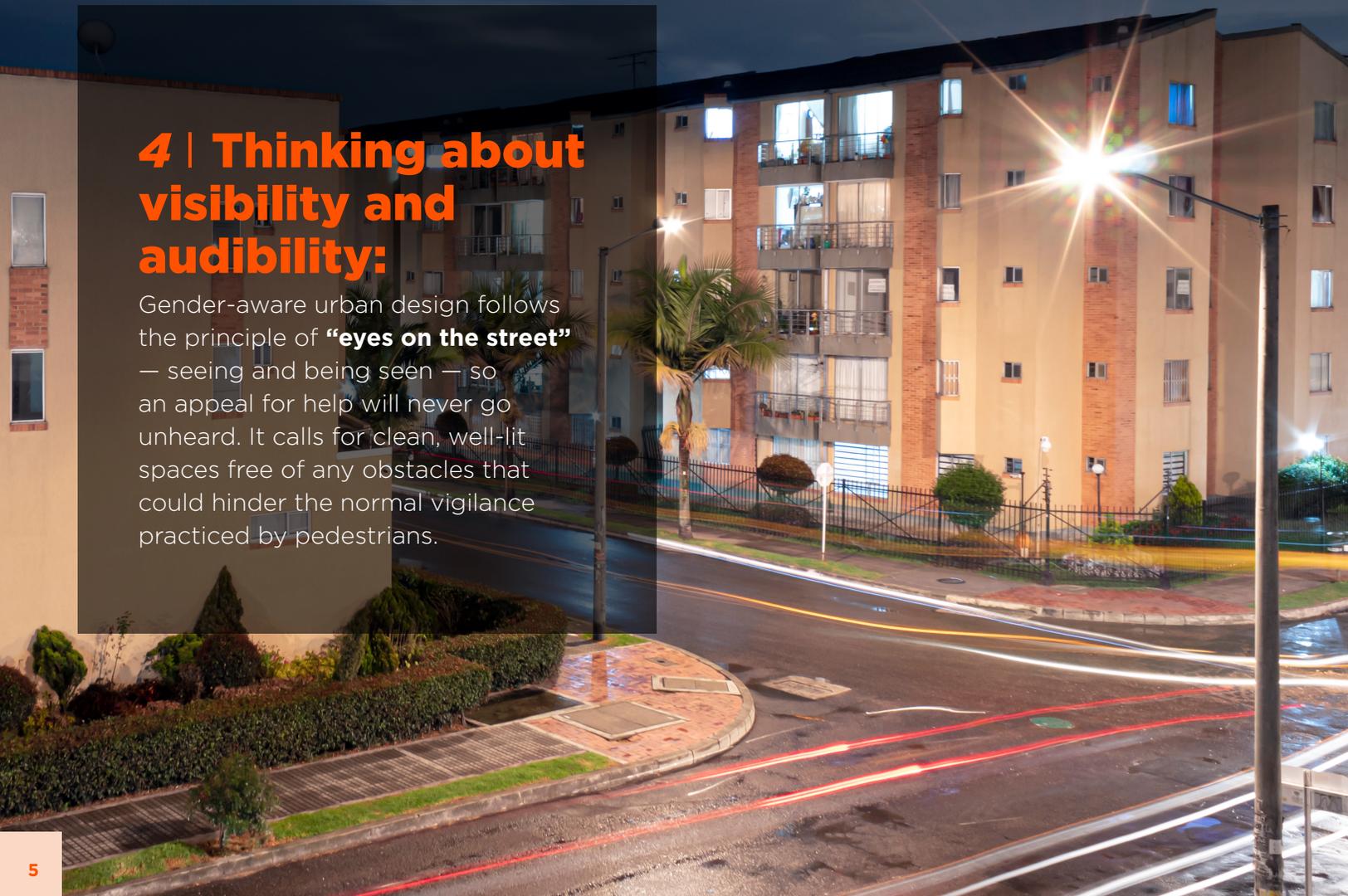


3 | Creating functional and dynamic neighborhoods:

We want to create new neighborhoods that meet people's needs, with shops, pharmacies and places for social interaction, recreation and breastfeeding. Mixed-use spaces support vibrant, well-connected and urban environments that bustle with life.

4 | Thinking about visibility and audibility:

Gender-aware urban design follows the principle of **"eyes on the street"** — seeing and being seen — so an appeal for help will never go unheard. It calls for clean, well-lit spaces free of any obstacles that could hinder the normal vigilance practiced by pedestrians.



5 | Building coherence and connection:

Routes between homes and local infrastructure should be direct and joined-up. Planners can make use of vertical and horizontal circulation elements such as staircases, lifts, paths, roadways, bridges and ramps, without introducing barriers to freedom of movement.



6 | Incorporating signage and information:

A good signage system helps people understand and navigate urban space. It is important to adopt a visual language that avoids reproducing gender stereotypes.





7 | Designing flexible, adaptable and hierarchy-free homes:

Homes should be designed to adapt to changes in household structure and/or economic circumstances and generational dynamics. It is good practice to keep all bedrooms equal in size and sufficiently versatile to serve as home office space or adapt to changing needs as the household matures.

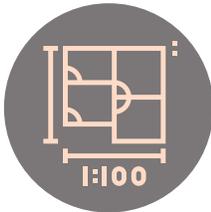
8 | Shedding gender stereotypes:

Gender-smart homes can foster interaction between household members in task-oriented areas, helping break down gender stereotypes. For example, larger or more open-plan kitchens allow multiple family members to get involved in domestic activities.



Gender-smart social housing: key points

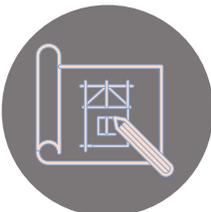
1.



AT THE PLANNING STAGE

- Where possible, locations with low pedestrian and vehicular traffic should be prioritized for housing development, so they can benefit from increased footfall and all the revitalizing effects of a new neighborhood. Large swathes of isolated, deserted and unsafe land, often associated with construction sites, should be avoided.
- Aim to locate apartment block entrances on quieter streets.
- Parks and green spaces should be equipped with facilities that can serve as a focus for community life and intergenerational mixing. Tree planting should prioritize species with taller foliage, in keeping with the “seen and be seen” principle.

2.



URBAN DESIGN AND HOUSING LOCATION

- Residential buildings should face onto the street to enhance natural oversight.

- Ground-floor flats with street-facing windows should be designed with sufficient setback between the street and the property boundary to respect occupants’ privacy and facilitate pedestrian movement.
- Avoid placing two parallel blank or windowless façades (generally lateral walls) in close proximity. This creates a gloomy passageway with poor visibility and a potential danger spot for pedestrians.

3.



DESIGNING OUTDOOR SPACE FOR RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENTS

- To prevent vandalism, opt for electrified metal grill fencing compliant with all applicable safety and quality standards. Fencing should be of an adequate height and offer no footholds that could be used to gain unauthorized access. If trees are to be planted, it is best to use species with taller foliage to preserve visibility.
- Introduce maps and information panels indicating the locations of police stations, women’s refuges, telephones for use in an emergency or to report domestic violence, health care facilities, parks, etc. Promote the use of non-discriminatory signage.
- Concrete wall enclosures are best avoided, as they restrict visibility from both inside and out.

4.



LOCAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND SERVICES

- All housing developments should be accompanied by **local infrastructure and services, such as public toilets, children's play areas, breastfeeding areas and hard-surface courts.**
- These facilities should be arranged in a single block with all necessary safety provisions, while facilitating open interaction among users in plain sight.
- They should be placed at an equal distance from all homes and be easy to access without the need to negotiate physical barriers or awkward spaces.
- Care should be taken to ensure two-way visibility and to avoid the use of walls or other visual elements that may inhibit natural oversight.
- Hard surface sports courts should be prominently positioned at ground level rather than set apart, to encourage interaction with passers-by.
- Collection centers and refuse areas should be located in a prominent spot where foot traffic is naturally high — ideally close to the pedestrian entrance to the development and well clear of internal road junctions.



5.



CIRCULATION DESIGN AND STREET FURNISHINGS FOR RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENTS

- The circulation scheme should create clear links between homes, local services and exit routes, with no visual obstructions. Longer routes should offer rest areas with benches and shading, which will be valued by those (often women) carrying heavy shopping bags or accompanying children and older adults.
- Signage promoting telephone numbers for use in an emergency or to report any form of domestic violence should be displayed.
- Panic buttons should be placed at strategic points around the development, such as the building entrances, shared facilities and services and recreational spaces set apart from roads and pathways.
- White reflective lighting should be installed to provide sufficient illumination for all public spaces, with particular attention to more remote parts of the site.
- Avoid thick and/or low bushes and foliage that could be used to conceal someone's presence.

6.



RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS

Corridors and passageways should be:

- Well-lit, with clear sightlines and audibility: Ideally, lighting should be natural or mixed (natural and artificial). Artificial lighting should always be white, reflective and activated by sensor immediately on entry.
- Security cameras should be placed in all passageways.
- Avoid protracted corridors, or at least provide rest areas along the way, preferably with direct access to the outside.

Stairs:

- We recommend the use of integrated staircases rather than closed wells, accessed directly from the passageway with no intervening doors or other visual obstructions. This approach makes it easier for people to see and hear what is happening around them. Staircases may also form part of the recommended evacuation route.
- If a stairwell/vestibule is included in the design, or there is a gap between the staircase and a fire door, it is advisable to ensure that security cameras are installed and there is some source of natural light.
- Staircase designs that prevent residents from seeing and hearing each other as they move around the building should be avoided.

Access:

- The entrance lobby should be equipped with white, sensor-activated lighting.
- An information board should be placed outside entrances, with emergency telephone numbers clearly displayed.
- The installation of a panic button is recommended, particularly in buildings located at a distance from the main entrance to the development.
- Outdoor space should be equipped with benches and electric lighting.

Residential layouts:

- Open-plan kitchen and living areas create a visual and functional unity that allows activities to be shared, helping break down stereotypes around traditional gender roles.
- Making all bedrooms the same size helps flatten out hierarchies within the family, allowing for a more egalitarian use of space. More equal layouts are better suited to, for example, the growing number of single-parent families headed by a woman.
- Homes should be designed as functionally flexible, modular spaces that can be continuously adapted to changing needs, such as adding a workspace or accommodating care for older adults or children.
- Laundry rooms should not directly adjoin apartments, as this creates an opportunity for trespass or home invasion. If unavoidable, reducing the size of the windows can help mitigate this risk. If double sliding windows are used, it is advisable to keep one side locked.



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