Beyond bright lights and security cameras: Re-gendering Melbourne’s public transport system

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Abstract: Despite the changing position of women in contemporary Australian society, barriers to mobility and spatial equality remain, causing the spatial exclusion of women and facilitating unequal gender relations. This paper identifies the major barriers to women’s mobility as the masculinisation of public space. This occurs through both the physical and conceptual construction of spaces along the pervasive binaries of male/female, masculine/feminine and public/private, which dictate who can legitimately occupy certain spaces and result in the exclusion of women from public spaces, detrimentally impacting their daily mobility. The paper challenges the widespread understanding that women’s ‘fear of crime’ is the main restriction of female mobility, rather showing that it is the underlying assumptions and ideologies about gender and space that are built into our public spaces that limit the mobility of many women. This paper uses the example of Melbourne’s expanding public transport network to highlight the continuing construction of gendered spaces and explores the misplaced social and bureaucratic focus on crime reduction measures to address this issue. It advocates for a whole of society approach to eliminate spatial gender inequality, offering suggestions for the re-gendering of Melbourne’s public spaces to achieve spatial and social gender equality.

Key words: gender; public space; mobility; equality; public transport; Melbourne.

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Introduction
While the comparative position of women within most sectors of contemporary western societies continues to improve, daily mobility and the use of public space remains difficult for many women, with gendered barriers, both deliberate and non-deliberate, directly impacting which spaces they can and cannot occupy. This gendered delineation of space impacts the way in which women choose to use or not use spaces through conceptual and physical cues that work to support a continuing notion of the inappropriateness of women in some public spaces.

This paper explores the way in which the mobility of women is reduced through the masculinisation of public spaces, specifically public transport spaces, and analyses the prominent responses to this in policy and planning, and the issues residing within them. First, it highlights the gendered delineation of space along the pervasive binaries of male/female, masculine/feminine and public/private, and the way this impacts the mobility of women. It then explores the widespread notion of women’s ‘fear of crime’ as a barrier to women’s mobility, highlighting the underlying gendered assumption built into public spaces that shape women’s mobility. Finally, it uses an example from Melbourne’s expanding rail network to exemplify the way in which the restrictions of women’s mobility are misunderstood or misdiagnosed, and provides
suggestions as to how Melbourne’s expanding transport systems could further increase women’s mobility. At its core, this paper shows the ardent need for the re-gendering of public spaces, specifically transport networks, through considered planning and policy, to create a more equitable and mobile Melbourne of the future.

**Gendered Space and Mobility**

To appreciate the limits of women’s mobility, it is important to first understand the way in which the basic notions of ‘space’ and ‘gender’ are created and understood in social discourse and their resulting interdependent relationship.

Gender is a key social subjectivity that determines the way in which people experience both the social and spatial world around them, and an individual’s ability to access, engage with, and utilise certain spaces (Hayden 1980). One of the most influential ways in which gender determines an individual’s ability to occupy space is the restriction of women’s presence in public space (Valentine 1989). In this context, public space refers to that which is outside of the residential home, including suburban streets, city centres and importantly for the mobility of women, public transport networks (Law 1999). While contemporary public spaces like these are conceptualised or assumed to be accessible for men, women and increasingly a broader range of gender identities, the reality of whose presence is appropriate in public space, and at which time it is appropriate, does not always reflect this (Hamilton & Jenkins 2000).

The relationship between gender and space is complex and intertwined, both shaping and influencing the creation of one another (Cresswell & Uteng 2008). The clearest manifestation of this relationship is the pervasive ‘public/private’ binary, which encodes western conceptualisations of space and society (Cresswell & Uteng 2008). This binary, which conceptually categorises space as either public space or private space, shapes the physical construction of society, and, as Cresswell and Uteng (2008, p.2) advocate, has been “mapped onto the masculine and feminine, man and woman, in clearly delineated ways”. Indeed, the binaries of male/female, masculine/feminine and public/private are widely accepted to be variations of the same conceptualisation, with male/masculine closely associated with the public and female/feminine with the private (Cresswell & Uteng 2008). The clearest spatial example of this binary relationship is separation of places of ‘production’, including workplaces and their urban settings, from places of ‘reproduction’, referring to the domestic and suburban setting (Hayden 1980). In this example, the delineation of space clearly reflects heteronormative gender roles present within many societies, with spaces of production constructed for the masculine economic provider role and spaces of reproduction aligned with the caregiver and domestic roles closely associated with women (Bondi & Rose 2003).

The gendered nature of spaces along these binaries restricts who can legitimately occupy and move through these places as those who transgress these categories are “out of place” (Cresswell & Uteng 2008, p.3). This has resulted in the exclusion of women from public spaces which are deemed to be, or at least unconsciously conceptualised as, masculine, in which women’s presence, especially at night, is understood to be inappropriate and dangerous (Valentine 1989; Cresswell & Uteng 2008). The exclusion of women from places outside the domestic setting – public spaces – as Valentine (1989) argues, can be understood as the spatial expression of patriarchy.

As well as the conceptual gendered delineation of space, assumptions about gender and gender roles also shape the physical construction and composition of spaces.
Historically, the professions surrounding the planning and construction of urban spaces, including city planners, architects, and policy makers, have been male-dominated. Therefore, public spaces have been traditionally created by men, with predominantly masculine needs and uses in mind (Greed 1994). Urban geographers and feminist scholars, including Bondi (2003), Massey (1993), McDowell (1993) and Valentine (1989), have long argued that gender assumptions are built into our urban spaces, creating the ‘sexist city’ (Greed 1994), from the design of urban spaces away from suburban settings, to the lack of facilities such as bathrooms or ramps needed by mothers with children, to the more extreme notion of the phallic nature of city skyscrapers (Bondi 1992).

While the rigid delineation of space and gender roles no longer hold the same power in contemporary western societies as it once did, the gendered construction of space remains influential (Bondi & Rose 2003), continuing to impact the mobility of women through certain spaces and mechanisms, an example of which is discussed below.

**Barriers to Women’s Mobility – Fear of Crime or Something More?**

The reduced mobility of women due to the masculinised nature of public space has been identified, or in some ways misidentified, in both academic and policy discourse as the result of two main mechanisms: women’s ‘fear of crime’ and their specific needs as caregivers to families. While women are no longer as rigidly bound to the domestic and caregiver roles as they once were, the phenomenon known as women’s ‘fear of crime’ continues to be understood as a major barrier to women’s mobility (Bondi & Rose 2003), especially in the context of public transport networks (Loukaitou-Sideris & Fink 2009). ‘Fear of crime’ refers to the feelings of vulnerability or threat that are evoked by certain places, people and situations, and which cause women to change their activities and movements, resulting in a reduction in their mobility (Stanko 1995; Koskela & Pain 2000). This understanding draws support from research around the world in which women report changing their daily activities and movements to avoid places they associate with danger or feelings of fear (Valentine 1989; Stanko 1995; Koskela 1999). While ‘fear of crime’ is a useful concept in understanding the way in which women alter their movements and behaviours in public spaces, as Valentine (1989) and Stanko (1995) show, the notion is limited in explaining, and indeed combating, the underlying social assumptions and understandings that cause feelings of vulnerability and fear for many women.

Rather than a fear of crime, women’s avoidance of certain places can be better understood to be fear of feelings of vulnerability or objectification (Koskela & Pain 2000). While crimes such as robbery, assault and rape inform where women choose to go, their choice is not based solely on criminal activity. As Valentine (1989) explains, unwanted male attention in the forms of comments, contact and the male gaze, as well as behaviour that aims to unnerve and embarrass women, evokes feeling of vulnerability that women actively avoid. Through personal experiences, the stories of friends, media reports, and public discourse that draw on the female/private and male/public binaries, women learn to associate the actions mentioned above and the resulting feelings of vulnerability and objectification with public spaces, coming to understand that it is inappropriate and even dangerous for women to occupy certain public spaces at certain times (Valentine 1989; Stanko 1995). As such, the masculinisation of public spaces, in which women are ‘out of place’, can be understood to facilitate the feelings of objectification and vulnerability that women report as actively avoiding in their movement (Huning 2013). Women’s restricted movement
because of these feelings is thus the result of the gendered construction of space, and not simply fear of crime (Stanko 1995).

**Spaces of Embodied Feelings**

While the presence of men in public spaces contributes to the feelings of vulnerability that works to reduce women’s mobility, public spaces themselves also come to embody these responses (Valentine 1989). This is described by Valentine (1989, p.385) as the result of a shift in women’s “threat appraisal”. Through the close association of certain public spaces with feelings of threat and vulnerability in social discourse, public spaces come to embody these feelings, and women come to understand the spaces to be dangerous rather than the perpetrators whose acts evoke these feelings (Valentine 1989). Research from Britain, North America and Scandinavia shows that the locations which women avoid and find most threatening are largely public transport stops or stations, and locations which surround them or which they are likely to encounter on their way to and from public transport networks, including underpasses, enclosed walkways, open parks or woodland, car parks and empty shopping centres (Koskela 1999; Loukaitou-Sideris & Fink 2009). The presence of spaces such as these shapes women’s patterns of travel as they try to avoid them through altering travel routes or just not making trips that require them to encounter these spaces (Hamilton & Jenkins 2000; Koskela & Pain 2000). The presence of such spaces around public transport networks directly reduces the mobility of women, as it hinders access to the transport that they may rely on (Loukaitou-Sideris & Fink 2009).

**Geography of Vulnerability**

As well as restricting the mobility of women through the avoidance of these ‘dangerous’ public spaces, the shift of women’s threat appraisal from men to public spaces legitimates male domination of public spaces, and can transfer the blame for crime or abuse that occurs in these spaces from the perpetrator to the victim for occupying certain spaces (Valentine 1989; Koskela 1997). Indeed, attacks on women in public space are often met with the questioning of: Why the victim was there? Didn’t she know it was dangerous? This kind of victim blaming perpetuates the restriction of women’s mobility and highlights the way in which women’s use of public space is understood (Valentine 1989).

Temporal factors also have an important impact on women’s mobility and use of public space. Public spaces can be understood to be controlled or dominated by different social groups at different times of the day according to work and leisure routines (Valentine 1989). While women may feel comfortable in certain spaces in the daytime, the same location may be perceived as unsafe at night due to the association of night-time with danger and crime (Loukaitou-Sideris & Fink 2009). While the darkness and reduced visibility that accompany night-time is often assumed to be the reason behind its association with danger, Koskela’s (1999) work on women’s mobility and fear of crime in Scandinavia proves that the social construction of ‘night’ is also responsible for this connotation. Women from several Scandinavian nations reported feeling nervous or vulnerable and changing jogging routes and activities at night even during summer when it remains light around the clock (Koskela 1999, p.115). This exemplifies the influence of social understandings or perceptions of danger, and their capacity to impact women’s mobility even without the influence of what can be understood as dangerous surroundings (Koskela 1999).

It is important to acknowledge that not all women or indeed all public spaces are impacted by feelings of vulnerability that restrict mobility. As social conditions and
their spatial realities change, women can and do find increased freedom of mobility, especially in urban spaces (Koskela 1997; Wilson 2001). As Wilson (2001) argues, cities and urban spaces can increase opportunities for independence for women rather than further exclusion. However, the opportunities that urban lifestyles bring are not a universal feature of contemporary urban settings. As Law (1999) states, the courage, freedom, or in this case mobility of some, does not negate the reality that the masculinisation of public spaces plays a large part in the lives and mobility of many women. With diversifying and expanding urban locations around the world and with the majority of the world’s population now residing in cities, it is critical to ensure all women access to the opportunities and freedoms that cities can provide, including the freedom of mobility.

Responses in Planning
As described above, the gendered, and indeed threatening nature of certain spaces is not the result of physical design and numeric domination alone, but rather the result of deep-seated assumptions about gender and space that are built into physical locations and social conceptualisations alike. This means strategies to increase women’s mobility, in the context of public transport networks, must target these assumptions through policy, planning and design (Greed 1994). While gender is a subjectivity now included in planning and design policies, the awareness of which is now understood as ‘good practice’ (Huning 2013), many of these approaches still fail to target the social assumptions which create gendered space and restrict women’s mobility. The expansion and improvement of Melbourne’s rail network is one example of this, highlighting the need for a deeper understanding of the physical and conceptual realities of gender and space.

Williams Landing Public Transport Project
Past and current responses to increasing the mobility of Australians through public transport networks have drawn on the notion of women’s ‘fear of crime’ as the main barrier facing women’s mobility. As such, responses to restricted mobility have focused on reducing crime – through measures including the installation of lighting and security cameras (Yavuz & Welch 2010) – rather than targeting the deeply ingrained gendered assumptions built into public spaces. The newly completed development of Williams Landing train station in the western suburbs of Melbourne is an example if this and highlights the need for a new gender equitable approach to public transport developments.

Williams Landing station, the construction of which cost approximately $110 million dollars, is part of a large-scale rail extension and upgrade project that aims to connect more people around the city of Melbourne and as a result increase the overall mobility of Melbourne’s population (Public Transport Victoria 2012). Constructed on an existing train line, Williams Landing is a brand new station, serving an area with no previous rail connection. As such, both the station and the surrounding infrastructure and services have been built on vacant land along the already existing rail route (Public Transport Victoria 2013). Williams Landing is the primary train station for the housing estates of Sanctuary Lakes and Williams Landing, and the surrounding suburbs of Point Cook and Truganina, all comparatively new residential areas (Carey 2012). Approximately 23 kilometres from Melbourne’s CBD, and with limited public transport options, the rapidly increasing population of this region are primarily dependent on motor vehicles for mobility.
As part of a rail safety upgrade, Williams Landing, like other train stations around Victoria, is fitted with comprehensive security camera networks, better lighting, and with some debate and controversy (Silverster 2011), the deployment of Protective Service Officers who patrol from 6:30pm until the last train at night (Public Transport Victoria 2012). As a ‘Premium Station’ (Public Transport Victoria 2013), Williams Landing benefits from all these security measures which aim to reduce crime and fear of crime.

Planned housing estates, such as those surrounding Williams Landing station, selling the ‘homeowner’s dream’, have in themselves traditionally created a plethora of issues surrounding the restriction of women’s mobility. As Johnson (1997) argues, through their aesthetically focused designs, these planned suburbs perpetuate the separation of gendered spaces of production and reproduction and foster a reliance on cars, creating barriers to women’s daily mobility. As such, public transport networks are well placed to increase the mobility of residents of these areas (Johnson 1997). Unfortunately due to its location, as highlighted in Figure 1, some distance away from built-up residential areas, and its planned surroundings of parkland, an expansive shopping centre and industrial estate, Williams Landing station can be understood to compound these issues rather than resolve them.

Gender and Design
As this paper has established, the physical composition of public space informs and is informed by the social biases surrounding gender and space. While this most commonly works to facilitate the masculinisation of space, which reduces women’s mobility, changes in the physical design of public spaces can also re-gender (or de-gender) public space, and increase the mobility of women (Huning 2013; Koskela 1999). While it is not as simple as ‘designing out’ spatial inequality, public spaces that unsettle established binaries and assumptions that inform their construction do work to increase the mobility of women (Loukaitou-Sideris & Fink 2009). The creation of spaces that do not embody uneven gender relations or provoke feelings of vulnerability, and which make the presence of women appropriate and more likely, can break the cycle of men’s spatial domination and women’s vulnerability described by Valentine (1989).

As described previously in this paper, places which women feel most vulnerable and actively avoid are most commonly: enclosed walkways, car parks, open fields or woodland, and empty shopping centres. While Williams Landing boasts security measures targeted at reducing crime, the development, when completed, will be surrounded by these masculinised public spaces which women actively avoid occupying or passing through. Indeed, the current surroundings of the station present these exact problems, with large expanses of empty land surrounding the station (as seen in Figure 2).

Figure 2. View from Williams Landing Station, showing surrounding empty land. Source: Author.

Research conducted in the U.S. by Loukaitou-Sideris and Fink (2009) illuminates the problem. They found that women felt more vulnerable and uncomfortable on the journey to and from public transport services than while commuting on these services, showing that the masculinised spaces that women must travel through to access public transport were the main barrier to their public transport use and the mobility it allows. While currently no research has been conducted on women’s use of Melbourne’s new stations such as Williams Landing, it can be inferred that the presence of gendered and threatening spaces such as expansive car parks and open parklands will limit the ability of women to use this development, especially at night, further restricting their mobility in suburban areas.
**Planning for Spatial Gender Equality**

The importance of the spaces surrounding public transport networks, not merely the services themselves, highlights the need for a whole of society approach to re-gendering public spaces (Greed 1994). This notion has been around since Hayden first asked us to question what would a non-sexist city be like? in her influential article of the same title (1980), and must be legitimately answered if women are to become spatially and socially equal to men (Greed 2008). For Greed (2008, n.p.), the non-sexist city, where women’s mobility is not be impacted by masculinised space, is “the city of short distances, mixed land uses and multiple centres”. These are features that can and must be incorporated in future planning and development surrounding Melbourne and its expanding transport network. Placing new public transport developments in residential areas, planning their surroundings, and developing tangential transit routes rather than extending Melbourne’s existing radial rail network would immediately increase the mobility of women in Melbourne’s growing suburbs. Essential to achieving these goals is the involvement of women in all policy and planning surrounding new developments and the deployment of a gender-aware approach to public transport development that takes into account both the physical and social realities of occupying space as a woman (Greed 2008).

With an expanding population and changing environment giving renewed urgency for accessible and appropriate public transport networks, policy and planning surrounding Melbourne’s transport systems must urgently ensure gender equity in mobility and put Australia on the right path for the creation of the non-sexist city through the re-gendering of Melbourne’s public spaces.

**Conclusion**

While transport networks expand across the world and more people enjoy increased mobility, the mobility of many women remains restricted with the presence of certain public spaces causing them to change or reduce their daily movements. While this continues to be identified as fear of crime and addressed with the installation of security cameras and bright lights, this paper has shown that instead it is the assumptions about gender and space that shape our society and are built into public our spaces that continue to restrict the mobility of many women. By addressing both the physical and conceptual creation of spaces along the gendered binaries of public/private, the mobility of women can truly be increased and gender equality on a spatial level achieved. As the example of Williams Landing station shows, the re-gendering of public spaces remains extremely important, and must take precedence at all levels of policy and planning surrounding the expansion of Melbourne’s public transport network. This re-gendering of Melbourne’s public spaces would drastically increase the mobility of Melbourne’s women, helping to spatially destabilise the gender inequality that still shapes our cities, and making it an important goal for Victoria’s planners.

**References**


