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WOMEN'S SAFETY AUDITS FOR A SAFER URBAN DESIGN

**Results of the pilot audit carried out in Centrum, Warsaw
(25 August 2007)**

October 2007

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I - Background

Feelings of insecurity and fear of crime and violence are highest in large cities. Urban design and planning do not create violence or other forms of assault, but they do create an environment that offers greater or lesser opportunities for violence. Making public spaces physically safer is one way to reduce the opportunities for assaults and the fear of crime.

As a result of their higher levels of fear of crime, women are generally more aware of those aspects of the built environment that can offer opportunities for crime and criminals and more sensitive to risks and insecurity. For this reason, utilising women's perceptions and experiences in urban design and planning can greatly enhance overall community safety.

The concept of Women's Safety Audits was developed in Toronto, Canada by the Metro Action Committee on Public Violence Against Women and Children (METRAC), and experimented worldwide. UN-HABITAT adapted and experimented this tool within the Safer Cities Programme.

A Women's Safety Audit is the best available tool for collecting information on public perceptions of the urban safety in relation to the urban design. Without proper knowledge of these public perceptions and experiences, social and physical planners can not theorize why crime happens, politicians can not formulate, prioritize and implement strategic policies and professionals can not combat (fear of) crime itself. It is a powerful tool for change, bringing an entire community together. Women's Safety Audits help create a more comfortable environment for women, children, elderly, and people with disabilities - for everyone. (METRAC, 1998)

The approach is based on the fact that fear of crime is highest amongst women, because they are more vulnerable. Therefore, if an area is considered safe by women, it is safe for everyone. Additionally, audits work on the premises that the experts on the security of a particular area are those who frequent it: its users. Thus, a Women's Safety Audit is conducted by a group of approximately 10 people who are familiar with the area and who are most vulnerable, such as women, children, elderly and disabled people, and people from marginalized or stigmatized groups. In a Safety Audit, women are the experts. You do not need a degree in planning or architecture - it is the experience of women and other vulnerable people that counts. (METRAC, 1998)

Women's Safety Audits consist of four steps.

1. Preparation and training: choosing an area, sensitization of key stakeholders and policy makers and training of the people who are going to conduct the audit walk itself;
2. Exploratory walks: a group of approximately ten people walk through the area with a map and a questionnaire to analyze the urban design and detect what corrective action needs to be taken in the urban environment in order to make it safer for its inhabitants;
3. Formulating recommendations: based on the views, perceptions and experiences of the people who conducted the walk and to be handed over to the key urban policy makers;
4. Follow up to ensure the implementation of recommendations.

The Safety Audit for Women can contribute to modifications in the design and planning of urban space that reduce the feeling of insecurity and occurrences of assault. Recommendations formulated on the basis of the comments provided by women during the audit can assist policy makers at the city level in addressing crime and safety problems.

II - Conducting a pilot audit in Centrum, Warsaw

As part of the preparation of the celebration of the 2007 World Habitat Day in Poland, and with aim at raising awareness on violence against women in public spaces and highlighting the significance of participatory planning processes to improve urban safety and living conditions, a pilot Women's Safety Audit was undertaken on 25 August in the city center of Warsaw.

The audit walk was organized under the guidance of the UN-HABITAT/ Warsaw Office in partnership with the Central District Hall, Fundacja Mama and PlanetWawa.

Eight women participated in the audit walk (ref. annex 1 – list of participants) that took place during night-time in the area delimited by the streets Marszałkowska, Chałubińskiego and Koszykowa and Jerozolimskie (ref. annex 2 – map).

Questions participants were trying to answer were as follows: "Why don't I like this place?"; "When and why do I feel uncomfortable here?"; "What if I were walking alone here late at night?"; "What if I had to wait for someone to come and pick me up?"; "Are there places someone could be hiding?"; "Does it feel safe during winter time/ in the rain?"; "Could I get help if I need it? Police station, city/ private guards, telephone, 24h/24 shops, neighbour?"; "What changes would make me feel safer?"

Participants, while walking in the selected area, assessed collectively the urban environment, and identify factors, such as lighting, signage, real and/or potential hiding places, maintenance, design, frequentation, etc., that may affect their safety and/ or feelings of insecurity. A questionnaire was provided to guide the participants and serve as reference point for discussions at the end of the walk (ref. annex 3 – questionnaire).

After the walk, the Central District Hall hosted the evaluation session which consisted of a summary of findings and joint recommendations. Participants pointed out factors which could affect and contribute to the safety of their environment (negative and positive aspects of the urban environment) and decided what the most important concerns were and established priorities with regard to suggested improvements and corrective measures to improve urban safety and design.

III - Outcomes from the pilot audit in Centrum, Warsaw

III.1 - Assessment of the urban environment

III.1.1 - Overall first impression

At first, majority considered the location is fairly safe.

However, some participants stated that they did not know if they would be brave enough to walk there alone.

III.1.2 - Words that best describe the location

The most recurrent words were: full of contrasts, diverse, surprising; antique with interesting buildings; peaceful atmosphere, but also lack of cohesion, neglected - mostly badly kept, mostly dirty and not friendly at night.

III.1.3 - Positive aspects about the location

Participants highlighted the vicinity of city centre; the easy access by public transport; the appropriate street addressing scheme; some old and nicely lit buildings; some small shops/boutiques nicely lit and a few restaurants open till late hours; a few green areas; busy area - though during daytime only, and traffic; security guards in a few places.

“Here when you look at this historic tenement and shop windows, you can say exactly where you are. Buildings have their own identity”. (Contrary of skyscrapers in Ul. Chałubińskiego or blocks of flats which are anonymous).

III.1.4 - Lighting

65 % of respondents considered the lighting scheme is fairly safe.
62 % of respondents considered pedestrian walkways and sidewalks are poorly lit.
75 % of respondents considered doorways, directional signs or maps are poorly lit.
50 % of respondents considered the lighting is obscured by trees or bushes or other obstructions.

Main streets are well lit, but secondary streets remain poorly lit.
Light is generally dedicated to buildings themselves rather than to walkways and pedestrians; participants noticed only 4 gates which were lit.
Some of the lights are obscured by trees, some are missing

“These streets are so dark... Really, it is dark.”

III.1.5 - Signage

First impression of signage is generally satisfactory.
However, all respondents noticed that there are no directional signs or maps nearby which can help you identify where they are.
Majority of respondents considered that if they weren't familiar with the place, it would be uneasy to find their way around.
All respondents also noticed that there are no signs which show where to get emergency assistance if needed.
Globally, participants noted the lack of board maps enabling finding the place; of signs (available signs are more dedicated to cars than pedestrians).

III.1.6 - Escape routes

Participants generally stated that it would be easy for an offender to disappear.

“It would not be difficult for the offender to escape... Easy! Among these streets, bushes...”
“For me the question is if I would be able to hide somewhere if under threat? Rather not, maybe behind a car or tree, I could run...”

III.1.7 - Getting assistance

Although the area feels crowded during day-time, the frequentation is rather low during night-time, said participants.

“It depends, but it is empty here. Complete lack of people.”

People that are likely to be around include: mostly inhabitants, office workers, passers-by and also men drinking beer in public spaces, drunkards during the night, prostitutes, etc.

“Over there, there were many inhabitants and a lady being seated on a bench, the other lady just had a walk with her dog. And it was so nice and calming, the fact that these people went out to sit on a bench, that they talk and enjoy themselves.”

“Beer drinkers... If I had to say whether presence of such persons is for me uncomfortable, yes it is... It's more uncomfortable than dangerous.”

Participants noticed one patrol during the walk and a few private building security guards. Majority of respondents stated that if they would have to call for help, nobody would hear you them. However, they possibly could ask for help in surrounding restaurants and to security guards.

III.1.8 - Maintenance

Majority highlighted it was a contrasted area, with attention mostly given to main streets.

“Marszalkowska is beautiful with its ornamented pavements like a tattoo, and, then you walk into a side street and it looks very much neglected, both pavements and green areas.” [...] “It very often happens that the whole street is on one side clean, cared for, nice and well lit and people live there, and on the other side of the street there are some ruins which awfully distort the view.”

Lack of maintenance seems indeed to be prominent in secondary streets, which suffer from a lack of maintenance for greeneries and pavements (i.e. herbs on the pavements that obstruct wheeling/pushing-chairs; difficulty to walk/ run with high heels; dirty pavements).

“I remember that quite often, as a mother with a pushing-chair, I had to leave the pavement to be able to move ahead.”

Participants also noticed some litter lying around, fliers/leaflets (often from sex shops) and dogs' excrements on the pavements, advertisements stuck to the windows and slightly torn... *“This gives the impression of a mess and negligence”.*

As a conclusion, participants stated the place did not feel properly cared for, but did not look abandoned. In their opinion, this may affect the potential of the neighborhood.

“Here are types of buildings which, with only a little care, could look tidy and pleasant.”

III.1.9 - Design

Participants detected:

- Some narrow sidewalks that make impossible to easily overtake a person coming ahead of us, or to cross over big puddles during winter time.
- Some very high ground floors, which give you a feeling of isolation when you pass by this wall.
- Some bushes/ recesses that may be places where someone could be hiding, where someone could bring a person to isolate this person.

“I looked at the streets and gate niches/ recesses, and whether they are closed or open... On the one hand, all these places where you can hide, these are places which at the same time pose a threat, for example, behind the pillars. On the other hand, these pillars bring variety to the street. We need to think about it carefully - whether liquidation of all these alcoves, pillars, decorations of the space solves the problem of safety or not. It seems it doesn't.”

III.1.10 - Urban furniture

Participants sometimes noticed an important number of bollards (not uniform, not the best quality and not the nicest), the lack of places where mothers can stop and rest with a child, the lack of rubbish bins as well as the lack of benches in public space that may refrain appropriation and use of public spaces (ex. Marszałkowska street and side streets).

“Although there are many green areas in the centre, people will not go out because they don't have places to sit down.”

III.2 - Recommendations and proposed corrective measures

After the audit, participants came up with various recommendations to improve urban safety and design; some can generate immediate actions; others require longer term actions and policy.

III.2.1 - Lighting

Participants were in favor of a better lighting scheme, especially in secondary streets. This includes lighting of shops, buildings, gates and squares and to cut down some of the existing branches/ trees which obscure light.

“There should be more lighting for people than for buildings.”[...] “Lightening of the City Hall would create warmer atmosphere around the building.”

Would be lighting a remedy for the participants? *“There is no one remedy, no a single method... Many things must work together... I don't know if the lighting would solve the problem, because, it is most pleasant, simply, when people are around...”*

The lightening scheme of the Investment House with BRE Bank was given as a good example.

III.2.2 - Signage

Participants suggested additional signs for pedestrians, not only for drivers: maps at the most important intersections; signposts to important institutions (Politechnika, Ministries, City Hall, Emergency).

III.2.3 - Getting assistance

Participants proposed more phone booths with emergency numbers.

III.2.4 - Maintenance

Participants highlighted the need to refurbish some buildings and make appropriate plans for maintenance purpose; improve the pavements in most of the streets and cut dry trees/ dry branches.

III.2.5 - Urban amenities

Participants stated that existing green areas/ squares should be improved and renovated, i.e. maintained, lit and furnished to meet users' needs, for instance mothers. They also stated that *"Green space and cared for gives the feeling of safety"*.

III.2.6 - Design

Participants recommended to:

- Improve some driveways, pedestrian's crossings, gates and pavements to make them more friendly for mothers and children and disabled.
- Enlarge some sidewalks as too narrow and obstructed by cars and as they make it difficult to overtake standing men.
- Promote bars and antiburglar blinds removal for shop windows. *"If they were open and well-lit they would give more feeling of safety"*.
- Develop and redesign spaces in front of the institutions. Participants emphasized that building should be conceived globally, attention should be paid to the whole building, not only its main entrance/ front door which include signs, light and places to sit down.
"Adapting the space in front of the institutions, it gives a lot... If the space in front of the institution is adapted, if there are these smaller lamps, it creates a sense of safety and it looks nicer."

They also recommended the use of other materials, tones, textures or colour aiming at improving comfort and sense of safety, such as light colors (i.e. for facades), wooden and not corroded materials.

"There were a few building which had light color facades and despite the fact that they were poorly lit, the light reflected from them and it had a different effect on a person passing by."

III.2.7 - Urban furniture

Participants recommended to:

- Remove some bollards and to have them unified in appearance; meaning not colorful and rusty but with style and more elegant to comply with urban esthetic requirements.
"If they were nice, wooden, nicely finished, forming a chain, so let's say that this is the material which would create more comfort than some metal painted in white..."
- Add benches, and to have solid ones... so as to encourage human presence in the public space.
- Add litter bins for better maintenance purpose.
"I like it that here in the centre there are stone rubbish bins so I don't have the feeling that it will fall into pieces, that somebody will use this piece to hit me or that I will stumble over it. It may be a silly example, little one, but it shows that if something is nicely done it has its effect."

III.2.8 - Changing the image of the neighborhood and diversifying the urban functions

Participants also stressed the need to change the image of the neighborhood and diversify its urban functions.

Participants recognized the huge potential of the neighborhood and clearly pointed out the need for the district to engage in a global policy with aim at attracting people, i.e. to diversify the services provided at the district level and undertake promotional activities (so as to encourage visit/sightsee; tourism).

Simultaneously, they indicated the necessity to involve local inhabitants in various community activities, and shared experiences they were familiar with, such as the project “Let’s start from petunia” and open exhibitions hold in the Old Town.

Participants underlined that *“This would make the place safer.”*

III.3 - Limitation of the pilot audit

Exploring a whole neighborhood may have impeded to come up with a clear picture of participants’ perceptions. In fact, perceptions can vary from one street to another. This made difficult for participants to properly fill the questionnaire.

Auditing a smaller site would have also helped translating the walk into more concrete and geographically-located recommendations.

III.4 - Conclusions

Main problems highlighted during the walk were: empty streets in the evening, dirty spaces – badly maintained squares and streets, inadequate lighting of public spaces, etc. We can therefore confirm that feelings of insecurity are directly linked to the quality, comfort and cleanliness of the area.

Discussions highlighted that public space play a role in developing and sustaining community relations. This may be taken into consideration and preserved or enhanced in any initiative carried out to improve urban living conditions.

The replication of this pilot audit in Żoliborz and Szmulki, Warsaw demonstrated the strong willingness of inhabitants to participate in such an exercise, to share their concerns and recommendations so as to improve their neighborhood. Participants indeed said they liked the walk, getting involved in their city, their neighborhood and the local spaces over which they have most control.

Users’ expertise can bring ideas to local decision-makers and sometimes innovative solutions. The Women's Safety Audit therefore constitutes a concrete contribution of the communities in the policy making process at local level, and forms an important step in systematizing participatory planning process.

The Women's Safety Audit helps highlighting feminine specificities in the context of the use they make of public spaces in the city and therefore can guide the local authorities when designing programme/ policy for risk management and prevention of insecurity.

Annex 1: List of participants, Women's Safety Audit, 25 August 2007

Discussants

1. Agnieszka Baryła (PlaNetWAWA)
2. Eliza Biała (PlaNetWAWA)
3. Sylwia Chutnik (MaMa Foundation)
4. Katarzyna Kuzko (PlaNetWAWA)
5. Urszula Majewska (Central District Hall, Warsaw, spokeswoman)
6. Marta Młodożeniec (PlaNetWAWA)
7. Joanna Szczepańska (PlaNetWAWA)
8. Anna Wieczorek (PlaNetWAWA)

Observers

9. Przemysław Bobak (UN-HABITAT Warsaw Office)
10. Marek Bryx (UN-HABITAT Warsaw Office)
11. Magdalena Dubrowska (Gazeta Stołeczna – Warsaw issue of Gazeta Wyborcza)
12. Grażyna Janowska (Gazeta Wyborcza)
13. Arkadiusz Kopczyński (Police Headquarters)
14. Piotr Pindor (PlaNetWAWA)
15. Gall Podlaszewski (PlaNetWAWA)
16. Magdalena Ślubowska (UN-HABITAT Warsaw Office)
17. Anna Wieczorek (Chamber of Town Planners)
18. Małgorzata Zaczek (City Hall Warsaw, Office of Crisis Management)

Annex 2: Map

Annex 3: Questionnaire

1. General information

Location:

Date:

Time (beginning/ end):

Audit group members:
.....
.....

2. Overall Impression

How would you generally rate the location?

very safe fairly safe not safe scary

List five words that best describe the location.

.....
.....

3. Lighting

First impression of lighting:

very good good satisfactory poor very poor

too dark too bright

What proportion of lights is out?

Are you able to identify a face 25 metres away?

yes no

Do you know where/whom to call if lights are out or broken?

yes no

Is the lighting obscured by trees or bushes or other obstructions?

yes no

How well does the lighting illuminate pedestrian walkways and sidewalks?

very well well satisfactorily poorly very poorly

How clearly does the lighting illuminate doorways, directional signs or maps?

very well well satisfactorily poorly very poorly

What is positive about the location?

How would you generally rate the lighting scheme?

very safe fairly safe not safe scary

Main problems, recommendations & corrective measures

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4. Signage

First impression of signage:

very good good satisfactory poor very poor

Is there a sign (i.e. room no., building name) identifying where you are?

yes no

If no, are there directional signs or maps nearby which can help you identify where you are?

yes no

Are there signs which show you where to get emergency assistance if needed?

yes no

Do the signs have a symbol attached?

yes no

Are there signs which direct you to wheelchair/ pushchair access?

yes no

Are there clearly defined entrance and exit doors?

yes no

Do exit doors identify where they exit to?

yes no

Is there information posted describing the building hours?

yes no

If you weren't familiar with the place, would it be easy to find your way around?

yes no

What is positive about the location?

How would you generally rate the signage scheme?

very safe fairly safe not safe scary

Main problems, recommendations & corrective measures

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5. Sightlines

Can you clearly see what's happening ahead?

yes no

If no, why not?

Indoors: sharp corners walls pillars other
Outdoors: bushes fences hill other

Are there places someone could be hiding?

yes no

If yes, where?

What is positive about the location?

Main problems, recommendations & corrective measures

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6. Isolation - Eye Distance

At the time of your audit, does the area feel isolated?

yes no

How many people are likely to be around?

In the early morning: many several a few none
During the day: many several a few none
In the evening: many several a few none
Late at night (after 10 p.m.): many several a few none

Is it easy to predict when people will be around?

yes no

What kinds of people are likely to be around? Please list.

.....

Would their respective presence make you feel safer or uncomfortable?

.....

Can you see a telephone or a sign directing you to emergency assistance?

yes no

Is there a monitor or surveillance system?

yes no don't know

What is positive about the location?

What is your overall impression regarding isolation – eye distance?

very safe fairly safe not safe scary

Main problems, recommendations & corrective measures

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7. Isolation - Ear Distance

If you call for help, would someone hear you?

yes no

Is there excessive noise that would interfere with your shouting?

yes no

Could you hear someone approaching?

yes no

Could you ask for help if you feel unsafe?

yes no

If yes, who could you ask (petrol station, 24h/24 shop, bars/ restaurants, public transportation employees, other)? Please precise.

.....

Is the area patrolled?

yes no don't know

If yes, how frequently?

every hour once per afternoon/evening don't know

What is positive about the location?

What is your overall impression regarding isolation – ear distance?

very safe fairly safe not safe scary

Main problems, recommendations & corrective measures

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8. Movement Predictors (a predictable or unchangeable route or path)

Is it to predict a woman's movements (e.g. her route)?

yes no

Is there an alternative well-lit and frequently travelled route or path available?

yes no don't know

Can you tell what is at the other end of the path, tunnel, or walkway?

yes no

Are there corners, alcoves, or bushes where someone could hide and wait for you?

yes no

Are there corners, alcoves, or bushes where someone could bring you to isolate you?

yes no

Are there areas which should be barricaded, enclosed, locked and which are not currently (abandoned/ unfinished building, vacant lot, etc.)? Please precise.

.....

What is positive about the location?

What is your overall impression regarding movement predictors?

very safe fairly safe not safe scary

Main problems, recommendations & corrective measures

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9. Escape Routes

How easy would it be for an offender to disappear?

very easy quite easy not very easy

Is there more than one exit?

yes no don't know

What is positive about the location?

Main problems, recommendations & corrective measures

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10. Maintenance

What is the surrounding or nearby land used for?

- stores offices restaurants factories
residential houses and streets busy traffic parking lots river bank
heavily treed/wooded area campus buildings Don't know Other

Does the place feel cared for?

- yes no

Does the place feel abandoned?

- yes no

If yes, why?

First impression about the surrounding's maintenance:

- very good good satisfactory poor very poor

Is there litter lying around?

- yes no

Are there graffiti on the walls?

- yes no

In your opinion are there racist or sexist slogans/signs/images on the walls?

- yes no

Are there signs of vandalism?

- yes no

Do you know to whom maintenance concerns should be reported?

- yes no

From your experience, how long do repairs generally take?

- one day within one week from 1-4 weeks more than 1 month don't know

What is positive about the location?

What is your overall impression regarding maintenance?

- very safe fairly safe not safe scary

Main problems, recommendations & corrective measures

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.....
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11. Overall Design

First impression of overall design:

very good good satisfactory poor very poor

In your opinion, is this a user-friendly place?

yes no

If no, why?

In your opinion, is this a mother-friendly place?

yes no

If no, why?

Would other materials, tones, textures or colours improve your sense of safety?

yes no

If yes, which ones?

Should additional urban facilities be planned to improve your comfort and sense of safety?

yes no

If yes, which ones?

What is positive about the location?

What is your overall impression regarding urban design?

very safe fairly safe not safe scary

Main problems, recommendations & corrective measures

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12. Priority improvements

Among all recommendations and corrective measures you suggested improving the situation, which ones are priorities?