

Urban Minded in Esbjerg, Denmark

Strategic intervention in Esbjerg's city center
informed by teenage girls!

THE CITY
WE DREAM OF!



Henning
Larsen

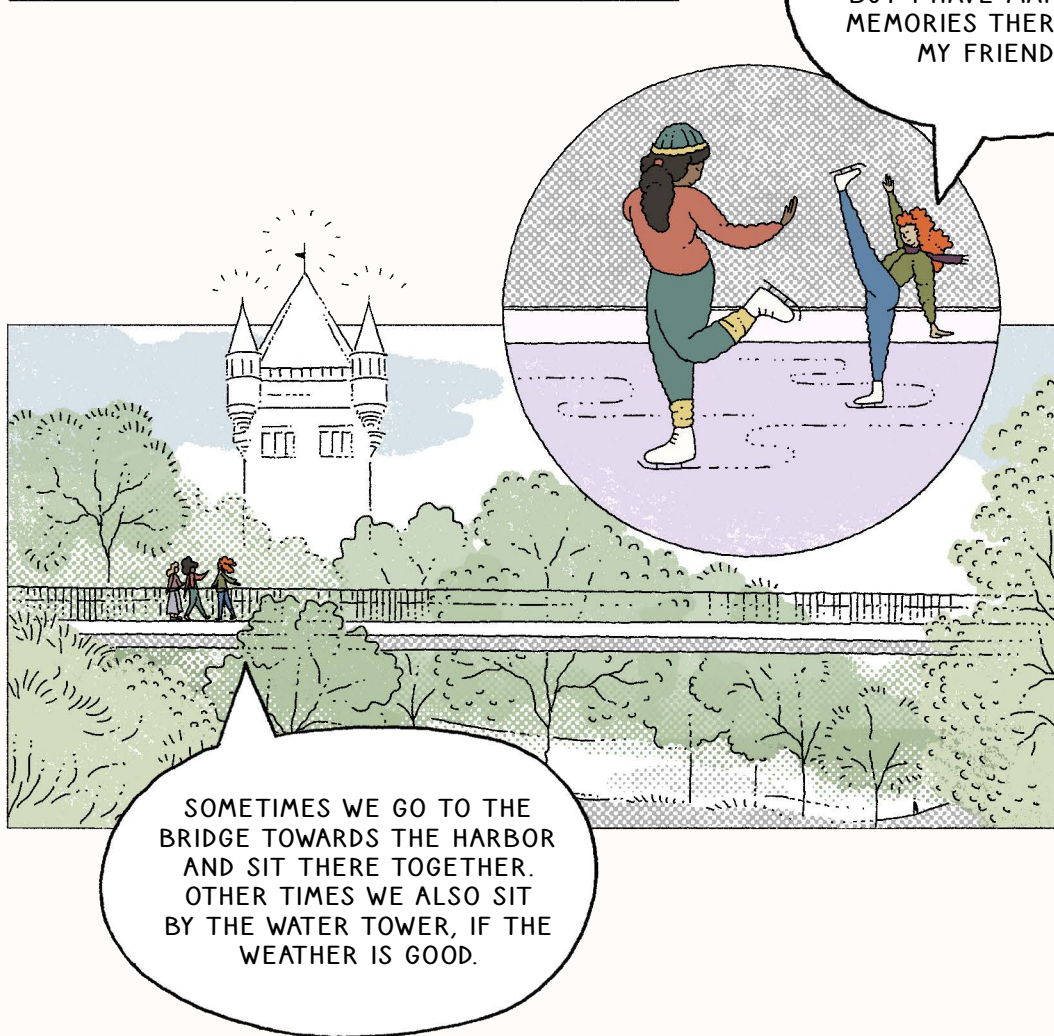
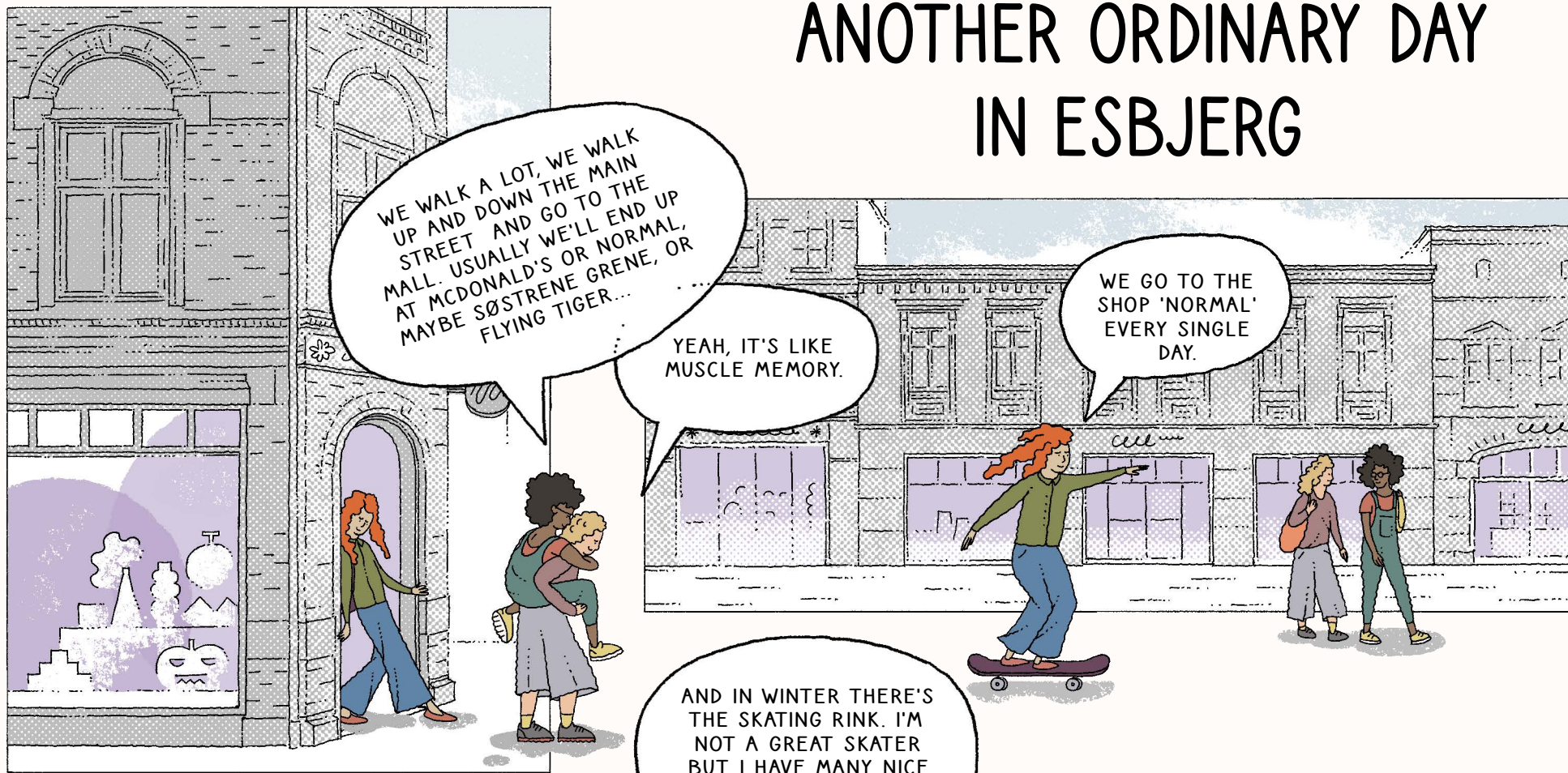
RAMBØLL

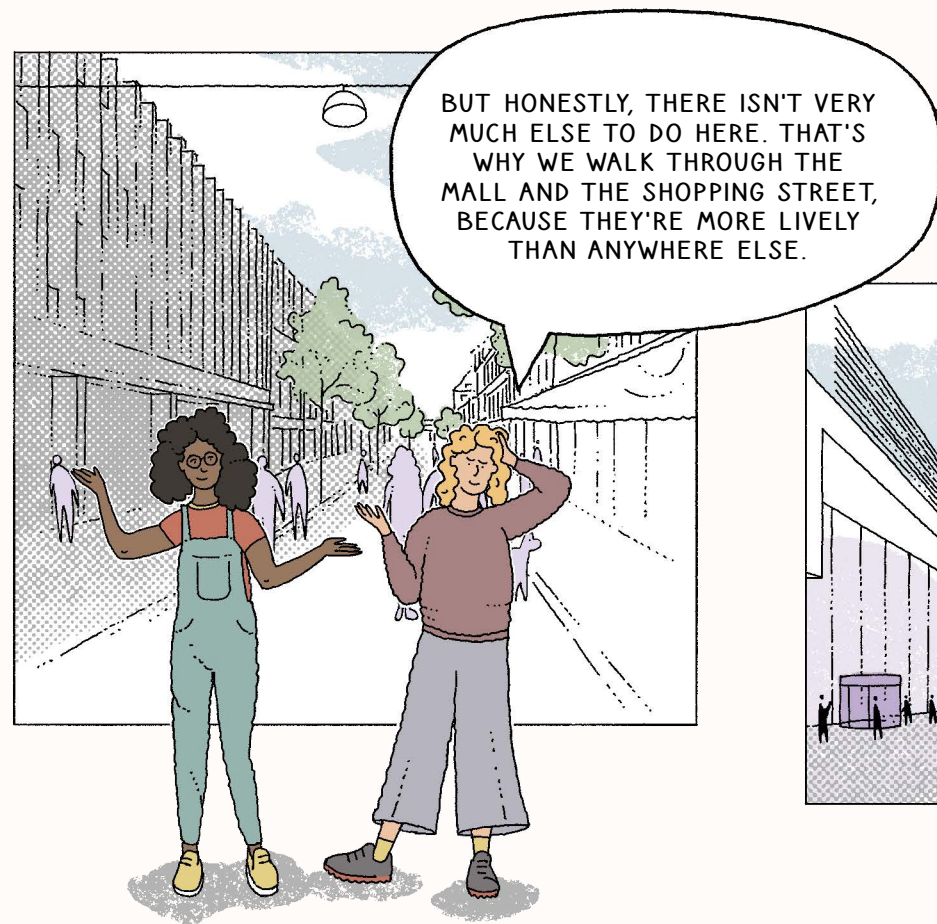
RAMBØLL
FONDEN

Esbjerg
Kommune

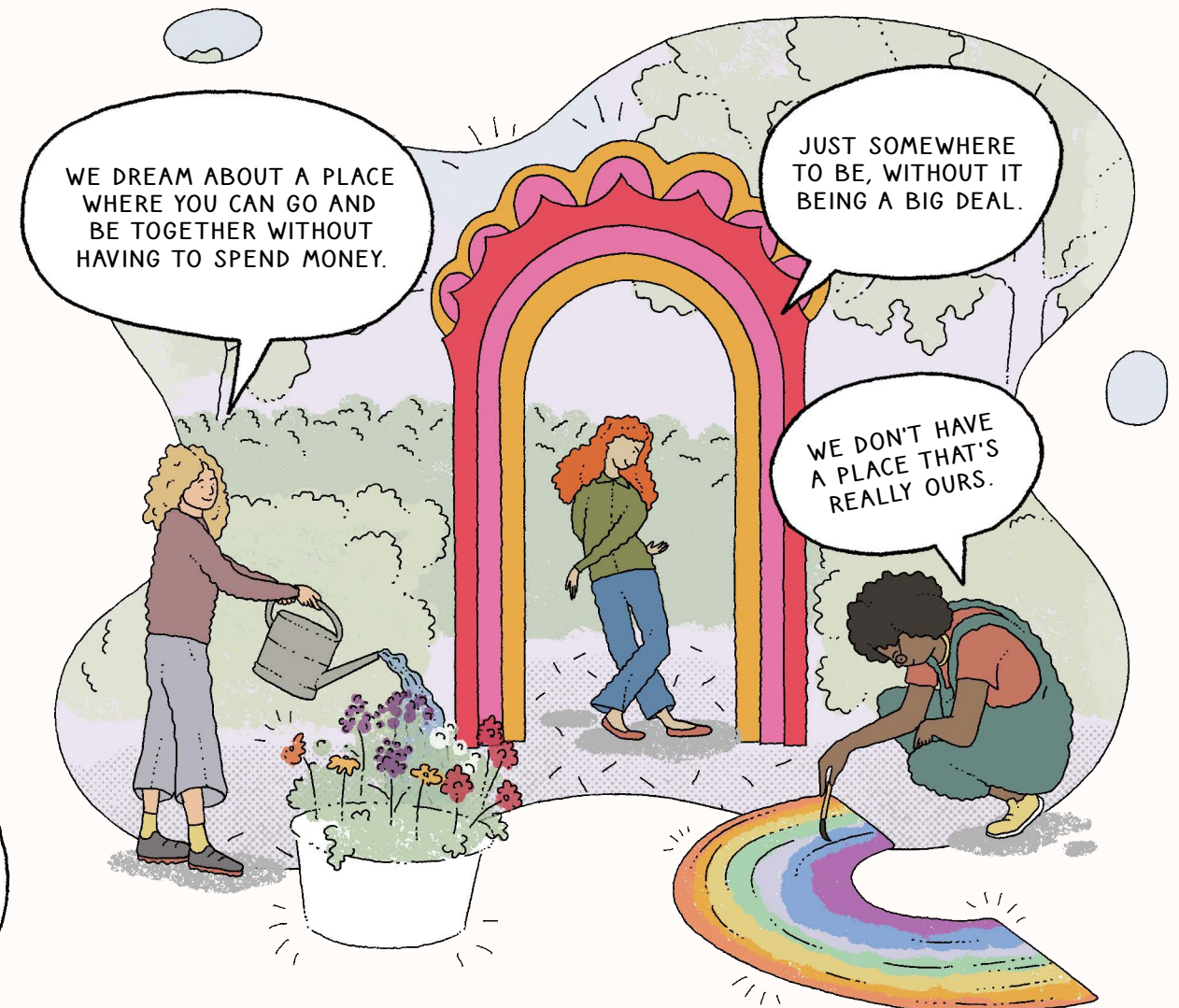
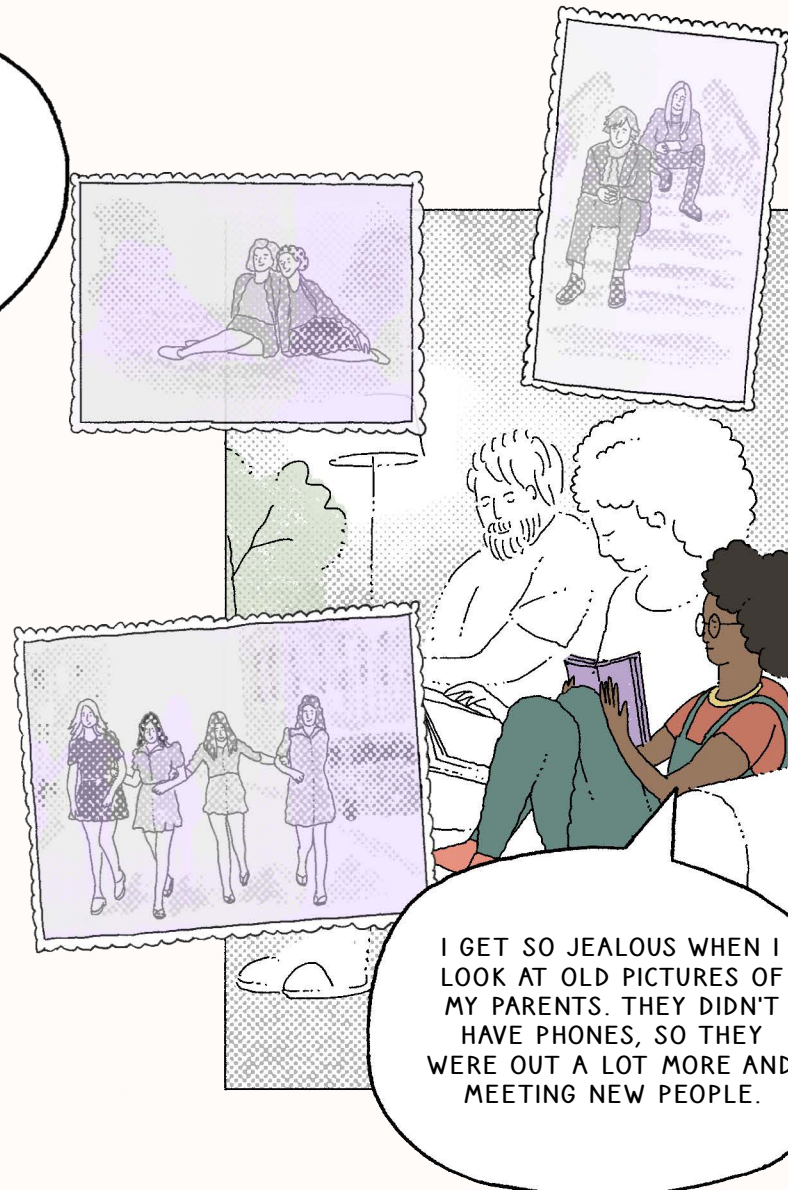
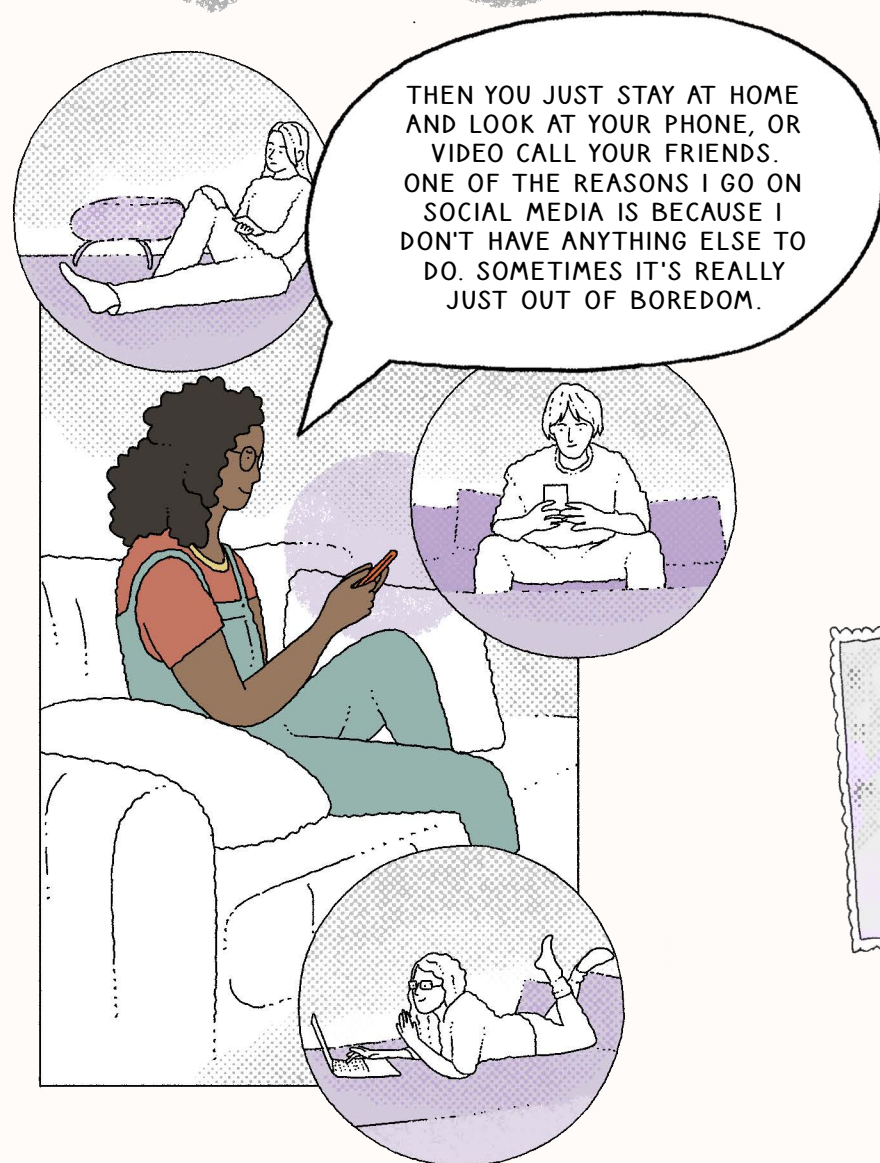
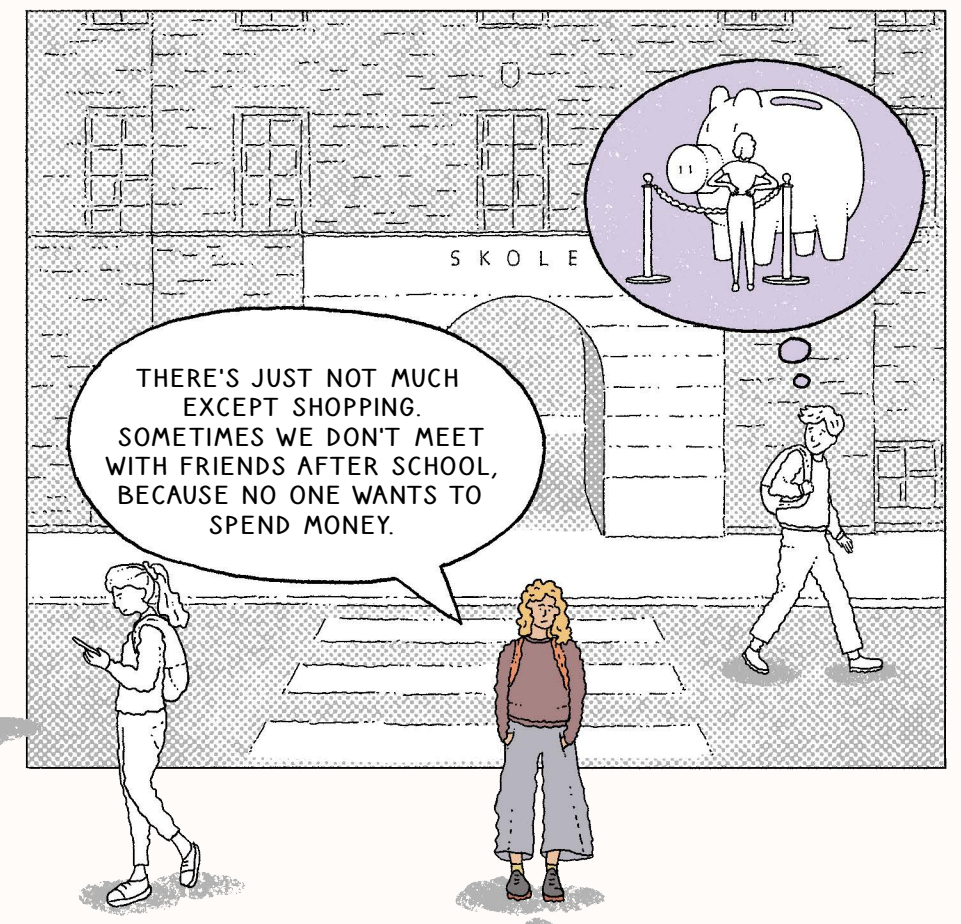
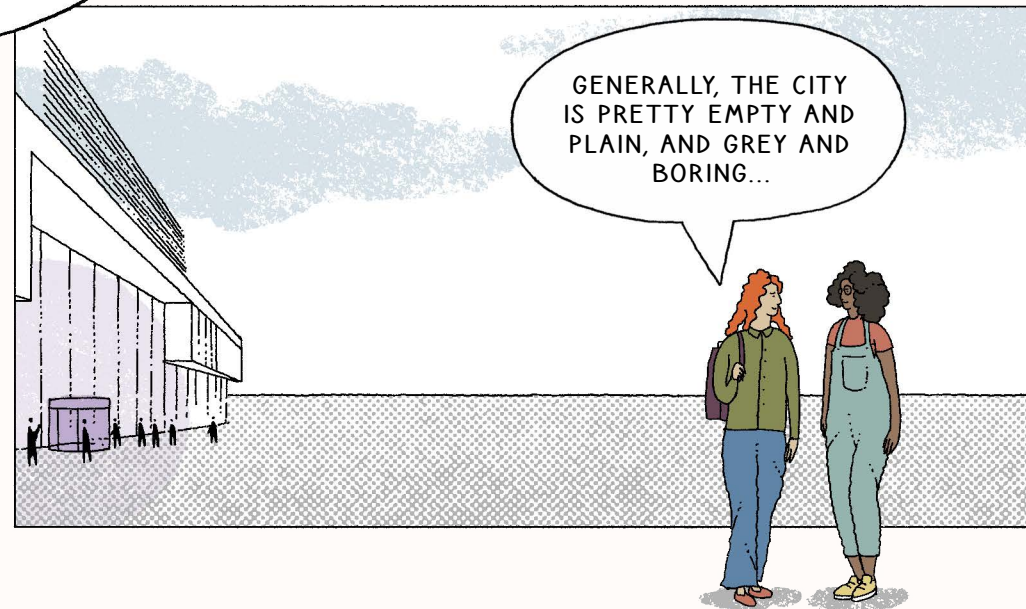
CS

ANOTHER ORDINARY DAY IN ESBJERG





BUT...



DREAMING BIG!

... WHERE YOU CAN JUST CHILL AND HANG OUT - WITHOUT HAVING TO BUY ANYTHING!

... DIFFERENT COLORS AND INTERESTING SHAPES.

... SOMETHING THAT FEELS DIFFERENT AND HAS LOTS OF PERSONALITY.

... A PLACE WHERE YOU CAN PLAY MUSIC AND LET GO.

... A PLACE WHERE YOU CAN GO AFTER SCHOOL WITH YOUR FRIENDS.

... NO PRESSURE, NO STRESS!

... MORE EVENTS, MUSIC CONCERTS, FANTASY FESTIVALS, FOOD MARKETS, FLEA MARKETS, VINTAGE MARKETS!

... A PLACE WHERE YOU CAN JUST BE AS YOU ARE WITHOUT FEARING JUDGMENT!

... MORE GREEN SPACES AND LOTS OF FLOWERS!



WELCOME TO
THE ESBJERG WE
DREAM OF!

YOU BUILD YOURSELF UP IN THE
CITY OVER TIME, YOU LEARN
YOUR WAY AROUND, AND YOU
CREATE A CONNECTION TO IT IN
YOUR OWN WAY.

ESBJERG IS MY CITY!

A FLOURISHING PLACE
SHAPED BY OUR
VOICES!

Why does this matter?

Our cities simply weren't designed with teenage girls in mind. Despite progress toward gender equality, public spaces still reflect an urban heritage that overlooks the needs of women, girls, and many other groups.

Active public spaces are most often dominated by boys and men. For many girls (and boys) who don't favour the active spaces on offer to them, the main alternatives are shops, commercial spaces, or passive seating. This is very much the case in Esbjerg. The result is clear: for these groups, participating in public life means either spending money or watching from the edge, neither of which is empowering the young girls of the city.

We know that one project can't solve all of these issues. However, our collaborative process (bringing together girls, designers, and the municipality in co-creation) shows that the city can change, and that urban life can be shaped by many voices working together.

WHERE DO WE START?

We embrace that representation matters and that different groups and individuals experience spaces in vastly different ways. This allows us to think critically about who is present in our cities and how they take up space. When individuals don't see themselves reflected in public spaces, they internalize the message that these places are not meant for them, making it harder to feel safe, comfortable, and free to be who they are. With this in mind, we start by taking the time to listen.

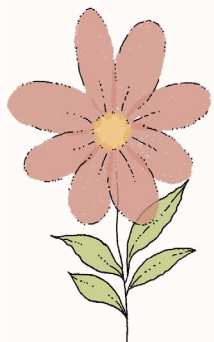


WHAT'S THE ALTERNATIVE?

If we don't think and act differently, we're likely doing more of the same. In this case, that means designing spaces that perpetuate old narratives and norms. We risk designing activities and spaces that are already coded through a gendered lens and recreating the same exclusions, behavioral patterns and stereotypes but with new materials and fresh paint.

WHAT DOES CHANGE LOOK LIKE?

Even before design is realised, change is in processes; in who is included, in how we question and define the design challenge. By gathering first-hand insights from girls in Esbjerg, we can identify opportunities for meaningful intervention and begin planting seeds of change!



Cultivating the city they deserve...

A MANIFESTO!



To understand the city they deserve, we met, talked and spent time with over 50 girls in Esbjerg. Through interviews and workshops, we were able to capture their experiences and perspectives, told in their own words. (You can read more about our process on page 8 of this document.)

Co-created and co-authored, their voices and our expertise shape this vision of what is possible. This is not about giving girls a voice, they already have one. It's about cultivating a city that hears them, recognizes them, and makes space for them as they are.

**Note that the text follows the phrasing of 'they' and 'we'. The intention here is not to deflect from their creativity and contribution but to honestly and accurately reflect the dynamic of the participatory process. Additionally, this choice of language allows us to emphasize the responsibility that is placed on us (we, the adults, practitioners, designers, decision-makers) to listen, recognise, make room, and quite simply, do things differently.*

THEY TALK — and we listen

Girls tell us of their relationship to the city — their city. They are local experts, having grown up here, made memories here, found their first taste of independence here. The city is told and retold from their perspectives. They teach us so much that we wouldn't otherwise know!



THEY FLOW — and we follow

Girls move through the city every day. They walk, wander, circle through the streets, and not just to get somewhere, but to be together, to explore, to observe, and to feel part of something. We owe them a city where movement feels safe, fun, stimulating, and free. Where they can walk, run, dance, without judgment or risk.

THEY NEED TO BE — and we know it matters

Girls need places to be together, alone, energized, lazy, stress-free, creative, and more. They need to feel accepted. Girls deserve places where they don't have to explain themselves. Places where nothing is expected of them, not perfection or politeness, nor feistiness, idealism or maturity. Places that don't demand of them to perform or to purchase. Places without pressure where they can just be. Places to sit, talk, rest, cry, laugh; places to be together or alone and places where they feel they belong.



THEY WANT TO BE ACTIVE AND PLAY — and we make room for it

Play is not childish. It's creative, expressive, liberating, and even healing. Girls want to invent, imagine, play music, perform, dance, be silly and goof around. The city can be the place for that. Urban play can be made public, visible, age-appropriate, engaging and fun.

THEY'RE READY TO PARTICIPATE — and we open up the process

Girls are not just users of the city; they are part of its life. Their lived experiences can redirect our attention and help us understand where and what our cities are lacking. They hold insight we need so when we open up the design process, we don't just improve outcomes, we honor who cities are actually for.



Our process

WHY ENGAGE?

There's so much we can learn through co-creation and active listening. We can address our biases, manifest social change, and create meaningful impact in our cities!

WHO TO ENGAGE WITH?

Through our process, we engaged with local teenage girls, aged 13-15, most of whom attend schools in and around the city center and use the city center frequently. Over the course of the project, we got to meet with over 50 girls!

HOW TO ENGAGE?

Through a strong collaboration between the local municipality and a multi-disciplinary design team, our process spanned a 7-month period and was anchored by several touch points with local girls along the way. These engagement activities were central to building relationships and trust, providing us with rich insights to support our designed intervention, as well as the making of this document.



WHY NOW?

This process has resulted in many nuanced learnings, inspiring ideas, creative recommendations, and thoughtful insights for sometimes small yet meaningful interventions that can make the city more attractive and engaging for girls. These insights support Esbjerg Municipality's strategic work on urban transformation and urban life, including the ambition to create a greener, more vibrant and inclusive city center.

The project contributes directly to the municipality's objectives of strengthening youth participation in urban development and ensuring that public spaces better reflect the needs and wishes of different user groups.

A closer look at Esbjerg

A city planned from scratch

A relatively young city in the Danish landscape, Esbjerg was founded in 1868 as Denmark's western deep-water port. The city was essentially planned from scratch to serve as a crucial export hub for fish, agricultural products and later North Sea oil operations. Unlike many Danish cities that evolved organically over centuries, Esbjerg's grid-pattern streets and systematic harbor expansion reflect deliberate 19th century urban planning principles. This functional approach created both advantages and contradictions: the active industrial harbor remains vital for the city and country, but operations have restricted public access to the waterfront, effectively detaching the city from the water that defines its identity. This has resulted in the paradox of a maritime city that is simultaneously connected to and extremely separated from the sea.

Addressing planning challenges

Despite minimal population growth since the 70's, the planning legacy of Esbjerg has contributed to urban sprawl. This has prompted municipal authorities to enact legislation halting further expansion in favor of transformation and densification of the city center. Current urban renewal efforts, including ongoing development strategies, represent a deliberate attempt to address these inherited planning challenges by creating a more compact, accessible, and water-connected urban core that better serves contemporary needs while respecting the city's industrial heritage.

Strengthening urban life in the city center

This project and process tap into these ongoing efforts for urban renewal, contributing to the ambitions of strengthening urban life in the city center. It also supports the municipality's strategic objectives to create a greener, more vibrant and inclusive city center where more citizens - especially young people and families - feel at home, want to stay, and think of as an attractive place to live. The project's insights and recommendations can thus serve as input for both the physical planning and the specific initiatives that will make Esbjerg's city center more attractive and sustainable in the long term.

A MARITIME CITY THAT IS
SIMULTANEOUSLY CONNECTED TO AND
SEPARATED FROM THE SEA

CURRENT URBAN RENEWAL EFFORTS
REPRESENT AN ATTEMPT TO ADDRESS
INHERITED PLANNING CHALLENGES

! TO CREATE A MORE COMPACT,
ACCESSIBLE, AND WATER-CONNECTED
CITY CENTER THAT IS GREENER,
MORE VIBRANT AND INCLUSIVE!

Learnings from the girls

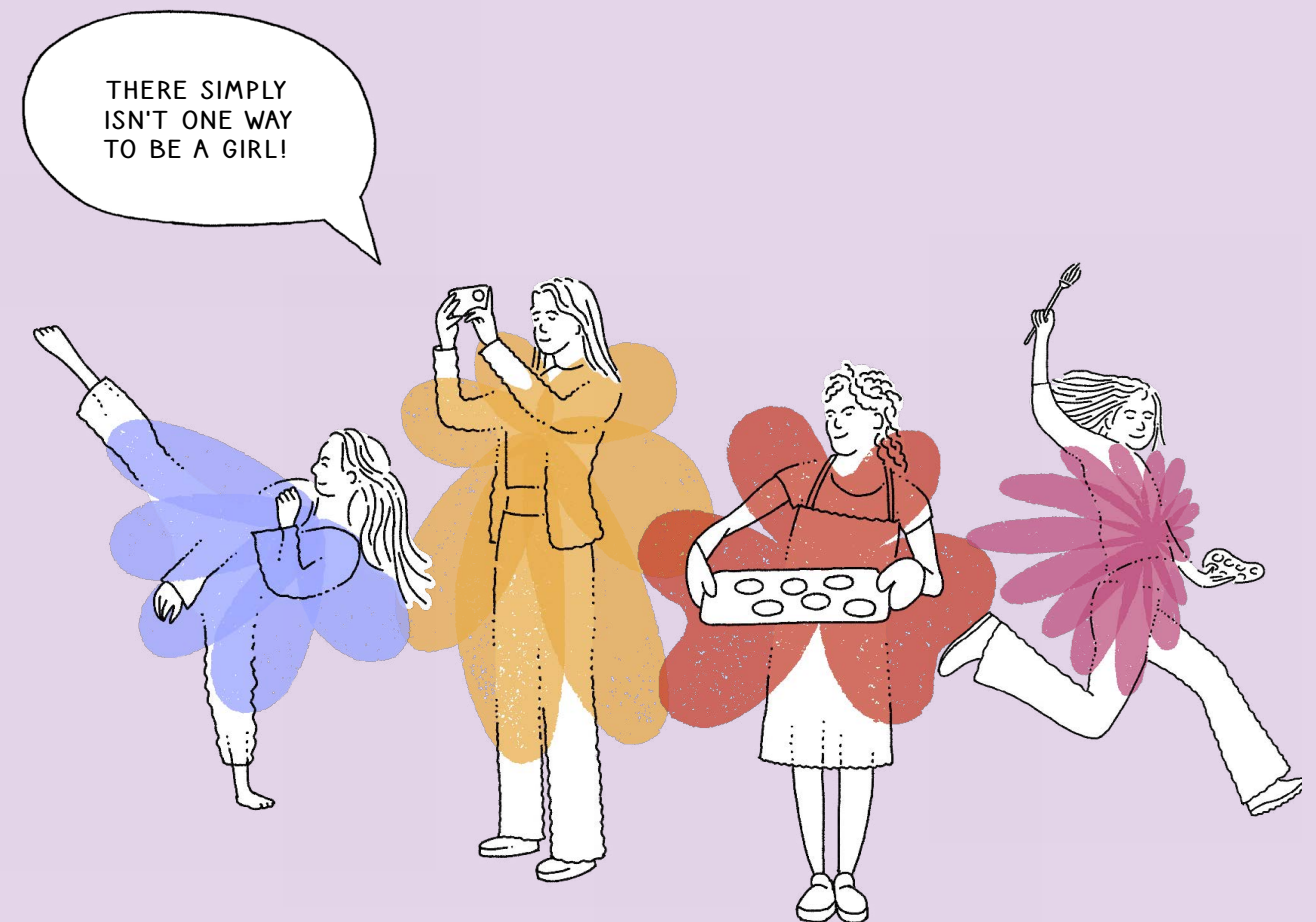
In the following pages we share our learnings from interacting with the girls. Told through seven reoccurring themes, commonalities, and meaningful reflections, these learnings can help us understand Esbjerg from another perspective.

- DIFFERENT AND ALIKE
- LOCALITY IS MADE UP OF MIXED FEELINGS
- REPETITION OF FLOWS
- THE CITY CENTER IS EQUATED WITH COMMERCIAL ACTIVITY
- FEELING GOOD IN PUBLIC SPACE
- BEYOND THE ORDINARY
- LIMITED WAYS OF BEING SOCIAL

DIFFERENT AND ALIKE

The qualitative methods used in our process allowed us to identify reoccurring themes and usage patterns while also making room for nuance and diversity of lived experiences.

We met and engaged with many girls of different backgrounds and family structures with different interests, hobbies, aesthetic preferences, communication styles, and more. From taekwondo and football to music, baking, painting, doing make-up, thrifting, reading, swimming, playing Dungeons & Dragons, and even playing in a rock band. That said, we were able to come across commonalities: shared sentiments and practices, or reoccurring themes in their relationship with Esbjerg.



LOCALITY IS MADE UP OF MIXED FEELINGS



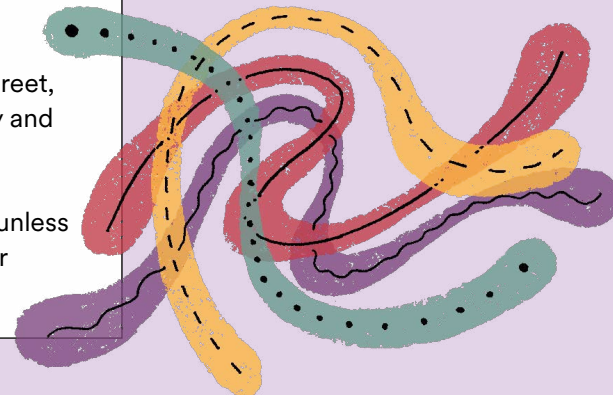
Knowing a place well means knowing its strengths and its faults. They like their city, they know their city, but at the same time they find it boring, grey and lacking activity.

- For the most part, the city center is perceived as safe but generally lacking sheltered outdoor spaces to linger and hang out. Interesting to note because there are seating options available on Kongensgade, but these would make them too visible and simply don't attract the girls.
- They want a big city feel in terms of activity and people, (and many of them think having more shops would create this), but at the same time they also don't venture far beyond the pedestrian road/shopping street. Most of their time in the city center is spent on this street (Kongensgade) between Broen (the mall), and Føtex (the hypermarket on Smedegade).

REPETITION OF FLows

Though the girls we spoke to were different in many ways, still their paths through the city were almost identical, moving along familiar flows especially down the pedestrian shopping street. Their movements aren't always purposeful. Often like muscle memory, they wander between shops to pass time together and be stimulated. Movement is habitual and rhythmic, guided by routine considerations of price and atmosphere. *Is it cheap? Is it a stress-free environment? Can we stay there for a long time? Can we find something new in a familiar place?*

- There are two main meeting points where they arrange to meet with their friends, and these are either the mall (Broen) or the main square (Torvet).
- Given that a lot of people follow these same paths and considerations, these become places where young people awkwardly bump into each other, sometime intentionally avoiding people they know but aren't close to.
- *Normal* and *McDonald's* could be weekly or daily stops, sometimes more than once in one day, depending on which school they go to.
- They frequently visit the same shops at the mall and on the shopping street, avoiding side streets because to them, they seem to be lacking activity and energy.
- Heading west on Kongensgade will take them to Føtex but no further, unless they have hobbies that justify it, at Kulturskole, the Taekwondo Club, or thrifting at Reshoppit.



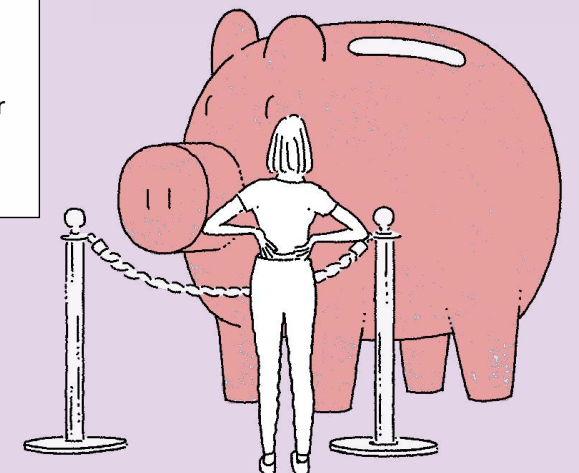
「THE CITY CENTER IS EQUATED WITH COMMERCIAL ACTIVITY」

On regular weekdays and weekends when there aren't special events taking place, Esbjerg's city center revolves almost entirely around commercial activity with few incentives to linger for any length of time beyond this usage. When we asked girls to reflect on the city center, it was often challenging to shift their attention to outdoor public space or to think beyond the shops and restaurants, the majority of which are large chains. Ironically, alongside this mono-function, Esbjerg is facing an issue with a significant number of shop vacancies in and around the city center.

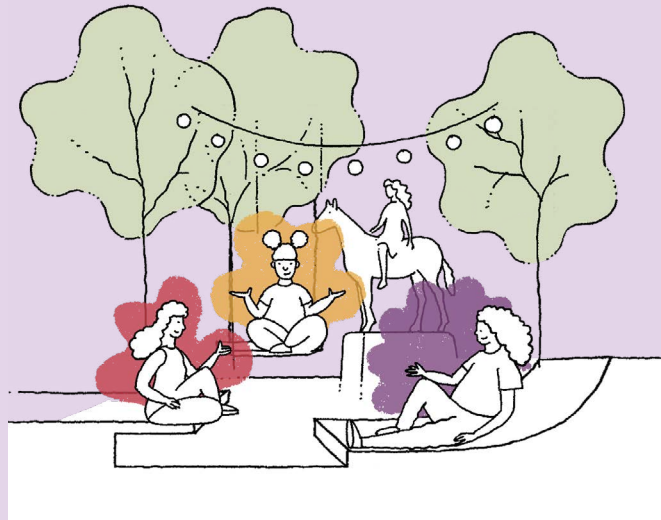
For teenage girls commercial spaces act as social spaces but, understandably, consumer culture and affordability create barriers in their urban experience.

- McDonald's is seen as a setting in which to connect with others, wandering through Broen or up and down Kongensgade is a social ritual, and even a quick visit to *Normal* during school break serves as a shared endeavor with friends. These everyday retail environments are of the social spaces available to teens in Esbjerg, outside of their homes and schools.
- Many spaces don't feel like they're meant for girls. Some are too exposed, others seem designed only for buying or watching and not being. There's often a subtle pressure to either move along or to buy. If you're not consuming something or browsing as if you're interested in buying, you might feel out of place.
- For many, money is always on their mind. Where to get a cheap meal, or the fact that buying a gift card for the movie theater will get you cheaper tickets than buying them directly at the cinema, or at which shops you can get free samples and tea, or the price of candy being 'not even funny', or being asked to leave because they're not buying... the list goes on.

EVERYTHING IS SO EXPENSIVE. WE NEED A PLACE WHERE YOU CAN GO WITHOUT SPENDING MONEY.



FEELING GOOD IN PUBLIC SPACE



The girls value environments that are low-pressure in that they don't ask that they compete or perform in any particular way.

- These are places where they can just exist. Comfort, warmth, and a sense of shared presence matter more than a grand design.
- Cozy corners, plants, colors, soft materials, materials that feel lived in, places where there are details to take in and where you can take your time.
- Places where one can find stimulation but where nothing is expected of you; these are what make a space feel right.

BEYOND THE ORDINARY

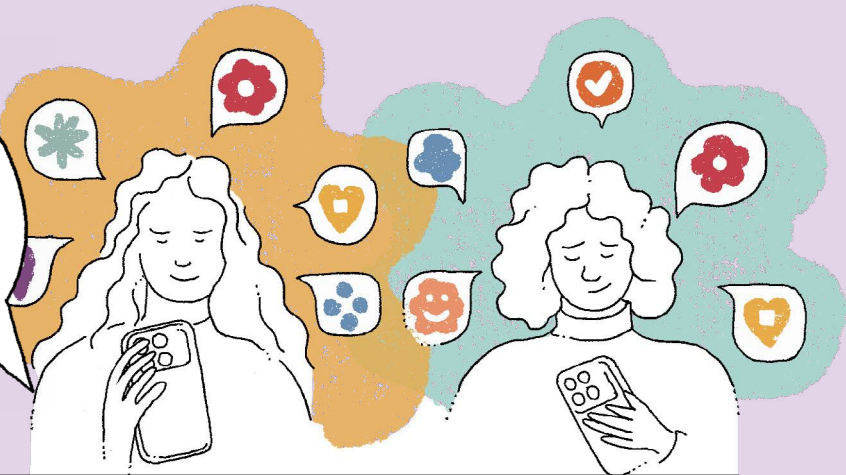


The girls we spoke to are part of a generation that craves authenticity. They gravitate towards aesthetics that have character and attitude.

- Thrifted items and reused materials hint at a past life, combining bright colors, textures, imperfect nature, and urban art, these create a sense of randomness and provide a unique feel.
- These are things that feel out of the ordinary and break away from what they consider typical for Esbjerg, often equating this with things that are boring, familiar and grey.
- Things that feel too polished or perfect risk seeming generic and mass produced.

LIMITED WAYS OF BEING SOCIAL

I THINK IT'S SAD THAT SOMETIMES WE'D RATHER BE PLAYING ON OUR GADGETS AND SCROLLING ON SOCIAL MEDIA THAN BEING TOGETHER WITH FRIENDS OUT IN THE CITY.



If you ask girls in Esbjerg, they'll say that there isn't that much for them to do when they meet in the city. At times, this prompts them to come up with games and activities, inventing creative ways of being together and creating a sense of intrigue or surprise where/when they are missing.

- They might go to a clothes shop and dress each other, intentionally selecting funny combinations or things that don't go, or alternatively, selecting clothes you know your friend wouldn't typically go for, but you think would look good on them.
- Similar to this, is having your friend choose flavors of candy for you or having them surprise you with a new flavor of bubble tea. They know what you would always go for, so they can keep you on your toes!

A complicated relationship with social media

Another way of being together is spending passive time on social media. Whether looking at reels together on one screen or each absorbed in their own device, being a teen today means being incredibly attached to your phone and your phone being incredibly central to your social life.

- That said, some girls expressed feeling jealous of their parents' childhoods for having grown up without social media. They perceive this as a time when people spent more time in the city, being present, hanging out and meeting new people whereas today they might choose to face-time their friends from home rather than meeting up.
- Comments were also made about going online simply because they're bored or even meeting up with people and feeling bored because they seem to be repeating what they've seen on social media.

From learnings to strategies

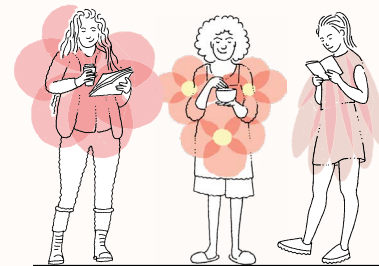
Following the engagement process and analysis, we've organized our learnings into four strategic areas, each of which is broken down into design principles. The first relates to considerations of movement and FLOW; the second, considerations of lingering, hanging out, and BEing in the city; the third recognizes that there should be no age restriction or social discomfort to PLAY, even though sometimes it feels the opposite. The fourth is an acknowledgement of elements that aren't defined by materiality but are still central to creating inclusive environments from the perspective of teenage girls.

GOING FROM WHAT WE
HEARD AND LEARNED TO
WHAT CAN BE DONE!



FLOW

- 1 Think about existing flows
- 2 Create intrigue and stimulation



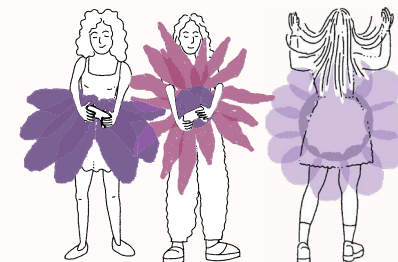
BE

- 3 Respect their privacy and the value of 'hanging out'
- 4 Prioritize non-pressured and stress-free environments
- 5 Connect to the elements



PLAY

- 6 Encourage curiosity at any age
- 7 Expand the notion of play



BEYOND THE SPACE....

- * Prioritize affordability!
- * Organize and activate!

FLOW

'FLOW' relates to the girls' experiences of moving through the city as well as their growing sense of freedom and agency.

1 Think about existing flows

We all have routes that we're drawn to in a city; our preferred ways of getting around. The presence of other people, stimulating sights and sounds, light, sun, shade, wind, sense of safety, past experiences, and more - these all play a part in defining urban flows.

Consider how girls flow through the city and why. Prioritize **approachability** and **accessibility**, to counter the influence and presence of countless invisible barriers. By implementing shelters along common paths, considering sight lines, and offering playful activities along the way, we can enhance and expand existing urban flows through the city.

2 Create intrigue and stimulation

Intentionally break away from the city's familiar aesthetics (which they consider boring, generic and grey), to create interventions that are infused with creative energy, character and attitude.

Create a **sense of authenticity**, abnormality and spontaneity with bold colors, urban art, imperfect overgrown nature, music and more. Introducing more sights, sounds, and sensory stimuli can change our perspective of the city.



I THINK THERE IS A FEELING OF SAFETY WHEN THERE ARE FAMILIAR PEOPLE AROUND AND YOU HAVE A CONNECTION TO THEM.

WE NEED A PLACE WHERE YOU CAN GO WITHOUT SPENDING MONEY, WHERE YOU CAN GO AROUND AND HAVE A LOOK AT WHAT'S THERE AND TRY OUT DIFFERENT THINGS.

MY MAIN WAY OF GETTING AROUND IS WALKING, BECAUSE YOU GET A LITTLE MORE OUT OF WHERE YOU ARE AND IT'S EASIER TO HAVE CONVERSATIONS WITH PEOPLE THAT WAY.

BE

By considering how our cities can be more welcoming and better suited to teenage girls, urban spaces can encourage a sense of empowerment and 'BE'longing!

3 Respect their privacy and the value of 'hanging out'

As they grow and gain independence, teens seek a sense of privacy from the watchful gaze of adults – whether on their own or in the company of friends.

Create safe and comfortable environments that honor the importance of **togetherness** as well as the longing for **intimacy, privacy and retreat**.

4 Prioritize non-pressured and stress-free environments

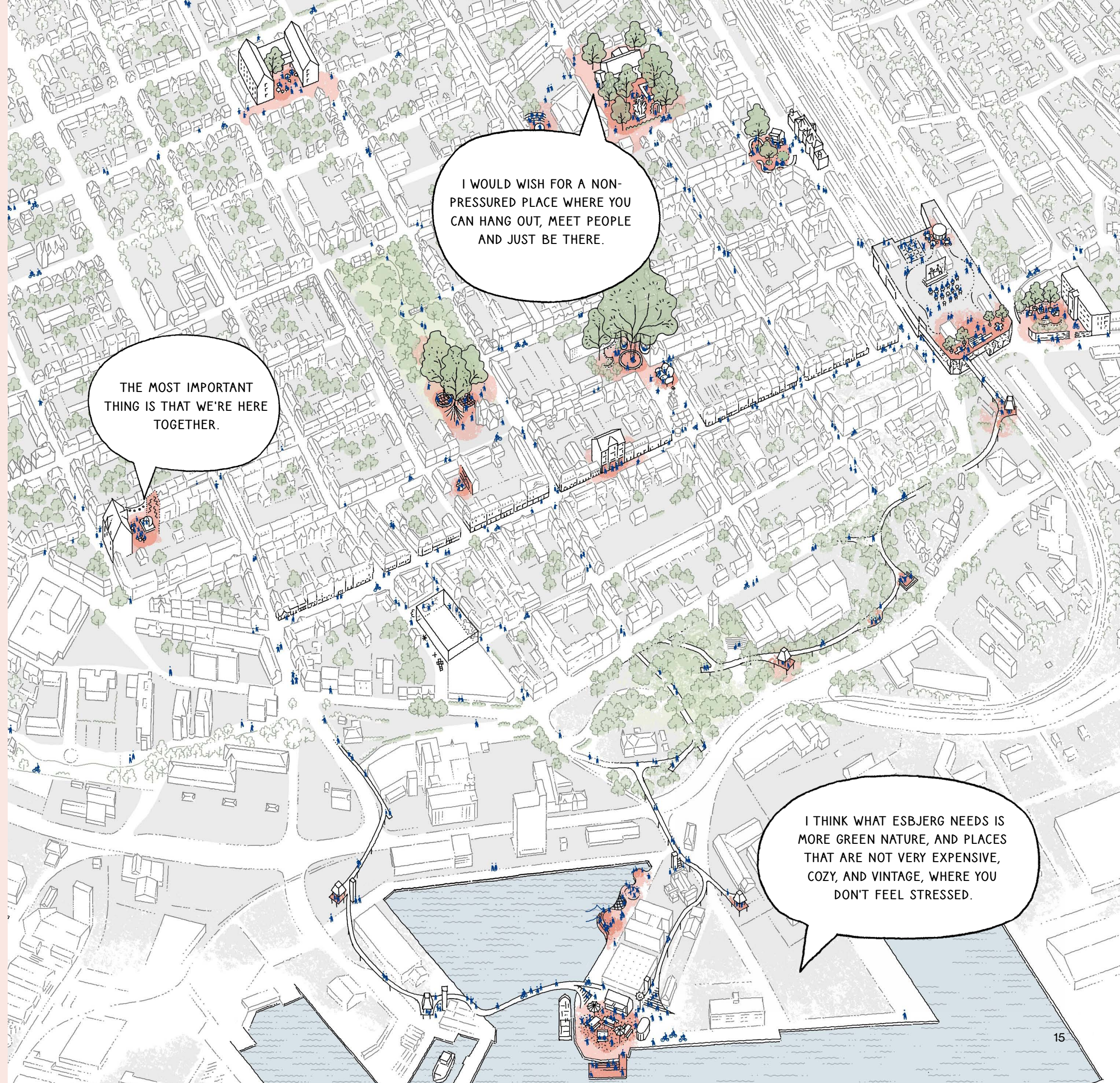
The girls gravitate towards places where they can take their time, where no one is pressuring them or rushing them to move faster, where they can look at things in detail. These are spaces that **feel safe and stress-free**. They can be here alone or together with others. *For lack of choices, they find this experience in shops with forced-path layouts. Let's design non-commercial alternatives to this!*

Create calm yet stimulating spaces where there is a lot to take in but **no right or wrong way to be**, by design.

5 Connect to the elements

They seek a connection to natural elements but in ease and comfort.

Allow many and varied touchpoints with nature; trees, flowers, views to the sky and treetops, connections to the water, and so on. Be mindful of wind and rain, providing shelters that can allow spending prolonged time outdoors.



PLAY!

Considering 'PLAY' as an important urban experience at any age, we can make room for creativity, imagination, and self-expression not just for teenage girls, but for all!

6 Encourage curiosity at any age

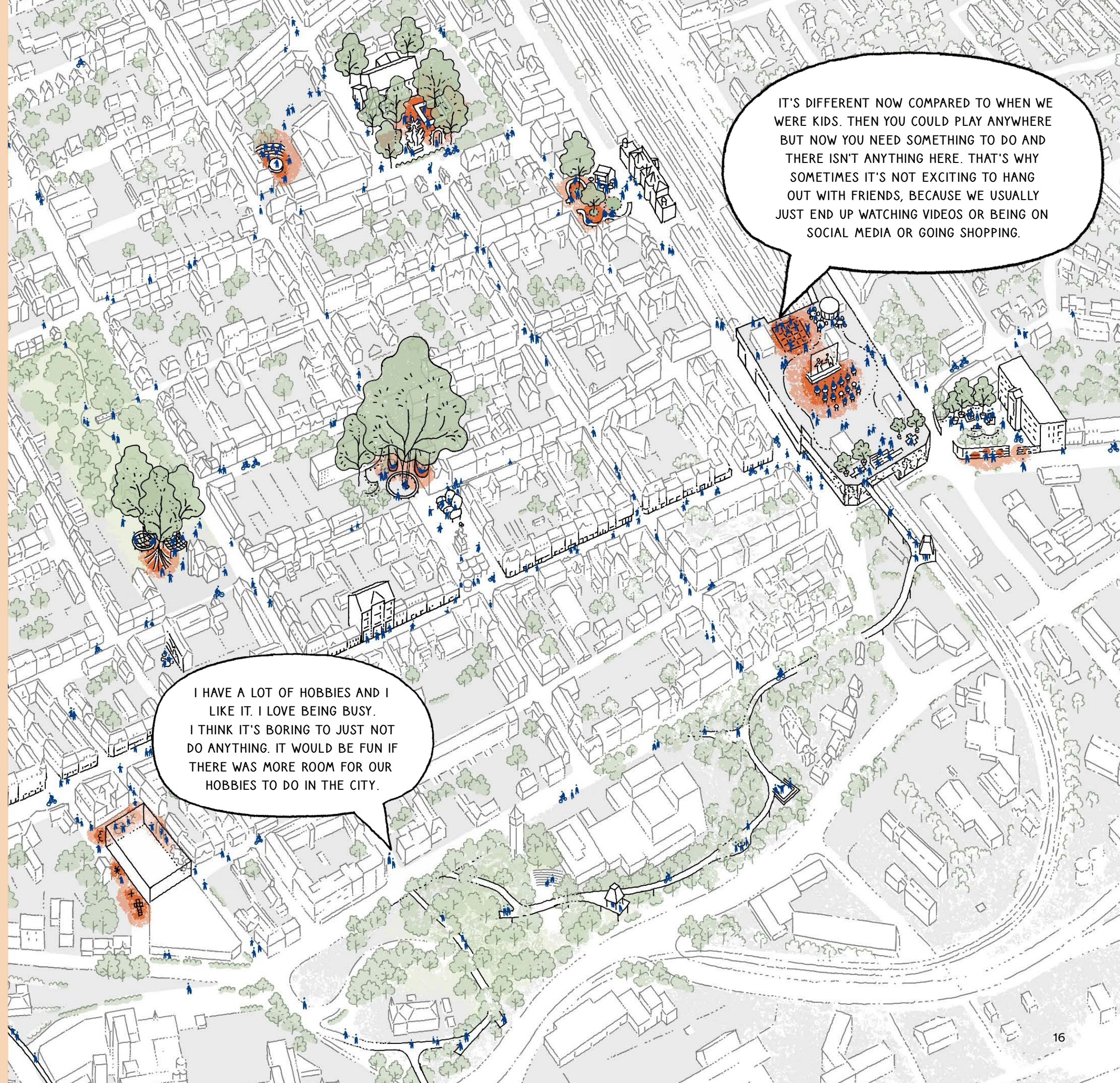
Whether using their imagination, dancing, inventing stories or games, being silly, or even toying with what it might be like to be an adult; **play can be found everywhere.**

Go beyond conventions to reinvent and reinterpret what it means to be playful; remembering that there is no right or wrong way to play!

7 Expand the notion of play

Simple interventions can make a big difference: a platform could be transformed into a stage, a mural can trigger curiosity and creativity or become a place for interactive self-expression.

Integrate elements that **encourage curiosity, playful attitudes and creative usage** while being mindful of aesthetics and social codes relating to age or gender; playgrounds often feel like they're for little kids, outdoor exercise equipment feel like they're for adults, traditional sports facilities are predominantly used by boys.



BEYOND THE SPACE...

Design and materiality cannot solve social challenges alone. What invisible obstacles might teenage girls face in the city? What types of activities can be planned in the area? Keeping these considerations in mind will help us ensure that spaces feel accessible, affordable, and inclusive.

* Prioritize affordability!

Teens have a limited budget, so the cost of things is always on their mind. With city centers increasingly anchored around commercial activities, they're frequently faced with **invisible barriers** that signal to them that **participation in urban life means spending all their pocket money.**

A free clothes exchange, cheap coffee, public rest rooms, and more. Ensure options at varying price points!

* Organize and activate!

Organized activities and periodic events can encourage individuals and groups to take up space in new ways, making memories that will have a lasting impact on their relationship to the city.

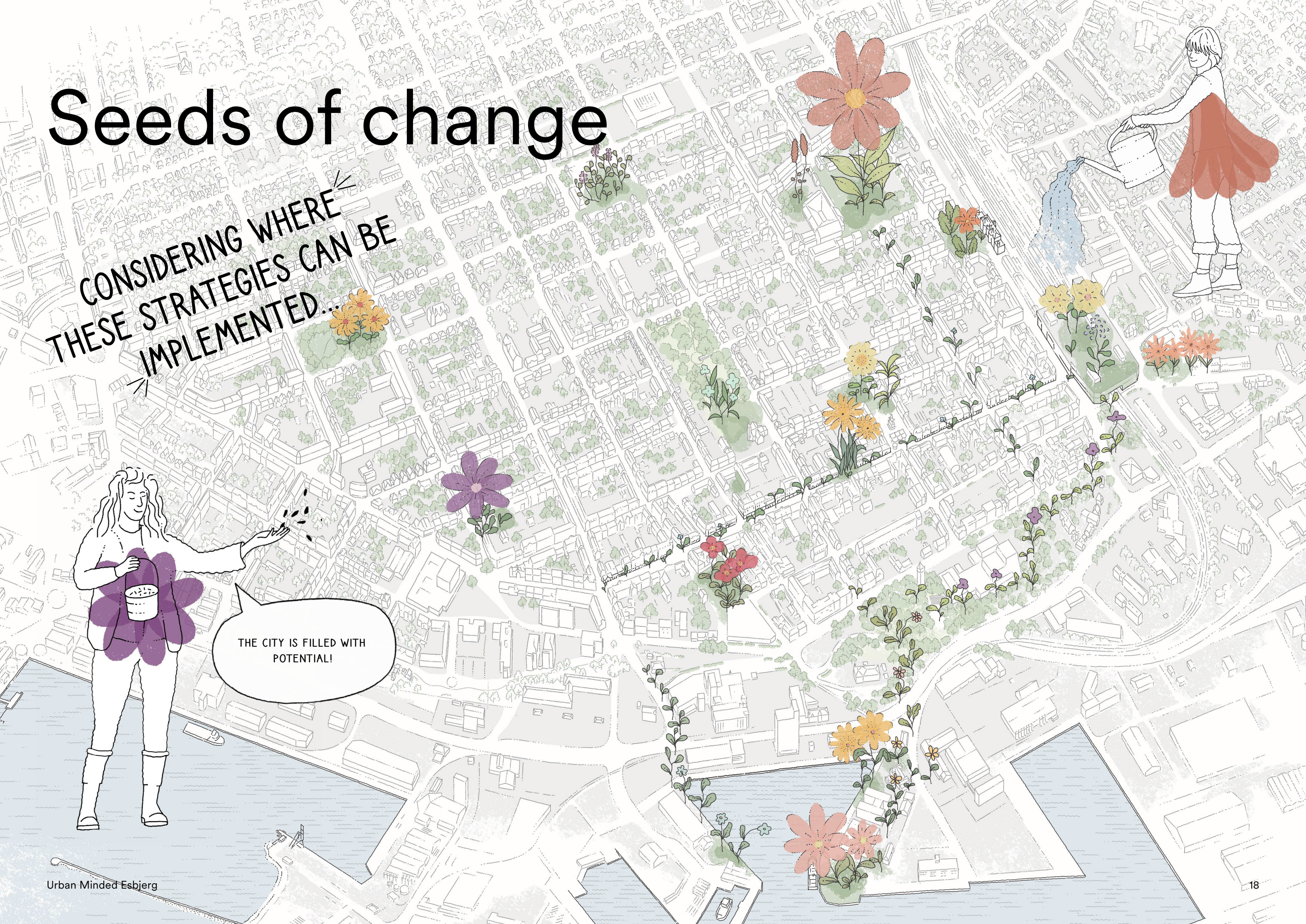
Create intentional invitations to spaces through activation and remember to consider the interests of teens when planning events in the city!



Seeds of change

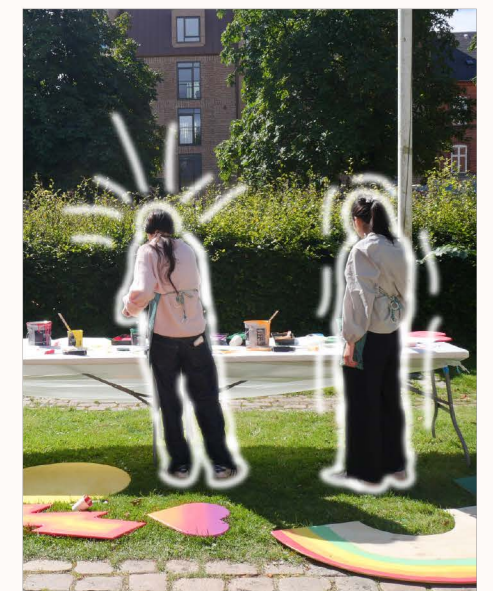
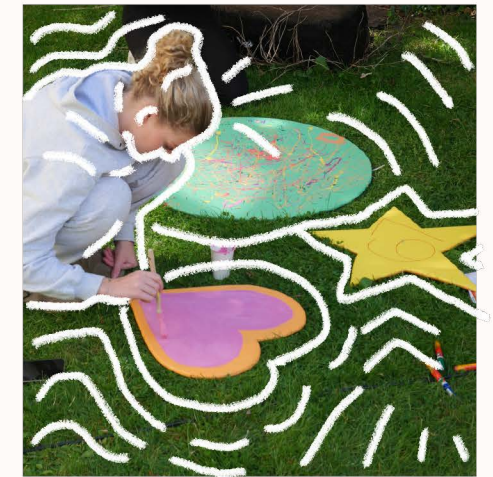
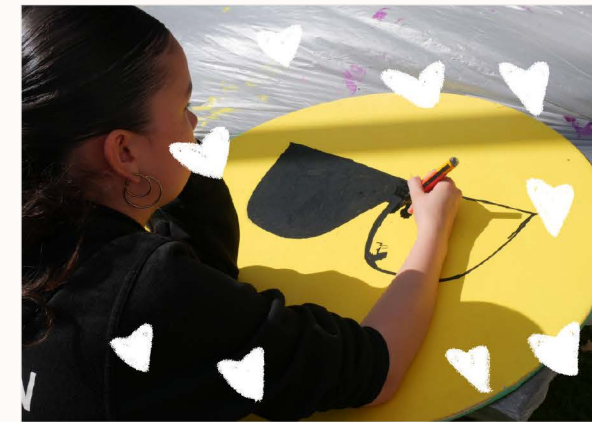
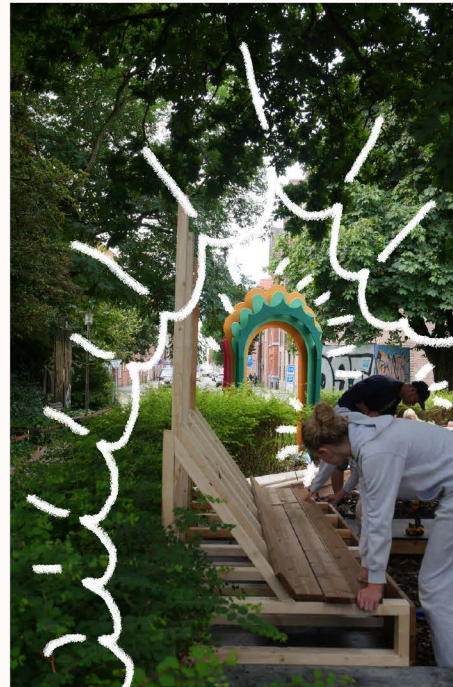
CONSIDERING WHERE
THESE STRATEGIES CAN BE
IMPLEMENTED...

THE CITY IS FILLED WITH
POTENTIAL!



The first seeds are already in the ground!

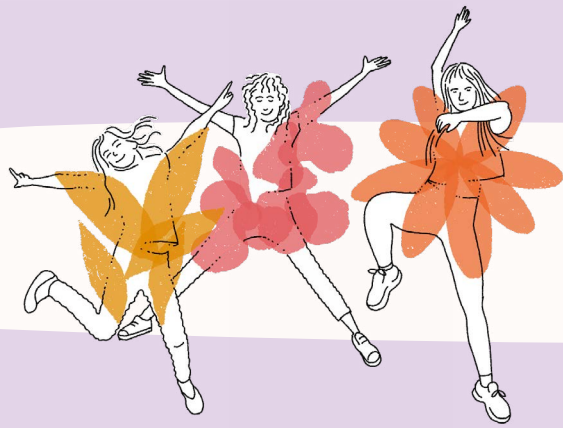
Photographs taken in August and September 2025, through the building days and inauguration event of our first urban interventions in Esbjerg.



What's next?

With one project complete, we've taken the first steps toward a city that includes girls and young women in public life.

Building on what we've learned, the next phase will expand this work through a collaboration between Esbjerg Municipality, Henning Larsen, and KOMPAN, supported by the Villum Foundation. In addition, we hope this document will inform future city projects, because a city that works for girls and young women works for everyone.



We're hoping our work can inspire and support others in taking on similar engagement processes, whether it's with teenage girls or other user groups that are somewhat underrepresented or misunderstood.

If you want to learn more about our process or are considering taking on a similar project yourself, don't hesitate to reach out!

About Urban Minded

Supported by the Ramboll Foundation, this project is a collaboration between Henning Larsen, Ramboll, Catapult Projects, Dorte Westergaard and Esbjerg Municipality.

Project Manager and Contact

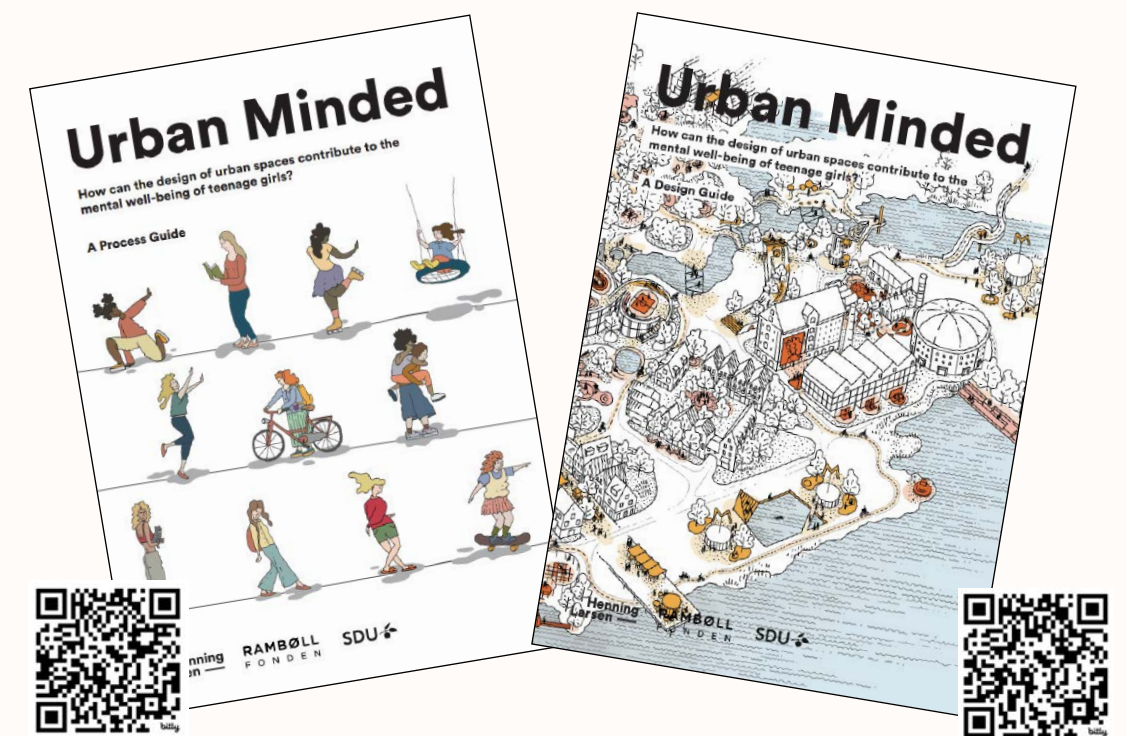
Maya Shpiro, Social Impact & Co-Creation Lead
(MOAS@henninglarsen.com)

Project Team

Yalda Pilehchian / Senior Strategic Urban Designer / Rambøll
Maya Shpiro / Social Impact & Co-Creation Lead / Henning Larsen
Lea Uguen / Landscape Architect / Henning Larsen
Anna Baldo / Social Impact Intern / Henning Larsen
Dorte Buchardt Westergaard / Landscape Architect / Freelance Advisor
Jens Peter Kruse / Architect / Catapult Projects
Natalia Gajo / Play Designer / Catapult Projects
Simon Bryderup Gaardsda / Architect / Esbjerg Municipality
Kristine Dagnæs-Hansen / Planner / Esbjerg Municipality

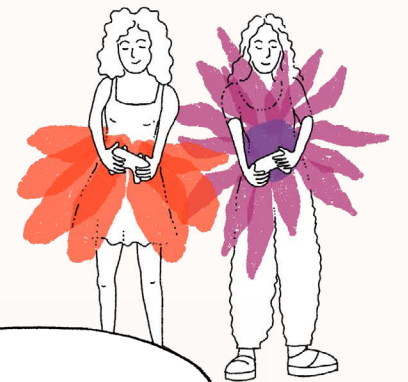
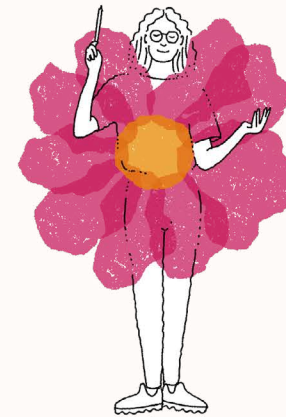
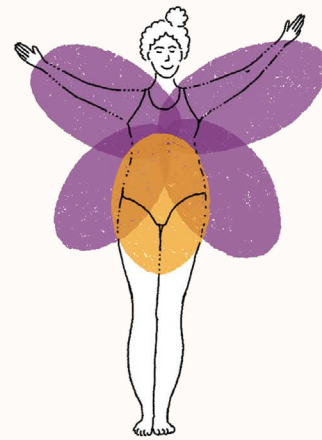
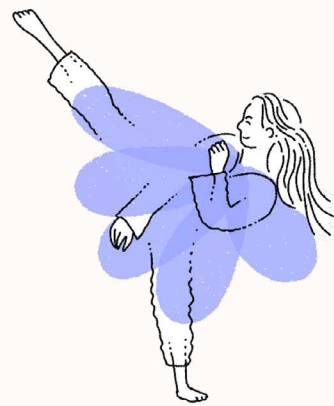
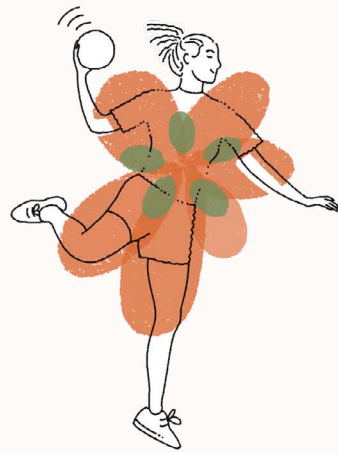
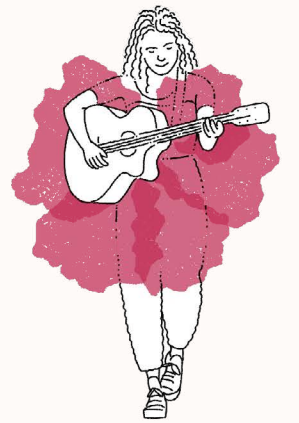
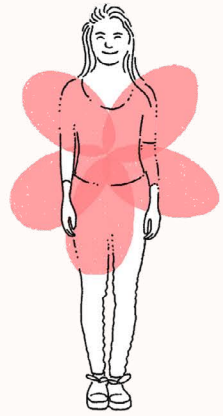
Illustrations

Ewa Floryn & Paweł Floryn (floryn@floryn.art)



This project builds upon Urban Minded, a research project developed in 2022-2023, to better understand the overlooked needs of teenage girls in urban design. Seeking to challenge and diversify the narratives about young women rather than generalizing their needs, the project engaged directly with girls in Copenhagen, highlighting the nuance of their lived experiences in and of the city.

The research resulted in two open-source guides that offer insights about our process and design principles for designing urban spaces with the well-being of teenage girls in mind.



THANK YOU!

