

**#WomenSpatialActivism**

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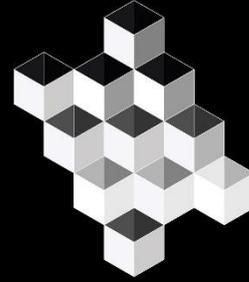
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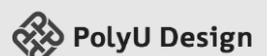
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# #WomenSpatialActivism: Designing for the re-appropriation of public spaces by women in New Delhi, India

Sugandha Gupta  
Luisa Maria Calabrese  
Akkelies Van Nes

76–99

The first attempt to reinvent the public spaces, #WomenSpatialActivism, reclaims the women's right to the city in India. Women Spatial Activism (WSA) proposes a gender-sensitive approach to urban design in the neighbourhood of Malviya Nagar in Delhi in India, that inspires the reappropriation of the front door by an old woman, the street by a working girl and the public park by mothers. The proposal is to reclaim women's right to the city through the recontextualisation of their public spaces which have been lost or need to be developed in urbanised India. The project has three main components: bottom-up strategic spatial interventions, the creation of a strong coalition of local stakeholders, and the use of digital technology. The hashtag #WomenSpatialActivism or #WSA aims to spread this movement through social media. The Women Spatial Activism project calls for a spatial gender agenda for an inclusive urban future for all.

#gender sensitive urban design

#spatial activism

#community building

#citizen participation

#stakeholder coalition

## Introduction

*If we are going to see real development in the world then our best investment is women.*

(Desmond Tutu)

*Masculine and feminine roles are not biologically fixed but socially constructed.*

(Judith Butler)

According to the United Nations, current urban planning and urban development policies are not sufficiently concerned with gender inequality. The vision of UN-Habitat III aims for cities and settlements that promote civic engagement and participatory planning to engender a sense of belonging and possession among all their inhabitants (“Quito declaration on sustainable cities and human settlements for all” 2016). Violence and crime against women in the form of rape, molestation, and eve-teasing is a grave concern in all parts of the world and has made public spaces fearful (Paul 2011).

The challenge to bring gender-equal public spaces into practice asks for a two-sided approach: a social/cultural behavioural practice (education) and a physical practice (how do we create safe and accessible public spaces for everyone). This article presents a wishful pilot project of Women Spatial Activism that comes from the personal motivation of the author: “I am the motivation for myself. As a young Indian woman, I want to live in a city where every woman feels free and safe in a public space. As a young urbanist I want to plan and design gender inclusive, safe and vibrant public urban spaces” (Gupta 2017). The project aims at defining a new role of Urban Design in enhancing gender equality through public space design in an urban neighbourhood in India.

The issues regarding gender inequality in public spaces in Delhi instigate the main question as: Which spatial interventions, technology-based

solutions and design processes could give women of New Delhi a gender-inclusive network of public spaces and re-appropriation to what the city has to offer? The network of public spaces here defines the connectivity between public spaces, in order to give a safe network of connectivity.

The article comprises of seven main sections to answer these questions. Section 2 constitutes Gender Inequality as a cultural, economic and spatial issue in India. This part is followed by gender and urban space that matter worldwide in Section 3. Section 4 targets the neighbourhood in question or the test case. In the next part, Section 5, a WomenSpatialActivism design charter is formulated from the issues that come out of the workshop and site analysis with the theoretical background and best practices all over the world. Section 6 comprehends the main design interventions of WomenSpatialActivism or WSA. Section 7 finally concludes the research and points out the intentional pilot project.

### **Gender Inequality as a Cultural, Economic and Spatial Issue in Delhi, India**

This section focuses on how gender inequality is a spatial issue and impacts the economy of the country. A space that does not support gender equality is a gendered space. Patriarchy starts strongly in the domestic system itself in India and the house remains the central space for women. A woman is strongly identified because of her male counterpart in India and the house becomes the symbol of her identity (Tharu, Susie and Niranjana 1994).

The public spaces for girls and women in India are only for necessary activities, such as going to work, to shop or other necessary activities. Loitering or “flaneuring” in public spaces is not accepted for women in Indian culture (Phadke et al. 2009). #Whyloiter? by the Pukar Organisation focuses on gender as a category to examine the

ordering and experience of the city, particularly public places, ranging from streets, public toilets and market places to recreational areas and modes of public transport (Phadke, Ranade and Khan 2009).

The country has a population of over 1.2 billion where half of them are female (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation 2011). The statistics show the importance and potential of the female part of the population at the same time.

The issues of gender inequality and crime in public spaces in India can be seen from three perspectives – cultural, economic and spatial. Here it has been argued how spatial changes in public spaces can also impact the economic and cultural issues positively in the test case of Delhi:

**Cultural Issue** — The cultural issue includes Delhi as a crime capital with the highest number of cases of crimes against women among India's 'million-plus' cities, followed by Mumbai and Bangalore (National Crime Records Bureau 2013, 79). The dependence of a girl for everyday tasks on her family is also a result of the cultural bindings of the country (Madhok 2008).

**Economic Issue** — The percentage of educated women is high in an urban area like Delhi but the working women population is low after a certain age as they go into domestic labour. Additionally, female labour force participation has been on a declining trend in India, in contrast to most other regions, predominantly since 2004/05 (Green n.d.). US\$2.9 trillion can be added to India's GDP by 2025 if it improves gender parity as stated in a report by McKinsey (Dobbs et al. 2015).

**Spatial Issue** — The quality of a public space can be determined based on the strength and the value of the social associations it enables, its capacity to welcome

and inspire a mixture of diverse groups and behaviour, and its potential for promoting mutual connection on a symbolic level, cultural expression, and integration (Falu 2009). The bad qualities of the public space network such as poor street lighting at night, domination by men in the streets, and segregated labyrinth streets with a lack of doors and windows on the ground floor make them unsafe for girls and women. The type of public spaces in India are streets, railway stations, parks and gardens, streets, roads, highways, cinema halls, malls, plazas, and bus stops (Mahadevia, Lathia, and Banerjee 2016).

The unsupportive spatial infrastructure is one of the reasons why the girls are not able to participate entirely in the Indian economy. Simultaneously, the relationship between activities for women and how the infrastructure and urban fabric is planned is poor. A fear of crime and the public realm dominates women's minds due to the non-gender friendly environments (Viswanath and Mehrotra 2007). This forces women to stay at home, in spite of having a high education, which represents a huge loss to the GDP and economy of the country (Valentine 1990).

Gender inequality starts as a social problem but in spatial terms it is about the unequal rights in private and public spaces for its inhabitants as well as visitors. Like most large cities in India, Delhi lacks inclusive spaces. Combined with high rates of crimes against women, and poorly designed urban areas, this contributes to a sense of fear experienced by them. It can be argued that there is a missing link between different spheres of politics, the economy, social relationships, safety and communities.

### **Gender and urban space studies that matter worldwide**

There are several seminal writings on gender as a performative act, but few on how this performative act relates to the form and use of urban space. The few writings on gender and space are much

rooted in French postmodernism philosophical writings. Henry Lefebvre states that a "right to the city" is the right to urban life. In many ways, only through self-organisation, can members of a free association take control over their own life, in such a way that it becomes their own work. This is called 're-appropriation' or de-alienation (Lefebvre 1996). The right to the city, that is, the right to use and the right to participate, are further researched upon and seem to be violated because of gendered power relations with ethnicity and the nation. In spite of knowing that women have a right to access public spaces, they do not use it because of the local cultural mindset (Fenster 2017). The enduring disregard for gendered and personified rights to everyday life explains the conventional statement of rights to the everyday life in the city (Beebeejaun 2017). Beebeejaun's discourse on a varied framework towards a right to the city can simply be understood that it depends on experiences of how women use spaces in everyday life. This discussion is used as the basis for the *Gender and the City* workshop and site analysis for figuring out problems and co-creation of spaces coming from the residents of the selected area.

Early twentieth century approaches to urban planning and urban design have been without a doubt dominated by a biased understanding of gender (Hayden 1980). Decisions about how the built environment should function, and therefore be planned, were taken by healthy white male individuals, making patriarchal suppositions about women and their lives (Woodsworth 2005). The basic unit for urban policies and plans was the stereotyped family, whereas the private realm is for the female members and the public realm is for the exercise of the logos (Arendt 1958). This approach in the Western world remained unvaried until the 1960s, when the 'second wave' of feminism came about and started playing an important role in problematising women's

condition (Greed 1994). The narrative implies a role of women in making decisions about the public space usage in the first place, which later is considered to have built the background of WomenSpatialActivism. To involve the women of the area one has to design for this in the planning and design process through a bottom-up approach.

In "Gender perspectives in Urban Planning" (2016) Ana Falú, the Coordinator of the UN-Habitat UNI Gender Hub, states that women are cross-cut by differences of class, income, education, sexual option, race, ethnicity, place and territorial segregation. She concludes that the main factors to be looked at while designing a gender-sensitive city in developed and developing countries are localisation, proximity, participation and resources. These factors form the roots of the design methodology in this particular case.

### **Test Case: Malviya Nagar, Delhi**

A mobile application called Safetipin is working on a digital database to mark safe/unsafe urban spaces through users in Delhi. The chosen location, Malviya Nagar area in South Delhi, is highlighted as a problematic area according to the Safetipin application and local police crime records for the area. The locals have an interest in improving the area, in particular the unsafe zone. The neighbourhood houses a high number of young girls (residents and migrated population), and there is a mix of different income groups living in the area (Safetipin 2017). In the year 2009, JAGORI, an NGO, launched the "Safe City Free of Violence against Women and Girls" initiative. The studies are aimed at supporting the struggle of the community to claim their rights and entitlements as citizens of Malviya Nagar, Delhi (Jagori 2015).

Fig 1. shows a map of the Malviya Nagar area in Zone-F, which is a planned posh locality of Delhi. A number of women from all parts of the

world come to live as 'paying guests' in the area due to its high proximity to jobs, schools, and services and cheaper living costs (Nag 2016). Many working women aged 18-30 years old face sexual harassment and molestation on the streets. They are either students, or working in the private or government sector. The area is near to various universities and large shopping malls. However, the area's open spaces are not considered destinations for recreation.

Our approach was to collect spatial data through registrations of human behaviour, and interviews with experts as well as with residents. In addition, a workshop *Gender and the City* with various stakeholders (journalists, sociologists, architects, planners, target groups, experts and residents) was carried out.

The gender and city workshop along with a site study identified the following objectives: the natural surveillance mechanism, way-finding abilities, transparency of the building facades, openness and lighting in the urban spaces, including sharing space, variety and mixed-use in functions, innovation and creative platforms with improved accessibility.

The area's residents stressed the absence of pavements and toilets, no community activities for women and a lack of meeting points. The expert interviews demarcate how there is no gender discrimination at policy levels, coordination clashes between stakeholders and government differences at local and central level. One of the main outputs of the workshop was that women prefer a medium crowded street instead of an isolated one. These objectives turned the route of the research towards a deeper connection on public spaces, safety, inclusiveness, co-creation and community building from a gender perspective.

## **WomenSpatialActivism Design Charter from Best Practices around the World**

For a better understanding of the critical context of gender in public spaces, it is very important to understand the interrelationship between both gender and public space in an Indian context. The best examples from the world, academic writings and authors are relevant in the sense of forming a basic structure for the design charter.

Collective housing and shared common spaces within residential projects for working women by Oho Fick, Sven Ivar Lind and Sven Markelius, and the Steilshoop project in Denmark, Sweden and Germany, respectively are perfect examples of community building (Hayden 1980). These particular practices fit to the present Indian society where there are more working and independent women specifically in urban areas. *Collectiu Punt 6* (Collective Point 6) strongly thinks that co-working and co-responsibilities can change the environment for the women completely where she can be more free. The methodology of co-creation with temporary urbanism is therefore adapted for the design solutions of #WomenSpatialActivism.

From the writings with a focus on street life, several authors touch upon the sitting and standing activities of people as an indicator of urban street life and safety. As Jan Gehl describes in his book *Life Between Buildings*, places where people like to stop and sit are the hubs of public life (Gehl 2011). Urban spaces facilitating only necessary activities, or places to sit or stand for men only, create neighbourhoods where women only perform necessary activities such as rushing, though only when strictly necessary. Jane Jacobs claims that the presence of people in streets enhances "eyes on the streets" to ensure safety. She stated: "Cities have the capabilities of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody"

(Jacobs 1961). Derived from Jacobs' and Gehl's work, the WomenSpatialActivism charter comes with the solution of "Bring out your own chair", to increase eyes on the street and community building by the women in the area.

As more women use public transport and walk than men, the quality of the pavements and surroundings is essential for moving around and staying in public spaces. The concept of 'Blockers', the 'Parking Interrupters', is based on these principles of reclaiming the pavements to walk and solve one of the biggest hurdles of illegal parking.

Wayfinding abilities was another objective during the workshop which has given Kevin Lynch's work importance. He made some cognitive maps on how most people imagine the city (Lynch 1972). His results comply with the wayfinding abilities of women who depend more on landmarks and signages than maps (Lawton and Kallai 2002). The Pink Carpet project or wayfinding strip in the dark and 'signage board bombing' come up as placemaking solutions to the issue.

Streets more on the commercial side are considered unsafe at night (Hillier and Sahbaz 2008). Lighting is considered as a very important safety parameter also by the Safetipin organisation (Viswanath and Mehrotra 2007). To solve the safety issues WSA came up with Light Your Lantern in order to light the streets in the night and impose a responsibility structure on the residents who put them on their balconies.

Another issue highlighted is connecting the objectives and issues. In this world of computers and a tech-savvy lifestyle most of the low-income countries are still inaccessible to computers but smartphone technology has reached the hands of many Indian citizens. A report estimates that smartphone usage in 2014 was 1.76 billion and it was estimated that one in three persons would

have a smartphone in India by 2017 (Vishwanath and Basu 2016). The WomenSpatialActivism design charter therefore uses digitalisation in terms of the application She-Connect that connects women travelling from the same source to the same destination. Digitalisation is also used in terms of checking the street connections through GIS and Space Syntax.

Space syntax is a method that analyses the spatial configuration of streets through visual sight lines. In the spatially integrated spaces, there is a mix of men and women on streets. Women avoid spatially segregated spaces (Nygen and Van Nes 2014). Likewise, women also avoid streets where there are no active functions and entrances with windows on buildings' ground floor levels (Van Nes and Rooij 2015). Integration and community opportunities came into existence as important features of the WSA design charter and gave rise to 'guerilla gardening' and the merging of diverse users in the public space giving rise to the Reclaiming the Park project (Gupta 2017).

In a research project on sexual harassment and urban space in Egypt, sexual harassment in terms of touching take place only in the spatially most integrated streets (Mohammed and Van Nes 2017). These results are integrated with the space syntax map of Malviya Nagar in Delhi and have been layered to draw conclusions for the purpose of choosing the first street for the pilot project.

A volunteer-run collective called Blank Noise launched a campaign – #WalkAlone – to encourage women to reclaim public spaces. The campaign urges women to undertake the challenge at any time of the day, for three weeks, humming a song, daydreaming, with hands unclenched, and shoulders relaxed, until they get back their right to walk without fear (Agarwal 2016). The movement is an inspiration for #WomenSpatialActivism to spread awareness through social media.

## **WomenSpatialActivism Design Intervention for the Test Case Malviya Nagar**

The WSA design charter forms #WomenSpatial Activism, which is a cycle of the three processes jointly impacting each other. The spatial part of #WomenSpatialActivism makes physical changes in the urban infrastructure. The social structure is about creating a stakeholder structure and process implementation. The digital movement is to activate the social stakeholder structure for implementing the changes. The three potential target actors for re-appropriation of spaces are: 1) The old woman reclaiming the space outside her house at the front-door level; 2) The young working girl walking to and from work or shopping; and 3) the homemakers and mothers spending time within the community through reclaiming public parks. The spatial activism starts firstly from a street and park level, and will spread through the neighbourhood and city levels. The three main components of the strategy are:

### **#WomenSpatialActivism Spatial Design Structure**

The physical interventions are at the street/building interface and neighbourhood levels. The key projects in revitalizing streets (community building and cleanliness through guerrilla gardening) consist of: Lighting Your Lantern (a fundraising project for lighting the streets), The Pink Carpet (a way-finding strip for a safer street), Spatial Activism Headquarters (engaging citizens for temporary urbanism to achieve re-appropriation for women) and Reclaiming The Park (re-appropriation by women in public parks with basic amenities). All these projects are a composition of small WSA design charter interventions, which are generic in nature and can be implemented in other areas.

The proposed various spatial interventions are bottom-up approaches led by citizens. Fig. 3 shows one of the connections between the neighbourhood's central part and the shopping mall outside the neighbourhood. This design proposal consists of several micro-scale strategic initiatives that can be applied everywhere. It is based upon the WSA design charter and objectives and issues that have been layered upon in an urban analysis.

The Light Your Lantern project (fig. 4) is a fundraising sustainable hanging lantern proposal lighting up streets in the hours of night for late-working women. The Pink Lanterns will provide light to the women and everyone else in the dark as the market closes. The Pink Carpet project consists of a glowing pink strip that can be followed by the pedestrians in the night showing them the right way to their destination. The Pink Carpet is an attempt to make the street safe for pedestrians and help them find their way home.

Spaces that are used for dumping garbage can be used to set up a Spatial Activism Headquarters. Several small micro-scale projects are proposed which can be made in this space, for example, the wooden slopes and urban gardening cases. Re-vitalizing the Street, (fig. 5) revitalises dead-end streets with green spaces instead of garbage dumps to accentuate the feeling of cleanliness and thereby safety. Fig. 6 shows how women reclaim space through their daily activities in the neighbourhood by passing cars and making room to walk by restoring the pedestrian path.

On a neighbourhood scale, the project, Reclaiming the Park (fig. 7) is a re-appropriation step taken by the citizens to reclaim the park and regenerate community events and activities. The spatial interventions include a redesigned public park that has women and kids as the central focus. Bamboo-sheltered open-air kitchens and toilets support the daily needs of the women and kids.

The respective proposals do not involve changes to the urban fabric because that might take years to happen. Instead they are short-term solutions that can help citizens now and hereafter find permanent solutions for urban designers of the area. In the longer term, opening up several routes towards the south will increase the spatial integration of the neighbourhood. Fig. 8 shows space syntax analyses of the area before (above) and after (below) the proposed interventions. As can be seen, the local vitality for pedestrians is improved, as well as the main routes inter-connecting various neighbourhoods with one another. High spatial integration indicates a high number of people on the street and a higher mixture of different people on the streets, which increases the number of shops and activities in buildings along the streets.

#### **#WomenSpatialActivism Social Design Structure**

The degree of implementation for this project is heavily dependent on community building, co-working and co-responsibility for the re-appropriation of public spaces. The involved stakeholder coalition (fig. 9) consists of advisory bodies, funding partners and women spatial activism partners (implementation partners, i.e. the local community). The role of the urban designer is pivotal to bringing all the stakeholders together on a common platform.

The advisory body can be categorised into artists and activists, NGOs or social organisations, university or research institutions and government research organisations. The artists or activists group includes organisations working in the locality such as a studio that is an international artists association. The NGOs or social organisations can provide a platform to conduct the pilot projects such as the revitalising street drive, lighting your lantern drive, painting the pink carpet, spatial activism live workshop and reclaiming park design. These activities are

supposed to be organised under their platform as these organisations have vital resources for project implementation.

The funding partners can be NGOs, government bodies, CSR organisations, international grants, social entrepreneurs and national grants. The funds are required to host the mock-up workshops, for subsidising lanterns, to procure materials for the pink carpet and other design ideas.

The Women Spatial Activism partners would be the implementing agencies to put the design ideas into action that would include the local community. These partners can provide key resources in the form of volunteers to implement the ideas. This community-building activity enhances the safety in the neighbourhood and allows women and girls to have secure access to all public places.

#### **#WomenSpatialActivism Digital Design Structure**

The digital process has two main components: global digital expansion is taken at two stages of the design process: firstly when we need participants for the mock-ups and the pilot projects to promote them as events, and secondly, we need the digital expansion for spreading and disseminating the hashtag #WomenSpatialActivism globally. It will form a public relations team to disseminate the design proposal.

Secondly, the mobile application She-Connect is a mobile application to be designed to overlay the information and data collected by various organisations working in Malviya Nagar and Khirki, filter and organise them to be used. This information and the spatial activism routes will be shown to the users. The users can then connect with other women from the same origin and destination so that they can travel together.

The aim is to spread the hashtag #WomenSpatial Activism through social media. The mobile application is a part of the awareness project as it will connect women to enable them to travel together along the #WomenSpatialActivism routes.

### **Conclusions: Towards an agenda for Women Spatial Activism**

The project presented in this article shows that designing gender equal spaces has to be a citizen-led approach bringing together a local community. The role of the urban designer in this process is to coordinate the stakeholders and propose physical solutions based on the needs of local communities. Active participation of all key partners in this project help build a spatial framework for an inclusive society and to implement a safe and gender-equal environment. The *spatial interventions* are a bottom-up approach and citizen-led movement that make their own neighbourhood safe, livable and righteous for them. The spatial interventions include a redesigned public park that has women and kids as the central focus, while bamboo-sheltered open-air kitchens and toilets support the daily needs of all. The Pink Carpet project is an attempt to make the streets safe for pedestrian women and help them find their way home. The Hanging Lanterns project will provide light to everyone in the dark as the market closes. The women reclaim space through their daily activities in the neighbourhood by reducing cars and making room to walk, while the slopes help mothers to push their strollers. In this alternative bottom-up process of city-making, local government ought to hold an open discussion with the stakeholders including social activists, citizens, urban designers and NGOs in order to formulate comprehensive and inclusive policies and plans. The local government and the municipality should integrate the interventions made at the citizen level inside each neighbourhood.

# #WOMENSPATIALACT

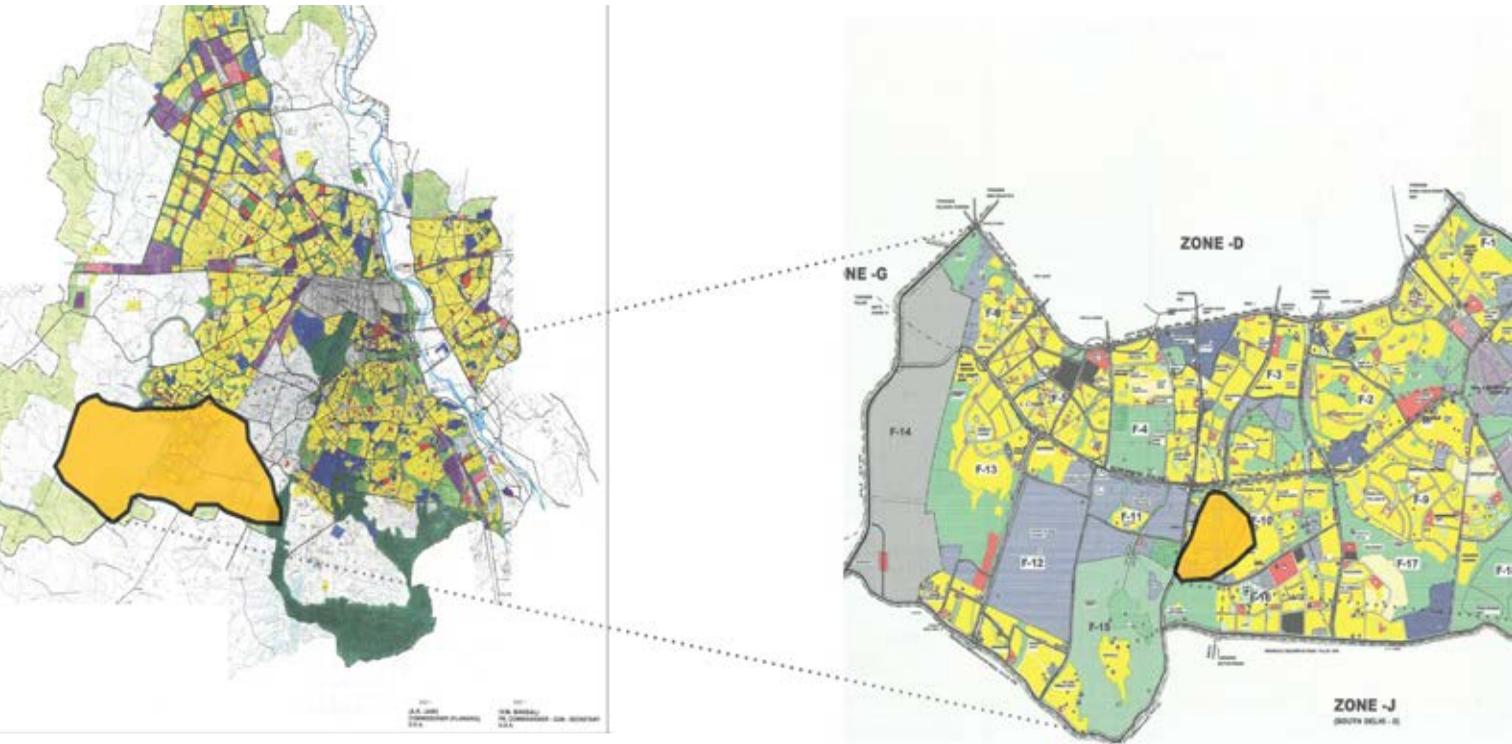
AN URBAN DESIGNER'S APPROACH TOWARDS RE-APPROPRIATION OF SPACES BY WOMEN



# ACTIVISM

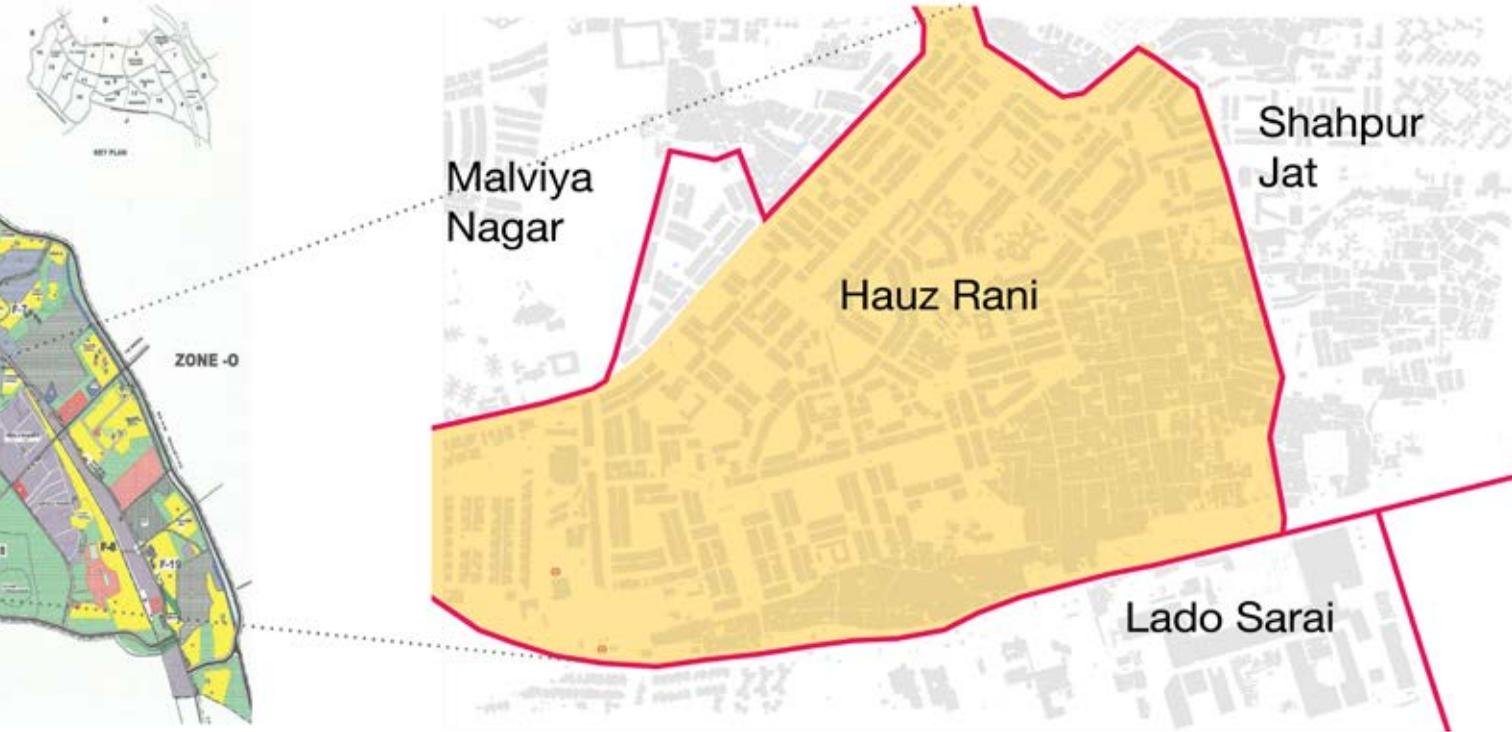
WOMEN IN NEW DELHI, INDIA





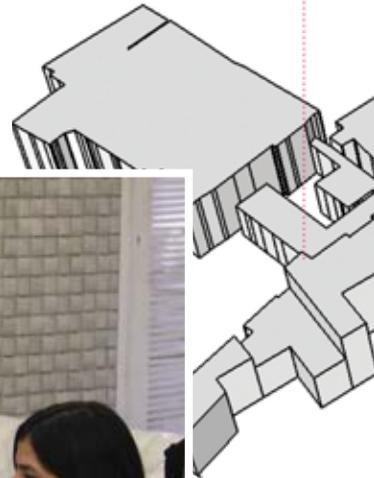
**Figure 1 (top):** Map over the Malviya Nagar area in Delhi. Source: Sugandha Gupta, Luisa Maria Calabrese & Akkelies Van Nes, 2018.

**Figure 2 (bottom pages 86-87 and page 88):** Images from the workshop. Source: Sugandha Gupta, Luisa Maria Calabrese & Akkelies Van Nes, 2018.





The Pink  
Fake Windows



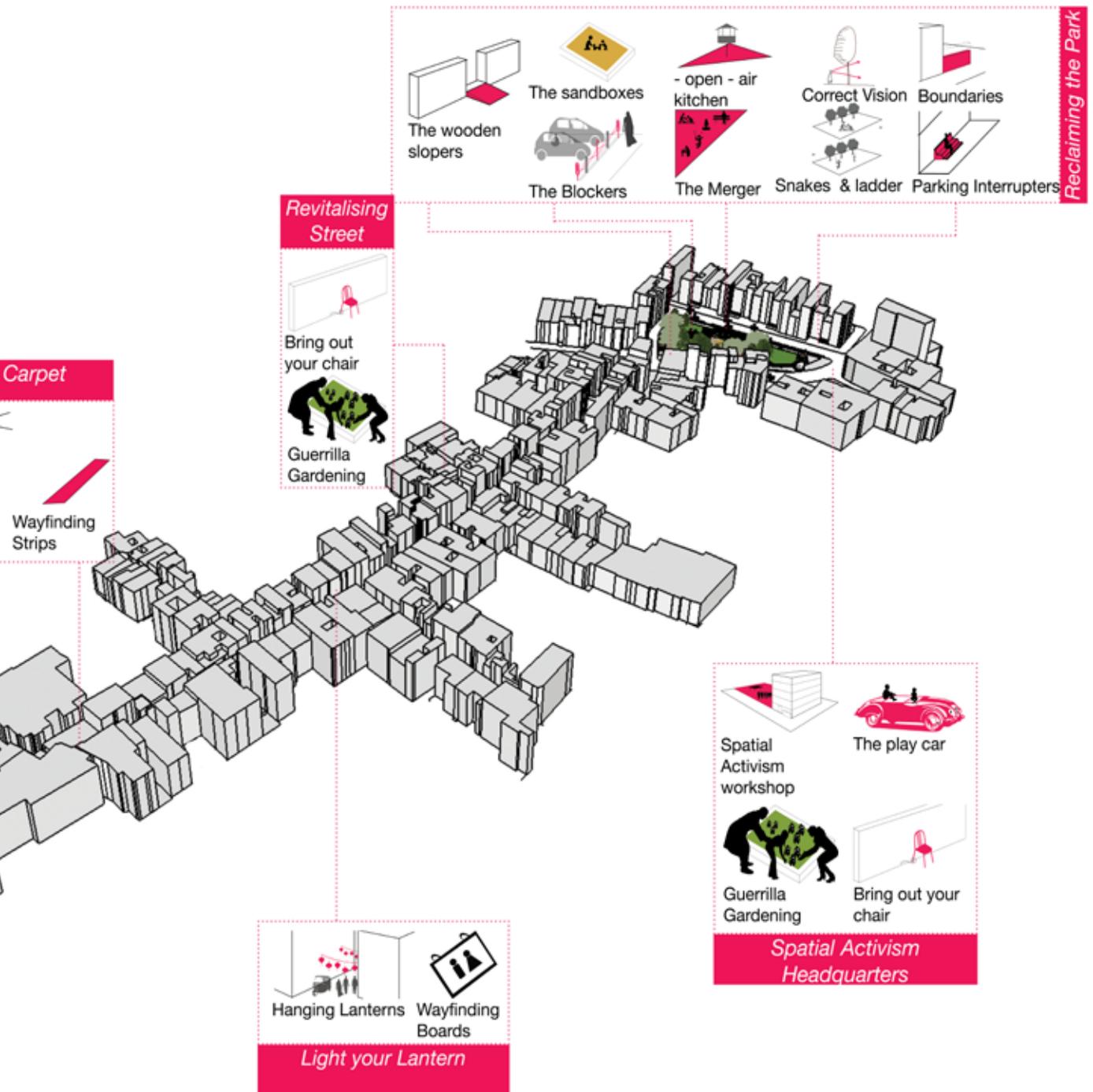
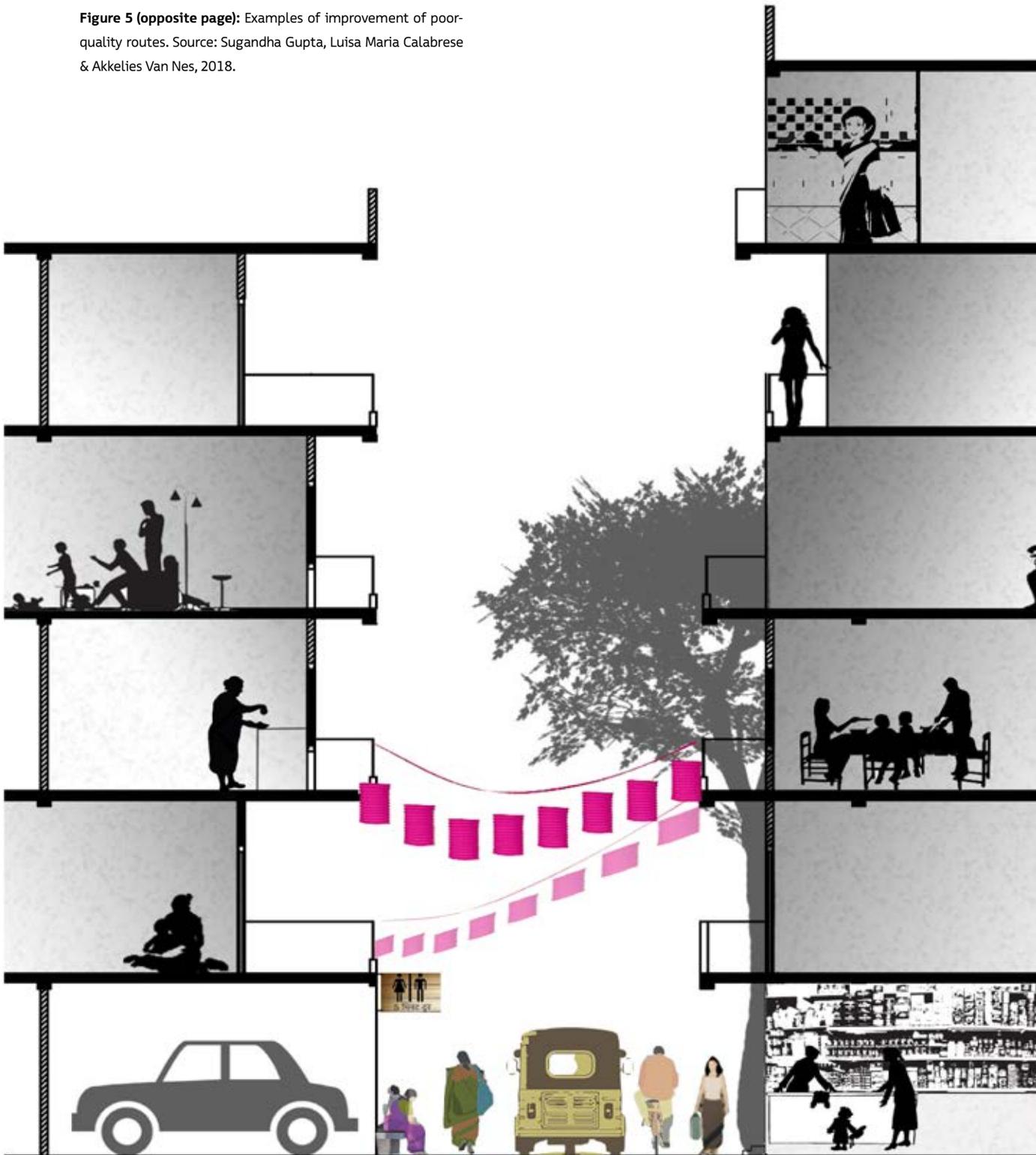


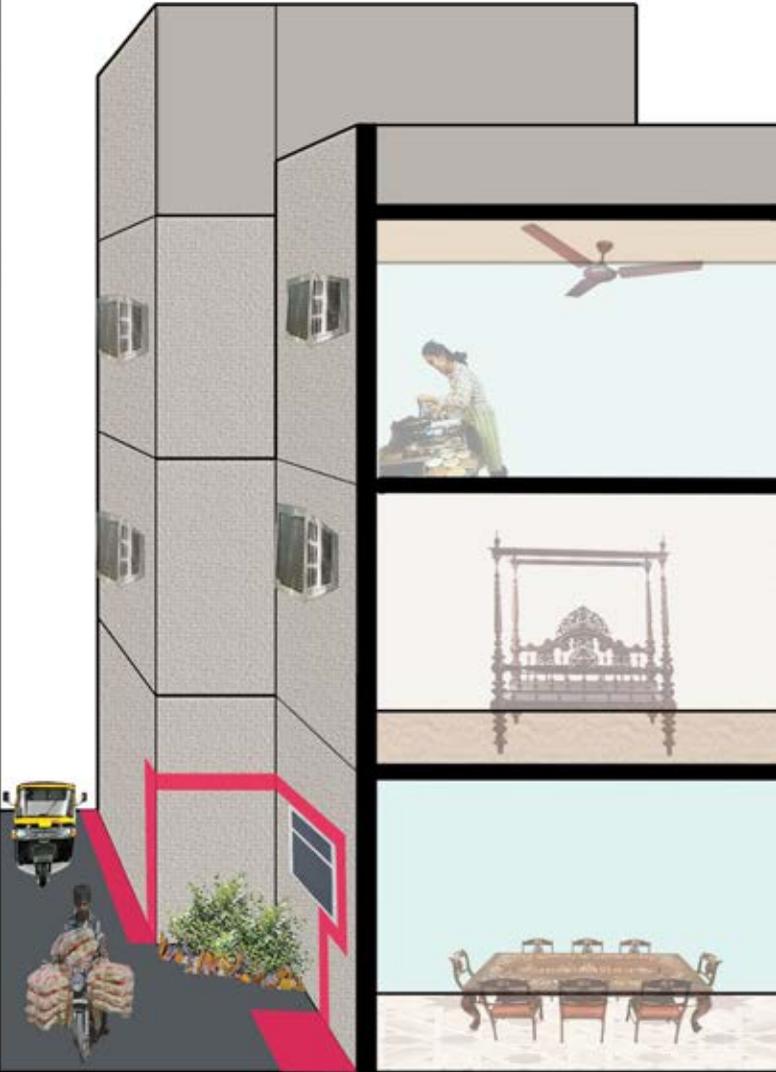
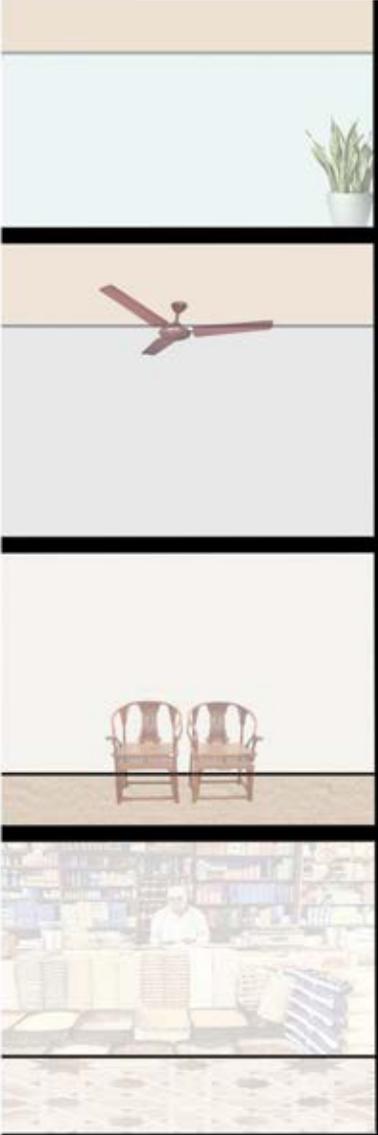
Figure 3: The various spatial interventions.

Source: Sugandha Gupta, Luisa Maria Calabrese & Akkelies Van Nes, 2018.

**Figure 4 (below):** The Light Your Lantern and the Pink Carpet projects. Source: Sugandha Gupta, Luisa Maria Calabrese & Akkelies Van Nes, 2018.

**Figure 5 (opposite page):** Examples of improvement of poor-quality routes. Source: Sugandha Gupta, Luisa Maria Calabrese & Akkelies Van Nes, 2018.

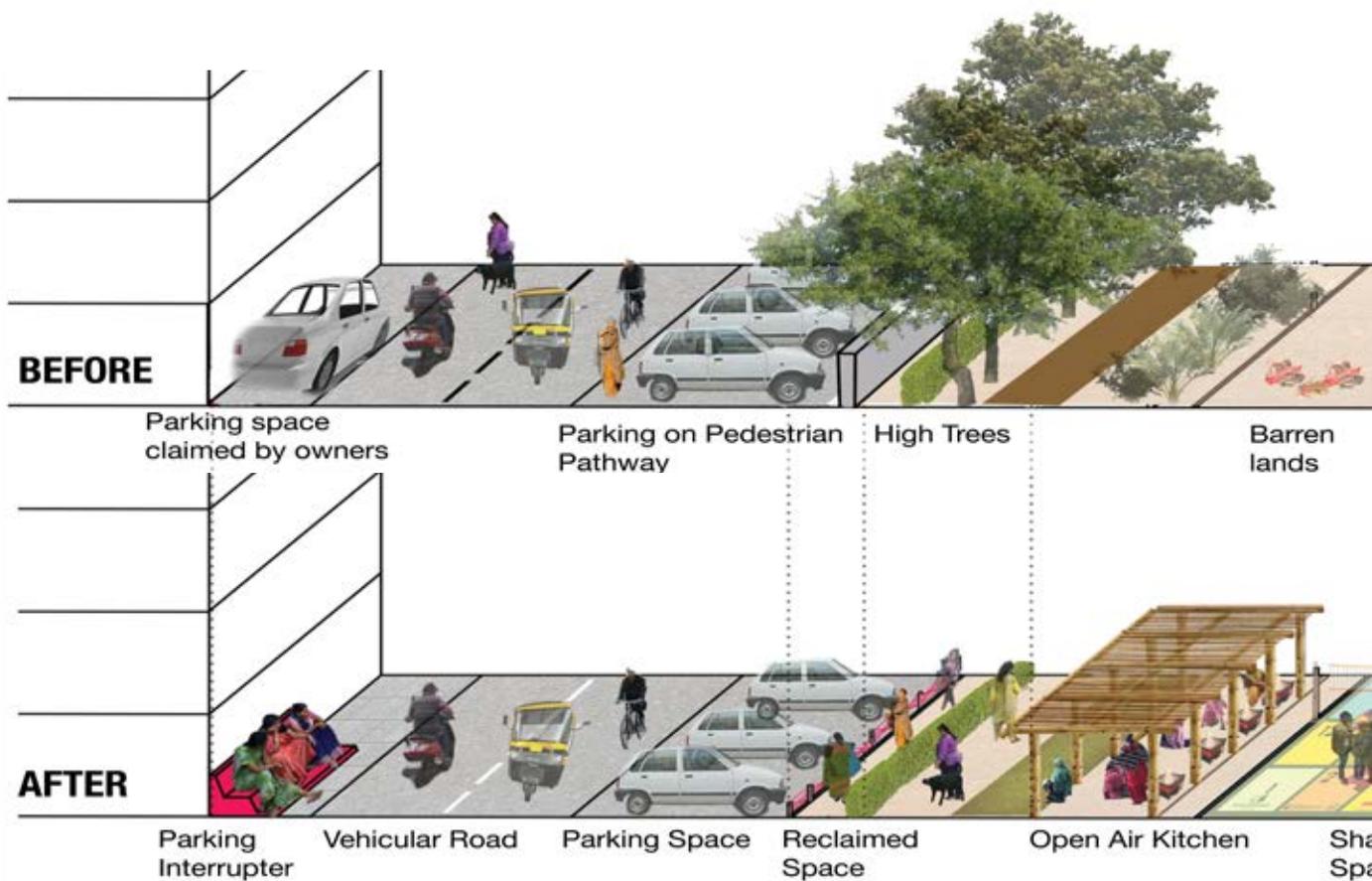


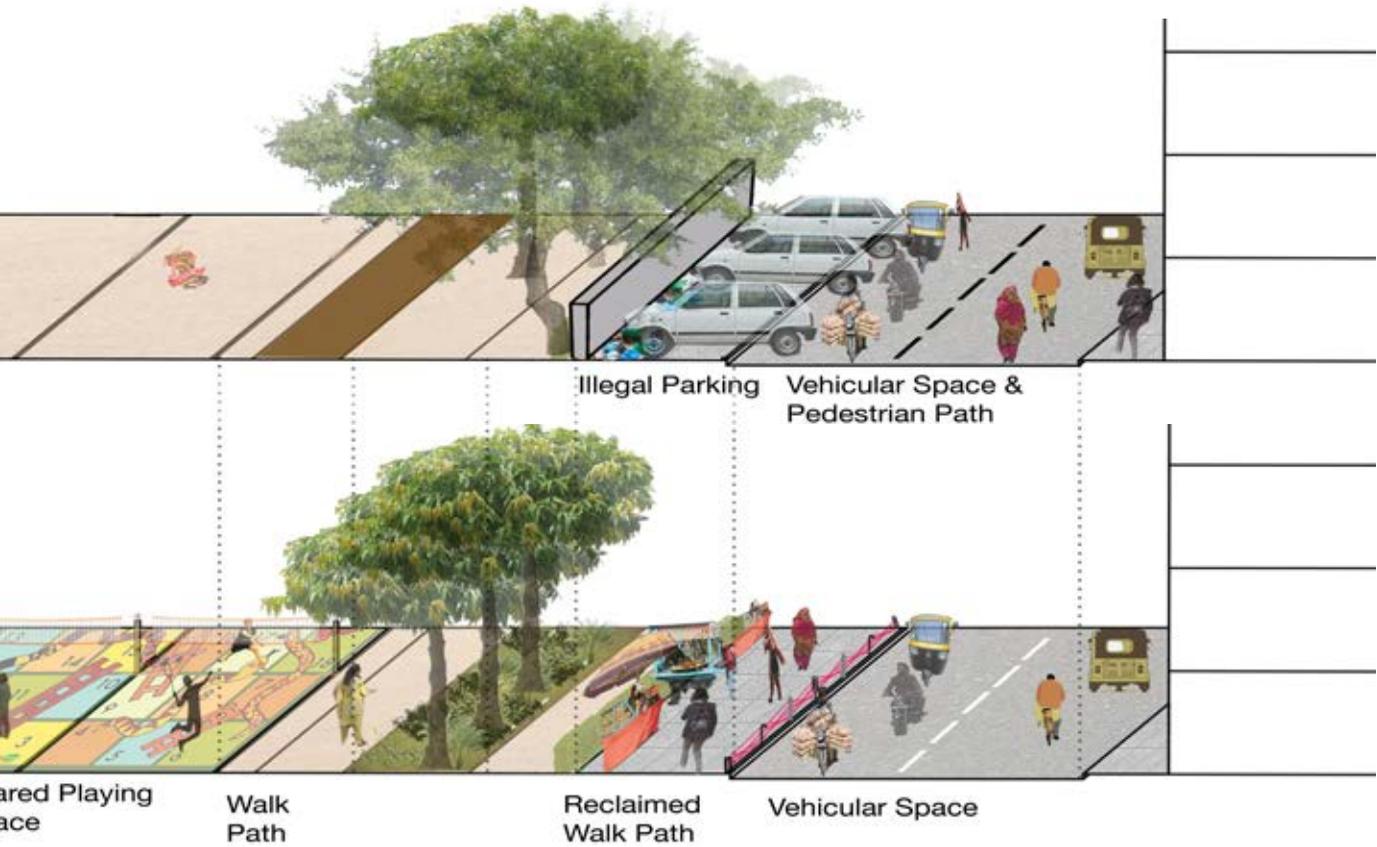


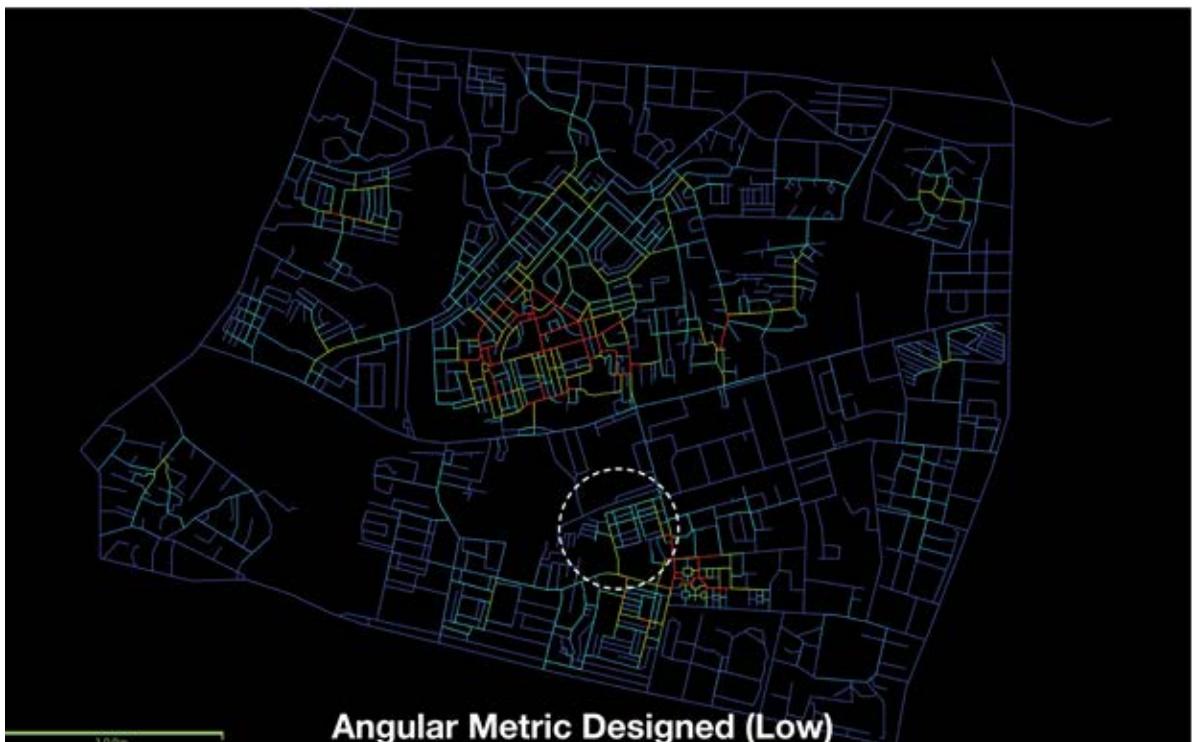
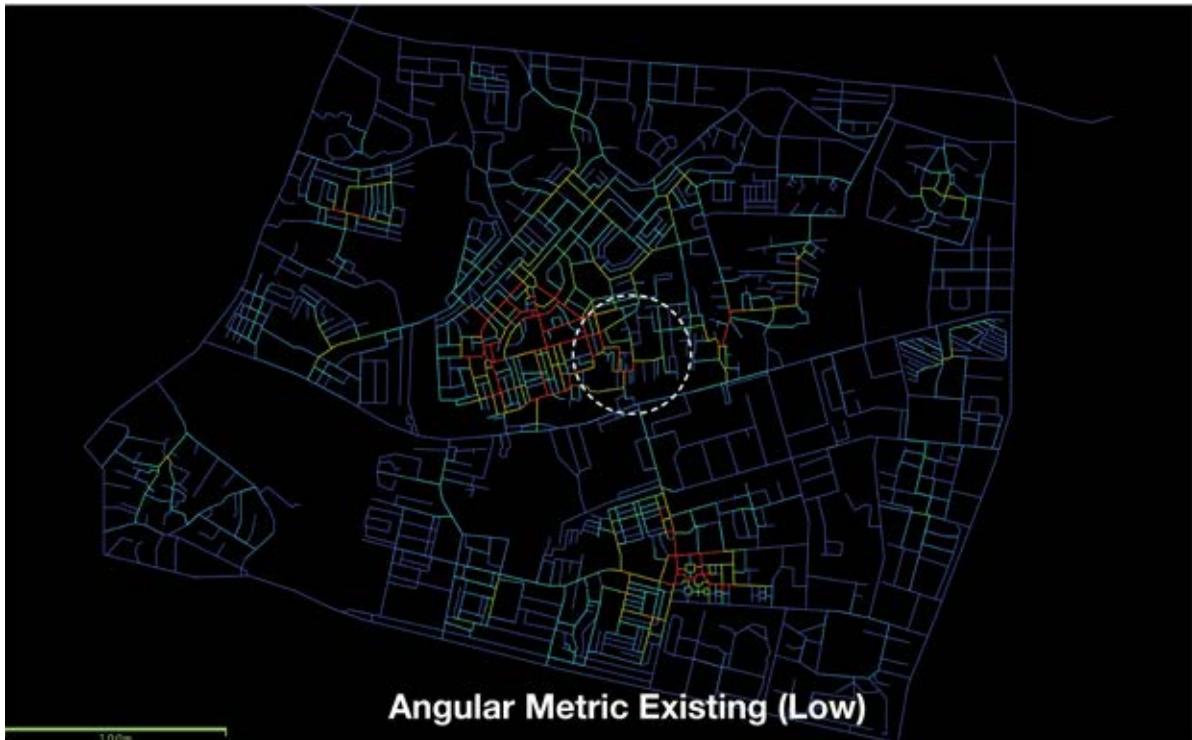
**Figure 6 (below):** Reclaimed park. Source: Sugandha Gupta, Luisa Maria Calabrese & Akkelies Van Nes, 2018.

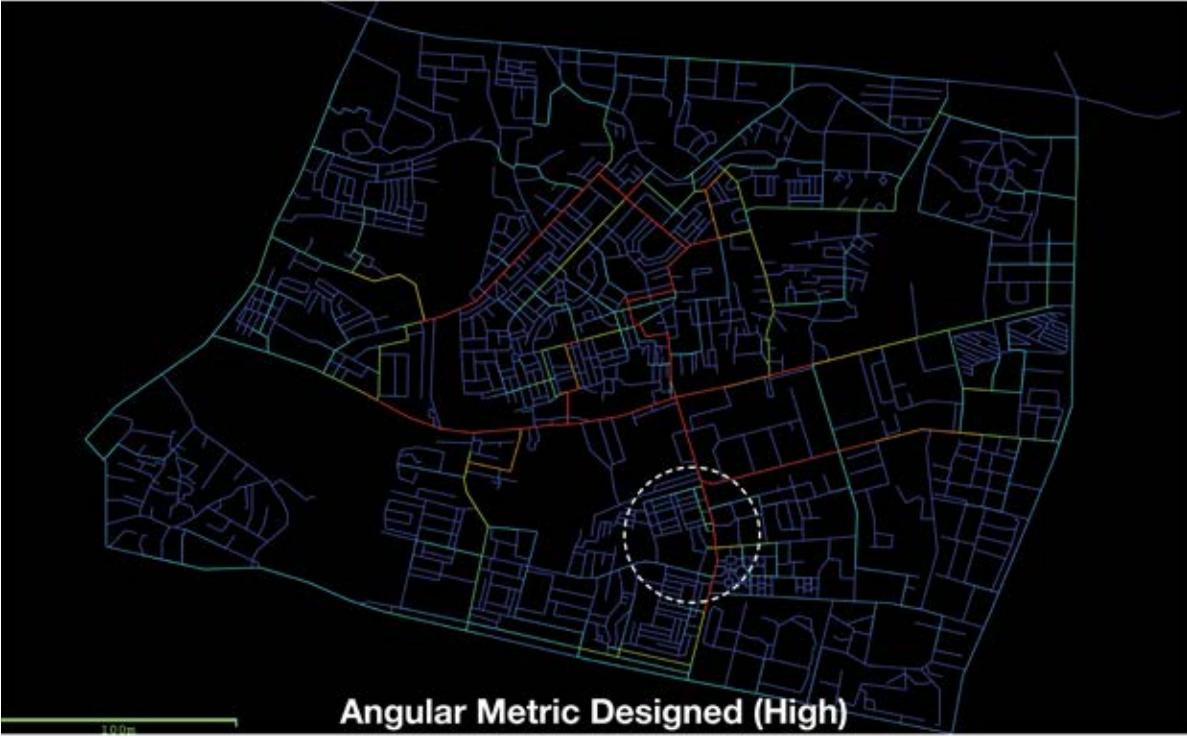
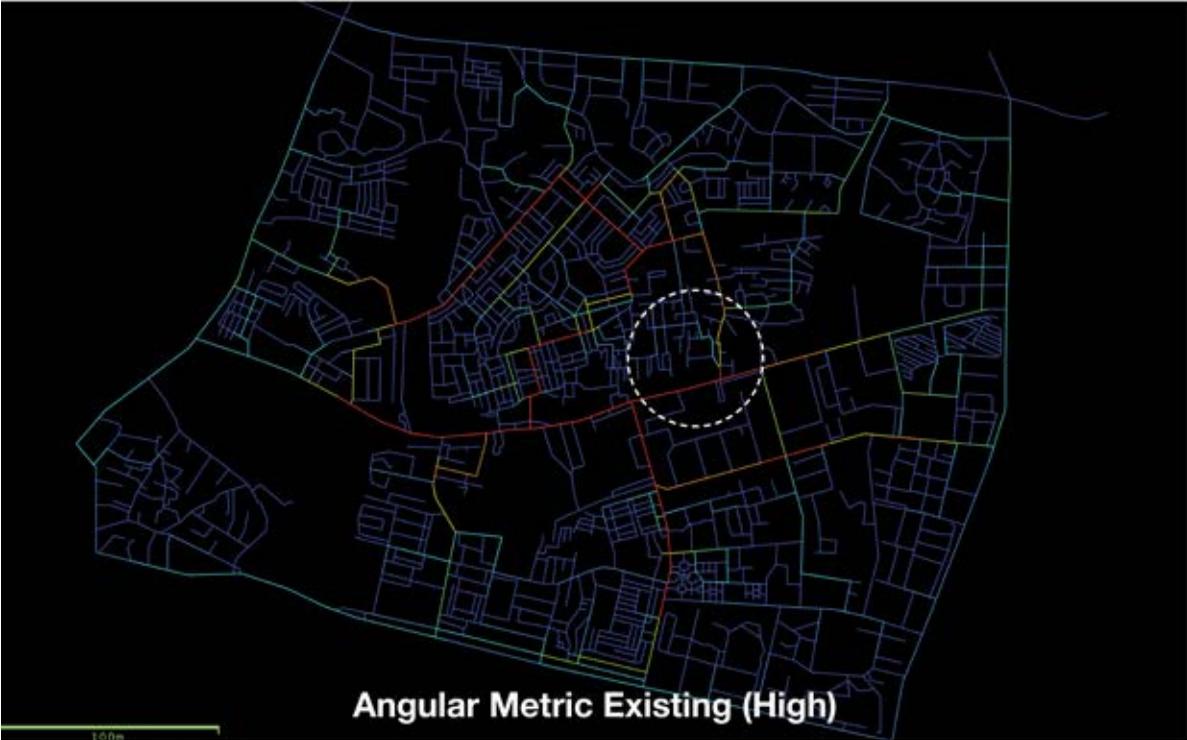
**Figure 7 (opposite page):** Sections of improved park. Source: Sugandha Gupta, Luisa Maria Calabrese & Akkelies Van Nes, 2018.

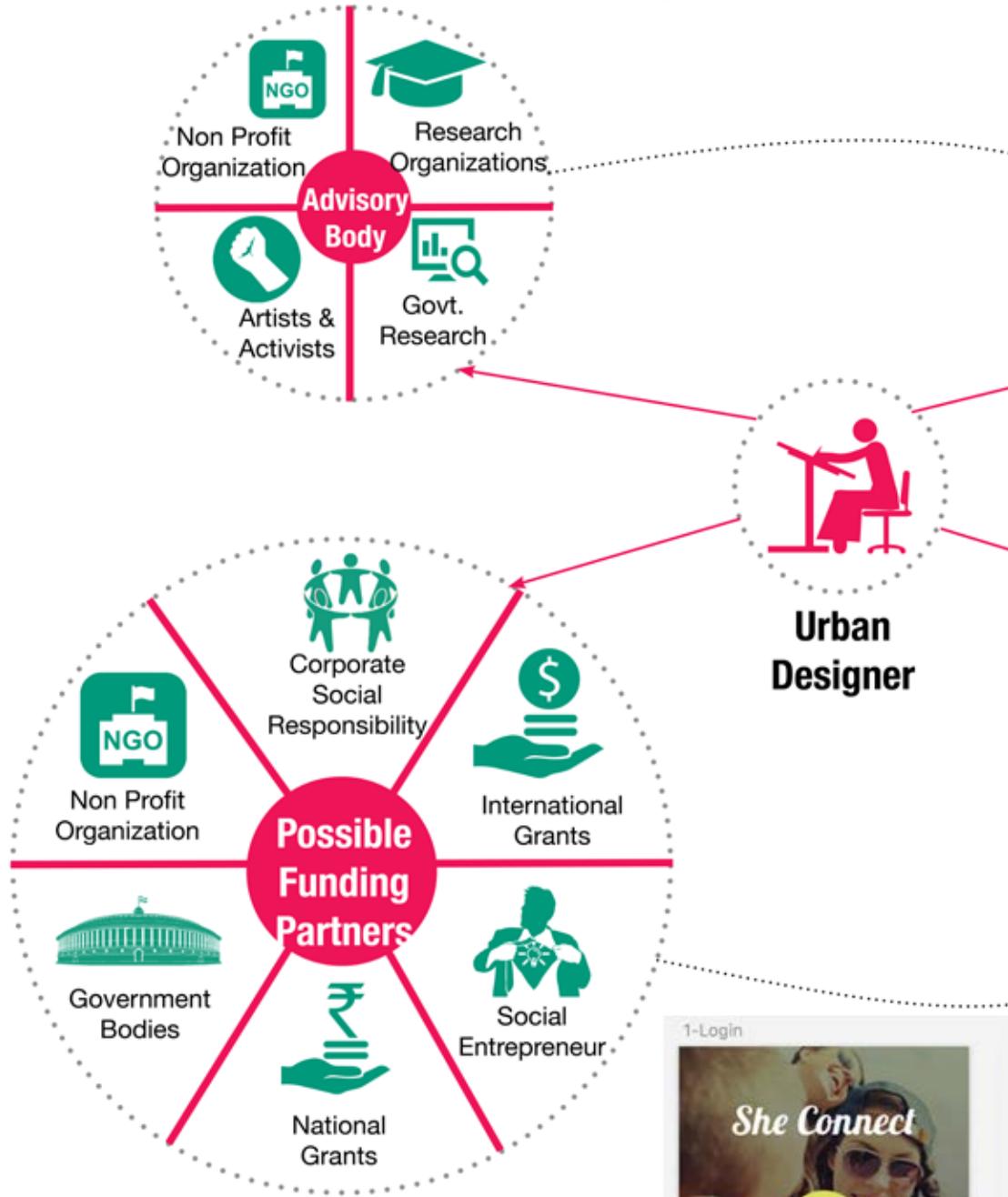
**Figure 8 (pages 94-95, top to bottom, left to right):** The space syntax analyses of the area. Source: Sugandha Gupta, Luisa Maria Calabrese & Akkelies Van Nes, 2018.





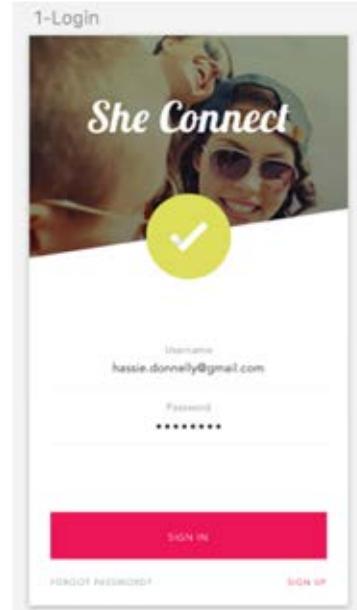


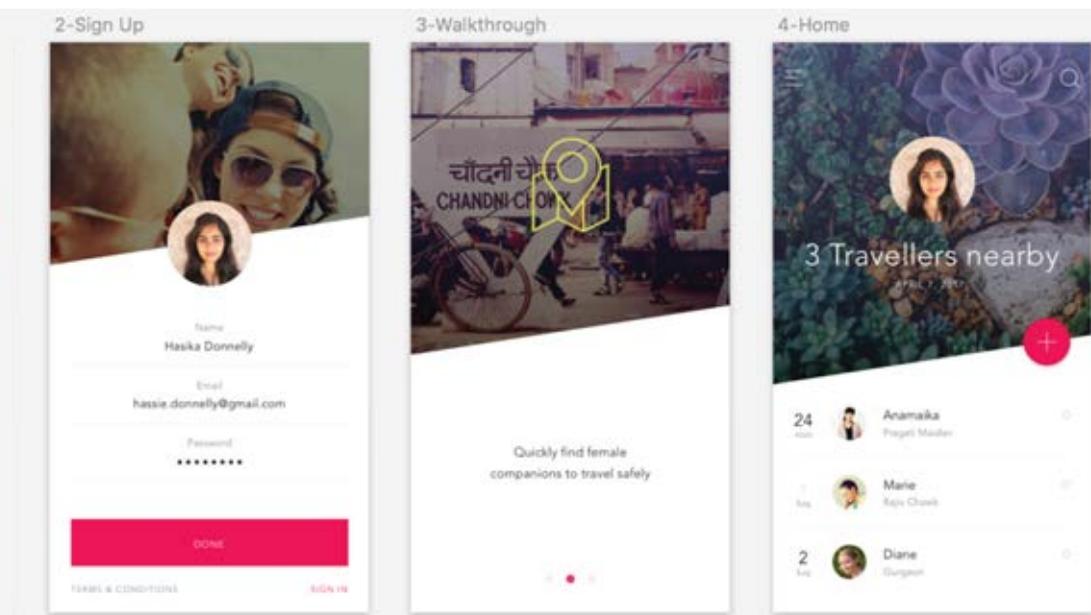
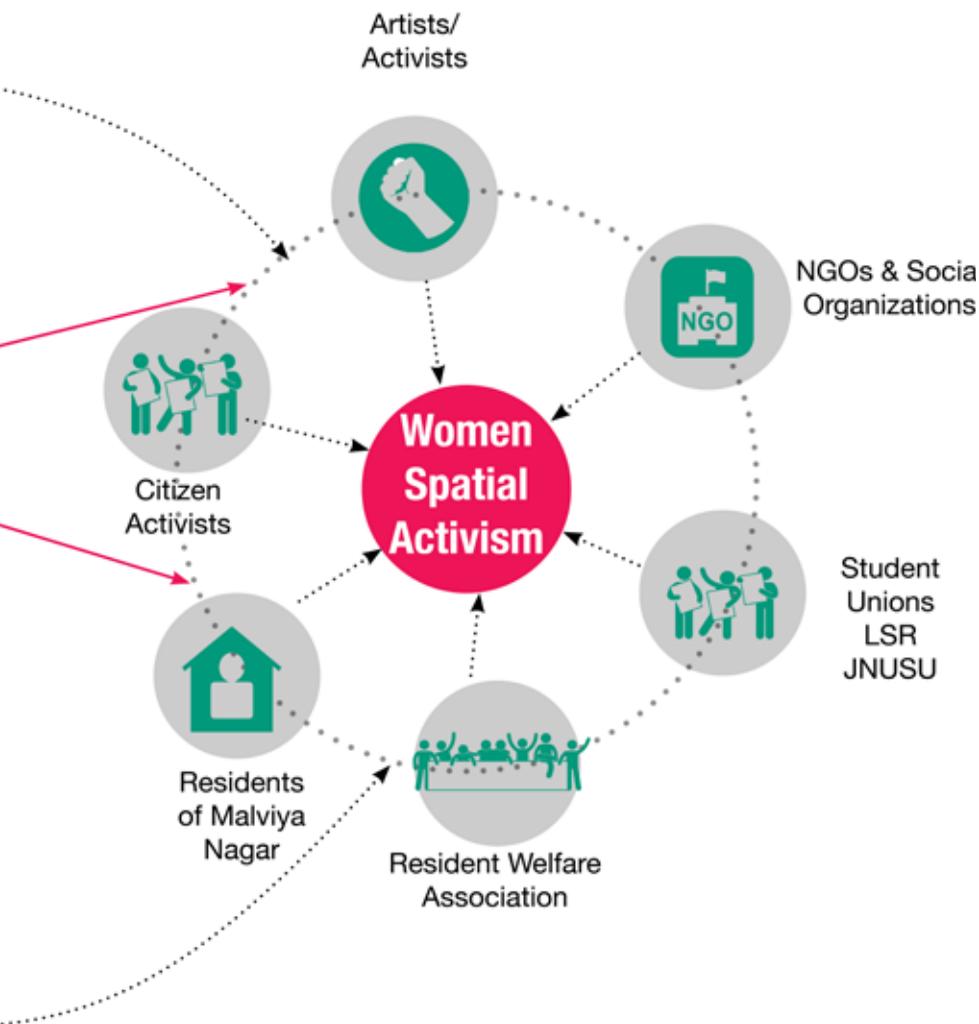




**Figure 9:** Stakeholder mapping. Source: Sugandha Gupta, Luisa Maria Calabrese & Akkelies Van Nes, 2018.

**Figure 10 (below):** The She-Connects app. Source: Sugandha Gupta, Luisa Maria Calabrese & Akkelies Van Nes, 2018.





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