

Women's Health Matters submission to the Woden CIT Campus Consultation

Urban planning in the ACT is an important gender issue because it has the potential to encourage or inhibit the social participation of women. Urban planning and design affect the accessibility of services such as health care, education, shopping centres, banks, post offices, and public transport. This is particularly important for women who are more likely to be reliant on active travel and public transport, such as older women, women with disabilities that prevent driving, students, and women who cannot afford car ownership. Perceptions of personal safety can influence the extent to which some ACT women use public spaces, preventing some women from fully participating in the community.

It is therefore critical for the Woden Renewal project and the development of the Woden CIT Campus to consider the voices of women and the gendered nature of public spaces in consultation and planning.

Canberra Safety Map

Women's Health Matters (WHM) developed the Canberra Safety Map (CSM) to help understand what elements contribute to women feeling safe or unsafe in the ACT's public spaces. The CSM is interactive and allows users to pin locations on a map of Canberra, marking locations as safe or unsafe. There is an opportunity for users to describe what elements made the location safe or unsafe, such as poor lighting, and a free text form allowing users to describe their experience in that space. Data from the Map is used by WHM to inform its advocacy and health promotion programs as they relate to women's safety and urban design.

Approach

In discussion with Minister Steel's Office, WHM has promoted the Woden Town Centre Redevelopment via the CSM, social media, and traditional media. We started promoting the CSM in December 2021 via our social media channels and monthly newsletter.

Throughout January and February 2022, we ran a social media campaign promoting the Woden Town Centre Redevelopment consultation and the CSM, and the CSM was covered by an article in HerCanberra and was shared on their Facebook page. The digital media promotion of the map encouraged an increase in spots submitted to the map, with 35 new submissions in January and February 2022 alone.

Findings

The CSM has received a total of 119 responses recording safe and unsafe locations across the ACT since the October 2020. Users can simultaneously select a range of descriptors for an area they are marking safe or unsafe. Across the ACT, the most highly selected descriptors for unsafe spaces are:

- Poor lighting: selected in 81 locations
- Hiding spots: selected in 67 locations
- Not enough people around: selected in 59 locations
- People in the area who may be a threat: selected in 58 locations
- Inadequate access to help: selected in 35 locations
- Visual obstructions: selected in 35 locations
- Limited escape routes: selected in 31 locations
- Space is poorly maintained: selected in 21 locations

These descriptors are reflected in comments provided by users for various ACT locations. Poor lighting and the potential for hiding spots are the most frequently reported factors that make women feel unsafe in public spaces as this leaves the potential for threats that they and those that could intervene cannot see. Additionally, isolation in public spaces and the lack of presence from other people who women deem safe are also recalled by users. Further, sexual harassment is a recurring theme in existing pins on the CSM, indicating it is a key safety issue for women in Canberra.

These themes are also reflected through pinned unsafe locations in Woden. Across the 9 pins in around Woden town centre, the most frequently selected descriptors for unsafe places are:

- Poor lighting: selected in 8 locations
- Hiding spots: selected in 7 locations
- Not enough people around: selected in 6 locations
- Space is poorly maintained: selected in 5 locations
- People in the area who may be a threat: selected in 4 locations
- Inadequate access to help: selected in 4 locations
- Limited escape routes: selected in 2 locations
- Visual obstructions: selected in 1 location

Within the last 9 months, users have left comments across Woden locations such as:

Phillip Business District

- *"I frequently need to walk through this area to access the bus Athllon Drive [Phillip Business District]. It doesn't feel safe to walk through at night and there are very few lights and people around."*

Westfield Woden

- *"Never feel safe walking around here, even in daylight. Always feels deserted with shifty people around. Poorly lit. Cars being broken into. Entire north-western side of the Westfield needs more shops to bring more people in and liven it up."*
- *"The lights in the Westfield carpark have been turned off for more than a year and it's scary walking back to the car at night in the dark after getting groceries. It's so dark once I accidentally drove into a piece of concrete sticking out I didn't see. And people lurking around up to no good."*

Phillip Town Centre

- *"Lights are always blown in the underpass and surrounding paths [Phillip Town Centre]. Generally a hangout for 'kid gangs'. Generally trashed by morning."*
- *"They changed the roads up and repainted the lines. Now, cars are frequently racing around the corner and not giving way — and drivers sometimes hurl abuse. It's really unsafe for pedestrians and other drivers."*

Woden Cemetery

- *"Important for travel between bus interchange/Woden centre and Phillip but v unsafe at night, even with close proximity to police station. Have been followed and intimidated in this area a number of times."*

Recommendations

Creating thoughtful, inclusive, and gendered urban design can help women to feel safer, more visible, and welcome in public spaces. These changes can improve women's security and simultaneously improve accessibility and liveability for everyone accessing these public spaces. WHM recommends:

1. Increasing and utilising lighting to improve visibility of pathways and assist with natural surveillance
2. Locating parks, play areas and public open spaces so they are visible from adjoining streets, and corporate and residential buildings
3. Ensuring footpaths and parks are well maintained, that routes have good sightlines to entrances and exits, that landscaping is pruned to ensure that sightlines are clear, and that there are opportunities for surveillance
4. Ensuring pathways and road crossings are safe and suitable for pedestrians with reduced mobility to avoid falls and injuries
5. Ensuring clear signage, access to security, and identification of safe routes
6. Consider investing in campaigns to increase active bystander action to intervene in sexual violence/harassment alongside improvements to physical infrastructure