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Designing Streetscapes with Gender Inclusivity in Mind



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Issue

In 2021, the Los Angeles Department of Transportation released a study focused on the travel needs of low-income, BIPOC women and communities in Los Angeles. It found that the current transportation system is not adequately serving women, girls, and gender minorities. They are often left with subpar transportation options, whether because of financial limitations, inadequate infrastructure or limited public transit service. Because of the city's car-centric environment, individuals with limited access to cars are often at a disadvantage when it comes to accessing jobs and other resources. To address these inequities, LADOT is taking steps to implement gender-inclusive transportation infrastructure design strategies.

This report, which focuses on infrastructure that supports walking, biking, rolling, and waiting, helps to lay the groundwork for design guidelines focused on improving comfort and safety for women, girls, and gender minorities. It presents five case studies on pedestrian street lighting, public seating, bus stop amenities, pedestrian infrastructure, and bicycle infrastructure that showcase strategies for implementing such projects effectively and equitably.

Methods

No known cities in the U.S. have applied a gender equity lens to transportation projects on a wide scale. Nevertheless, some agencies have initiated specific projects with gender equity purposes in mind. To develop design strategy recommendations

for LADOT, the researcher first identified transit agencies and departments across the U.S. that have implemented equity frameworks for evaluating transportation projects and/or equity-minded project prioritization methodology. Agencies were selected that have made significant progress in one of five areas: pedestrian street lighting, public seating, bus stop amenities, pedestrian infrastructure, and bike infrastructure.

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with planners from five transportation agencies: the Seattle Department of Transportation, the New York City Department of Transportation, TriMet (Portland Region), the Minneapolis Department of Public Works, and the Austin Transportation Department. These interviews centered around the topics of prioritization methodology, successes and challenges, and the consideration of equity in project planning. Transportation guidelines and plans produced by these agencies were also reviewed. From the information gathered, five case studies were developed, each focusing on a different strategy for improving gender inclusivity in streetscape design.

Key Findings

Pedestrian Street Lighting: Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT)

SDOT released its Citywide Pedestrian Lighting Plan in 2012 to apply a data-informed approach to the siting, planning, design, and implementation of pedestrian lighting. Through community partnerships, SDOT has been able to address lighting needs identified by specific neighborhoods and demographic groups.

The biggest challenge for SDOT in improving street lighting has been their ability to secure funding, which has led them to tap into private development interests.

Public Seating: New York City Department of Transportation (NYC DOT)

Since the New York City Department of Transportation began its CityBench program in 2012, over 2,100 backed and backless benches have been installed on sidewalks. The wider, more supportive designs were informed by observations of and interviews with bench users. Bench siting was prioritized near locations serving high populations of older adults and people with disabilities (e.g., hospitals, municipal facilities, commercial corridors, and senior centers).

Bus Stop Amenities: TriMet

TriMet has had a bus shelter siting agreement with Portland since the 1990s that streamlines the process of installing shelters. Unlike many other transit agencies, TriMet does not prioritize advertising revenues in siting bus stop amenities. As of 2010, TriMet sold advertising space on less than 20% of its shelters. Instead, it prioritizes shelters and benches at bus stops with more than 50 daily weekday boardings and those near locations such as senior housing facilities.

Pedestrian Infrastructure: Minneapolis Department of Public Works (DPW)

DPW set a goal to increase the city’s pedestrian mode share from 16% to 25% by 2030, in part through pedestrian realm improvements such as ADA ramp installations and curb extensions. DPW regularly updates inventories of its major pedestrian infrastructure assets to form a baseline of existing conditions, identify infrastructural disparities, and develop action plans to bring all infrastructure up to standard.

Bicycle Infrastructure: Austin Transportation Department

In its 2014 Bicycle Plan, the Austin Transportation Department set the goal of building a 400-mile All Ages and Abilities Bicycle Network, of which approximately 250 miles have been completed. The Department has recently shifted focus in its updated plan from cycling for recreation to cycling for transportation and increased access to citywide and neighborhood destinations. The network includes protected bike lanes, intersection crossings, trails, and paths, all intended to create a comfortable biking environment for a wide range of ages and abilities.



Frank, S. (2023). Designing Streetscapes for Gender Inclusivity (Master’s capstone, UCLA). Retrieved from: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3j95x9xc>

Los Angeles Department of Transportation. (2021). Changing lanes: A gender equity study. Retrieved from <https://ladot.lacity.org/sites/default/files/documents/changing-lanes-report.pdf>

Conclusions

Take a proactive approach to identifying deficiencies in infrastructure. Creating comprehensive inventories of assets and their existing conditions can help to quantify needs and set targets for improvements. Without an awareness of where infrastructure upgrades are needed and where large gaps exist, it can be difficult to make improvements equitably.

Use geospatial data to aid in project prioritization. Asset inventories can in turn be overlaid with geospatial data on sociodemographic factors, bicycle and pedestrian network gaps, residential density, destination density, and more to identify where investments are most needed.

Set quantitative goals with clear success criteria. Setting quantitative goals with deadlines (e.g., install 500 benches per year) can aid in aligning resources and tracking progress over time. They can also be used as an objective tool for measuring the success of project implementation.

Establish unified goals among agencies to facilitate partnerships and cooperation. Multiple city agencies are responsible for managing the public right-of-way in Los Angeles. Communication and collaboration among these agencies is key in working toward unified goals, such as implementing gender inclusive design in transportation environments.

Collect self-disclosed information on the gender of participants during public outreach. This can help in understanding the unique concerns, preferences, and needs of women, girls, and gender minorities. Feedback that is collected through outreach can be disaggregated by gender (as well as other demographic factors such as race and ethnicity) to determine if there are distinct differences among populations.

Include a gender equity component in project prioritization methodology. Such a metric could look at walksheds or bikesheds around destinations associated with caregiving (e.g., schools, grocery stores, senior centers, parks, and medical facilities). Another potential category could look at locations where there may be greater risk for gender-based harassment or assault; these locations could be identified through an analysis of reported incidents.