University of Cincinnati

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I, Shannon Bowman, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Community Planning in Community Planning.

It is entitled:
Urban Places for Youth

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This work and its defense approved by:

Committee chair: David Edelman, Ph.D.

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Urban Places for Youth

A thesis submitted to the
Graduate School
of the University of Cincinnati
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requirements for the degree of

Master of Community Planning

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By
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Committee Chair: David Edelman, Ph.D.
Abstract

Urban planners became interested in learning how to design public spaces to better suit the needs of people in general. However, users of the city include distinct demographics, such as age groups. Many studies have examined the effects, needs, and preferences of the built environment for adults and children, yet one cohort of the city that is often ignored in planning discourse is adolescents. Though they have been regarded as having separate needs and desires from children and adults, little is known about the types of urban public places they prefer. This thesis investigates what a group of youth in East Oakland, California regard as desirable places to spend time in.

Previous studies show that youth prefer qualities such as green spaces, areas for social exploration, stimulating areas of interest, and secure mobility within their built environment. Yet the Oakland youth prioritized elements of security, the availability of food, and active recreational options at no cost in addition to the findings from literature. Furthermore, the feelings of the Oakland youth provide important implications for planners in the City of Oakland since the youth expressed great frustration with the lack of exciting and safe places to go in their communities.

Enhanced urban spaces can promote positive youth interactions, civic engagement, and community health in Oakland. Recommendations from this thesis include future collaboration with the city to create more youth-friendly sites that include their desired elements of space, as well as improved safety and alternative transportation options.
Dedication

This thesis is one of many steps taken to improve the living situation for youth in Oakland. Dedicated to Hiram Lawrence Jr. (23-months old), Carlos Nava (3-years old), Gabriel Martinez Jr. (5-years old), and the fifty other young people that died in Oakland in 2011 from stray bullets, gang violence, and the unsafe streets – to provide hope for our future generation, growing up in this city.
Acknowledgements

A sincere thank you to my chair, Dr. David Edelman, for giving me the opportunity to learn, grow, and complete my master’s thesis – while directing me towards graduation.

I could not have written this thesis without the support of La Clínica’s Peer Health Educators – the incredibly wonderful and talented youth that provided the foundation for this research. Their leaders, Yesenia Molinar and Claudia Rodriguez-Briones have also provided continual support and friendship throughout my years of involvement with the youth, and my growth as a community activist.

Lastly, I would like to thank my dear family and friends for always being there for me and supporting my decision to leave home in order to pursue my dreams.
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1. Introduction

Public space – parks, plazas, community centers, and streets – are of the utmost importance in providing an area for people to congregate in positive ways. Great public spaces, or places, can promote social interaction, community health, and urban vibrancy. As social interaction occurs, people feel invited and connected to others in the city. When people are present, social capital is gained and commercial exchanges are made. People exchange ideas and information, learning from each other contributing to the vitality and flow of a city. It is within this public realm that society is shaped.

From an urban design perspective, public urban spaces can be shaped in ways that cater to the needs of the population using, or expected to use, that space. City streets, plazas, and parks may be designed so that they function in ways that better lead to its intended use. For example, the idea that public plazas in a downtown setting are designed as congregating places for workers during the daytime means that there be seating available, places to buy lunch, and easy accessibility for a large number of people at commute hours. Other public places, such as neighborhood parks, may serve a different population. For example, a playground may exist in an area with families. Playgrounds offer recreation and serve as a learning environment for young children. Design features in a playground might include a climbing structure, slide, and see-saw for the children to use. Park benches and green areas might surround the playground, which offer places of rest and commune. However arranged, the design of the public urban spaces and how it appeals to its users is very important. Many scholars have researched the effect of the built environment on the population and how it either promotes or hinders positive community growth and interaction.

One major user of a city that is often overlooked are youth, ages thirteen to nineteen. They neither fit in the “child and family” cohort, nor are they adults and are often in a developmental stage where they are more interested in exploration, gaining independence, and socializing with their peers.
than other age cohorts. However, many cities do not intentionally create places for the youth to commune; with each other, nor is their presence welcomed in many public plazas or parks. As the downtown provides space for adults and playgrounds offer places for children, teenagers may not be included in any public space. A rare example might be a recreational facility for older children, such as a skate park or basketball court. Still, there are often limited options for youth incorporated into city design.

This thesis aims to examine places for youth in Oakland, California. Within the city, there are over 43,000 youth ages ten through nineteen – yet though youth comprise over one tenth of the city’s total population,¹ there are few places in Oakland’s public realm that serve as youth-friendly urban spaces. Neighborhoods ridden with high rates of juvenile crime such as East Oakland have blighted and dangerous public parks, busy streets, poorly maintained playing fields, and no movie theaters, malls, or recreation centers. Planning scholars Kevin Lynch and Tridib Banerjee wrote an article, “On People and Places.” Resonating with the experience of growing up in a low-income family of East Oakland, they note how:

The children are even more outward-looking when the physical home is crowded; the public environment becomes an extension of home... Beyond the programmed spaces provided by the adult society, there is very little they can control on their own. Other parts of the public environment are either unsafe and dangerous, or inaccessible because of the adult management and maintenance policies.²

The combination of dangerous residential neighborhoods and few opportunities outside the home often leave Oakland youth with no place to go. Katheryn Frank, in “The Potential of Youth Participation in Planning,” states: “Traditional planning is failing youth...” because the “current planning practice [focuses] on the needs and preferences of adults, [segregating] youth from public places and [limiting]

¹ U.S. Census Bureau (2010)
² Banerjee and Lynch (1977)
their mobility.”\(^3\) She later cites, “youth in Oakland described how the city ‘turns its back on teens’”\(^4\) since the environment does not provide security, mobility, or opportunity for youth. An uninviting public sphere, along with the marginalization of youth may have drastic planning implications for the city.

Young people living in struggling cities such as Oakland are “in close contact with that [blighted] environment in everyday life, and they depend on it for psychological stimulation and sustenance... they rely on the larger public environment for their independent activities and expression of self.”\(^5\) Focusing on how best to address their needs, particularly in the case of how they interact with their physical surroundings, is relevant. “Planning has far-reaching implications for youth because they are the generation that will experience the results of the decisions the longest.”\(^6\) Still, little is known about the types of places youth prefer in the urban environment. An investigation into the desired social and physical characteristics of place – the need for inclusion or accessible recreation facilities for example, will be analyzed in order to translate their preferences as implications for urban planners and designers.

### 1.1 Research Questions

This thesis seeks to better understand how Oakland youth feel about their urban environment. The research will investigate findings from literature on general youth’s preferences for place and how that compares to Oakland youth’s preferences. Oakland youth will be asked whether or not they feel they have places to go in their community, and if so, the types of social and physical characteristics these places have or would have. Planning implications from their preferences will be deduced so as to link the findings to recommendations for future city development.

The backdrop for this study will take place in a neighborhood of East Oakland, California, and include a focus group with thirteen youth between the ages of thirteen to eighteen. The youth live in lower-

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\(^3\) Frank (2006) and referring to (Lennard and Lennard 2000; Meucci and Redmon 1997)  
\(^5\) Banerjee and Lynch (1977)  
\(^6\) Frank (2006)
income neighborhoods of East Oakland, and are of Mexican and Salvadoran decent. The objective of interacting with the youth is to explore their ideal preferences for urban public places. In analyzing the youth’s preferences this thesis seeks to evaluate how these relate to the implications for planning in the public realm. The background research will begin with an investigation on previous research and then compare findings from the youth themselves. From this research, the author hopes to gain an understanding of:

1. What characteristics of the urban environment do youth consider preferable?
2. How do these social or physical characteristics translate into ideal design features, and, according to youth, what might these places look like?
   Where in their community would they be located?
3. How do Oakland youth’s preferences differ from the findings in literature?
4. Have the Oakland youth’s demands for space been met?
   What are the planning implications of their answers?
5. Using these findings, is it possible to create functional youth-places?
   Are these youth-preferred places beneficial to the youth and/or the overall urban community?

1.2 Study Significance

It is worthwhile studying the shape of our built environment and how it affects the quality of life for its inhabitants. As planners and urban designers seek to improve the design principles for urban spaces, investigating how certain populations actually perceive and use these created spaces is important in order to achieve successful places. According to Passon et al., youth are frequently excluded from urban planning goals and community design plans. As stated in the article,

There is some research regarding how children evaluate their environments, which has resulted in a greater understanding of how to make a community a good place to grow up. However, youth are rarely considered and their needs are not heard.\(^7\)

\(^7\) Passon et al. (2008)
An investigation into youth’s preferences for place is significant for multiple reasons. Young people are vulnerable and sensitive to their environment, and cities are the domain from which they grow. The built environment can affect youth in both positive and negative ways. Well-planned cities are linked to better social cohesion, reduced violent crime, and healthier residents.

This research can “substantially convey how the social conditions can produce a difference in the ways children use and value their environment.” For example, research shows that creating inclusive spaces for youth can reduce youth-related community violence. Miao et al. investigate “five elements essential for community engagement in evidence-based youth violence prevention,” two of which are related to elements of physical space. The elements are Inclusivity and Social Learning, by way of “[building] a learning community.” Both elements can be translated into elements of urban design and placemaking to “create a safe and inclusive environment” for youth in Oakland.

Our neighborhoods and the incorporation of youth-friendly places play an important role in the development of youth. According to Stoddard et al, “youth living in impoverished urban neighborhoods are at risk for becoming hopeless about their future and engaging in violent behaviors.” One of the factors that affect hopelessness is “connectedness to one’s neighborhood.” The study surveyed 723 African American youth living in impoverished urban neighborhoods and found that neighborhoods can “offer features that promote the healthy development of young people, including the development of hopefulness. Positive neighborhoods offer young people the opportunity to interact with caring adults who reinforce pro-social behaviors.” This thesis seeks to answer what are the physical elements of positive neighborhoods as perceived by youth – in attempt to explore whether or not physical characteristics of space may have later implications for societal benefits and thus, the creation of factors that are molded through urban planning.

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8 Banerjee and Lynch (1977)
10 Stoddard et al. (2010) and in reference to Resnick et al. (1994 and 2004)
The setting in Oakland makes this research significant for two additional reasons. One, the youth in the focus group are of minority populations, and their input can be vital. Price advocates for diverse input into the planning process, particularly among underrepresented residents. “In urban revitalization initiatives, [public (and youth) participation] ... plays a key role in local governance structures...,” which “in the context of antipoverty initiatives, these structures leverage social capital in low-income neighborhoods and allow citizens to influence the policies that impact their well-being.” To do so, involving youth in the planning process of their own neighborhoods is fundamental towards creating sustainable community development.

Second, the youth living in East Oakland are exposed to crime on a regular basis, either as victim or perpetrator and “In Oakland and in Alameda County, homicide is the leading cause of death for youth ages 1 to 24 (36.1%).” Thus, a better understanding of how youth perceive and prefer their environments may trickle into further implications for planners. Allison et al. focuses on strategies to “enhancing access to positive youth development opportunities.” Some of these opportunities include the vital connections and “important role of the community, neighborhood resources, [and] social connections among community residents” that are linked to youth violence prevention. As in the case of Oakland, other research similarly “suggests that supportive social connections among neighborhoods are protective within low resource urban communities” because “a sense of collective efficacy has also been linked to reductions in crime and violence and played a larger role in predicting these outcomes than poverty.” Can urban places for youth have an impact on the youth’s “sense of social obligation” and chance to “interact with their neighbors to obtain perceptions of community challenges”?

Lastly, there is a great lack of literature on the topic. The few available sources on youth and planning all point to a common deficiency: youth are under-represented in planning discourse, and

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11 Price (2011)
12 OFCY Oakland Youth Indicator Report (2011)
13 Allison et al. (2011)
14 Allison et al. (2011)
youth’s needs are poorly understood and under-researched. Frank notes, “A quarter of persons in Western nations, and 30 percent worldwide, are under the age of eighteen years old, yet this significant stakeholder group is one of the least considered in community and environmental planning.” Furthermore, Frank discovered that planners in both the United States and Australia “have little professional knowledge about youth and do not systematically address their needs in planning processes.”

As observed in this thesis as well, Frank and Cushing found that “comprehensive plans made few references to youth beyond descriptions of child-oriented projects such as schools, day care centers, and playgrounds, and thus do not reflect the many other ways in which youth interact with their communities.” Yet youth-based research and participation within the planning process has the potential to produce outcomes at multiple levels... [Including] create changes in the environment. There has been relatively little systematic study of youth participation outcomes at multiple levels, but the research with other populations suggests that studies with youth will find positive effects on such measures as personal confidence, social connectedness, civic competencies, and leadership development. At present, however, the potential benefits of participation on youth have not been identified by systematic research.

Aside from a few fundamental planning texts on this topic, other overlapping sources are from different disciplines. Still, the strands of literature that are under child and teen development, psychology, or leisure studies, reiterate the same theme: “Much has been written about children’s cognition, competence, behavior, attachment to place, and access to/use of space, but little attention has been paid to youth...” and “Although recreation programmers seem to know quite-a-bit about what young people need, they know less about what youths want and how social spaces and places provide a

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16 Frank (2006) and Cushing (2011)
17 Checkoway and Gutierrez (2006)
18 Lynch and Banerjee (1977), Frank (2006), and Passon et al. (2008)
context for identity development.”¹⁹ As found in most planning doctrine, recreation programming is generally limited to younger children (in the form of a playground or splash park), or adult-geared recreation, but not spaces that are specifically for youth, or intentionally inclusive of youth.

The significance for this thesis research is clear – there is a deep need to understand youth’s preferences for place because significant planning implications aiding in community development may be deduced. In hopes of enriching youth’s lives, a more inclusive planning process must be addressed. The youth involved in this thesis provide valuable insights to the realities of the urban areas they live in. They are affected by the social, political, economic, and physical elements in their community, all which relate to the holistic world of urban planning. Careful attention to the way they perceive their environment and what they seek in a desirable place to live will help urban planners create more cohesive and usable urban places. Along with a lack of literature and few case studies, this thesis hopes to provide a stepping-stone for further research down the line – both in Oakland and for other urban areas alike.

¹⁹ Henderson (1999)
2. Literature Review

With the rise of advocacy planning in the 1960s, we observe an evolution in awareness and inclusion for who can be involved in the planning process. In these paradigm shifts, we begin to see the emergence of the first texts on the way people perceive and are affected by their urban environments. From this new body of research, we are learning how we can begin to better shape our places to become more vibrant, usable, and pleasurable for the community.

In the 1970s, Tridib Banerjee and Kevin Lynch made an important observation stating that “very little work has been done in defining or understanding subjectively perceived qualities of the built environment. However, if the main aim of environmental quality management is to improve the quality of our everyday life, we must then try to understand how our spatial surroundings affect everyday living and our overall sense of well-being.”\(^\text{20}\) In 1980, William Whyte’s research on people’s behaviors and preferences for public spaces contributed to the growth of how planners view the arrangement of physical elements in the environment as impactful.\(^\text{21}\) Despite this realization and the emergence of a new thought process, changes have been slow to appear in the community.

Narrowing the focus to only youth’s perceptions and preferences for the built environment, the amount of acquirable literature gets much smaller. The most fundamental text investigating the effects of our environments with consideration to youth’s perspectives was published in 1977 by Kevin Lynch, *Growing Up in Cities*. The project grew out of funding from the 1968 General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) that established the ten year “Man and His Environment” Program. This conference was important at this time because “the programme plan recommended new forms of environmental assessment that would include human perceptions, values,

\(^{20}\) Banerjee and Lynch (1977)  
\(^{21}\) Whyte (1980)
and behaviors” as connected to a more holistic view of the community and man’s interaction with the environment. At the time, Lynch was already well known as a fundamental contributor to providing a framework for analyzing the built environment and its effects on the human population. He is most well-known for his work, *The Image of the City*, that categorizes urban environments into paths, edges, nodes, landmarks, and districts.\(^{22}\) The *Growing Up in Cities* Project is the first notable source to examine this idea within the context of youth’s perceptions and preferences of their environments.

*Growing Up in Cities* primarily seeks to answer the question: “How do children and adolescents themselves feel about ‘growing up in cities’”? He understood the relativity of this topic; stating “their subjective perception of the environment they live in... has to be assessed as an important factor in attempts to make a better quality of life a reality for all.”\(^{23}\) In order to answer this, he undertook his study with research teams working with and surveying youth around the world – evaluating how youth from Argentina, Australia, Mexico, and Poland “use and value their spatial environment.” The intent of the program is stated as:

To help document the human costs and benefits of economic development, by showing how the child’s use and perception of the resulting micro-environment affects his life... The research was meant to suggest public policies for improving the spatial environment. In the process, [they] hoped that [they] might learn some things about environmental indicators, long-term changes in child environment, the misperceptions of planners and educators, and the latent public support for improvement.

The research teams used a variety of data collection methods, such as asking the youth to draw maps of their hometowns, surveys with youth on what they consider as their favorite places, time budgets, and interviews with parents and officials. Though the outcomes from this study were found to be limited due to the small size of the research groups and their varied geographical and socioeconomic conditions from place to place, findings still indicated important “impressions” for the youth’s preferences and

\(^{22}\) Lynch (1960)  
\(^{23}\) Lynch (1977)
usable recommendations for planning in their locale. Furthermore, the most important outcome was a recommendation for further research on the topic, which was later recognized.

Following the study, Banerjee and Lynch later note that “it now seems clear that an international comparison of childhood attitudes may be much less important than comparative studies in the same culture and region, as was done in Mexico.” Because the UNESCO goals were to link the research to policy changes at a local level, it was important that the findings be practical and relevant. “Studies consisting of a regional patchwork of samples that compare micro-locations differing from each other in specific traits of environment, age, or class may offer the most efficient way of instructing decisions, and of building local research capability.”24 His study researched two locations in Mexico, Toluca and Ectapec, both located within a similar region and providing useful comparative results from these youth. For example, both studies indicated that girls tended to value their home more so than boys. However, findings from the youth navigating their environment in Ectapec, Mexico, varied so greatly from those in Melbourne, Australia. A big issue in the Australian study was that youth felt their outside environment was “boring.”25 Despite differences in how youth might value elements such as the home or streets as useful, dangerous, positive or negative attributes in their community, for example, their research still indicated commonalities amongst youth across all nationalities. These are broader characteristics (the need for green spaces, safety, and recreation), but this still gives important insights into youth’s general needs and preferences for space. All in all, Growing Up in Cities was intended to be the first of a series of similar studies to come, with lessons learned along the way.

An update to Lynch’s study did not occur until Louise Chawla published Growing Up in an Urbanizing World, seeking to renew the original concepts introduced by UNESCO in 1977. The project was also funded by UNESCO and another Inter-governmental development agency, Management of Social Transformations (MOST). Chawla’s project aimed to similarly identify areas for future community

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24 Banerjee and Lynch (1977)
25 Lynch (1977): Excerpts from the National Reports
development efforts, affecting the quality of life situations for youth around the world. This project is dual-focused, striving to understand how “young people from impoverished communities around the world assess their urban environment,” as well as “provide recommendations for increasing the genuine participation of young people in community development projects, so that they may be heard as full-fledged agents of community change, rather than... muted passive recipients of social transformation dictated by others.” These objectives reiterate Banerjee and Lynch’s, directing research findings towards better understanding of youth’s needs and preferences, as well as political and planning implications. In both cases, the youth are perceived as valued constituents of the community.

Using selected recommendations from Lynch’s study, this text updates its research methodology in three ways: It seeks to gather more “qualitative and quantitative information about the conditions of children’s lives in representative urban environments,” methods for action were identified, intended to become recommendations for policy changes, “curricula, and environmental improvements in response to children’s needs,” and a phase that focused on how to “increase public awareness about urban issues for children and the possibility of engaging children themselves in research and action for change.” To gather data, interviews were collected with youth between 10-15 years of age, in conjunction with the observation and evaluations of public and semi-public spaces in each study location. The text is also rooted in a series of international case studies, from Johannesburg to Bangalore. There is one study in the United States which coincidentally takes place in Oakland, California. The Oakland findings in Chawla will later be related to the findings from this thesis.

Similar to what Lynch found, youth from all nationalities had similar needs and desires for place. Findings point to a set of general desired characteristics important to young people in their local settings. Chawla notes that “despite the diversity of the countries and places where they live, there is a remarkable consensus about the qualities that create places where children and adolescents can thrive,

26 Chawla (2002)
versus conditions that cause them to feel alienated and marginalized.” From the conditions listed below, we can glean from these studies relevant physical features to incorporate or improve in our built environment, which creates implications for planners. And though still broadly labeled characteristics, “the values that these children express point to a model of development that can respond to human needs for friendship and place, and provide social support as well as physical necessities.”

The major themes from all eight countries were compiled, and they include valuable information because of the diversity of youth surveyed and the extensive research that was conducted: From the data collected in all eight countries in this study, “the young people involved in the project doubted that adults in power would really listen to them or take their ideas seriously.” Furthermore, Chawla and her team found that the youth’s preferences fit into broad categories, some of which can be translated into physical features in the built environment:

**Figure 2.1: Global Youth Preferences and Negativities**

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<tr>
<th>Preferences of Place:</th>
<th>Negativities (and sources of alienation) of Place:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Safety and freedom of movement</td>
<td>• Stigma and social exclusion</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Social integration</td>
<td>• Boredom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• A variety of interesting activity settings</td>
<td>• Fear of harassment and crime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Peer gathering places</td>
<td>• Racial tensions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Cohesive community identity</td>
<td>• Heavy traffic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Green areas</td>
<td>• Uncollected trash and litter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provision of basic needs</td>
<td>• Lack of basic services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Secure tenure</td>
<td>• Sense of political powerlessness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• A tradition of community organizing and self-help</td>
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A major takeaway from these studies was the fact that the research investigated changes from Lynch’s study, which collected data twenty-five years prior, and compared the findings to more recent youth preferences and perceptions of the built environment. Two cities (Melbourne and Warsaw) were used in both studies, but the others differed. Generally, the youth had similar preferences across both eras,

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27 Chawla (2002)  
28 Chawla (2002)
with slight differences in variances depending on their study location. Lynch did not separate the two
categories of youth preferences/deterrents, but kept them under the positive category, while
mentioning the negativities (for example, the need for “a variety of interesting activity settings” to
prevent feelings of boredom. From the slight variances yet general consensus in preference for space,
Chawla categorizes the most positive physical and social qualities against the most negative physical and
social qualities. From here, the physical qualities are 1) green areas, 2) provision of basic services, and 3)
a variety of activity settings. There are clear design elements that can be gleaned from these programs.
The social qualities were 1) social integration, 2) freedom from social threats, 3) cohesive community
identity, 4) secure tenure, and 5) tradition of community self-help.29 Though these are “social” qualities,
implications for planning and the creation of design elements that support these preferences can be
gleaned. For example, providing infrastructure that provides a sense of safety (i.e. good lighting, mixed-
use land uses where there are “eyes on the street”), and cohesive identity that can be supported with
the use of gateways, signage/branding, and public art displays, show how we can design spaces with
these preferences as the intentional outcomes for places.

Both Lynch and Chawla’s research take place in communities of color and generally in lower-
income and urban areas, and thus can relate to this study on Oakland youth. Lynch’s original project
intent was “to emphasize the settlements of the immigrant poor, as these were the people who were
presumably most exposed to environmental stress.”30 Findings from this study in Oakland, California,
will later seek to validate some of Lynch’s and Chawla’s findings as related to youth today. The youth
interviewed will be with a similar group consisting of all youth from immigrant families of Latino
background, and from underfunded schools. The text’s description of “processes designed to
understand children’s own perspectives on the places where they live as a basis for partnerships

29 Chawla (2002)
between children and adults to improve urban conditions”\textsuperscript{21} will also resonate with the objective of the findings from Oakland youth.

In a later text, Chawla and Driskell organize “Indicators of Children’s Environmental Quality,” a chart showing how we can organize the types of places youth prefer, into a table of positive and negatively perceived elements of space. The table below, shows Chawla’s previously mentioned (Figure 2.1) positive and negative qualities in the upper and right quadrants. Quality characteristics are translated into ideal design features, which is useful for planners and urban designers.

![Figure 2.2: Indicators of Children’s Environmental Quality](image)

Likewise, the table also indicates negative space qualities, which are uninteresting, blighted settings that may make youth feel bored or insecure. From these social and physical qualities, one can see how it leads to more concrete implications for planners. As noted, “Another important lesson that has stood out has been an effective approach for promoting human-centered development in general.” Policy leaders, among others, are more likely to “make change happen if they see evidence that will improve

\textsuperscript{21} Chawla (2002)
young people’s lives.” This type of research can lead to positive future development that is more integrative of youth’s needs and desires, making cities better places to live.

Another notable study investigating youth’s preferences for place is also useful because it is the most recent, and studies were conducted in California. Passon et al. state their main research question as: “to understand how youth evaluate and value their communities, and the planning and design implications of such perceptions” – bolstering the original UNESCO objectives. Throughout their paper they argue that adults create “environments where their children and youth live, but it is not clear if these places contain the qualities that young people value.” In order to examine whether or not this was true, they conducted surveys of high school youth ages 17-18 from three different communities in Southern California. Building from Lynch’s 1977 study, they questioned the youth about quality indicators that formed from previous research (indicators that were identified from Lynch, 1977 and again in Chawla, 2002). As mentioned earlier, these quality indicators included factors such as social integration, having access to a variety of interesting settings, having safety and freedom of movement, peer meeting places, cohesive community identity, and green areas (see Figure 2.1).

Passon et al. found that urban versus rural youth valued similar characteristics of place, though their attention for what they felt was needed in their community differed. For example, though suburban youth felt safe, had access to natural areas and liked the “small town feel” of their community, they often felt there was a lack of “interesting places where people my age can get together, shop, or run errands, talk, play games, and be away from adults.” Youth from the largest city in the study felt the least safe, but had the highest appreciation and participation in cultural events. Still, despite varying demographics for each study area, there were common themes among youth’s preferences, which reiterate Lynch and Chawla’s multi-national studies, indicating a strong preference for interesting

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32 Chawla and Driskell (2006)
33 Passon et al. (2008)
34 Passon et al. (2008)
places.\textsuperscript{35} Even in Passon et al.’s study which occurred more than thirty years after Lynch’s, “the biggest complaint among the adolescents in each of the study communities is boredom.” From here they link these findings to implications for planners, in that “an attempt should be made to support interesting settings and mixed-use areas, and to create an identifiable town center that is easily accessible by alternative means of transportation.”\textsuperscript{36} These are practical recommendations relevant to planners today.

2.1 Youth as a Cohort

In reviewing the youth’s input from different geographic or socioeconomic areas, we see how priorities for desired physical characteristics vary, but preferences for place remain relatively constant across all youth. Another important question related to youth’s preferences is how age might be a factor. From previous research we already know that children prefer different environments than adults\textsuperscript{37} – but where do youth lie on this spectrum? Layne presents a compelling study, conducted in 2009, that compares youth to adult preferences for place. In his extensive dissertation, he examines both cohorts separately to investigate their desired place characteristics. His main research question is that if they have similar place preferences, then places can be created that appeal to both youth and adults, and may thus foster intergeneration interaction – a positive quality of communities. Through researching both cohorts, he finds that they possess similar needs and wants in a place. The chart below shows the slight differences for five different place characteristics: Safety, Belonging, Multiple Activity, Ability, and Engagement:\textsuperscript{38}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{35} Lynch (1977) and Chawla (2002)
\item \textsuperscript{36} Passon et al. (2008)
\item \textsuperscript{37} Knowles-Yánez (2005) and Driskell (2002)
\item \textsuperscript{38} Layne (2009)
\end{itemize}
The figure above demonstrates only a slight difference in how youth versus adults prioritize different characteristics of the environment. Safety was the number one priority for both age groups, though youth valued having access to multiple activities and mobility higher than adults. Adults valued a sense of belonging and engagement over youth. Still, the place characteristics ranked overall between the youth and adults show a similar trend. After the above data analysis, Layne ranked each characteristic that was identified by each cohort, posing the questions in a different way, providing another example of how each cohort prefers spaces in the environment. The following chart is compiled showing the following priorities for physical environments ranked by both groups:

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39 Layne (2009)
Figure 2.4 shows a better comparison of the two different cohorts and we can see a little more how youth differ from adults in their preferences for place. Surprisingly, Layne’s research shows that youth valued peaceful and familiar settings more than adults. Adults preferred restful and beautiful settings more than their younger counterparts. That said, these place qualities are vague and could mean a wide variety of physical typologies or programs. Instead, one of the most important findings from Layne’s study was not that both cohorts represented fairly similar (with subtle differences) in preferred characteristics, but rather the fact that intergenerational places can be created to afford to varying age groups. Rather than creating separate public spaces (for example, a playground for children only or a garden for adults only), it is possible to make places that appeal to many different users. In turn, these places may foster positive community-making, including intergenerational interactions.\(^{41}\)

Another useful study examining youth as a special age cohort is Whitlock, who surveyed high school youth to see how they feel with regards to adults and their place in the community. Relative to

\(^{40}\) Data, compiled by author, is from Layne’s Study (2009)

\(^{41}\) Layne (2009)
adults, Whitlock found that “entertainment and socializing preferences for older adolescents tended to be far more exclusive and to parallel adult tastes... lurking beneath the façade of entertainment needs lies something even more important – the need to do something with meaning and purpose beyond themselves.” In a way, this bolsters Layne’s findings that youth and adults may be better suited to share common spaces, because they seem to have similar preferences. If this were the case, however, planners need to investigate how to create spaces that appeal to children, youth, and adults of all ages – while still providing spaces that are appealing specifically for each specific cohort. As an outcome to her research, Whitlock also translates her findings to design principles for the community. One of her action items is to improve entertainment options in public spaces. In order to do this, it is important to “recognize and actively address the age-related differences in youth tastes and desires,” in that “younger adolescents want structured entertainment options” while “older youth ‘tastes’ are more similar to adults – they do not want to be ‘babysat’.” Planners should be cognizant and accommodating of these variances in space desires. As will be later discussed in the conclusion, these findings point towards mixed-use and universally designed places.

2.2 General Youth Preferences

From all the literature combined: the notable studies reviewed above and any additional literature presenting related findings, we can assess major themes that stand out as strong preferences for youth. Though each author had developed frameworks or categories based on the youth’s preferences, some included broad social categories while others get more specific with physical design elements involved. A table shows a summary of all findings, and the overarching consensus is analyzed below:

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42 Whitlock (2004)
43 Whitlock (2004)
### Figure 2.5: Selected Studies Investigating Youth’s Preferences for Place

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Title and Description</th>
<th>Findings of Study</th>
<th>Cases</th>
<th>Youth Ages</th>
<th># of Youth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lynch (&amp; Banerjee) 1977</td>
<td>Growing Up in Cities: International case studies were conducted to evaluate youth’s perceptions and preferences for their environments</td>
<td>Youth prefer natural settings, interesting places, and safe locations. Their research also provides important recommendations for future research.</td>
<td>Eight international case studies</td>
<td>10-15</td>
<td>Varied by case study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henderson 1999</td>
<td>Youth Places &amp; Spaces: Case Studies of Two Teen Clubs: An investigation on youth’s attachment to place, and the “common denominators” in what youth seek in a place.</td>
<td>Youth prefer places to hang out with peers, safe-places, and accessible and convenient places.</td>
<td>Two Teen Clubs in Canada</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talen &amp; Coffindaffer 1999</td>
<td>The utopianism of children: An empirical study of children’s neighborhood design preferences</td>
<td>Interaction, diversity, and accessibility: preferred residential and commercial land uses (which lent themselves to playful and social activity) to recreational uses such as playgrounds and parks.</td>
<td>Rural Children’s “perfect neighborhoods”</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrible 2000</td>
<td>An annotated bibliography of literature concerning children and their knowledge of the environment:</td>
<td>Findings (from literature): Youth tend to have an “affinity for natural environments” among other elements.</td>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robertson &amp; Walford 2000</td>
<td>Land Use-U.K. Project for the U.K. Geographical Association where schoolchildren conducted surveys comparing urban and rural children’s perceptions of the environment</td>
<td>Children’s desire for a cleaner and varied landscape in the future with more space and greater provision for well-planned low-density housing, and recreational facilities. Rural children had more optimism for the future of their landscape, and urban children more pessimism in their perception of their environment.</td>
<td>Case comparing rural and urban schoolchildren’s surveys in the United Kingdom</td>
<td>School-aged</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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45 From Frank (2006)
46 Accessed through Fiasky (2009)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Summary</th>
<th>Collection</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percy-Smith 2002</td>
<td>Contested Worlds: Constraints and Opportunities in City and Suburban Environments in an English Midlands City</td>
<td>Inner city youth: Parks/open green space, having friends/young people around, local amenities, youth club, friendly people, nothing, safe. Suburban youth: Parks/open green space, sports facilities, local amenities, lots to do, youth club, having friends/young people around, safe, quiet, friendly people, nice area</td>
<td>An urban &amp; rural community in the United Kingdom</td>
<td>10-15</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whitlock 2004</td>
<td>Places to Be and Places to Belong: Youth Connectedness in School and Community</td>
<td>1. Connectedness to community would be improved by having “places to go hang out.” 2. Feel welcomed in public and that they be included in the community planning process. 3. “Entertainment and socializing preferences for older adolescents tended to be far more exclusive and to parallel adult tastes…”</td>
<td>School wide surveys in 3 school districts of the northeastern U.S.</td>
<td>8th, 10th, 12th graders</td>
<td>318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McKoy 2007</td>
<td>Engaging Schools in Urban Revitalization: The Y-PLAN (Youth – Plan, Learn, Act, Now!): University of California, Berkeley’s model for youth civic engagement</td>
<td>Youth often provide input into the planning process when involved; yet their preferences are not often regarded as valuable and are not realized in final designs.</td>
<td>West Oakland, California High School Students</td>
<td>Hundreds</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

47 In Chawla (2002)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Study Title</th>
<th>Key Findings</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Passon et al. 2008</td>
<td>Implications of Adolescent’s Perceptions and Values for Planning and Design: Probably the most useful study in this thesis because it is the most related to the thesis topic and is also the most recent of such studies.</td>
<td>Positive environmental qualities were “small town feel,” safety, and access to natural areas. Negative qualities were boring places, limited places to hang out and socialize, transportation problems, and over regulation of space.</td>
<td>Three communities in Southern California: One rural, suburban, and city are compared.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machemer et al. 2008</td>
<td>Comparing Rural and Urban Children’s Perceptions of an Ideal Community: Using multivariate statistics to show pattern frequencies in large survey showing the differences between the urban and rural youth of MI.</td>
<td>Urban and rural youth prefer different urban models. Urban youth primarily preferred Nature, Health, and No Pollution, with secondary preferences for: Intriguing Architecture, Urban Neighborhood, Duplex Housing types. Design elements can be derived from preferences for modern sculptures, fountains, cinemas, and sports fields or complexes.</td>
<td>Comparison between two MI areas: (urban) Grand Rapids and nearby rural community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layne 2009</td>
<td>Supporting Intergenerational Interaction: Affordance of Urban Public Space. A comparison between youth and adult’s preferences in urban public places.</td>
<td>In order of preference with respective ‘quality value’: Peaceful (79), Inviting/Familiar (65), Restful (26), Having Fun (25), Beautiful/Attractive (15), Engaging (11), and Private/Personal (10).</td>
<td>Various youth groups in ‘the Triangle,’ NC (representing a broad range of demographics).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santo et al. 2010</td>
<td>Engaging Urban Youth through Technology: The Youth Neighborhood Mapping Initiative – Justifies incorporating youth into the planning process as valuable contributors and stakeholders of the environment.</td>
<td>Youth prefer unstructured learning environments, “letting young people be young people,” real-world connections, and flexibility and real participation in the planning process.</td>
<td>Two neighborhoods of Memphis, TN.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Citing another community study conducted by RRHA in Allison et al. (2011)

Source: Compiled by author.

Though some studies were focused on broader categories within urban planning or youth development literature, they provided some information regarding youth’s preferences for place. This may be useful in grasping the social and physical qualities that we can then translate into urban design features and later implications for planners. From the table as seen as a composite of the literature findings (from 1977-2011), the major themes in youth’s preferences for space are broken down into several categories: green spaces, areas for social exploration, stimulating areas of interest, and secure mobility.

Green Space seems to be mentioned as a priority for most youth in all studies (Lynch & Banerjee, Talen & Coffindaffer, Terrible, Chawla, Passon et al, etc.). Green spaces in the form of gardens, trees, or flowers provide a beautiful community aesthetic that the urban youth seem to value. The youth seem to be drawn towards green areas or landscaping because it provided a sense of community health, and can provide a break in the proliferation of concrete found in urban areas. Larger green spaces, beyond landscaping which provides an important aesthetic, can also play a role in creating places for the youth to explore and interact with their environment. Green areas can be places of retreat where the youth can escape the structure and rigidity found in monitored or structured urban areas. The previous studies do not examine in depth the different types of green space preferred by the youth, but it would be interesting to see exactly what type of green spaces they perceive as ideal (i.e.
landscaped areas or natural refuges, recreational or secluded spaces), since these have different characteristics and limitations.

Kingston et al. introduce “learning landscapes”\(^{49}\) as a form of creating the ideal green spaces for youth, because they seem to incorporate multiple uses and fall under several of the quality indicators for space. The learning landscapes models provide interactive green and recreation spaces, where the youth can also learn from each other and the environment. These spaces seem to be ideal for youth, if implemented correctly and properly maintained. With regards to age differences, Layne found that youth tend to prefer natural spaces over cultural spaces, whereas adults tend to prefer cultural spaces over natural spaces. Furthermore, in his study he found that youth cared less about design, and more about people. Still, natural settings can be broken down into various design features. Layne also found that youth were more likely than adults to prefer water as a feature, just as likely to prefer plants and trees, but less likely to appreciate “the great outdoors,” including nature sounds and wildlife, as characteristics of place.\(^{50}\) This might contrast with other studies that show the value in recreational and exploratory spaces, though ranking the qualities against each other is not an accurate representation of youth’s priorities since each study was conducted in a fairly different manner.

**Areas for Social Exploration:** This category includes the spaces conducive to freedom, exploration, and independence that youth need. Developmentally, youth need spaces for growing, and exploring one’s environment and social scene are elemental parts of growing up. This category is broad, because exploratory spaces might be secluded natural spaces, and social spaces can be benches placed in the middle of a busy public plaza. Through both, youth navigate their way into forming an understanding of the world: themselves, others, and their environment.

Though safety seems to be a bigger concern in some communities over others (Salvadori’s Oakland study in Chawla, 2002), a certain level of freedom and an unstructured environment seems to

\(^{49}\) Kingston et al. (2007)

\(^{50}\) Layne (2009)
be key in addressing the youth’s preferences for independence and exploration with their environment. Kingston et al discusses the importance of having this characteristic as a place for the youth to grow and learn on their own. Being in a less structured environment makes the youth more aware of their surroundings, and allows them to interact with their peers in sometimes uninterrupted environments. These types of settings also let the youth learn and grow, not having so much pressure to conform to a behavior that adults might normally monitor. Ellis, an advocate for children’s places, includes youth in her discussion of children in her text. She reviews literature on children's preferences for place and space, pulling from similar sources such as Lynch and Chawla. She notes that “public hangouts and private refuges are highly desired by adolescents. Hendry et al. (1993, cited in Matthews & Limb, 1999, p. 69) observed that these meeting places become ‘theaters for self-display, observation points for assessing roles of others.’ [Teen places address] the significance of young people’s group membership, and places for groups to congregate...”

Ellis (2004)

According to Ellis, places are important for youngsters because they can provide “security, stability, nurturance, belonging, meaning, and identity.” These elements can be translated into urban design plans by intentionally creating spaces where teens can congregate, recreate, or interact with others – without feeling overly monitored or like their setting is too structured to be free.

Stimulating Areas of Interest: All youth have growing minds and bodies. Their abundance of energy and almost constant need for stimulation makes their preference for “interesting” places not surprising. As Passon et al mention, boredom is a common issue for youth in many different settings, but particularly evident for those living in the suburbs. Urban youth may not have access to the same types of amenities in their environments, though they often have more options within a closer proximity. Either way, the need for recreation centers, fun opportunities, entertainment venues, or any place the youth perceive as “fun,” “interesting,” or adrenaline-producing, is an attractive characteristic,
fulfilling to their needs and desires. Stimulating areas of interest can also be social in nature, promote physical activity, competitive environments, and healthy uses of space for the youth. Specific types of recreation can be broken down into categories, as well. Layne found that youth were much more likely to prefer active recreation that included “playing,” but not “walking/moving” activities, unlike “gardening” as the adults preferred more so.\footnote{Layne (2009)}

**Secure Mobility** is a very important concept that has been thoroughly discussed in the literature by Whitlock, Kingston et al, Passon et al, and more. Secure mobility means the youth have access to amenities in their community, are connected to places and others, and feel secure navigating their environment. This might break down to mean having access to alternative modes of transportation or safe walking routes along streets, feeling comfortable, welcome, and connected to the larger community, and having inviting places to go. This might seem counter-intuitive with regards to the previous theme since the youth seem to want independence and some lack of structure in their environment, but they also value feeling like they are included in the community as a whole.\footnote{Whitlock (2004)}

Loukaitou-Sideris explains how “common grounds such as parks, schools, and community centers are important places for mingling of children from different cultures and ethnicities...”\footnote{Loukaitou-Sideris as cited in Knowles-Yánez (2005)}, which expands on both the youth’s needs for social exploration and connectedness to the greater community.

Since transportation is an important element of secure mobility, some scholars point to this being one of the most important community structures with regards to positive youth development. As Kingston et al. note:

> When cities are planned for cars instead of people, children and youth are among the groups that are disadvantaged, along with the poor, the elderly, and the disabled. Like the other groups, they lose access to needed services and resources, or become dependent on their parents to drive them everywhere. In addition, they lose their

\footnote{Layne (2009)}\footnote{Whitlock (2004)}\footnote{Loukaitou-Sideris as cited in Knowles-Yánez (2005)}
historical freedom to use the streets and sidewalks as their playground where they could meet friends, exercise, observe adult roles, and participate in the life of their community.\textsuperscript{55}

Youth, particularly those from suburban areas, are at a major disadvantage if they do not have access to public transit or a personal vehicle. Many suburban communities are not walkable, amenities are distant from residential areas, and smaller towns may offer fewer recreational activities appealing to youth. Meanwhile, urban youth may encounter safety as a large inhibitor to secure mobility; if the streets and sidewalks are not safe, whether from heavy vehicular traffic or violence, opportunities for their mobility to access the amenities that are available in a larger city are diminished.

Ultimately, in categorizing these themes of youth preferences, later research shows that it may be important to consider how best to create effective and appealing intergenerational places, where people of different age groups can connect with each other and place. With this in mind, a certain set of social and physical characteristics are recommended. Below are qualities of place that both youth and adults are attracted to, that Layne recommends for designing places:

- Safety
- Familiarity of neighborhood (belonging)
- Pedestrian accessibility to key services (multiple activities)
- Modifiable of major environmental barriers (ability)
- Proximity to middle-aged and older neighborhoods (engagement)\textsuperscript{56}

These preferences for space are not surprising. Children and adults alike would have some of the same preferences, such as an attraction towards green spaces and safer areas. The youth differ than both their younger and older counterparts in their need for semi-independence from adults and children, yet at the same time also having a place to connect to the community as a whole. Healthy exploration and

\textsuperscript{55} Kingston et al. (2007), referencing Karsten and van Vliet (2006)  
\textsuperscript{56} Layne (2009)
social interaction are very important parts to growing up, and forming an identity with one’s community and environment. Providing the spaces where youth feel they can grow, learn, and thrive, is important.

Lastly, Van Loon and Frank explore how impactful the form of the built environment can be on youth development. Their study focused predominantly on the link of urban form to physical activity among youth, but it offers many insights into the importance of creating youth-friendly spaces for general public health of our younger population. They note that “… it is evident that urban form can either serve to constrain or promote physical activity. Urban form interventions have the potential to result in lasting influences on the behavior of large populations of youth.” Furthermore, “Based on [a] framework [categorizing urban form influences on youth physical activity], elements of the built environment are classified as relating to access (how close and well-connected different land uses are) or design of streets and play spaces.” Though this thesis generalizes the words “youth spaces” and “places” to refer to areas for youth (mostly in the context of parks, or public plazas), the design elements can be translated into micro or macro elements of urban form, such as enhanced streetscaping or pocket-parks that might offer youth better accessibility or “go-to” areas of attraction, which would impact their level of physical activity in transit – and thus potentially have an impact on public health. Many of the youth’s preferences listed above are linked to increased levels of physical activity in van Loon and Frank: “In contrast to measures of density and land use mix, a variety of objective measures of access to specific land uses have been tested for associations with physical activity-related variables. These include measures of access to commercial destinations, schools, parks, and recreational areas.” Beyond these broader land-use types, van Loon and Frank also discuss the importance of specific design features such as “the availability of seating, the presence of street trees, safe street crossings, and adequate lighting,” in addition to: renovated parks, playgrounds, street design, and overall connectivity of features found in the urban form as having a significant impact on youth

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57 Van Loon and Frank (2011)
physical behavior.\textsuperscript{58} These physical features are important elements of urban design that should be notable to planners.

### 2.3 Oakland

Above are the general preferences of youth, stemming from studies conducted all over the world and over a time span of more than thirty years. In investigating the needs and preferences of Oakland youth today, a specific demographic in a smaller case study, we can compare findings but variances in their relationship to the community may be expected. There were no available studies that specifically investigated Oakland youth’s preferences for place, aside from a chapter found in Chawla’s 2002 study, written by Salvadori. Though Oakland may present a specific set of characteristics and quality indicators from the youth within their local environment, as stated by both Lynch and Chawla, findings even in very specific geographic areas have shown that youth prefer similar broader characteristic in the environment, but will have specific issues related to each geographical area. In the case of Oakland, we can relate the one case study from Salvadori and may also be able to compare findings from other studies that were taken from similar geographic or socioeconomic regions. In a case below, Machemer et al provides a study comparing rural to urban youth’s preferences, which may also have some takeaways relatable to Oakland.

Salvadori’s case study was conducted with a similar demographic as the youth surveyed in this thesis (Mexican and Cambodian youth), and from similar neighborhoods within East Oakland. The youth were slightly younger, between 10-14 years of age. Though the location and demographics are similar, the findings relatable to this thesis appear somewhat limited. The youth they interviewed were living in housing developments, and during the time of survey the youth’s preferences were very narrow to those constraints of space. For example, their perception of environment was restricted to the fact that

\textsuperscript{58} Van Loon and Frank (2011)
they could play in the parking lots between buildings, and a priority was the preferred safe-havens from
the nearby violent places in the neighborhood. Furthermore, the youth surveyed provided confusing
responses to research questions about the identity of their community (when asked “what is the
furthest place in Oakland you have been?” they answered with places outside of Oakland, such as
Nevada and San Francisco – not answering the question properly).59 The data analysis focuses more on
the youth’s idea of hopeless futures and gender differences with activity preferences, but does not seem
as cohesive within the rest of Chawla’s text by providing broader preferences within the public sphere. If
Salvadori’s case study relates to these thesis findings, it would be further indicative of the fact that the
city has “[turned] its back on teens.”60 By not offering safe spaces within the community, the youth are
denied their secure mobility to interact and connect with the city.

Since the youth in Oakland are living in an urban environment, it is similarly important to
investigate any variances in preferences found from youth living in similar geographies. Fiasky cites that
from “research that has included comparisons between urban and rural children environmental
perspectives, differences were discovered … [though] in a study which also included suburban children
… no difference between responses of rural, suburban, and urban groups regarding environmental
perspective and behavior”61 were found. Passon et al. and Chawla bolster the position that there are
differences in the priorities of the youth living in urban versus suburban or rural settings, though youth
tended to have similar preferences no matter what the size, structure, or nationality of the youth’s
locale. Machemer et al. is able to reiterate these findings through his literature review and an intensive
study. In conducting 150 youth surveys and using multivariate calculus to analyze the results of the
youth’s spatial preferences, they noted significant differences between the ways urban versus rural
youth perceive and prefer their built environment to be structured. Interestingly, they found that urban

59 Salvadori (2002)
60 Frank (2006), citing Ashley, Samaniego, and Cheun (1997)
61 Fiasky (2009)
youth differ from rural youth in their perception of unhealthy environmental qualities, because young people are able to keenly associate certain negative environmental qualities as degrading to their ability “to grow up in healthy ways” and to their overall “well-being.” Thus urban youth had a stronger preference for the inclusion of natural parks and proximity to dense and walkable areas, whereas the rural youth had more of a “utilitarian view of how the land should be used,” along with “spatially dispersed community amenities.” Using these findings, it will be interesting to see what the Oakland youth in this thesis feel as preferable for their living environment – one plagued by both issues of violence and toxic environmental hazards.

2.4 Youth Engagement for Progress in Planning

In a study conducted by Whitlock, one youth said: “They think they know what we want even when they really don’t. It’s old men deciding what we want to do.” With the introduction of advocacy planning in the 1960s came the realization that participatory planning was more likely to lead to the creation of sustainable urban spaces that residents are vested in. Lynch and Banerjee were among the first in planning literature to value the voices of youth with regards to how we plan our cities. Today, civic engagement within the planning process is considered ethical planning. The American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP) recommends including members of the community at stake in the planning process in order to ensure equal opportunity. Mullahey, in her practiced-based paper, Youth Engagement in Planning, asks: “What empowers a community – where ordinary people create better places, transform their own and others’ lives while solving the public problems of the day?” She answers: “Inclusive planning, for starters.” Traditionally, youth have been seen as inferior to adults, or perceived as incapable in contributing to the planning process. “Too often, planners, citizens, and officials hold stereotyped opinions about young people’s capacity to grasp the long-term consequences

62 Machemer et al. (2008)
63 Whitlock (2004)
64 American Planning Association’s AICP Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct
of actions and their perceived limitations of experience and expertise." There have been many cases of citywide development that either ignores the youth’s needs all together (places might focus on the creation of younger children spaces such as playgrounds), and then there are youth-intended places that are designed solely by adults and without the input or engagement of youth. Machemer et al believes that not only do young people have a right to be engaged, but also that "literature shows that they have the skills to effectively contribute to the planning process." Nearly all the studies compared in this literature review involved engagement with youth – through the various case studies conducted since the 1970s to today planning scholars have been gathering input into what features and types of places might create more viable communities for young people and adults alike.

A major argument with this type of research has consistently been that “youth participation in community evaluation research is desirable, and that there is a need for more knowledge of this approach." While Checkoway and Richards-Schuster discuss the importance of youth participation in planning processes, their reasoning is not to obtain a better picture of youth’s different preferences in planning ideals – as gathered from case studies. Rather, they note that youth participation is valued as important because it is “rights-based,” the inclusive process facilitates community action projects and initiatives (aligned with youth-development), and it can “allow young people to share in the democratization of knowledge.” Other sources focus on youth-inclusive planning processes because young people will provide different perspectives on how we should approach urban planning issues. Checkoway and Richards-Schuster note that much of the existing youth-based research in planning (including this thesis) considers youth to be subjects or consultants of the research, rather than active participants and partners for change. This in part is due to the fact that:

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65 Mullahey (2008)  
66 Machemer et al. (2008)  
68 Banerjee and Lynch (1977), Whitlock (2004), Passon et al. (2008), etcetera
Because adults often view young people as victims or problems who require proactive or ameliorative services, rather than as competent citizens capable of meaningful participation in society, it is not surprising that their evaluation research also emphasizes troubled youths and casts them as human subjects.69

In obtaining the youth’s preferences for the urban environment (as in this thesis), the youth were not involved in a more extensive implementation project, but rather their views were taken as subject/consultant information to be used as an argument for further research needed in this field. Checkoway and Richards-Schuster provide an important analysis on how we should be cognizant of the methods used for youth participation within the planning process – and gives tips on how to make the collaboration most effective for everyone involved.

Nonetheless, involving youth in case studies to discover their preferences for place is a start in the right direction. Ultimately, “youth participation is a process of involving young people in the institutions and decisions that affect their lives. It includes initiatives that emphasize educational reform, juvenile justice, environmental quality, and other issues...”70 Youth should be included in urban planning because planning issues are pervasive in their community, and youth are affected by all aspects related to planning – subdivision development, zoning codes, transportation networks, economic development, and environmental issues are all integrated into the world in which youth navigate. By beginning to incorporate their input – even what they view as “beautiful or ugly,” we may begin to see a trickle-down effect into subsectors of youth development, such as educational reform and juvenile justice – because our youth are more capable and connected to their surroundings.

Lastly, there are many developing resources on how to best work with youth and the planning process. The APA now provides a youth-educator planning toolkit, and methods are becoming modernized as to best relate planning to the youth. For example, Santo et al recommend using forms of

69 Checkoway and Richards-Schuster (2003)
70 Checkoway and Gutierrez (2006)
technology to engage youth in the planning process. These new tools can be helpful in capturing youth’s needs and preferences for planning ideals. The authors note that “processes designed to capture youth perspectives and engage young people in community development decisions can improve planning outcomes, support the development of sustainable and family-friendly urban areas, and foster civic-minded future leaders.” Interactive web-based applications, urban planning computer games (such as Sims City), and other techno-savvy and educational options are becoming more and more available to youth, as well as more and more practical for providing input into how to integrate their perspectives.

Santo et al. (2010)
3. Methodology

The foundation for this thesis is rooted in a literature review, which is later supported by qualitative data collected directly from youth in Oakland, California. This is a vital combination, since there is a limited amount of scholarly work and empirical data available, particularly that which worked directly with youth participants. Many of the more recent sources published in the 2000s point to the limited amount of research and all state the need for further investigation into this topic. Furthermore, the available case studies come from projects spanning over a time period of thirty-five years, which poses the problem of some being potentially outdated. This thesis has the opportunity to update some of those observations by a section devoted to new raw data collection, but with a limited number of youth participants. The combination of the literature review with the data collected directly from youth provides a framework for future arguments. This methodology will be broken down into the following sections: 3.1 An overview of method for literature search, related material, and review, 3.2 Methods for Data Collection (Research Design, Study Setting, Data Collection), and 3.3 Methods for Data Analysis.

3.1 Literature Review Methods

Similar to what Layne experienced with his study comparing youth and adult preferences for urban public places, limiting the subject review field for this thesis is difficult. The reason is because youth preferences for urban public places is a topic that spans several disciplines such as psychology (youth development), urban design (architecture), and urban planning literature. Initially, finding relevant material was challenging because of the broad field associated with youth and the very narrow topic of youth in urban planning, which was NOT on the slightly different, but related topic of participatory planning methods or youth-based planning education. As Layne notes,

Passon, et al. (2008), Cushing (2011), as well findings from the author’s literature review.
When conducting cross-disciplinary research, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish “who or what is the basic unit of analysis. In most social science research, it is the person, group, or social aggregate. In environmental research, it is as much, if not more, the space or the place that is under study than the person or the agglomeration [of both].” Therefore, realizing the limited exposure design researchers and scholars have had to understanding ... the limited knowledge held about what youth ... perceive as supportive spaces, it was thus critical to the success of the study to make a connection between [youth] and design fields by first delving into the realm of sociology and social work research.73

Extensive searching of literature in these realms showed that there were two main interdisciplinary and related strands of literature to pull from: those on the function and effectiveness of physical space (place) and its interaction with the human population, and that on youth-specific preferences for space. However, these strands separately still brought about a significant number of texts that were only partially related to this thesis. Ultimately, it was attempted to limit the literature review to include only the intersection between the realm of sociology, youth development, and planning and urban design theory.

Earlier texts showed the emersion of this intersection, not previously examined in planning-related literature. Within this narrower topic, it is important to acknowledge the predecessors that brought about this intersection, which include scholars such as William Whyte and Kevin Lynch.

The literature review also helps to clarify why youth’s preferences for urban public spaces is a topic that is of significance – for example, that the youth are important members of our society, are the future leaders of the community, and need effective places to grow and interact with the community in positive ways. The significance here is not limited to the fact that a healthy upbringing and community interaction can also impact economic development and even crime reduction. This thesis will use this background literature to show why and how these are important factors in why we are considering the

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73 Layne (2009)
youth’s preferences for where and how urban public spaces should be designed. Interacting with the youth, through data collection (outlined in the next section), verifies the findings from the literature review.

### 3.2 Data Collection

In addition to conducting a literature review, this thesis uses a method of interaction with youth subjects. The importance of collecting data through youth interactions is relevant because this thesis intends to contextualize the youth’s preferences relevant to today’s time. Since there is limited scholarly literature available on the topic, empirical data will provide information first-hand from the youth that can be used as a foundation for an argument in contemporary implications for planning. In conducting these types of studies, “we might learn which components of a given setting can be changed, and which ought to be preserved. We would know which elements of the environment are sacred, which are rejected and considered dispensable.” Ultimately, “these studies can give us specific insights about relevant indicators of subjectively perceived environmental quality.” In fundamental texts such as Banerjee, Lynch, and Chawla, youth were asked about the places “where they spent most of their time... important places, places they liked or disliked... Other questions were related to their perceptions of change in the area, ideals for improving their area, and their own preferences for ideal environments to live in the future.” With these guidelines in place, this thesis sought to approach the following research questions from both the angle of the literature review and a case study.

#### 3.2.1 Research Design

The research is designed to present a single case study of youth’s preferences for urban public places. Through three types of qualitative data collection, the research seeks to answer the following questions (outlined in Chapter 1: Introduction):

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74 Banerjee and Lynch (1977)
1. What characteristics of the urban environment do youth consider preferable?

2. How do these social or physical characteristics translate into ideal design features, and, according to youth, what might these places look like?
   **Where in their community would they be located?**

3. How do Oakland youth’s preferences differ from the findings in literature?

4. Have the Oakland youth’s demands for space been met?
   **What are the planning implications of their answers?**

5. Using these findings, is it possible to create functional youth-places?
   **Are these youth-preferred places beneficial to the youth and/or the overall urban community?**

Some of these questions have already been investigated in the literature review, but others are intended to come from the Oakland youth themselves (rather than youth as discussed in older case studies, in other geographic regions). Figure 3.1 shows which questions were investigated in the literature review versus through the data collection, or which are answered in both.

**Figure 3.1: Methods for Answering the Research Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literature Review</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>Youth Data Collection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are there successful examples of youth-friendly spaces?</td>
<td><strong>What constitutes a “youth-friendly” place?</strong></td>
<td>Are there “youth-friendly” places in Oakland? Where and how are they?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is it possible to accurately create intentional and functional youth-places?</td>
<td><strong>How do these characteristics translate into ideal design features?</strong></td>
<td>According to youth, what are the ideal design features?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are these youth-preferred places beneficial to the youth and or the overall urban community?</td>
<td><strong>Why is this research significant?</strong></td>
<td>Are the preferred design features (identified by literature) different or the same for Oakland youth?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Developed by the author.*

The design of the research is also based off models and recommendations from previous literature.

After extensive and global collection of data, Lynch recommends a ten-youth minimum for each study
area, and “In choosing the areas and subjects, a small, defined population group with distinct territorial identity was sought.” This data collection will use one study area to interact with thirteen youth of a similar socioeconomic background.

The agenda of the youth meeting aligns itself closely to other case studies, such as that used in Passon et al. (2008 research also in California), Chawla (2002 and including other authors of her text), Layne (2009), and Machemer et al. (2008) in that it provides several different ways for the data collection to occur, and/or is partnered with some level of introductory planning education.

For this thesis, the author’s intention of collecting data through interacting with youth was twofold: To illustrate that the literature supports findings relevant to today’s youth located in an urban area, and to gather current information from the youth’s perspective, slightly varying in data collection methods of earlier literature. The method of data collection with the youth was aimed at collecting their thoughts and preferences for spaces, with a focus on urban public places.

The author decided to stray from the most common method presented in previous literature, which involves collecting spatial data from youth, by mapping one’s neighborhood visually. The reason for excluding this method was to focus on how the youth would design their own space with no constraints. Many pieces of literature state that neighborhood mapping is the best way to perceive the perception of young people in space, because the assumption is that children and youth will draw most prominently (the features or establishments) what they find important to them, in their neighborhood. However, it does not appear that there is empirical evidence that supports this argument. Furthermore, investigating the youth’s preferences for where they like to go and they types of places they wish they could have in their neighborhood focuses more on implications for the future, or normative planning practices beneficial to youth; not a sociological analysis of the current status of the neighborhood as

75 As cited in Chawla (2002)
76 Banerjee and Lynch (1977)
77 Lynch (1977) and Chawla (2002)
perceived by youth. Current neighborhood status and overall perception of the places the youth live were still assessed, by way of simple questions and throughout the discussions.

3.2.2 Study Setting

**Region and Demographics:** Oakland, California is situated on the inner side of the San Francisco Bay, directly across from the city of San Francisco. Because it is centrally located within the state and also has coastal frontage, it has served as a major port city of the West Coast since World War II. A maze of freeways tangle outwards from the port’s ship and train yards, going through the city of Oakland and to the nearby cities of the metropolitan Bay Area. Oakland sits in the middle of this region, with a city population of around 400,000 and a metro region with 7.46 million people.\footnote{78} Oakland is also known as one of the nation’s most diverse cities,\footnote{79} with more ethnic languages spoken than any other city.\footnote{80} Its large immigrant population means that many of the youth growing up in the city are bilingual, and children in the public school system are exposed to a convergence of many different cultures.\footnote{81}

There are 43,281 youth ages 10-19 within the city of Oakland, accounting for a little over 11% of the general population.\footnote{82} Nearly 40% of all “Oakland youth under the age of 20” are Latino.\footnote{83} Only 60% of students entering Oakland public high schools will graduate in four years, and less than 50% of Latino male students will graduate at all.\footnote{84}

The thirteen subjects in this study are all of Latino background, representing Salvadoran-American and Mexican-American males and females ages 13-18 years. All youth live in East Oakland neighborhoods between 20\textsuperscript{th} and 95\textsuperscript{th} Avenues,\footnote{85} and attend one of four Oakland Unified Public School

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{78} U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{79} CNBC, The Atlantic Cities, and other news sources \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{80} U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{81} “42.5% of Oakland youth speak a language other than English as their primary language at home” (OFCY 2011), and “94% of students enrolled in Oakland Public Schools are minorities.” (Tsoi-A-Fatt 2009) \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{82} U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{83} OFCY (2011) \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{84} OFCY (2011) and Tsoi-A-Fatt (2009) \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{85} Representing Fruitvale, Havenscourt, and “Deep East Oakland” neighborhoods}
The context of the neighborhoods the youth live in represent several indicators: the neighborhoods are comprised of the city’s most low-income families, and house the majority of gang-inflicted violence within the city. The neighborhoods between 60-95th Avenues are sometimes called “the Killing Fields” for its concentration of gun violence, and stray bullets that often strike innocent children and youth in the street and in their homes. The Oakland public school system is often referred to as “a pipeline to the prison system,” since so many of its youth end up in the criminal justice system before they graduate high school. Walking the streets, riding the bus, and playing outdoors are highly risky activities that many of these youth face on a daily basis.

**Program:** The program through which the youth were involved with the data collection for this thesis was under the umbrella organization, La Clínica de la Raza. The youth were regular participants in an after-school “Peer Health Education Program,” held under the community health education department within La Clínica de la Raza. La Clínica is a non-profit organization that serves the uninsured and underinsured population of Oakland and the surrounding area. Most patients and members are of Latino origin, and services are offered in Spanish or English. La Clínica houses four main centers located in the Fruitvale Neighborhood of East Oakland. There is a main medical clinic for adults and children (including women’s services, dental, and optical services, some of which may be offered in a separate facility from the main medical offices), a teen clinic (Clínica Alta Vista), a mental health clinic (Casa del Sol), and a community health education facility (Casa CHE). Casa CHE is located a few blocks east of the main clinic, up along Fruitvale Avenue. This center has three community-centered divisions: Adult Services, TRUCHA, and the Youth Services Department.

The youth participants in this study are members of the Youth Services Department of Casa CHE. There are several peer health education programs that are run by the different youth services staff,
varying by funding grants. Though all youth groups are collaborative and often share staff and resources, the youth who participated in the focus group were in the group run by Health Educator I, Yesenia Molinar (and overseen by Health Education Youth Services Supervisor, Claudia Rodriguez-Briones). The funding grant for this particular program is from Alameda County’s Tobacco Control. This grant seeks to reduce the use and harms of tobacco within the county, and is focused on prevention and health education programs in various high schools of the county. School-based health clinics (SBHCs), such as a few that La Clinica operate, are funded by Tobacco Control to run youth peer-health education groups. The youth groups are primarily focused in tobacco prevention education, but also spend much of their time in general youth-development and other youth-related health education topics. Because La Clínica has operated youth groups funded by various grants over many years, there is an established youth program that occurs every year. The funding grants change from time to time, but the youth program remains fairly constant.

The youth in this study have been participating yearlong with peer-led tobacco prevention education in Oakland. Many of the youth participants have been members of the Casa CHE programs for a number of years, and returning youth (year after year) are very common. The youth’s siblings and staff’s family members often participate as well. Prior to participating in this program, however, all youth are selected via an application process and series of interviews at the beginning of each school year. Youth are chosen to participate based on their level of interest in the program and their perceived ability to succeed and benefit from the program. Though the program strives to work with underprivileged youth from the nearby community, the youth must show a serious level of commitment to the program, along with the ability to participate in all program activities. These activities range from community health education activities that take place in the youth’s own middle and high schools within

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86 “The project goal is to guide and train participating youth in leading two social action projects that addresses the underlining causes of health inequalities in tobacco-related diseases in East Oakland. One project will be school-based tobacco prevention presentations at middle and high schools in OUSD, and one will be a community-based project designed to create change, based on the spectrum of prevention.” Yesenia Molinar, group leader.
the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), such as peer-led classroom presentations on public health topics and other school-wide activities, to community oriented activities such as political activism at a local level (May 1st Immigrant Right’s Boycott or San Francisco’s Gay Pride Parade), or providing educational resources through events such as a health fair or celebration of *día del niño* or *día del muerto* (traditionally celebrated Mexican holidays, *Day of the Child* and *Day of the Dead*, respectively).

The author’s involvement with the youth from La Clínica de la Raza has been over a series of years of personal employment within La Clínica, ranging from 2008 to 2011. Ms. Bowman first worked with the families who were members of La Clínica in the main health clinic, as a Human Service Specialist. In spring of 2009 Ms. Bowman transferred to Casa CHE as a Health Educator II under the youth services department. Her work partners were current and participating staff members, Yesenia Molinar and supervisor Claudia Rodriguez-Briones. Ms. Bowman had previously worked with ten out of the thirteen youth involved in this study, some from as far back as the 2008-2009 school year. She maintains ties with the youth, and had thus known many of them for five years preceding the study. This personal connection is perceived to have aided in the research process, since many of the youth seemed comfortable in the familiar setting of the focus group run by Ms. Bowman and with the aid of Yesenia Molinar.

The focus group took place during a regular meeting time for the youth, afterschool on a Thursday afternoon, for two hours. All youth were informed of the focus group and asked to attend. However, it should be noted that the date of the focus group was the preceding Thursday before the OUSD’s Winter Break on December 20, 2012. Snacks and materials were provided by Casa CHE, normal components of each youth meeting. Each youth also received an incentive for their participation, a $10 gift-card to Target. These incentives were provided by Ms. Bowman and were unannounced prior to the meeting.
3.2.3 Data Collection:

To gather the perceptions and preferences of the youth, qualitative research techniques employing different skill sets and interaction with the group were used, representing verbal, image, and written responses. Banerjee and Lynch felt that “implications for environmental management policies or development actions are based on interpretations, rather than on rigorous statistical inferences.”

Data collected came from the following sources: One-worded “favorite place” answers were asked verbally of students sitting in a circle, written responses to various questions that the students individually wrote (yet were posted publically along the walls of the center), drawings composed in groups of 3-4 youth, and presentations of the drawings back to the rest of the group that generated both a verbal description of the drawings as well as a discussion with the group and program facilitators.

The meeting was broken down into the following agenda:

1. **Welcome**, sign in, and snacks

2. **Check-In Question**: Youth sitting in a circle “checked in” with how they were doing for the day, and answered the following question: *What is your favorite place in Oakland?* Responses were documented and are part of the following analysis, in Chapter 4.

3. **PowerPoint Presentation on Urban Planning**, led by Ms. Bowman. Since many of the youth were not familiar with the field of urban planning, an introductory and educational presentation was given to give the youth background information on the potential implications of their preferences for space. The final slides of the presentation gave context to the upcoming drawing project, where the youth were given a site within their neighborhood if they chose to use that particular site. The Presentation can be found in Appendix B.

4. **Gallery Walk** of five written questions posted along the walls of the center. With music playing in the background, the youth were able to get up and walk around the room, answering the questions at their own pace. Though they each wrote responses individually, they were able to see what others had written on the poster paper before them, or converse with their peers as they wrote their responses. They were able to write as little or as much as they wanted, though each youth was asked to answer each of the five questions at least once.

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87 Banerjee and Lynch (1977)
5. **Drawings: “Their Ideal Public Space”** were created in groups of 3-4 youth. The youth had access to colored pencils, markers, and crayons and had approximately 30 minutes to draw their ideal public place they would like to see incorporated into their community. The groups sat in separate areas of the center, as to foster their own separate designs within each group.

6. **Presentations of Drawings** were given back to the whole youth group, sitting in the main circle they started in. Discussions following each group presentation evaluated the youth’s ideas generated in their drawings.

7. **Closing.** The meeting was closed and the youth were thanked for participating.

### 3.3 Data Analysis Methods

The data collected represents the answers to six questions (verbal and written), images from four group drawings, and qualitative information gathered during open discussion. The data was documented in written notes, pictures, and video, which were later transcribed. The data collection is related to the literature review, and primarily seeks to answer or address the questions posed in the hypothesis. Moreover, analysis and discussion will be made from additional findings from the data.

Analysis will use methods such as identifying major themes/common characteristics in both drawings and written and verbal responses to questions, examining the repeated themes in a quantifiable manner, using media tools such as Wordle (which shows the percentage of word usage), testimonial evidence (provided by youth anonymously), and using a grid-analysis to analyze the percentage of characteristics in the drawings. When possible, charts will be drawn to show results and/or major themes from the research collected.
4. **Research Analysis**

The results of the youth focus group are presented in this chapter. As stated in Chapter 3, the goal with the data collection was to gain the youth's direct input on their urban public place preferences. Since the methodology focused on obtaining data with three separate methods, the data here are analyzed separately by type of data, and then analyzed collectively as a presentation of their overall preferences. The three types of data collected were also designed to collect the same type of input from three different settings – so that the youth felt most comfortable and gave the responses in a variety of ways for them to communicate their preferences for space.

The three types of data collection all help to support in answering the thesis research questions seeking to understand youth preferences for place. Many of the questions asked to the youth were repetitive in nature, but this was to pull from the youth their ideals, as perceived in different settings or from different types of responses that may answer the same question. For example, they might be asked the same question verbally in a group setting, individually in written form, and then for them to draw out their ideas. Together, the goal is to be able to analyze all these responses collectively in order to derive their most predominant preferences for place.

The youth were first asked for their verbal place preferences during the check-in session, which produced a list of their favorite places located within Oakland. The second portion of the data collection took place though a gallery walk, where the youth were able to write (anonymously) their responses to a set of questions related to their preferences for place and space. Lastly, four drawings were created by groups of youth that depict their ideal hang-out place located within Oakland. This activity let the youth collaborate with their peers and used imagery to produce their set of preferences. Below is an analysis of each of these sets of data collected, as well as compile an overall sense of the collection of forms of data that was obtained by the youth, and what it means in terms of their preferences for place.
Relating back to the literature, this favorite place analysis varies slightly from the method used in Lynch’s study. Lynch asked his youth to describe a favorite place, where the pupils could imagine any place they desired. Thus, they were not actually listing the best of the existing places but rather described their “utopias.” Here, youth are asked both about their (existing) favorite places within their community, as well as given a chance to design their ideal site. Collecting elements of design as noted from both sides, existing and envisioned.

Lastly, the preferences as described by the youth here are generally analyzed collectively as a group. The results of most the preferences were done anonymously, aside from the drawings, which can be analyzed with the most scrutiny based on who was identified (demographically) as participating in each group. Since the drawings varied most from group to group, this was found to be helpful in analyzing their preferences.

Perhaps the most important outcome of the data collection of each section is the collective analysis and concluding arguments, which compare all the outcomes described in sections 4.1-4.3. The tables presented show the space comparison, and how the final preferences for youth are identified using all the data collected in this focus group.

4.1 "Favorite Place” Analysis – Verbal Responses

The first section of the data collection series are from the youth’s verbal responses that were offered in a group setting. The youth were initially asked “Where is your favorite place in Oakland?” during an introductory check-in at the beginning of the session. The youth are accustomed to being asked a question of the day as well as to describe how they’re doing before the peer meeting official begins. During the focus group, asking where their favorite Oakland place was served as the question of the day.
Many of the youth responded with hesitation at first. Several youth indicated they did not like the question because they felt it was too limiting – why does their favorite place have to be in Oakland? For many, their favorite place that first came to mind was not in Oakland, but rather somewhere located outside of Oakland. The author asked them to name their favorite place in Oakland, if they had to choose one place to go. From this, the responses were as follows:

- City Hall – Frank H. Ogawa Plaza
- Jack London Square
- Downtown Oakland Ice Arena
- East Oakland Sports Center
- The Oakland Coliseum
- The Batting Cages & Wing Stop
- Taco Truck
- La Clínica de la Raza
- My House
- Nowhere

Perhaps the most surprising response from the youth was **Oakland’s City Hall at Frank H. Ogawa Plaza**. Oakland City Hall is a beautiful historic structure built immediately following 1906 San Francisco Earthquake. The building was completed in 1907 and is a prominent feature in the landscape of downtown. A large open lawn fronts the building, and benches line the park. Aside from a few large, shade-providing Live Oak trees there are not many other features in the park. Nearby amenities include the entrance to an underground BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) station, several coffee shops, a Walgreens, CVS, and many city offices. The California State Administrative building is one block away.

One could argue that there are few, if any, youth-intended attractions in this area. Aside from the spot’s easy accessibility (numerous buses, BART, walkable streets, and a free Broadway St. shuttle all stop in front of the City Hall plaza), the surrounding area serves as a financial district and administrative
hub for the City of Oakland – thus attracting professionals during the work week. Nightlife establishments cater to those over the age of 21, but not to youth.

Similarly, Jack London Square is a waterfront district comprised of open space with benches, a few occupied buildings and art galleries, and many vacant buildings waiting to be leased. Several high-end restaurants are in the area, but the youth have not mentioned they patron these establishments. Rather, they seem to engage in the free activities, which may include roaming the open space, socializing in the seating areas, walking along the waterfront path, or attending one of the area’s events. In Jack London Square the youth are more likely to be spectators than participants or patrons of the businesses. However, the area is beautiful (waterfront vista includes rows of boats along the docks, and views across the estuary of Alameda and San Francisco). There is a pleasant ocean breeze, and the area is safe for walking or jogging. Kayaking services are offered at the Jack London Aquatic Center, which the youth have done before in previous activities arranged through the organization (La Clínica de la Raza). However, the aquatic center is off the beaten path, and without an organization the youth are unlikely to partake in kayaking due to the high membership fees.

The attraction to both these places may be in several facets – first, both Oakland City Hall at Frank H. Ogawa Plaza and Jack London Square are aesthetically maintained public places that include shaded seating areas and manicured green spaces. Second, they are heavily populated by the general public during peak hours. They also both hold many events annually. City Hall has several major events per year, including the Oakland Jazz Festival and the Oakland Hemp Festival. Jack London Square has a regular Sunday Farmer’s Market, summer movie nights and outdoor dancing, as well as other annual festivals. Still, many of these events are intended for adults only (such as a beer festival and the Hemp festival). Other events are family oriented, but none are specifically designed for the teenage population.
From a design standpoint, attractive features such as trees, open spaces such as lawns, and benches may provide young people with places they can enjoy, just as anyone might in a very public square.

Other favorite places mentioned by the youth – the Downtown Oakland Ice Arena, East Oakland Sports Center, The Oakland Coliseum, and The Batting Cages & Wing Stop – are all recreation-based attractions. These are a mix of public and semi-private places, but all are attractive and inclusive of youth. All of the four locations mentioned above cost money to access – even the East Oakland Sports Center, which is a community facility managed by the City of Oakland. The prices to access these recreation centers range at the lowest cost from $3 for youth (day pass) at the East Oakland Sports Center, $3.50 for 18 pitches at the batting cages, $7.50 on cheap Tuesdays for ice skating, or $2 for a Wednesday-night A’s baseball game at the Coliseum.88

Though $3 may seem like petty cash, to a teen with no allowance and/or no job, this might make these locations inaccessible – particularly on a daily/weekly basis. Furthermore, they all have operating hours, which may offer fewer options during evening times when levels of boredom may spike.

Lastly, the youth’s initial hesitation to list a location in Oakland is indicative of a lack of youth spaces within the city. This comes as no surprise, as the youth often express boredom and/or having no place to go. This could be perceived as a much larger problem, with serious implications for planners. As will be discussed later, this may also relate to larger issues such as the city’s higher than average incidents of youth-committed crime, high school dropout rates, and youth obesity rates.

4.2 Gallery Walk Analysis

After the Check-In Questions in Section 4.1 “Favorite Place Analysis,” the youth listened to an introductory presentation on urban planning. The presentation broke up the session and gave them background information for the purpose of this focus group. The overall session was intended to be both educational for the youth as well as productive in collecting their point of view on the subject of urban public places.

After the presentation, the second section of the data collection series was collected through written responses documented by each youth through a “Gallery Walk.” The Gallery Walk was an open room with questions posted along the walls, an activity that was designed to let the youth answer the research questions at their own pace, with or without communicating with their peers. Each participant was given a marker to answer five questions written on five separate poster papers that were intended to reiterate questions relating to the youth’s preferences for place – asked in a different format from the verbal responses given publicly in the previous section.

As they wrote their responses to the questions, their responses could be perceived as anonymous if they were at the poster on their own. Others walked around the room with a few other peers, discussing the questions together as they each wrote their own response. Some took this activity seriously, whereas others seemed to be more influenced or conscious of what their peers saw with respect to their response. Regardless of how they approached the questions, the responses are helpful in answering the research questions posed by this thesis. The questions, the youth responses, and notes about the responses are compiled into Table 4.0 below:
Figure 4.1: Gallery Walk Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Youth Responses</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 What characteristics do your favorite places have?</td>
<td>Adrenaline Rush</td>
<td>The youth’s preferences for place include fun places:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Food</td>
<td>* places of excitement and entertainment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Food</td>
<td>*something that is stimulating or interactive; “scary” and “exclusive” cause an adrenaline rush</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>*places that allow for movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Entertaining</td>
<td>In sum: they enjoy pleasurable places with the presence of food, fun, and excitement, that are lively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lots of color</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Keeps me occupied</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Scary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exclusive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Twerk [Street Dancing] Team</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exercise</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Excitement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 What are your favorite public places in Oakland? Why?</td>
<td>Food places like Mexican food, pizza, noodles</td>
<td>Engaging places of recreation or physical activity that also:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ice rink. Because it’s fun. It’s the only place where you can have fun without going anywhere too far like Reno</td>
<td>*provide secondary entertainment of an intended activity, such as sport spectatorship or participation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coliseum</td>
<td>*allow for freedom of movement, seating areas (socializing with peers is possible), and food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coliseum – Go Raiders &amp; A’s</td>
<td>*public plazas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fruitvale Plaza</td>
<td>*natural areas with vistas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Park</td>
<td>*educational/interactive places</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Movie</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recreation Center near DMV</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oakland Hills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chabot Space &amp; Science Center</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>because I see stars</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 If you were bored, where would you go and what would you do?</td>
<td>Chill, somewhere with a view</td>
<td>Few of the mentioned places are actually in Oakland.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Westfield Mall</td>
<td>*suggestive that the youth would rather leave Oakland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New Park Mall</td>
<td>*semi-public/private establishments such as the mall or movie theater</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mall</td>
<td>*places that offer something “to do” such as relax, socialize, window shop, or be entertained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emeryville, to Ikea because it’s big and fun to look at stuff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Movies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Skate with Friends</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>San Francisco Pier (walk around)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Drive around shooting people, birds, cars, houses, w/ a paintball gun.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The park swing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Do you feel you have places in your community where you can go, where you like to be?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>There are not enough places for youth in their communities, let alone in Oakland. However, places deemed of quality are:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>*open, free, and partially regulated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not Really</td>
<td>*public (open) places such as the streets, park, an urban lake, and waterfront district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Streets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rock climbing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recreation Center</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lake Merritt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The responses from the Gallery Walk exposed the reality of being young and growing up in Oakland. There was great frustration with the lack of places to go, and safety appears as an emerging issue for youth you feel they have nowhere to go in their own communities. Boredom is another common theme, and the youth preferred places that were entertaining, fun, and gave them “something to do.”

**Question 1** directly asks the youth for the characteristics of their favorite places. These responses are helpful in determining what qualities a teenager’s favorite place has. Though these responses were mostly quality characteristics instead of physical characteristics (traits such as “exciting” or “fun”), these may be able to be translated into physical design features.

The results of question 1 are not surprising. Youth prefer places that are fun, exciting, and vibrant. They enjoy places where they are stimulated and feel as though they have an activity to engage in. These places are pleasurable and positive (places that release endorphins – with the availability of food, physical activity, or “scary” places that cause excitement). Collectively, these traits can be deduced
as places where the youth will have “something to do,” such as participate in an activity, such as sport spectatorship or active participation and recreation, and enjoy themselves.

**Question 2** asks the youth to specifically name where they like to go, *in Oakland*. Though this was a reiteration of the Check in Question from section 4.1, the written question gave the youth another chance to think about where they like to go locally – and after listening to a presentation on urban planning efforts.

Unlike the initial Check In Question, the youth display less hesitation here to name a place where they like to go in their own city. Perhaps this is because they were less influenced in the moment by a previous peer stating they had “nowhere to go” as what occurred during the Check In session (once one youth responded in this manner, other youth responded similarly, perhaps indicating peer influence. Though this negative trend does not appear under these responses, the youth may have still been influenced by the other’s responses here – which may be likely to occur in all data responses of the youth – since no activity was conducted separate from the presence of others.

The youth listed places that are engaging – physically, with entertainment, education, food, or the presence of an abundance of people. “Fruitvale Plaza,” “Park,” “Food Places,” and the “Coliseum” are all semi-public or public places where members of the general population are likely to congregate. These areas all have access to food retail and other businesses, are accessible by public transit, and places that allow the youth freedom to engage in any activity they like – whether this be shopping, socializing, relaxing, or sport spectatorship. The “Ice Rink,” “Park,” “Recreation Center near DMV,” and “Oakland Hills” all provide options for physical activity or recreation. The “Oakland Hills” are unique in that it is not a regulated space, and thus the youth would have more freedom here to engage in physical activity such as hiking, walking, or biking – though socializing or hanging out amongst the redwood trees or vista spots in a secluded setting may be more likely.
The other unique response here is the “Chabot Space & Science Center because I see stars.” This center is also located within the Oakland Hills, but it is an educational institution that provides youth-friendly activities and spaces. The center includes an observatory as well as other interactive features related to the astronomical sciences. Though this center is intended for children and teens, it also requires access through payment or membership. Alternatively, the youth may have visited as part of a school or program-based field trip but access is not continuous.

The important takeaway from these collective responses are that a) the youth do feel they can list places in their own community if needed, and b) they tend to prefer places that offer a secondary form of entertainment – something to engage in and focus their attention on, in addition to being able to be present with their peers. This extra source of stimulus may be a reoccurring theme presented throughout each data collection section.

**Question 3** does not limit the youth to listing a place in Oakland. Interestingly, without this restriction the youth all responded with places that are *not* in Oakland.

The only responses under this question that are possible to occur in Oakland include: “Chill, somewhere with a view,” “Movies,” “Skate with friends,” or “The park swing.” The response “Chill, somewhere with a view” can occur in the Oakland Hills or at Lake Merritt (a previous “favorite place listed in section 4.1), but is also likely to occur elsewhere. Going to the movies in Oakland, on the other hand, is possible but unlikely to occur in Oakland. There are only two movie theaters located in the entire city of Oakland, and they are not close to the neighborhoods in East Oakland where the youth participants live. The youth may be more likely to frequent movie theaters located in other cities, such as Alameda or Emeryville. These theaters are often perceived as more accessible, and offer additional attractions such as shops and food retail.
“Skate with friends” is an activity that some youth, but not many, like to do as there are few skate parks in the vicinity. “The park swing” is ambiguous, and could occur at a park anywhere. Is this an activity that is likely to occupy the time of a teenager for long?

All other activities, including the malls mentioned, “Emeryville...,” “San Francisco Pier,” and “shooting with a paintball gun,” in addition to the activities previously mentioned: “Chill, somewhere with a view,” “Movies,” “Skate with Friends,” and “The park swing,” are activities that may likely occur outside of the city of Oakland. There are serious planning implications for the youth feeling that they would rather leave Oakland than stay in the city, if they were looking for something interesting to do. These implications will be discussed later in this chapter, and again in Chapter 5.

Another important takeaway from these responses is to examine the characteristics of the places that the youth are willing to seek out. Even if this requires them leaving the city, they appear to be willing to commute to places of more interest – such as the Westfield Mall in San Francisco, the outdoor mall/development/movie complex at Bay Street in Emeryville, to a paintball park (the closest paintballing parks are located 26-40 miles away from Oakland), or to a San Francisco Pier. What characteristics do these places have that an East Oakland youth is more likely to commute up to one hour in transit time to satisfy their boredom? These places will be analyzed with attention to their common physical characteristics in the conclusion.

Question 4 reiterates the sense that the youth feel they do not have any place to go in their own community, and would rather stay at home or leave the city altogether. A few public places were in their responses, however, that may provide clues to the types of physical plazas or open spaces as preferred by these youth. These particular places (aside from the vaguely-located “The Streets” and “Parks”), include “Lake Merritt” and “Merritt’s View,” and “Jack London,” are recently improved urban public places that the city has invested significantly in over the past ten years. They appeal to broad members of the public, and it is also nice to see that the youth enjoy these places as well. Lake Merritt
and Jack London Square (as previously mentioned), are generally bustling with people, offer nice views of water bodies, have walking paths, seating areas, and are landscaped. Both provide some access to food retail, but within a larger distance. They are both easily accessible by public transit as well as walkable. Relative to other places in Oakland, both are probably the largest public areas and are somewhat safe places for youth to roam around, exercise, or socialize. Nonetheless, it is disheartening to see that five of the thirteen youth (~40%) responded they felt they did not have any place they could go – or would rather be removed from their community in the privacy of their own home.

**Question 5** asks them to list their favorite free places to go to hang out. The focus is on free spaces, as to keep the focus of their favorite places that are either public and/or do not require any money to use.

The youth chose places that are open to the public and cater to all age groups, but may have a particular focus on youth-friendly or youth-inclusive activities. The activity “Paintballing” was chosen twice, though this is unlikely to be a free and/or public place, so these will be negated here. Three parks were mentioned here, “Park” as an ambiguous term twice, and another reference to Lake Merritt. “First Fridays” is a unique response, and this open gallery walk in downtown Oakland on the first Friday of the month has generally catered to the adult population – thus it is a little surprising to see that one of the youth mentioned this as a preferred place to go. And while First Fridays is an event open to the public (as well as free gallery admission), they only occur on one day per month, so it is not a permanent place for the youth to go hang out at. Still, listing this as an option provides additional clues to the place characteristics that youth look for – such as vibrancy, an abundance of people, a display of art or entertainment, and the freedom to roam in a safe, social, and walkable urban environment.

The response “Pet Shop” is ambiguous, and perhaps is intended to show that the youth might enjoy going to a pleasurable place such as a pet shop, where they can interact with animals or shop. Moreover, similar to previous questions, two youth once again expressed they did not have any free
favorite place to go, at least not in Oakland. These negative responses seem to convey a sense of frustration in a way – though the question states nothing about limiting their favorite place here to Oakland, “none in Oakland” makes an aggressive statement that Oakland is inferior because it lacks passable places for them to go hang out.

Collectively, this data collection section provides helpful information about the youth’s preferences for place – what types of characteristics are important or attractive to them, as well as what their favorite places look like in the area. It also gives a sense of how far they are willing to travel, in order to occupy their free time.

4.3 Image Analysis

Perhaps the most significant of the three types of data collected are their designs for public places created by the youth themselves. Broken into groups of three to four teens each, the groups
were given a large piece of butcher paper with an area to create their preferred “hang-out” spot or public place they would like to see in their community.

Each piece of butcher paper had a square outline for where they would draw their design. They were asked to label the location of their site, which could be either an existing vacant lot they determined would be a good site for their plan, or a hypothetical site located within their neighborhood of choice. Using a variety of drawing materials (markers, crayons, etc.) and separated into different areas of the center, they worked on their designs for approximately forty-five minutes. After completing their designs, each group would present to the rest on their chosen location and why they designed their site as so. These presentations were filmed and the information given verbally was also used as part of the translations of the drawings, photos of which are below.

During the initial planning presentation given at the beginning of the session, the youth were also shown a few slides to describe what and how “redevelopment” can be done by planners. If they could not come up with a location for their site design on their own, a vacant lot in their neighborhood was shown as a potential location (the site was of a surface parking lot next to a vacant building). One or more of the groups chose a similar site to the one shown in the presentation.

The drawings have been dissected for their design elements, chosen location, and the types of activities that were deemed worthy of a spot they would like to spend time at. Their demographics (age, race, neighborhood of residence, and school attending) are also analyzed as a potential affecting factor in what types of places they prefer to have.
Group 1 designed a place nestled amongst the redwood trees of the Oakland hills. This natural setting is also home to a winding street network that accesses upper-middle class single family homes, and a few amenities including two churches, East Bay Regional Park land, and one Oakland public high school: Skyline High School (depicted in the drawing above as located on the west side of this youth place. Below, an image shows the setting desired by the youth).
Figure 4.4: Group 1’s Chosen Setting

Figure 4.4: Google Street View shows the chosen setting desired by the youth. To the left is a vista overlooking the San Francisco Bay, as seen between the homes of residents. To the right is natural open space that is part of Redwood Regional Park. Source: Author.

The design’s most prominent feature may be its location. Above all, the youth have indicated a desire to be in a natural setting with a vista. The design includes a cabin (described as “a place to hang out, chill”), pathways extending to a vista point, down the hill and past an “off-limits” area, and a paintballing field. There are various bushes and trees sporadically placed, indicating that the youth intend this area to be somewhat unregulated and mostly consisting of natural open space. They have also included a few people in their design, a few in pairs and a few off the paths, seemingly enjoying the location as couples or off into the natural area.

This is the most natural and unregulated space designed by all the youth groups. The location of their favorite place in this setting indicates that the youth prefer a place not located in their neighborhood, and surprisingly, one unlike any place near where they live. To access this location, the youth must take a bus or be driven a good distance up a hill, to another neighborhood of a significantly different socio-economic status and built environment entirely. Here, there are an abundance of trees and open green spaces, the homes are well maintained and spread apart, the weather is usually a few degrees cooler with fog settling in the hills, and the crime levels are much lower.

Above all, the design is important because they’ve indicated a desire to be in a natural setting with a vista. This location is completely free to access, unregulated, and open to anyone’s access. The
vista point offers a destination of significance, where viewers can enjoy the location’s setting high in the hills overlooking the San Francisco Bay Area. There is a sense of freedom and the natural setting allows for both exploration, and potential engagement in illicit behavior, though the youth only indicated “enjoying the view” and “hanging out and chilling” as activities, which make this place more designated for passive, leisurely and social behavior.

The other notable features in this design are the pathways, cabin, and paintball field. The pathways indicate that the youth like to have access points and/or walkways to stroll or hike along throughout the area. The cabin seems to represent a secluded interior where the youth can engage in more private activities or take shelter. The paintball field mimics an amenity mentioned in other parts of this focus group, including another group’s place design. Paintballing as a potential youth activity in a site will be discussed in the conclusion.

Figure 4.5: Group 1 Members

Group 1 Members Work Together on Their Site Design during the Youth Focus Group Source: Author.

The demographics of the students in this group are also important to consider here. This group consisted of four members: a Mexican Male, 18 years old, living in East Oakland, and attending Oakland Tech High School, a Mexican Male, 14 years old, living in East Oakland, attending Oakland Unity High School, a Mexican Female, 16 years old, living in East Oakland, attending Coliseum College Prep
Academy, and a Mexican Male, 15 years old, living in Fruitvale (an East Oakland neighborhood), and attending Skyline High School. Though all students live in similar neighborhoods of East Oakland (Fruitvale is technically considered an East Oakland neighborhood, located approximately twenty blocks west of “East Oakland”). One of the four students attends the high school next to the designated site location as chosen by the youth. Thus he is exposed on a daily basis to this more natural setting and the different socio-economic status of the student body (relative to the other Oakland high schools).

Furthermore, the uniqueness of this open green space plan relative to the other group’s designs located in urban settings brings up questions related to youth preferences: For example, is it possible that there is a correlation between youth who are exposed to more green and natural spaces tend to prefer more green and natural spaces? Did the one student who attends Skyline High School (in the hills) push for his group to design in this location, or was it a group effort? To make an argument here, further investigation is needed. However, this design is important because it reiterates the findings from literature, as stated in Chapter 2: youth prefer green spaces, unregulated settings, and places where they can explore and socialize with their peers.
The site design created by **Group 2** is located near 60th Avenue and Havenscourt Boulevard, where San Leandro Street crosses 66th Avenue. Below is an image of the potential site for the youth's design.

**Figure 4.6: Group 2 Site Design**

![Group 2's Site Design](image)

*Group 2's Site Design is an interior space consisting of three levels offering various recreational activities. Source: Author.*

A Google street view shows the potential location as designated by the youth. Catty-corner from this vacant lot and rail lines is a new low-income housing development. This open location (to the right) is probably intended as a redevelopment site, as the location is very accessible to where the youth live. This site is also down the street from an Oakland public middle and high school, Coliseum College Prep Academy. Source: Author.
The location chosen by the youth may be significant for its accessibility. Obviously, the site is currently vacant and would make a suitable site for new construction. The youth live in this neighborhood, and some of the youth in this peer group attend a nearby Oakland public high school. In judging from the location description, this site is vacant. Though the site looks bleak in the image above, in panning to the right one will find a street with a new low-income housing development, a new Oakland public charter school under construction and up one block is another school, Coliseum College Prep Academy. This site is also sandwiched between two major thoroughfares of East Oakland, San Leandro Street and International (E 14th) Boulevard.

This group’s design was created with much care. The group planned the site with attention to detail, both in function and in creating a space that is vibrant and fun for youth. The design is actually for a three-story building, not an outdoor area like the other groups have created. This building is secure; in addition to bullet-proof glass, only teen members age fourteen and older can enter the space. As described by this group, one must sign up for an ID and membership, though admission is free.

There are many recreational activities available here. These include bungee jumping, ice skating, virtual sky-diving, rock climbing, a swimming pool with a water slide, and a paintballing arena. In addition to these more extreme sports, there is also a performance stage, an area to engage in “nonillegal tagging” (legal graffiti area), benches and a plaza for socializing (where music is always playing), trees and a fountain, a food court, and free Wi-Fi. The youth also included an elevator to get upstairs.

From the description, this facility seems like the ultimate youth center. There is no shortage of entertainment options here, and the activity options are fairly diverse. The recreational options are more unusual activities that often require money to use in other places (for example, a virtual skydiving experience “Ifly!” and bungee jumping). They are also activities that generally need to be monitored and maintained for safety (for example, a life guard for the pool, a spotter for rock climbing, or an ice caddy
to smooth the ice on the rink). The space includes room for artistic expression, with an appreciation for visual arts and musical performances (tagging area, performance stage, and music playing). Lastly, if the youth want to relax next to the fountain, use the internet, or socialize more passively, they are also able to do so.

In this design there is an emphasis on “free” and “cheap.” The admission to the center is free, the internet access is free, performers play on the stage for free, and the food court should only serve cheap food.

This is a very interesting design, full of notable elements that may be determined as important for the youth. For example, the “nonlegal tagging” or legal graffiti area allows the youth to engage in an activity that is normally off-limits in the real world. Here is a space where they can be creative, yet not have to worry about something that is normally associated with delinquency in society. In most public areas tagging is an illegal, illicit behavior. Perhaps cities should incorporate more spaces for legal tagging in their urban areas, which may give an outlet to those who like to express themselves visually in public.

As noted above, this design has many notable features. It differs from the other groups designs, being an indoor place, but mimics that of others in which it is secured by bullet-proof glass. The place appeals to youth only, which differs from Group 1’s design which seems open to the general public. This site is accessible, but not surrounded by any green space (though they’ve included two trees in their plaza). This youth area would require considerable regular maintenance and some supervision for safety – another variance from the other groups’ designs.

Perhaps this design varies from the other groups because this group was working separately in another room, away from the influence of others. This was also an all-female group, if that were a factor in determining the youth’s preferences. Still, features such as the paintballing place and security measures mimic that of several other groups’ designs.
This design was created by three female youth, who are: a Salvadoran-American 15 year old from East Oakland, attending Skyline High School, a Mexican-American 17 year old from the Fruitvale neighborhood of East Oakland, attending Oakland Unity High School, and a Mexican-American 17 year old from the San Antonio District of East Oakland, also attending Oakland Unity High School.
Group 3 designed a mixed-outdoor park space. Their site includes varying open-air spaces and activities, including a small shelter for “chilling,” studying, or relaxing. The outside area includes a playground, a skate park, a natural area with a pond, a tree-shaded and landscaped seating area, an eating area with tables and umbrellas, and a snack bar.

The outdoor activity options vary greatly from the other group’s active recreation in their designs. Rather than being more organized activities that require equipment and extensive maintenance (such as ice skating), this site design resembles a city park. The separated spaces have simple activity options, but still a diverse array of active or passive spaces. For example, park benches can be used for resting, socializing, or observing other park users. The pond and green spaces are pleasant, landscaped green areas that add an aesthetic value to the park. The playground and skate park offer places for children and youth to be active, but are still basic park amenities. This group’s site also includes three
park entrances, which suggests a barrier around the outside (such as a fence). It is not clear how secure or open the site is to the remaining public.

This group chose to locate their site in the lot given as an example by the PO. The site is a corner, vacant lot currently used as a parking lot within East Oakland, accessible to the neighborhoods where the youth reside.

Though their plan resembles what looks like a city park with an added snack bar and indoor area, the plan is both open yet segmented. In analyzing this space, it appears that this group has “compartmentalized” each activity option in their site design, creating smaller enclosed spaces for their respected activity type. This separates the more active areas to the more leisurely spaces. Each space is still connected to the whole space, and they all appear somewhat open to activity-wanderers. These somewhat-enclosed areas focus inward towards their designated activity (for example, for someone viewing the pond, the seats all face the pond). This creates more intimate spaces for interaction with the group present or the activity involved.

This design has a significant amount of green space integrated throughout the design. The trees, grass, flowers and bushes seem to “hug” the various activity areas, acting as a buffer or pathway guide. Other spots, such as by the pond, seem to have green areas to enjoy actively (not just as an aesthetic or buffering quality); such as a lawn to sit on. The pond acts as a focal point, being a place that can be strolled around or simply viewed by people sitting on the surrounding benches.

In addition to green buffers, this site design has no shortage of seating options. There are picnic tables, benches of different sorts, and movable cushions (inside the shelter). All the seating areas are clustered and focused inward, suggesting a space to view an activity (such as skateboarders or pond), or to socialize with others sitting in the same area.

Shade is provided throughout the site as well. The picnic tables all have umbrellas, and many of the benches seem to appear under a tree. The youth either prefer the cooling effects of this shade, or
like the enclosed feeling these overhangs provide. Lastly, food seems to be a repeating feature in most of the youth’s designs. Here, a snack bar provides food options for those enjoying this space.

A final important note might be that this design seems to appeal to the general population, not just youth (which is found in the designs from Groups 2 and 4). There was no specified entrance, for example, that restricted any users. Furthermore, the playground suggests recreation options for younger children or youth. The leisure feeling of this design, as suggested by the landscaped areas, the pond, and abundant seating options, also can be enjoyed by elderly or other resting people. Still, there are only three small entrances into this park, thus it is not immediately open to the street side. This may be for security, to buffer the bustle of the busy street, or to provide a sense of enclosure, privacy, and/or tranquility.

Figure 4.10: Group 3 Members

Group 3 Members Collaborated to Create a Functional Design. Source: Author.

This site was designed by three females, varying from thirteen to seventeen years of age. Two of the teens live in neighborhoods still technically in East Oakland, yet closer to Oakland’s downtown and Lake Merritt. These are the Fruitvale and San Antonio neighborhoods, which are very diverse and mixed-income (working class) areas. The third teen lives in “deep” East Oakland, an area known for more serious gang violence. However, safety is an issue in all three areas, which are located in the “flatlands” of Oakland. These flatter, less green neighborhoods have occasional parks integrated within a gridiron street pattern, though most are not as well-maintained as other parks in Oakland.
Despite the neighborhoods in which they live, all three teens attend schools located within the Oakland hills. These schools are in much greener, safer, and higher socioeconomic area than the East Oakland schools. Thus these youth are exposed on a nearly-daily basis to greener and better maintained city parks, mostly nestled within upper-middle class residential neighborhoods.

Overall, this group produced a design that was green, well-manicured, and usable for all members of the population. Their design offers active and passive recreation options, within more intimate spaces for leisure and socially-oriented uses.
Group 4’s design is most similar to that designed by Group 2. Situated in a more urban area of Oakland, the site has little or no green space, yet offers an interior space with recreational activities near the youth’s neighborhoods. Source: Author.

The design is complete with a parking lot and taco truck located on the exterior of the site, and varying activity areas inside. There is a glass, bullet-proof dome that covers the entire site, both for shelter as well as protection. Only one entrance leads into the facility, and membership is exclusive to non-sex offenders only (age was not mentioned as a factor for entrance). Inside the dome there is an ecofriendly train that circulates around the perimeter, passing on a bridge over a lake and through a tunnel. There is a lake for boating and fishing, an arcade with “donated” PlayStation video game consoles, pinball machines, and billiards, a paintball court, and a dance club that sits inside the tunnel. The dance club has benches where the youth can socialize “with someone new they might meet inside.” There are Jacuzzi hot tubs by the lake. Everything in this site is free.

The youth have placed their ideal location “in the cuts,” meaning a place away from much other activity. They mentioned it should be out by the 880 freeway, which near them is an abandoned area,
similar to the site that Group 2 chose. One can assume a location such as this represents where they have chosen:

**Figure 4.12: Group 4’s Chosen Setting**

![Google street view shows an isolated site located near the freeway, in East Oakland. There is not much to this area, aside from railroad tracks and other transit lines. The land along 880 is mostly abandoned, industrial, or blighted. Source: Author.](image)

It is not clear whether or not the youth chose this site because of its isolation, or because this open land would be a good place for redevelopment. Being close to the highway, it is also accessible—via the freeway but also because most of the youth live in the area near the freeway. These abandoned spaces can also be perceived as less regulated, but they are also less safe than a bustling high-pedestrian trafficked area.

Aside from this site’s isolated location, the activities offered in the design are quite exciting from a youth’s perspective. There are recreational activities offered, such as boating, fishing, playing in the arcade, paintballing, and dancing in the club. The youth can enjoy spaces not normally open to underage youth, such as a club and Jacuzzi hot tubs. Furthermore, the fact that this site is free to access allows the youth to participate in activities that are normally restricted to people with money (such as paintballing). There is also an emphasis on nightlife activities, such as billiards and clubbing.

From a physical planning perspective, the youth have included basic infrastructure to make this site practical. The glass dome offers shelter and protection from the street. The surface parking lot offers connected parking to the site (though none of these youth drive). The train can be used as a form...
of interior transit, or used as another form of recreation. They have also specified that it passes along a bridge and through a tunnel. There are bathrooms located by the entrance. A taco truck (a common type of food vendor found in East Oakland, usually stationed along a busy street or sidewalk) offers food to the users of this site. Details such as a mud puddle in the paintballing court, benches in the club, and a strobe light in the arcade were also specified.

In asking about the safety of the site (including whether or not drugs were allowed inside the dance club), the youth clarified that “yes the site was safe.” In order to enter, everyone would have to pass through metal detectors, “same as airport security.” Sex offenders would not be allowed in, so they suggest some sort of member screening as well – though age was not a specified factor. The bullet-proof dome protects the interior of the site from any stray bullets or street violence. Because they have placed the site in an isolated location, however, there is no interaction with the outside street – one can drive to this place, enter, and be completely removed from the street. The youth can also interact in seclusion, with these “discreet” dark and unregulated spaces in and around this design.

Lastly, this design is similarly diverse in activity options to the other group’s designs. There is a mix of leisure and active recreational activities, along with some entertainment, regulated and unregulated spaces.

Figure 4.13: Group 4 Members

Group 4 Members draw out the train and parking lot first, as the foundation for their site design. Source: Author.
Group 4 consisted of two female and one male student, fifteen, sixteen, and seventeen years of age. They are of Mexican and Salvadoran ethnic backgrounds, and attend Oakland Unity High School (two), and Skyline High School (one). They all live in East Oakland. The younger female that attends Skyline is exposed to a more green environment in the hills, but she is a freshman there, and attended the same school as the male (Roots International Middle School), located in the flatlands not from this site’s chosen location. These youth all live in areas where they are exposed to rail lines (BART as well as Amtrak), have been exposed to boating through La Clínica’s peer program, and taco trucks in the neighborhood – whether or not these influences have impacted their design preferences, is unclear.

**Overall Site Design Analysis:** As stated earlier, the youth were asked to design their ideal public place. This could look like a public plaza, park, or “hang out” place that could be incorporated as a public space in their community. The site designs, created by each youth group and analyzed above, offer valuable information about the types of physical places they view as ideal. This section of data collection differed from the previous two types (Check-In questions and Gallery Walk Questions in 4.1 and 4.2) because it focused on the youth’s desires created from an open slate – they were able to create something they’d dream of having in their community, but may not have access to at the moment. The other sections were only based on their preferences for existing places, which limits the parameters of their true preferences for place – because if a place does not exist, their true preferences will remain unknown. However, by having the groups design their ideal public places we can understand their preferences a little better.

There are two parts of information that can be analyzed from the group drawings overall. One, the youth’s specified location of their site, which offers clues into the types of settings they would like to see these youth-friendly spaces. Second is the content of each site design, denoting their preferences for place:
The groups have chosen to locate their youth places in two different types of settings – in the urban flatlands on the fringe of their East Oakland neighborhoods – a place easily accessible, yet less developed, monitored, or safe; or conversely, in the hills of Oakland’s upper-middle class neighborhoods – a place near a high school several of the youth attend, though not easily accessible by bus (a fifteen minute drive up the hill). Near Redwood Regional Forest, this location represents a safer, greener, and cleaner environment.

With the groups choosing two very different sites, questions arise. Many of them do not have cars, nor do all their parents necessarily drive. For the youth to access the park spaces in the Oakland hills, they must spend a considerable amount of time riding the bus. However, the bus will bring them up to a community physically unlike their own – hilly topography, stately redwoods, and lush green vegetation sandwiched between well-maintained homes that front a million dollar view of the San Francisco Bay Area. Do some youth seek to escape their own environment? Particularly, for youth who expressed they did not have any place to go in their own neighborhood, do they feel they can “get away” by a day amongst the Redwood trees? Or, do all youth crave this more natural environment as a healthy oasis from the industrial, concrete flatlands they live in? Furthermore, are youth who are exposed to this type of environment on a regular basis (groups who preferred green spaces had at least one member who attended the high school in this hilly neighborhood), more likely to prefer this type of environment as opposed to an urban one?

Still, two groups decided on blighted urban areas for their youth places. These locations close to the 880 freeway are industrial, vacant, and poorly maintained areas. However, they are close to where the youth live. Additional questions arise here – for example, are there redeeming qualities in these unmonitored, yet more secluded sites that the youth prefer? Or, are the youth’s preferences here reflective of the place that they live in? Many newer developments in and south of Oakland (San Leandro to San Jose) are occurring near the freeway. Several of the “favorite places” mentioned in
section 4.1 were also located near the freeway (The A’s/Raiders Coliseum, Wingstop and Batting Cages), so perhaps the youth here are locating their site similar to other favorite places they know.

Alternatively, the youth may have chosen these locations to engage in the redevelopment of a vacant site (how to make their community a better place, which was discussed in the urban planning introduction presentation at the beginning of the session). It is also possible these urban locations were chosen simply for accessibility and without account for the physical characteristics of the surrounding environment.

The content of the site designs varies in type of amenity, yet show similar trends in type of activity. Below is a chart tallying up all the noted design characteristics and amenities included in the group’s designs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic of Space or Amenity</th>
<th>Number of Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location Setting:</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Open Space</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Green Area</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed urban/natural</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation Options:</td>
<td>4/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paintball</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swimming</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arcade</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playground</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ice Skating</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skate Park</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual Sky Diving</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bungee Jumping</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rock Climbing</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boating/Fishing</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacuzzi Hot Tubs</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dance Club</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Train Riding</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment Options:</td>
<td>3/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet/Technology Center</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vista/Aesthetic Feature</td>
<td>1-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Stage</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dance Club</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graffiti Wall for Tagging</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic Outdoor Amenities:</td>
<td>4/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benches</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feature</td>
<td>Value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pond/Lake</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picnic Tables</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umbrellas</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fountain</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walking Pathways/Trails</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parking Lot</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelter</td>
<td>4/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Center</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabin</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dance Club</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couches</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computers/Internet</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bathrooms</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elevator</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(unspecified interior)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Space</td>
<td>3/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural (unregulated)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landscaped</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trees</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grass or Open Area</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flowers</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water Feature</td>
<td>4/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetic – Fountain or Pond</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactive – Lake, hot tubs or Swimming Pool</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetic Qualities</td>
<td>3-4/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landscaped Green Spaces</td>
<td>2-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pond/Lake</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fountain</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vista Points</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Meeting Space</td>
<td>4/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelter or Center</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seating Areas for Socializing</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>4/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snack Bar</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taco Truck</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security</td>
<td>3/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perimeter Barrier/Fence</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullet-proof Glass</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessible to Members Only</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intended User of Space</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth-specific</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members Only</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open to Anyone</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free of Cost</td>
<td>3/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specified</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not specified</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Compiled by Author.*
As noted from the figure above, one can see how some characteristics of space and amenities appear in multiple groups’ designs. Thus the prevalence of each feature is regarded as the most desired across each group, and may be perceived as more important for the youth places. For example, each group design included various forms of recreational options. Some specific recreational activities, such as paintballing, appeared in three of the four group’s designs – and can be perceived as a more desired amenity from the youth’s perspective.

Over fifteen different types of recreational activities were included amongst the four groups’ designs, with paintballing and swimming as the most common preferred activities. All the group designs included some form of recreation that offers options for physical activity, social interaction, or entertainment. The more extreme types of recreation not commonly found at public parks (such as rock climbing or bungee jumping) are associated with what the youth consider “fun” or “exciting.” There is some amount of risk associated with these types of activities, and are commonly associated with producing an adrenaline rush. Entertainment options were included in a few of the designs, from a performance stage and dance club to background music to free internet access. The stage and legal graffiti area offer creative spaces for the youth to express themselves or interact with peers in such a manner.

Basic park amenities were also important features of each design. Basic amenities could include features such as benches, landscaped green areas, water features, shelter or shade, and bathrooms. Having access to food options, such as a snack bar or taco truck, was a feature very important to the youth. In fact, four of four groups included food in their site designs.

Security was another vital feature for the sites. The youth directed their designs inward, focusing away from the street and bolstering buffers around their environments. The barriers protect from the bustle of a busy street, stray bullets, entrances screen members, and their places are generally hidden from the public.
Overall, a diverse set of activity options created inviting or fun places for youth. Active and adrenaline inducing recreational activities, park benches in social settings, water features, snack bars, and shelters were amongst the most common park features – seen universally in all four of the group’s designs.
5. Conclusion

In conducting a literature review prior to the focus group, it initially seemed frustrating that the one source on Oakland youth contained such limited findings relative to the other case studies. The study produced vague results – the youth’s world seemed limited to their immediate surroundings of the parking lots between their housing division and had little exposure to the rest of the city. Thus the study was not initially perceived as useful to the youth surveyed in this focus group. Since her youth provided answers unrelated to the city itself, there was a perceived lack of relativity to the youth in this study who commute across the city for school every day. It was assumed that the La Clínica youth would have more preferences and interactions within the city itself, providing an outwardly focused view of how they perceived their environment.

However, the youth in this focus group responded similarly to those in Savadori’s study. When asked of their favorite place in Oakland, many responded with “nowhere.” Some offered their own house or bedroom as the number one place they would like to go in their community. The results from this case study reiterated Salvadori’s findings in that the youth are isolated and harbor feelings of hopelessness with regards to their surroundings. In fact, the Oakland youth felt negatively towards the city, almost angered that they were being asked to identify any such usable space within the city limits.

The comparison between Salvadori’s case study of East Oakland youth in 2002 and the youth from this study provides helpful information in assessing the situation in Oakland. As Lynch and Banerjee found from their initial multi-national study, comparing case studies of youth with similar demographics within the same micro region might prove more useful than conducting studies around the world, in providing implications for planners.

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89 Salvadori (2002)
90 Banerjee and Lynch (1977)
Still, the main priorities of youth preferences as assessed by the literature review were reiterated by the Oakland youth. The four themes: green space, areas for social exploration, stimulating areas of interest, and secure mobility are all present in the Oakland youth’s preferences for place. Though the Oakland youth preferred places that indicated similar characteristics, the major priorities out of their responses were slightly shifted. The youth here valued having a diverse set of activity options, active and adrenaline inducing recreational activities, park benches in social settings, water features, snack bars, and shelters. Their favorite public places indicated a desire to be around people of all ages and all diversities – though the most desired public locations were all located outside of their neighborhoods. A composite image below shows the Oakland youth’s preferences for place:

Figure 5.1: Oakland Youth’s Conceptual Design of Space

Source: Created by the author.
Using the youth’s site designs depicting a location they perceive as an ideal place, the image above combines the most common features preferred by each group. Features such as a secure setting with recreational activities, a technology center, food, entertainment, and green space were important.

The composite of data collected by the youth present the above trends, but the individual experiences or preferences as mentioned by some youth seemed to have further implications for planners. For example, the Oakland youth’s designs show how they crave to have places as their own, or to have access to amenities they would not normally have access to. Particularly true for the youth in East Oakland, who come from working class families, having access to recreational opportunities that youth of privilege tend to have was very important. For example, access to a swimming pool, Jacuzzi hot tubs, ice skating, and rock climbing are all activities that usually require money or membership at a private club to use – thus they requested access to these amenities in their site designs. The Oakland youth also wanted to go places usually off limits to them, not because of their lack of money, but because of their age. Having a safe place in the community where they can go to a dance club or do graffiti, was also appealing.

Their responses demonstrate how a lack of basic needs from their environment – shift priorities away from the qualities that youth in the general population prefer. For example, two newer themes are more present in the Oakland youth’s desired spaces – tight security and the availability of food. Though they seemed to want to be inclusive of others and connected to their community, their designs were mostly walled off from the neighborhood. Creating safety away from the dangers of the street was more important than community integration, so their designs focused inward to provide a carefree site where they could engage with peers in a safe setting. Food and free services such as internet were also provided in each site, indicating the youth’s desires to have access to amenities which normally cost money and may be somewhat inaccessible to them.
The intentions for place preferences are unclear out of some responses from Oakland youth. The question “If you were bored, where would you go and what would you do?” was answered with: “Drive around shooting people, birds, cars, and houses with a paintball gun.” Oakland’s youth have a strong culture of violence in their community. While this is a reality, they also feed off each other and appear to find it “humorous” in dealing with their reality of crime by perhaps hypocritically preferring activities. Still, paintballing was a very popular response among all the youth in this focus group. Paintballing courts were included in three of the four site designs, and was also mentioned in the Gallery Walk responses. However, from an urban planning perspective it is unclear whether or not specific recommendations made by youth would enhance community safety in the long run – particularly because Oakland has high incidents of gun-related violence and gang activity. Simultaneously, other “hang-out” places for youth in Oakland were limited to safe zones such as staying at home (playing video games or watching TV).

Knowles-Yánez’s overview of Buss (1994) is closely related to the experience of the youth in Oakland. Just as several students in the focus group were hesitant to list any “favorite place” in Oakland where they would like to go, and stated “nowhere,” “my house” or “my room” instead, Buss’s study found that urban children (including youth) in Los Angeles had similar experiences. The study found that:

children no longer feel safe and no longer trust places such as schools, parks, and neighborhoods where they used to be able to recreate and create their own identities. These former safe spots for social interaction have been replaced by commercialized places of recreation such as malls, which frequently show evidence of violence (graffiti) and social ills. For Buss, involving children in planning activities served to inform planners of the complex, not always predictable, perspective of children...

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91 OFCY (2011)
92 In Knowles-Yánez (2005)
The research was not surprising given the place characteristics, but the extreme negative sentiment towards the city of Oakland was. The youth felt excluded from certain neighborhoods or amenities that are off limits, and angered towards the lack of options offered to them. This study pointed to the realities of growing up in a violent neighborhood. Residents are less able to mingle with each other on a micro-scale because neighborhood parks and streets are not perceived as safe places to commune. This takes away from the social cohesion that might exist in other areas, and isolates youth with limited mobility as it is. A lack of easy places to go to satisfy boredom or the need to be active and social also seems to have an effect on the youth's development. The youth are already disadvantaged in their communities, but their environments seem to have a large negative impact on their view of the world outside the home because they have such a lack of connection to opportunities, a lack of trust, and further feelings of hopelessness from their environment. Though further research is needed, there may be correlations to how the youth perceive their built environment around them and other issues plaguing Oakland youth – issues such as obesity, crime, and a lack of upward social mobility.

A planning implication from this data collection is that Oakland is losing its youth to other cities. They would rather commute for over an hour in order to find an interesting or safe place to hang out. In economic development, this translates to lost dollars for the city because youth are not perceived as a “valued constituency.” As Whitlock stated, “young people contribute vitality, service and labor, money, and fresh ideas to their communities. In fact, in economic terms alone, teens (ages 12-19) spent $175 billion in 2003, of which, approximately $125 billion was teenager’s own money. Teens spend an average of $103 per week.” 93 If Oakland were to create more viable spaces for young people, they might be able to revitalize lackluster parts of the city.

In addition to hindered economic development, consequences of having negative perceptions of the city may affect youth in a multitude of ways. A prescription for vibrant cities should include

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93 Whitlock (2004)
interesting places for youth to go, but also the necessary infrastructure for them to feel mobile and connected to their community. If the Oakland youth had positive sentiment about their city, they may be more vested in their existing public spaces.

A prescription for youth friendly cities is that include options and therefore opportunities for youth to grow. As Banerjee and Lynch state,

The city should open out for these children. They want both quiet and stimulus, and should find both of them close at hand. The relation of residential areas and city services is not only important for adult welfare, but the child’s welfare as well. In fact, it may be even more critical, since the child is more limited in his range, and has the greater hunger for stimulus, since it is the material on which his growth feeds. Attractive public places should be accessible to them, where interesting activity can be seen and engaged in.  

Creating vibrant and interesting places means investing in the types of places youth consider significant. “Being welcomed in public space was about belonging, respect, opportunities to connect in meaningful ways with each other and the community as a whole.” The preferences for place can be achieved by attentive planners and urban design principles cognizant of the youth’s needs. To achieve this, the need to integrate youth with the planning process is ever more relevant.

Layne’s study on the implications of intergenerational public places evaluated youth and adult preferences for urban public places, to see if preferences for space were similar between the two. By exploring similarities in elements of urban design preferences (physical features found in the layout of plazas, parks, streets) the study implies many important implications for planners seeking to better public spaces and ways to create more user-friendly designs that appeal to broader audiences, as well as intergenerational interactions. “The connection between preferred space characteristics... [translate into] urban spatial relationships ... that could be employed by intergenerational program and shared-site

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94 Banerjee and Lynch (1977)
95 Whitlock (2004)
administrators or urban planners and landscape architects to evaluate existing sites or to develop new age-integrative settings.” Layne’s study is significantly relevant to this thesis, as it not only outlines youth preferences for urban public places and provides a comparison to the outcomes of this study, but it also furthers the research to include adult preferences and how they relate to the youth’s. Furthermore, the implications of creating intergenerational or universally-inclusive public places is appealing because it appears to have benefits that are aligned with youth preferences but also foster interaction between other members of the community, which fulfills the youth’s needs for connectedness with others in space. Both youth and adults combined prefer urban public places that are “safe and welcoming, encourage the presence of people, be open yet protective, include natural and man-made elements, provide for a variety of passive and active activities, and be restive and festive.”

This thesis provides space recommendations as provided by youth across different case studies, but the reality of today’s planning world is noted: Knowles-Yánez states that “scholarly research approaches toward children and land use practice are grouped together [in this section] because of the following: they tend to lack a tight link to a practice outcome.” One of the major disconnects in planning for youth is that “Young people do not normally view themselves as a group that can influence policy, adults do not view them as competent citizens, and public officials do not view them as central to their work.” However, as Richards-Schuster & Checkoway argue, youth should be both participants in and affecters of public policy. Some of the inhibitors of youth involved is that often “community agencies view young people as passive recipients of services rather than as competent citizens, when schools lack quality curricula to prepare them for civic leadership, and when adults treat them as inferior and disregard their potential because of their age.” The Oakland youth seemed to have strong opinions about their urban environment – throughout the focus group they were vocal and outraged

96 Layne (2009)  
97 Layne (2009)  
98 Knowles-Yánez (2005)  
99 Richards-Schuster and Checkoway (2010)
about the situation about the city. However, for most of them it was their first exposure to the field of urban planning. They were interested in learning more, but also want to see results of change in their community.

Planners should consider a move towards more research in the field of youth development and youth’s sense of place in an urban world. With further research in the field, models for youth-oriented or inclusive placemaking may be developed that can help better promote positive youth development and interaction with the community. By creating intentional places in the city where youth feel belonged, connected, and a sense of freedom yet responsibility to their place, they may be more likely to see themselves as part of their community at large. Though my research was inconclusive in how the creation of better youth places might affect our urban areas in the long run, there is potential for these efforts to have many positive effects on our future generation.

Lastly, recommendations for further research include: conducting comparison studies with more youth in Oakland – whether it compare neighborhoods or demographics, relative to the youth’s preferences for the built environment; ask youth more questions about transportation, mobility, and allowance or spending money to see if this affects where they like to spend time; ask – what would youth perceive as ideal in their community, not just as a youth-space? Would they be more likely to include universal and inclusive designs such as parks that appeal to the general public, or would they still prefer to have their own “youth-only” place, disconnected from the rest of the city?; and what do youth’s preferences in urban design spaces such as streetscaping and plaza design entail? – in other words, if the youth were given a specific location in a neighborhood – how would they improve that site/area to become a more livable and youth-friendly piece of the city at large?; what would they like to see more of in their neighborhood? How are schools incorporated into the larger picture of youth, their neighborhoods, and the city?; How are youth affected by the built environment (focus is away from
preferences, but merges with topics such as social engineering, crime prevention and the built environment, and the context of youth in their environments with youth development theory).
Sources


Interview, Claudia Briones-Rodriguez, Youth Services Supervisor. La Clínica de la Raza: Community Health Education Department. Oakland, California.

Interview, Liz Blume, School of Planning Adjunct Professor & Executive Director of the Community Building Institute at Xavier University: for her local planning experience as well as her connections to various community engagement organizations.

Interview. Mahyar Arefi. POV of Hope VI trespassing youth incidents, as resident and UC Planning Professor. He is part of the Hope VI HOA and attends the regular meetings. He was part of these discussions.

Interview. Yesenia Molinar, Health Educator at La Clínica de la Raza: Community Health Education Youth Services Department. 9-18-12.


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Appendix

Focus Group Presentation to La Clínica Youth, December 20, 2012:
(29 PowerPoint Sides Presented by Projector)