

Beyond street harassment

Increasing young people's sense of agency over the public space by involving them in shaping it – but in a way that is fitting and valuable for them.

Background and aim

Street harassment is a persistent and normalized form of gender-based violence in public spaces that can have severe effects on the target. In Rotterdam, young people aged 15–25 are not only disproportionately targeted but are also often the perpetrators. Current interventions have focused primarily on repression, supporting targets and bystanders or on raising awareness but often fail to address the social structures that sustain the behavior. This project set out to design for understanding and reducing street harassment behavior among young people in Rotterdam, addressing a critical gap: the lack of understanding about why young people engage in street harassment.

Results

Through taking a systemic perspective, it became clear that street harassment is not an isolated behavior, but is entangled with broader systems of inequality and identity formation that unfold in public space. Generative sessions with young people from Rotterdam brought to light that when in public space, young people experience and reinforce these inequalities, but are unable to challenge them due to a lack of agency over their environment. Constrained by social expectations, they conform to the status quo: a culture of inequality, in which street harassment is normal.

Concept

The design proposal, a workshop, aims to increase young people's sense of agency over the public space by enabling them to contribute to shaping public spaces in a way that is both fitting and valuable for them. Through engaging in speculative design practices, I created alternative futures of public space that I made tangible in the form of scenarios and objects. In the workshop, young people engage with these scenarios and objects. Through discussions about the meaning and the consequences of these futures, they share their dreams and concerns about their own neighborhood. By shifting focus from punitive measures to cultivating agency, this project reframed young people not as part of the problem, but as a part of the solution. More than anything, the workshop is a way to take young people seriously and to position them as valuable contributors to society.



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Beyond street harassment: Cultivating agency over
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