

A Study on Placemaking through Youth-Friendly Spaces in Sri Lankan Urban Context

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Abstract

Urbanization in Sri Lanka, driven by industrial expansion and rural-to-urban migration, has transformed cities into hubs of education, employment, culture, and services, particularly for youth. However, urban public spaces and placemaking efforts often overlook the deeper spatial, social, and experiential needs of young people, focusing mainly on functional requirements rather than meaningful engagement. There is a critical research gap in understanding how youth, the urban context, and placemaking interconnect, especially within Sri Lanka, where studies rarely investigate how spatial design influences youth behavior or how youth contribute to the shaping of public space. The purpose of this research is to examine how placemaking can create effective, inclusive, and sustainable spatial interconnections between youth and the urban built environment within the Sri Lankan context. This study explores the relationship between youth behavior and spatial qualities within the urban context, emphasizing how architectural and urban design approaches can contribute to meaningful placemaking. A qualitative methodology is adopted, utilizing three case studies as the primary basis for data collection and analysis. The focus is on identifying how specific spatial qualities influence youth behavior and how these insights can guide more responsive, youth-centered, and contextually appropriate urban places. Findings highlight that youth-friendly spaces are essential for fostering social inclusion, encouraging active participation, and nurturing civic responsibility. When 'placemaking' is aligned with the real needs and lived experiences of young people, it enhances their overall quality of life and strengthens both community well-being and the long-term development prospects of the nation..

Keywords: Placemaking, youth-friendly spaces, quality of life, youth, urban context.

Introduction

Urbanization continues to intensify as more than half of the world's population now lives in cities, driving higher density and increasing demands on urban infrastructure. This rapid rural-to-urban migration significantly affects quality of life, making placemaking, the deliberate design and activation of public spaces essential (Perera et al., 2024). Well-designed public spaces foster social interaction, a sense of belonging, and meaningful engagement, which are particularly important for urban youth. In Sri Lanka, youth are often overlooked in urban public-space planning, even though their social behaviors, creative activities, and daily interactions actively shape how spaces are perceived and used (Jayathilaka & Chandrasekara, 2016). Creating youth-friendly spaces is thus crucial, as it not only enhances young people's quality of life but also contributes to a vibrant, inclusive urban future. This study focuses on understanding how young Sri Lankans engage with and co-create public spaces, providing insights for both theory and practice in placemaking.

Critical Argument

The rapid expansion of urban industries and the influx of people from rural areas seeking employment and improved living conditions are often celebrated as indicators of economic growth. However, this unchecked urbanization frequently overwhelms city infrastructure and fails to deliver the quality of life that attracts residents, particularly young people (UN-Habitat, 2023). Although youth constitute a significant portion of urban populations and are drawn to cities for education, employment, cultural engagement, and social opportunities, urban spaces largely remain ill-equipped to meet their complex needs (Perera et al., 2024). This disconnect raises critical questions about how effectively urban environments are supporting the very demographic that drives economic vitality and cultural vibrancy.

Urban placemaking has traditionally focused on basic functionality rather than fostering environments that enable youth to thrive. As a result, public spaces often underperform in promoting mental well-being, physical activity, social cohesion, and civic engagement among young people (Sustainable Earth Reviews, 2020). Evidence from participatory planning studies suggests that integrating youth perspectives into public-space design is not merely beneficial but essential: youth-friendly spaces enhance social inclusion, cultivate civic responsibility, and empower young individuals to contribute actively to the urban fabric (Socio-Ecological Practice Research, 2024; Chen & Yu, 2024). Therefore, the lack of attention to youth needs in urban planning is not just a design oversight, it represents a systemic failure that limits the potential of cities to become inclusive, resilient, and socially vibrant.

Research Questions

The Central Question of the study is: How do the Placemaking youth-friendly spaces contribute to the uplifting quality of Life of Youth in the Sri Lankan Urban Context?

To answer the above question, the research also explores the following questions.

1. What is quality of life for the young generation in the Sri Lankan Urban context?
2. What are the qualities/ attributes of youth-friendly spaces?
3. How the placemaking be done through youth-friendly spaces?

Research Objectives

1. To identify the relationship between the behavior of the young generation and spatial Qualities, focusing on the urban context.
2. To explore the concept of placemaking and how to architecturally achieve it.
3. To recognize the ways to uplift the quality of life of youth architecturally in an urban context.

Research Gap and need for the study

Urban public spaces and placemaking projects often fail to consider the perspectives and needs of youth, even though young people play a vital role in creating dynamic and inclusive cities (Chawla & Heft, 2002; Hart, 1997). Youth are often perceived as passive occupants of urban areas, yet their interactions, social behaviors, and cultural activities actively shape how these spaces are viewed, utilized, and transformed (Mossberger et al., 2008). The relationship between youth experiences, urban environments, and placemaking is still not sufficiently well understood, especially regarding how these elements work together to shape meaningful and functional public spaces (Evans, 2009; Whyte, 1980).

While global research is increasingly emphasizing the value of youth involvement in urban design and placemaking (Dovey & Pafka, 2019; Sanders, 2002), there is a lack of evidence from Sri Lanka. Most Sri Lankan studies on urban spaces address overall community needs or focus on physical infrastructure, rarely exploring how youth, as a unique demographic, interact with and influence urban environments (Gunawardena & Seneviratne, 2018). This creates a notable context-specific gap, since international research cannot be directly transferred to the distinct social, cultural, and spatial context of Sri Lanka.

This research aims to address these gaps by investigating how youth engage with and influence urban spaces through placemaking in Sri Lankan cities. By examining the reciprocal relationship between youth, urban contexts, and placemaking practices, the study seeks to generate contextually grounded insights on youth-friendly public space design. The research further intends to provide practical recommendations for urban planners and policymakers to create inclusive, participatory, and youth-responsive public spaces that reflect the social and cultural realities of Sri Lanka.

Literature Review

Concept of Placemaking

Placemaking is fundamentally a people-centered and collaborative approach to shaping public spaces. It involves engaging stakeholders and communities in the planning, design, and management of places to strengthen the connection between people and their environment (Jacobs, 1961; Whyte, 1980). Over time, placemaking has evolved into a multidisciplinary practice, combining urban planning, architecture, sociology, and public policy to create vibrant and meaningful urban areas (Chawla & Mintzer, 2018).

Despite its widespread use, placemaking lacks a universally consistent definition. Studies reveal that it is often understood as a process-based and context-sensitive practice, emphasizing community participation, public space improvement, and adaptability over time (Silva et al., 2023; Nursanty & Wulandari, 2020). Core principles of placemaking include active community engagement, provision of accessible and diverse activities,

reflecting local identity and history, and ensuring comfort and safety in public spaces (Carr et al., 1992; Nursanty & Wulandari, 2020).

From a relational perspective, places are not static; they are continuously constructed through social interactions, memories, and human interventions. Placemaking transforms spatial boundaries and physical elements into meaningful places, fostering a sense of belonging and identity among users (Cilliers & Timmermans, 2022). However, literature also notes potential challenges. While traditional placemaking fosters community belonging, it may exclude broader populations if dominated by specific stakeholder groups, and professionalization of the practice can risk losing its grassroots and inclusive character (Lester, 2019; Silva et al., 2023).

Overall, placemaking is a flexible yet contested concept. Its success depends on balancing physical design, social interactions, and participatory processes, making it especially relevant when designing youth-friendly spaces in urban contexts (Chawla & Mintzer, 2018; Cilliers & Timmermans, 2022).

Types of Placemaking

Placemaking can take different forms depending on scale, goals, and stakeholder involvement, commonly categorized as top-down, bottom-up, and collaborative approaches (Silva et al., 2023; Chawla & Mintzer, 2018). Top-down placemaking is authority-led, focusing on infrastructure and aesthetics but often overlooking local needs (Lester, 2019). Bottom-up placemaking emerges from communities, emphasizing empowerment, inclusivity, and local identity (Nursanty & Wulandari, 2020; Cilliers & Timmermans, 2022). Collaborative placemaking combines both approaches, integrating professional expertise with community input to create functional and socially relevant spaces (Carr et al., 1992; Silva et al., 2023). Understanding these types is crucial for designing 'youth-friendly spaces', as participatory approaches can enhance engagement, creativity, and a sense of ownership among young urban residents (Chawla & Mintzer, 2018; Cilliers & Timmermans, 2022).

Fundamental Placemaking Principles

Placemaking rests on core principles that prioritize people, purpose, and place. First, community participation is central: successful placemaking involves engaging local stakeholders early and throughout the process, ensuring that the design reflects their needs, values, and identities (Nursanty & Wulandari, 2023; Menezes et al., 2006). Along with this, usefulness and multi-functionality are crucial and great places accommodate various activities, serving as spots for social interaction, recreation, and cultural events (Peinhardt, 2023; Myrick, 2024).

In addition, accessibility and connectivity ensure that spaces are inclusive and easy for people to reach and navigate (Project for Public Spaces-based frameworks; Myrick, 2024). Comfort and safety also play a big role: factors like seating, lighting, cleanliness, and personal security make a place inviting and usable (FHP Architects, 2022). Finally, a strong sense of identity and belonging is vital, and essentially, places should reflect local history, culture, or character so that users feel emotionally connected (Menezes et al., 2006; Nursanty & Wulandari, 2023).

Implementation of Placemaking

The implementation of placemaking involves transforming public spaces into vibrant, engaging, and meaningful places through design, programming, and community participation (Chawla & Mintzer, 2018; PPS, 2005). A successful placemaking process typically begins with assessing the needs and aspirations of the local community, followed by short-term interventions such as events, pop-ups, or temporary installations to test ideas and encourage engagement. Over time, these activities inform long-term design strategies, infrastructure improvements, and policy decisions that make spaces more inclusive, accessible, and socially relevant (Silva et al., 2023; Carr et al., 1992).

A prominent example of placemaking in action is Chicago's Millennium Park, particularly the *Cloud Gate* sculpture, popularly known as The Bean. The installation demonstrates how public art, programming, and thoughtful design can transform an underused urban area into a dynamic civic hub that attracts residents and visitors alike (Choose Chicago, n.d.; PPS, 2005). By encouraging social interaction, it plays and promotes engagement with the skyline of the city. The principles of placemaking, turning a physical space into a meaningful and interactive experience that fosters community, identity, and civic pride (Chawla & Mintzer, 2018).



Figure 1 – Implementation of Placemaking

Source: The Bean, Chicago_©Choose Chicago (<https://www.choosechicago.com/articles/tours-and-attractions/the-bean-chicago/>)

Impacts and Benefits of Placemaking

Placemaking has a wide range of positive impacts that extend across social, economic, health, and environmental dimensions. On the social side, placemaking fosters stronger community engagement and social cohesion by creating inclusive public spaces that encourage interaction, belonging, and civic participation (PPS, 2016; Homesight, 2023). It can also enhance mental wellbeing: when people help design their own public spaces and feel more connected to them, rates of depression and stress decline, and a stronger sense of place and community identity emerges (PPS, 2016; Lakshmi Thilagam, 2023). In informal or low-income settings, such as kampungs, participatory placemaking has been shown to boost feelings of local identity, pride, social connection, and empowerment (MDPI study, 2019).

Economically, placemaking acts as a powerful catalyst. Investments in public space not only improve the quality of life but also stimulate local economies. Public realm improvements can attract small businesses, boost foot traffic, and raise property values (Brookings, 2021; Dublin City report, 2022). Well-designed places become economic assets, drawing in residents, visitors, and entrepreneurs, and helping cities leverage public spaces as incubators of economic activity. Environmentally, placemaking can contribute to sustainability: integrating green infrastructure, walkable layouts, and active-

transport design lowers carbon emissions, improves public health, and builds climate resilience (Homesight, 2023; Happy Cities, 2025).

Youth-Friendly Spaces

Youth-friendly spaces are public environments designed to meet the social, recreational, educational, and cultural needs of young people, fostering their development and engagement within urban contexts (Chawla & Heft, 2002; Hart, 1997). These spaces go beyond basic amenities, providing opportunities for social interaction, creativity, skill-building, and civic participation. Research shows that when young people have access to well-designed, safe, and inclusive spaces, they are more likely to engage in pro-social behaviors, develop a sense of belonging, and strengthen their identity and autonomy (Mossberger et al., 2008; Evans, 2009).

Effective youth-friendly spaces are characterized by participatory design, where young people are actively involved in shaping the space according to their needs and preferences (Hart, 1997; Chawla & Heft, 2002). Accessibility, safety, diversity of activities, and flexibility are key principles; spaces that integrate these aspects encourage ongoing engagement and adaptability to changing needs (Whyte, 1980; Mossberger et al., 2008). Additionally, youth-friendly environments can contribute to broader societal benefits, including community cohesion, reduction of anti-social behaviors, and nurturing civic responsibility among urban youth (Evans, 2009; Chawla & Heft, 2002).

Architectural attributes of youth-friendly spaces

The architectural attributes of youth-friendly spaces refer to the physical and spatial design elements that make public areas safe, engaging, and accessible for young people. Overall, these spaces are designed inclusively with the following attributes to foster social interaction, participation, and a sense of belonging among youth.

Flexibility: Spaces that can be easily reconfigured to accommodate a variety of activities and uses, and that can adapt to changing needs over time. (Reynolds & Hastings, 2009)

Safety and security: Spaces that are designed to be physically and emotionally safe, with appropriate lighting, security measures, and visibility. (Morgan et al., 2018)

Access and inclusivity: Spaces that are easily accessible to all young people, including those with disabilities, and that are designed to be welcoming and inclusive of diverse backgrounds and experiences. (UN-Habitat, 2015)

Comfort and privacy: Spaces that provide comfortable seating, temperature control, and acoustics, as well as opportunities for privacy and quiet reflection. (Kim & Kaplan, 2004)

Sustainability: Spaces that are designed to be environmentally sustainable, with features such as green roofs, rainwater harvesting systems, and energy-efficient lighting and heating. (Duggal & Greenberger, 2014)

These architectural attributes are essential to creating youth-friendly spaces that are safe, accessible, and welcoming to young people, and that promote their physical, emotional, and social well-being.

Urban Context

The urban context refers to the physical, social, economic, and cultural environment in which cities develop and evolve (UN-Habitat, 2023; Silva et al., 2023). It encompasses the density of population, land use patterns, transportation networks, public spaces, infrastructure, and community interactions that collectively shape the urban experience. Understanding the urban context is crucial for placemaking because the characteristics of a city, such as population composition, cultural diversity, and spatial organization, influence how public spaces are used and perceived (Jacobs, 1961; Whyte, 1980).

Urban public spaces are often shaped by both top-down planning interventions and bottom-up community practices. High-density areas, for instance, require careful spatial design to ensure accessibility, safety, and inclusivity, while low-density areas may struggle with connectivity and social interaction (Chawla & Mintzer, 2018; Evans, 2009). In addition, urban contexts determine the socio-economic and cultural relevance of public spaces: the success of placemaking interventions depends on aligning design with local needs, lifestyles, and patterns of daily urban activity (Mossberger et al., 2008). Considering the urban context is particularly important when designing youth-friendly spaces, as young people's engagement, mobility, and participation are strongly affected by the city's physical and social structures (Hart, 1997; Chawla & Heft, 2002).

Sense of Place

The successful implementation of an Inclusive Design Process with a Diversity agenda results in creating a 'Place'. Unlike outcomes of prescribed facility design templates, the place created becomes deeply meaningful to the youth community in which it is built, which can encourage better youth connections, growth, and engagement (Fig. 3).

By creating a distinctly local space that reflects the values and aspirations of the youth community, they instinctively take ownership, resulting in a greater sense of pride in and respect for the place (Adams, J., 2016).



Figure 3 - The sense of place created by the Cockburn Wetlands Education Centre

Source: <https://www.sitearchitecture.com.au/designing-for-youth/>

SITE's broader understanding of community needs through our engagement processes and design responses has encouraged better planning of youth and community spaces. For example, our design response for the Dalyellup Multi-purpose Hub identified opportunities for improving activation and

crossover of activities with adjacent developments already underway (Fig.4). Parking, landscape, precinct drainage, skate park, nature play, and pump track developments were altered to provide a more cohesive colocation of community infrastructure that offers more opportunity for community activation, which, over time, will greatly enrich the sense of place. (Adams, J.,2016)

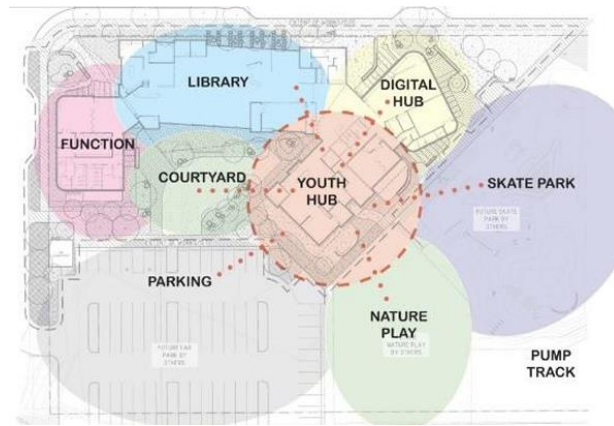


Figure 4 - The Dallyelup Multi-purpose Hub

Source: <https://www.sitearchitecture.com.au/designing-for-youth/>

Overall, for spaces and places for youth to be successful, they must involve a tailored engagement strategy followed by a collaborative design process, which places priority on diversity and inclusion. The design responses informed by this approach have the potential to be more engaging and stimulating and offer more opportunities for activation, meeting the needs and desires of the local youth while also enhancing broader community facilities and services. The outcomes can create a youth and community space with a strong sense of place. Local, this sense of place encourages a deep sense of youth and community pride, empowering youth to take ownership of their place where they can safely and respectfully learn, play, grow, and thrive. (Site Architecture Studio, 2022)

Precedent Studies

In addition, the study incorporates precedent research that examines successful approaches to youth-oriented urban environments. These precedents provide valuable insights into design qualities and spatial strategies that have effectively responded to the needs of young people. Drawing from these studies, a set of criteria is developed as a framework for analyzing the selected case study, enabling a more systematic evaluation of how placemaking can uplift the quality of life of youth in Sri Lankan urban settings.

Dynamic and Interactive Design:

Young people are attracted to the vibrant and interactive architecture of Federation Square, Melbourne. A stimulating environment created by distinctive architectural features, including geometric structures, free-flowing spaces, and interactive displays, makes it impressive for visitors. Young visitors are allowed to engage and are encouraged to explore due to these design components (Fig.5).



Figure 5 – Dynamic & Interactive space design using geometric structures
Source - https://encrypted-tbn0.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn:ANd9GcRwwV5t9097_NPqeZx8cvzzYGRSrpYksupqA&usqp=CAU

Event Spaces and Performance Venues:

Young people's interests are attended to by the particular event spaces and performance spaces provided by Federation Square. Concerts, cultural activities, and public events are held in the main square. Young performers and artists are able to show their skills and engage with the neighborhood because outdoor stages and amphitheatres are available (Fig.6).



Figure 6 – Outdoor Event space

Source - https://www.visitvictoria.com/-/media/atdw/melbourne/see-and-do/art-and-culture/architecture-and-design/a4c0c3cff3c70f2c7abc700bc62764a3_1600x1200.jpeg?ts=20220627301255

Cultural Institutions and Exhibition Spaces:

The Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) and the Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia are two of the cultural institutions that are situated in Federation Square. These organizations offer exhibitions, workshops, and interactive displays that are relevant to young people's preferences. Young visitors' artistic exploration, artistic expression, and cultural engagement are encouraged by the presence of various cultural locations.

Digital and Technological Integration:

Recognizing the vitality of these components in the culture of youth, Federation Square promotes the integration of the digital and technological spheres. Collaborative artwork, live broadcasts, and smart installations are shown on big screens and digital displays. Young people are given greater opportunities to interact with digital media, socialize online, and enjoy innovative forms of creative expression and entertainment because of this technological integration (Fig. 7).

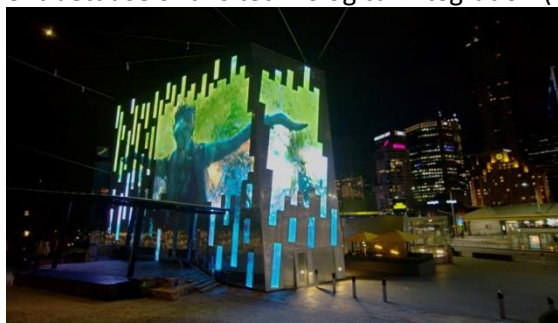


Figure 7 – Digital Canvas on the wall

Source -https://images.squarespace-cdn.com/content/v1/5e83b641c9b1c42c3bfbcb2b9/15940935542643JRTV1MZTY6WVEQ8K2J5/FSQ_01.jpg?format=1500w

Informal Gathering Spaces:

Informal Gathering Places: Federation Square offers a variety of unofficial gathering spots, which allow young people to interact socially (Fig.8). Open-air terraces, outside seating areas, and restaurants provide comfortable spots to relax, mingle, and delight in the lively ambiance of the square. Such settings stimulate spontaneous connections and provide young visitors with chances for bonding.



Figure 8– Informal Gathering area and outdoor seating

Source - <https://firesideagency.com.au/media/pages/projects/reimagining-melbourne-s-gathering-place/d15a40f732-1670288840/fireside-agency-case-study-work-fed-square-1-1200x.jpg>

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach to investigate how urban spaces influence the behavior and quality of life of Sri Lankan youth. The methodology is grounded in primary information gathering through direct engagement with selected case studies. Three Sri Lankan urban spaces were chosen as case studies due to their significance as youth-oriented environments within the local context.

Data collection relied heavily on deep on-site observations to document spatial arrangements, user activities, and patterns of interaction. In addition, informal discussions were conducted with users and members of the general public to capture perceptions, experiences, and expectations regarding these spaces. This triangulation of observation and discussion ensures a more comprehensive understanding of youth engagement within each setting.

Each case study was analyzed according to its spatial strategies, with attention given to the types of spaces provided, such as gathering areas, circulation routes, event-focused zones, and informal meeting points, and how this influenced user behavior. The evaluation of the case studies was further supported by a framework derived from the literature survey, including precedent studies, which provided criteria for assessing the effectiveness of placemaking strategies in creating youth-friendly urban spaces. Through this systematic process, the methodology enables both an in-depth understanding of the selected cases and a broader reflection on how spatial design can uplift the quality of life of youth in urban contexts.

Limitations of Research Scope

Despite efforts to ensure comprehensive analysis, the study faces several limitations:

- Only three case studies were chosen in this study, all located within Colombo. Therefore, the findings might not fully reflect youth-space dynamics in other Sri Lankan cities with different cultural or spatial contexts.
- Observations took place during specific time periods, which may not account for seasonal changes, nighttime behaviors, or event-based activities that affect youth engagement.
- Data on user perceptions were gathered through informal conversations, which may lack depth or consistency compared to structured interviews or focus groups.
- Qualitative observations partly depend on the researcher's interpretation of spatial use and behavioral patterns. Although guided by literature-based criteria, researcher bias cannot be entirely avoided.
- The study does not include numerical data (surveys, counts, statistics), limiting the ability to apply findings broadly to the youth population.

Case Studies

Case Study-1: Diyatha Uyana, Battaramulla, Colombo, Sri Lanka

Diyatha Uyana is a multifunctional open urban space located in Battaramulla, Sri Lanka. It is a vibrant recreational park that has been converted into a youth-friendly space. Diyatha Uyana was built to fulfil the entertainment and recreational needs of the community and is one of the first recreational Parks built in the most recent round of growth in Colombo. The design typologies applied by Diyatha Uyana to create fun and inviting surroundings for youngsters are discussed in this case study (Fig. 9).

Nature-centred spaces:

Diyatha Uyana is a prominent example of a nature-centered public space that attracts large numbers of young people. Its design integrates landscape gardens, water features, and open walkways that encourage relaxation, social interaction, and outdoor recreation. A strong connection to nature offers

opportunities for stress relief, physical activity, and mental well-being, all of which are crucial for young people living in highly urbanized environments. Informal gathering areas and leisure-oriented facilities within the park allow youth to socialize in a safe and accessible environment, while the presence of cultural and recreational activities fosters inclusivity and community engagement. Overall, Diyatha Uyana demonstrates how nature-centred design can positively influence the physical, psychological, and social dimensions of youth quality of life.

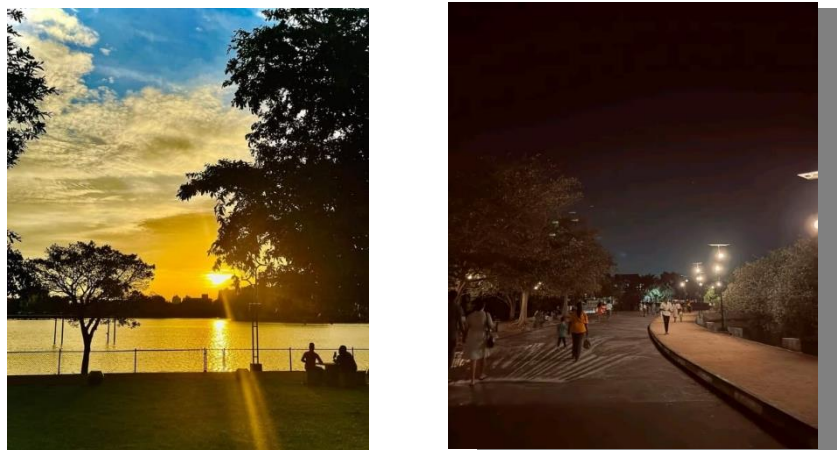


Figure 9 – Nature-centered spaces in Diyatha Uyana
Source - Author

Open and flexible spaces:

Diyatha Uyana consists of open, flexible layouts that support a variety of events and activities. The public area has broad lawns, external pavilions, and flexible spaces that may be used for a variety of events, including market-style events, art exhibits, live performances of music, and festivals of culture (Fig.10). Young people can utilize the spaces for interacting, group meetings, and recreational pursuits due to the flexible structure.



Figure 10 – Open and flexible Restaurant in Diyatha Uyana
Source - <https://bandi42.files.wordpress.com/2013/03/p1020049.jpg>

Interactive spaces:

Diyatha Uyana includes interactive spaces, which encourage involvement in the community and social interaction among young individuals. Young people are allowed to socialize and share experiences while enjoying pedal boat rides in the central lake region. In addition, there are also dedicated picnic areas, seating spots, and stalls for food providing locations for interacting and creating interpersonal relationships (Fig.11).



Figure 11 – Seating spots and interactive landscape

Source - <https://dynamic-media-cdn.tripadvisor.com/media/photo-o/05/06/4f/a4/diyatha-uyana.jpg?w=1200&h=-1&s=1>

Technology-enabled spaces:

Diyatha Uyana includes technology-enabled places to capture the interest of youths who are proficient with technology. It also offers free Wi-Fi access for every visitor, encouraging children to stay linked and take part in online adventures. Separate spaces with seating and charging stations are also offered to youths to enjoy their devices comfortably (Fig.12).



Figure 12– 3D Art pathway Source-https://1.bp.blogspot.com/-I7qg3x528SY/UK2EtqylAKI/AAAAAAAAIrg/ZzfM8us92MY/s1600/1_DSCF1326.JPG

Accessible areas:

Diyatha Uyana includes a range of strategies to meet the requirements of young people with disabilities, ensuring accessibility for all. The park has ramps, wheelchair-accessible seating places, and wheelchair-friendly pathways (Fig.13). Furthermore, the park administration ensures that activities and events include people of all abilities.



Figure 13 – wheelchair-friendly pathways

Source - https://www.sundayobserver.lk/sites/default/files/news/2017/08/25/z_p43-Urban-2.jpg

Sustainable areas:

Diyatha Uyana provides sustainable architectural typologies as an example of ecological management. The park uses sustainable methods like garbage disposal, preservation of water, and the usage of renewable energy sources. Greenery, such as shrubs, trees, and flowerbeds, enhances the aesthetic appeal while making the surroundings healthy for young visitors. The case study of Diyatha Uyana

demonstrates that architectural typologies can be used effectively in creating a setting that is welcoming to young people. For other metropolitan areas aiming to address the requirements and interests of young people, it acts as an inspiration by promoting their personal growth, social relationships, and overall well-being.

Case Study-2: Good Market, Colombo, Sri Lanka

Good Market in Sri Lanka is a community-driven initiative that promotes social enterprises and ethical businesses through a nonprofit organic food store and a weekly market at the Colombo Racecourse.



Featuring over 120 suppliers and 70–80 exhibitors, it offers organic produce, ethical products, food, performances, and activities. By applying architectural typologies, Good Market has created youth-friendly, inviting spaces that foster engagement and social interaction, making it both an economic and cultural hub (Fig.14).

Figure 14 – social interactive pathways

Source - [Galle Good Market starting 23 January | Daily FT](#)

Open and flexible spaces:

Good Market includes open and flexible spaces that can handle the different needs and pastimes of young people. The marketplace has wide social gathering areas, exterior vendor stalls, and shared seating areas, which encourage cooperation and social interaction. Young individuals have an opportunity to demonstrate their talents as well as take part in community activities due to the flexible arrangement, allowing for a variety of events, workshops, as well as performances.

Interactive spaces:

For the purpose of encouraging participation and interaction, Good Market features interactive spaces on the premises. These spaces often feature interactive demonstrations, hands-on activities, and artworks that motivate people of all ages to learn, explore, and produce. Young people's creativity and interactions with others are promoted by these interactive features, which promote a spirit of amusement and investigation.

Technology-enabled spaces:

Good Market includes technology-enabled places as it appreciates the importance of technology in young people's daily lives. Accessibility to digital resources and tools, such as charging stations, wireless internet, and information stands, is made feasible in these places. With technology, Good Market is making it achievable for younger consumers to interact online, get information, and maintain contact while participating in the market ambiance.

Sustainable spaces:

Via its architectural design, Good Market emphasizes sustainability and ecological morality. The market utilizes eco-friendly processes, including the utilization of reused materials, recycling containers, and energy-efficient lighting systems. Young visitors feel the attraction better with an abundance of greenery, such as plant pots and vertical landscaping, that provides an essence of the environment.

Community-oriented spaces:

By providing areas that encourage teamwork, exchange of cultures, and conversation, Good Market contributes to developing a sense of community. The marketplace regularly arranges workshops, panel presentations, and neighborhood-led initiatives dealing with problems related to society and the environment. Young people can interact with other people who share their passions, contribute thoughts, and collaborate to enhance their communities in these circumstances. For other markets and gathering spots aiming to prioritize the youth's desires and needs, the Good Market provides an inspirational precedent in encouraging their active engagement, empowerment, and connectivity with their local communities.

Case Study-3: Galle Face, Colombo, Sri Lanka

Galle Face Green is a prominent urban open space located along the western coastline of Colombo, Sri Lanka. Originally established during the British colonial period as a promenade for recreational activities, it has evolved into a multifunctional public space that caters to diverse groups, including families, youth, tourists, and street vendors. Spanning approximately 5 hectares, it serves as a venue for social gatherings, cultural events, sports, and informal economic activities (Fig.15).

Despite its popularity, the area faces challenges related to crowd management, inadequate amenities, and environmental concerns such as coastal erosion and pollution. As a case study, Galle Face Green provides insights into how historic urban spaces can be adapted to contemporary needs, balancing heritage preservation, recreational use, and inclusive urban placemaking (Perera, 2018; Jayawardena, 2021).



Figure 15 – Galle Face Green
Source – Author

Open and flexible spaces:

Galle Face provides youths with a range of recreational activities in flexible and open locations. A broad range of sports, outings, and social events can be enjoyed on the spacious green lawns. Events, performances, and celebrations are possible to be held due to the flexible arrangement, providing youths with an opportunity to take part in cultural events and performances.

Interactive spaces:

The promenade incorporates dynamic areas that encourage youths to get together and socialize. To encourage participation, parks, outdoor exercise equipment, and other entertainment zones are properly placed. Interactive sculptures, water features, and installations of art that offer fascinating points of interest stimulate young visitors' sense of wonder and creativity.

Technology-enabled spaces:

Galle Face encompasses digital-enabled areas, as it understands the significance of technology in contemporary society. Having free Wi-Fi provided along the promenade, young people may remain connected and take advantage of online adventures. In addition, touchscreens and digital screens serve to encourage online interaction, demonstrate local talent, and share information.

Event spaces:

The Galle Face provides unique spaces for events that cater to young people's preferences. Concert performances and various other artistic activities can be hosted in amphitheaters and performance venues. Young artists, performers, and entertainers are able to show their skills in these venues and connect to the community as a whole.

Recreational Amenities:

Galle Face offers a variety of attributes to improve the amusement for young visitors. These provide young people with various recreational opportunities, such as jogging trails, bike paths, and skating rinks. The promenade also features dining places, cafes, and lounging places where young people may relax, socialize, and take in the vibrant ambiance.

Analysis of Findings and Discussion

This analysis and discussion present the identified key spatial qualities that influence youth behavior and engagement within public environments. Drawing on emerging themes, it highlights the importance of nature-centered and recreational settings, the value of flexible and multi-use spatial configurations, and the role of interactive and participatory elements in fostering active involvement. The discussion further considers how accessibility, inclusivity, and sustainability shape equitable youth experiences, while cultural identity, creativity, and expression contribute to a sense of belonging and personal empowerment. Together, these dimensions provide a holistic understanding of how spatial design can better support the needs, aspirations, and everyday practices of young people.

Spatial Qualities and Youth Behavior

Across all three Sri Lankan case studies (Diyatha Uyana, Good Market, and Galle Face), youth behaviour strongly corresponded with the spatial qualities present in each location. Youth were consistently drawn to open, flexible, and safe environments that supported social interaction, relaxation, autonomy, and outdoor leisure. Spaces with clear visibility, natural elements, flexible seating, and active edges showed the highest youth engagement, while areas perceived as enclosed, poorly lit, or overly regulated showed lower youth presence.

Importance of Nature-Centered and Recreational Settings

Diyatha Uyana demonstrated that nature-centered spaces significantly support youth psychological and physical well-being. Landscaped gardens, water edges, shaded pathways, and open lawns encouraged informal gatherings, quiet reflection, and relaxing activities. Youth who visited the space reported reduced stress, increased comfort, and a stronger connection to the environment. These

findings align with global literature emphasizing the restorative value of natural landscapes in youth-friendly design.

Flexibility and Multi-Use Spatial Configurations

All three sites displayed the importance of flexible spatial configurations in attracting youth.

- At Diyatha Uyana, flexible lawns and pavilions were used for events, exhibitions, and group activities.
- At Good Market, movable stalls, shared seating, and event areas enabled workshops, performances, and cultural programs.
- At Galle Face, the open green provided ample space for sports, cultural events, group recreation, and informal community gatherings.

The study found that youth prefer spaces that can adapt to shifting social, cultural, and recreational needs.

Interactive and Participatory Elements

Interactive spatial elements—such as art installations, seating clusters, play features, outdoor fitness equipment, and tech-enabled areas—encouraged youth to participate more actively in the space. The availability of digital features (Wi-Fi, screens, charging points) was especially significant for encouraging longer stays, group activity, and youth-led initiatives.

Accessibility, Inclusivity, and Sustainability

The case studies demonstrated that accessible design (ramps, wide pathways, inclusive seating) increased the diversity of youth who used the spaces. Sustainability elements—greenery, shading, waste management, and ecological conservation—contributed to a healthier environment and supported youth comfort. Good Market's eco-friendly approaches and Diyatha Uyana's landscape design exemplified youth-friendly sustainable spatial practices.

Cultural Identity, Creativity, and Expression

Federation Square's precedent study reinforced the importance of culture, creativity, and expression in placemaking. Sri Lankan case studies mirrored this insight: Good Market and Galle Face hosted events and performances that allowed youth to express their identities and engage with community culture. This strengthens belonging and supports the development of social and civic responsibility.

The findings indicate that placemaking plays a vital role in shaping youth experiences in Sri Lankan cities. Placemaking that incorporates open spaces, interactive design, and community participation can support youth's mental, physical, and social well-being. This aligns with Whyte (1980), Grabow (2015), and PPS (2012), who emphasize that well-designed public spaces foster social interaction, comfort, and belonging. In the Sri Lankan context, where youth face rising stress, limited recreational opportunities, and cultural pressures, youth-friendly placemaking becomes essential for uplifting the quality of life.

The study confirms that architectural attributes directly influence youth behavior, supporting findings by Reynolds & Hastings (2009) and Morgan et al. (2018). Youth respond positively to flexible layouts, natural landscapes, comfortable seating, visibility, shade, and accessible pathways. Where these spatial qualities were present (e.g., Diyatha Uyana and Galle Face), youth tended to stay longer, socialize more, engage in recreational activity, and develop a stronger connection to the environment. This indicates that spatial design is not neutral; it is an active tool in shaping youth culture, behavior, and identity.

While international literature highlights youth participation and inclusive design (Chawla & Heft, 2002; Hart, 1997; Dovey & Pafka, 2019), Sri Lankan urban spaces rarely incorporate youth-centered

strategies. The findings support Gunawardena & Seneviratne (2018), who argue that youth interactions in local public spaces remain poorly understood. The case studies show that Sri Lankan youth actively seek spaces to socialize, express creativity, and engage with nature—but many urban spaces do not fully support these needs. Thus, there is a critical need for localised placemaking frameworks tailored to Sri Lankan cultural, climatic, and social conditions.

Youth prefer environments that support spontaneous gathering, movement, creativity, and social participation. Good Market and Galle Face show that programming events, workshops, performances, greatly enhance youth engagement. This supports Arefi (2014) and Wyckoff (2014), who emphasise that community-driven placemaking is most effective when it reflects local identity and offers opportunities for activity and participation. In Sri Lanka, incorporating youth-led programming can turn underused spaces into vibrant social hubs that build confidence, leadership, and civic engagement.

The study demonstrates that youth-friendly placemaking must integrate:

- Flexible and adaptable design
- Natural and restorative environments
- Interactive and tech-enabled elements
- Cultural and expressive opportunities
- Sustainable design practices
- Accessibility and safety

When these attributes are combined, youth-friendly spaces become platforms for empowerment, participation, creativity, and community-building. This supports the national goal of developing a resilient, skilled, and socially responsible young generation.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that youth-friendly placemaking plays a vital role in shaping meaningful, inclusive, and supportive urban environments for young people in Sri Lanka. By examining three key public spaces, Diyatha Uyana, Good Market, and Galle Face, the research reveals how spatial qualities such as openness, flexibility, interactivity, natural elements, and digital integration directly influence youth behavior, well-being, and social engagement. These findings clearly answer the central research question by showing that placemaking, when aligned with the lived experiences of youth, can significantly uplift their quality of life within the urban context. This aligns with Whyte's (1980) observation that vibrant public spaces encourage social interaction and meaningful engagement.

The study also addresses the sub-questions by identifying the specific spatial attributes that make urban spaces youth-friendly and by demonstrating how these elements positively affect youth participation, mental comfort, creativity, and social inclusion. A key contribution of this research is its locally grounded insight into youth–place interactions, an area that has received limited attention in Sri Lankan urban studies. As Chawla and Heft (2002) emphasize, young people actively shape their environments through their behaviors and social practices, and this study reinforces that youth are not passive users but active contributors within public spaces.

Beyond conceptual insights, the research offers several practical implications for architectural design, urban design and policy. Sri Lankan cities can benefit from incorporating more flexible multi-use spaces, nature-integrated recreational areas, tech-enabled amenities, and safe, accessible circulation networks that support spontaneous socialization and cultural expression. Urban design guidelines should integrate youth-centered principles such as participatory planning, inclusive programming, and

sustainable environmental design. Policymakers can enhance youth engagement by supporting youth-led initiatives, community events, and long-term maintenance frameworks so that public spaces remain safe, active, and meaningful.

Overall, the study highlights that investing in youth-friendly public spaces is essential not only for improving individual well-being but also for fostering civic responsibility, social cohesion, and sustainable urban development. By aligning architectural vision in 'placemaking' with community needs, Sri Lankan cities can create vibrant, empowering, and future-ready environments that truly support the next generation.

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