



Make Space York

Project Report

2021-2025



Make Space York: foreword

Making parks safer and more inclusive for women and girls is a growing movement, one that's reshaping how we think about public spaces. Make Space York is a brilliant example of what this looks like in practice. From its beginnings in Rowntree Park, Abigail Gaines has shown how listening to teenage girls and acting on their ideas can transform not just parks, but the conversations around them.

This project reflects the principles set out in the Safer Parks: Improving Access for Women and Girls guidance in the most tangible way, through community-led action. It's no surprise that Make Space York became the first winner of the Green Flag Award for 'Best Initiative to Engage Women and Girls in Parks.' That recognition speaks volumes about the creativity, commitment, and engagement at the heart of this work.

What's exciting is how far it's come since being featured as a case study in the guidance. From co-designed spaces to city-wide festivals, Make Space York has grown into a source of inspiration and shared learning for others who want to make parks more welcoming. This report captures that journey beautifully, offering practical insights and a vision for what's possible when we make space for girls, and in doing so, make space for everyone.

I hope it encourages you to take these ideas forward in your own communities. Every conversation, every small change, can help create parks that truly belong to everyone.

Dr Anna Barker

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University of Leeds

introduction

Since 2021, *Make Space York* has been working to make parks in York more inclusive and welcoming for teenage girls. Founded by Abigail Gaines, the project centres around teenage girls' voices, co-designing spaces and events that reflect their real needs and aspirations. What began as a grassroots initiative in Rowntree Park now has wider reach.

The project started by listening to teenage girls and young women to understand how they felt in public parks and what would encourage them to use these spaces more. From that listening came action. The *Make Space Festival*, launched in 2023, brought a new kind of activation to parks - free, inclusive events designed to invite girls back into public space on their own terms. In May 2024, the city saw the opening of York's first park space co-designed with teenage girls: a playful, social area in Rowntree Park shaped by their ideas and voices.

This report outlines the project's journey, methodology, impact and key learnings - from the first surveys and co-design sessions to delivering city-wide festivals and starting to influence local policy and practice. It presents both the outcomes and lessons learned so far, offering inspiration and practical guidance for others who want to create more equitable public spaces.

Headline outcomes:

350+ girls engaged through co-creation, workshops & events

York's first park space co-designed with teenage girls, opened May 2024

The Make Space Festival - 40+ free each year for girls aged 10-18

A visible cultural shift - with early signs of influence on policy and practice citywide

This work shows what's possible, even on a modest budget, when girls are trusted as experts on their own experiences. It challenges outdated assumptions about teenage park use, reimagining what 'active' and 'welcoming' can mean. Designing for girls doesn't mean creating girls-only spaces, it means designing better, more inclusive spaces for everyone.

All of this has been made possible through collaboration: between volunteers, funders, community partners and the girls themselves. Special thanks go to the Friends of Rowntree Park, the Make Space for Girls campaign, and to Susannah Walker (In Her Place) for her ongoing insight and encouragement. Massive thanks to all who have funded so far and helped turned the girls' ideas into reality.

background



why Make Space York began

Teenage girls are strikingly absent in parks and public recreation spaces. Nationally, only 14% of teenage girls meet recommended daily activity levels. They are three times more likely than boys to experience mental health challenges during adolescence, and 59% report feeling unsafe in parks. Many say these spaces offer *"nothing for them."*

Facilities like skateparks, basketball courts, MUGAs and football pitches are typically labelled as "teen provision" but 90% of users are boys and men. Of course we should look at barriers that prevent girls using these spaces, but we should also not assume they are the best provision to meet the needs of all teenagers. Defaulting to such sports facilities without robust evidence of demand excludes many.

Often teenage 'play' is overlooked in park design - although different from that of younger children, it's just as important. Equipment and design which encourages teenage play - for girls and other groups - needs to have its place along side the sports facilities traditionally provided in parks. Doing this creates spaces that work for more young people.

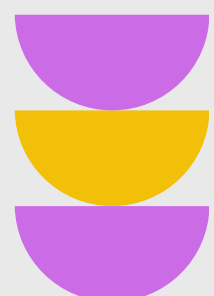
The Make Space York project began as a response to this imbalance, challenging assumptions about what teenagers want and highlighting the need for inclusive design that prioritises social connection, creativity and non-competitive play.

We must move beyond "tick-box" approaches to youth provision and engage with young people, in particular girls and young women, to find out what they really want from parks and other public spaces. We should address the barriers that prevent some girls using existing facilities, but at the same time we should be asking what else could we do to create welcoming parks and get more girls active and benefiting from the opportunities spending time in parks can bring.

why this matters

Teenage years are formative. How young people experience public space during this time shapes their future relationship with the world around them, from future activity levels to how much they feel part of the community. Welcoming parks help build confidence, independence and belonging in public spaces - especially for girls.

Make Space York is part of a national movement for gender-inclusive design. The project was inspired by organisations like Make Space for Girls and it aims to co-create parks that are inclusive, playful and relevant, giving teenage girls agency and visibility in public life.



Project aims and objectives



Key objectives:

1. Create inclusive space in Rowntree Park that reflects teenage girls' voices through co-designed equipment and features.
2. Host girl-focused events and activities that encourage ongoing park use, especially during the summer months.
3. Share learning and influence policy, encouraging other parks and decision-makers across York to adopt inclusive, youth-led design approaches.

From inception, the project embedded young people's input into every stage - using workshops, surveys, creative sessions and events to shape its direction as it developed.

Project Methodology

Rather than following a rigid research framework, Make Space York adopted a flexible, participatory methodology rooted in responsiveness, creativity and trust-building. Girls were not passive participants, they co-created the process and outcomes.

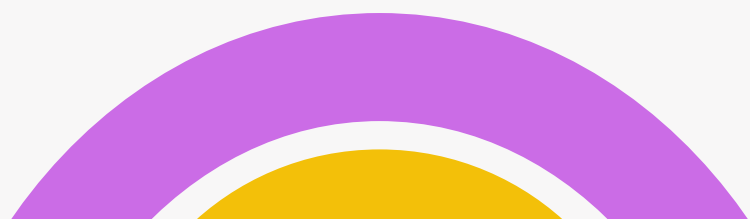
Guiding values:

- Deep listening which centred lived experience
- Flexibility and openness allowing the project to evolve organically
- Creativity and co-production rather than consultation



Project Actions

Make Space York brought about change through a multi-layered approach combining physical improvements, annual events and year-round engagement.



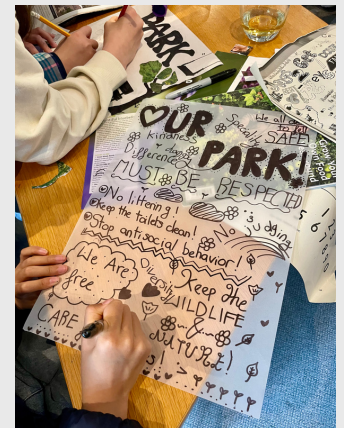
engagement

The project began with engagement to find out what barriers prevented girls from using the park and what would encourage them to use it. This grew iteratively, starting with online surveys and small focus groups, and expanding to include a wide range of methods.

Engagement Methods (2021–2025):

- **Surveys:** Online surveys in 2021 and 2022 captured initial input from over 150 girls aged 11-18 and followed up with an additional survey of 52 boys and 42 girls on park use, safety, and desired facilities.
- **Focus groups:** Informal discussions to explore experiences and gather design ideas using maps, photography, and creative prompts.
- **Creative workshops:** Activities such as zine-making, manifesto writing and filmmaking enabled girls to think more deeply and creatively about their feelings about public space.
- **Public talks and events:** Shared findings and gathered intergenerational perspectives.
- **Adult engagement:** Sessions with parents, councillors and designers to challenge assumptions and build support.
- **Observational research:** Monitoring park use to identify barriers and opportunities for inclusion.
- **Exhibitions and pop-ups:** Opportunities for public dialogue and further data collection.
- **Feedback forms and interviews:** Evaluation and reflection from event attendees and stakeholders.

This evolving, inclusive approach enabled the project to reflect real experiences and respond directly to teenage girls' feedback.



engagement

Girls views via engagement 2021-25



Engagement with over 350 teenage girls revealed consistent themes about park use and what girls want to see. Most of the engagement has been focused in Rowntree Park, with views also gathered on West Bank Park and Homestead Park in York.

Common concerns linked to Rowntree Park

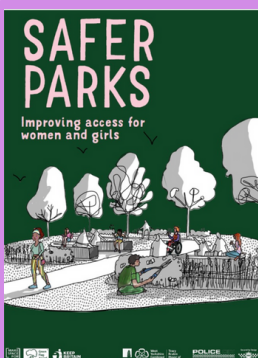
- Even at age 11, some felt “too old” for the play park and left swings when younger children appeared or stated they got ‘side-eyed’ by parents who didn’t think they should be there.
- Basketball courts and skateparks were seen as “boy-dominated” and intimidating.
- Some girls used to skate but stopped using the skatepark as they got older, citing discomfort, not enough space and fear of being knocked down, feeling unsafe or fear of being judged.
- Girls preferred visiting the park with family or friends but avoided it alone or in the evening.

What girls valued in Rowntree Park:

- The café, lakes, amphitheatre (stone stage/theatre area), woodland story circle with natural seating and mix of formal and natural spaces.
- Nature and calm environment.
- Seeing a mix of ages in the park.

What girls said they wanted in Rowntree Park

- Non-competitive play options (e.g. swings, hammocks, climbing structures) away from the small children’s railed play park where they feel people think they are too old for the space.
- Safe, open sight lines and welcoming design.
- Space to hang out, relax, talk and observe from a height (climbing with platforms and a range of social seating).
- Natural materials (e.g. wood) and nature nearby (flowers, trees).
- Play equipment that encourages creativity, not prescriptive.
- Well-maintained toilets and clean spaces.
- People around - they like seeing activities organised.



The engagement at Rowntree Park is highlighted as a case study in the ‘Safer Parks: Improving access for Women and girls’ guidance produced as a collaboration by Professor Anna Barker (Law at Leeds), West Yorkshire Combined Authority, Keep Britain Tidy, Green Flag Awards and Make Space for Girls. The guidance was published in 2023 and updated in 2025. Our engagement and actions since the publication have continued.

engagement

In their words:

There's nothing to do. It's all for little kids or sporty boys.

I just want somewhere I can sit with my friends and not feel watched.

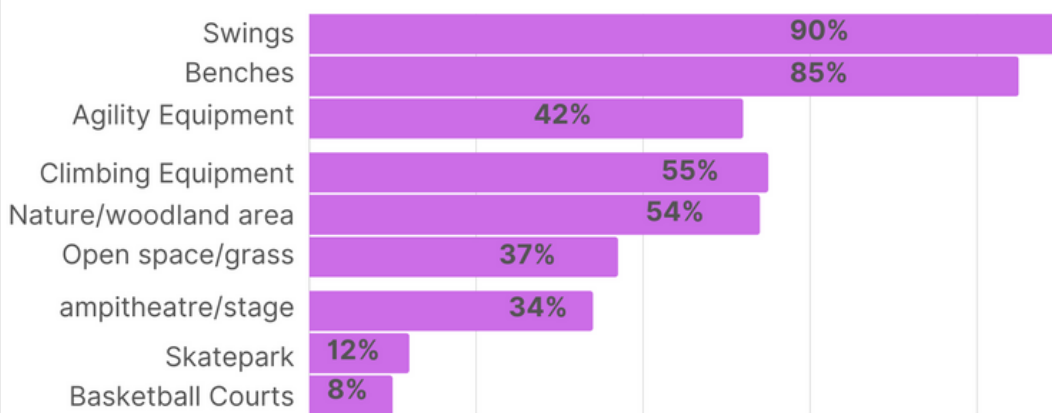
I love the swings... but only go to the kids' play park when it's quiet."

You get side-eyed by parents in the small kids play park. They think you are too old and shouldn't be there.

"I don't skate. I don't play basketball. Why should I come to the park?"

These insights became the foundation for designing both the physical space and the Make Space Festival, proving that when we ask girls what they want, and act on it, we create more relevant, inclusive places for all.

Graph showing what equipment/facilities girls aged 10-17 used/liked in Rowntree Park 2021



The survey was repeated to include boys. There was a slight increase for sports facilities (26% for skating) and agility/climbing equipment. The highest scoring areas were swings and benches.

The Make Space Festival

launched June 2023

A range of free events and activities for teenage girls hosted in York parks each June. A focus on creating welcoming, inclusive parks.

40+ free events
each year
in York parks

300+ girls
involved
each year

Sports &
Exercise

Arts &
Crafts

Nature &
wellbeing

Social
Awareness



What started as an idea from focus group discussions evolved into an annual celebration of girl-led creativity, movement and community.

Each year, the festival has featured a mix of activities and examples include orienteering, football, basketball, running, dance, yoga, illustration, printing, photography, film making, forest school style woodland workshops, herbal remedy and soap making, social awareness workshops (History of feminism), nature walks, mindfulness sessions and more.

Try new
things

Meet new
people

Be
empowered

The first two years of the festival ran over a month with activities most days, and more at weekends. In the first year, 2023, all facilitators involved volunteered an hour of their time to run activities. The only small amount of funding came from the Friends of Rowntree Park. The success and overwhelmingly positive feedback led to its expansion in 2024 and 2025, both in scale and geographic reach. Funding via grants and sponsorship was sought to cover costs to ensure the events remain free. In 2025 the festival ran a range of events over two weekends in two parks in York.

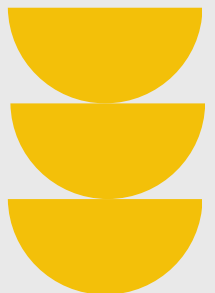
The Make Space Festival

expanding reach and impact



While Rowntree Park remains the heart of the festival, its footprint has grown. In 2024 some events were hosted in Homestead Park and Westbank Park. In 2025 Homestead Park and Rowntree Park each hosted a full weekend of events.

Feedback from participants and parents/carers has consistently highlighted the festival's positive impact on girls' confidence, sense of belonging, feeling of community and willingness to engage with parks in new ways. The 2025 festival saw participation from girls from York and further afield, supported by a network of local artists, facilitators, and youth-focused organisations.



The Make Space Festival



significance

The festival promotes active lifestyles in a broad, inclusive sense, not limited to traditional sport, but encouraging movement, exploration and creative physical engagement with park spaces. The activities offer low-pressure, enjoyable ways for girls to be active outdoors.

By getting girls out into green spaces and helping them feel ownership of those spaces, the festival supports both physical and mental wellbeing. It also nurtures a sense of community and collaboration, where girls connect with each other, try new things, and build confidence in public. This kind of empowerment - rooted in joy, visibility, and shared experience - is at the heart of the festival's success.



The Make Space Festival worked in the park as more than a one-off event, acting as both a longer term intervention and a statement. As well as encouraging girls to use the park more even when the festival was over and try new activities, it also demonstrates that when teenage girls are actively welcomed and involved, parks become more vibrant, inclusive and alive. Furthermore, The festival also strengthens community support and understanding of the broader Make Space York mission, making it a vital intervention in shifting culture as well as space.

For more on the 2025 event:

[A Celebration: Make Space Festival 2025](#)

More background on the festival:

[Make Space Festival overview](#)



recognition

'Best initiative to engage and increase use of parks by women and girls'

Friends of Rowntree Park 'Make Space' Festival (2023)

co-created space in Rowntree Park

This dedicated area was designed collaboratively with teenage girls over an 18-month process and opened in May 2024. The girls identified priorities for playfulness, social use, aesthetics and comfort, leading to a unique, inclusive space intentionally different from traditional sports-based provision for teenagers.

Features include:

- A group-friendly basket swing
- A climbing and seating stack for socialising and movement
- A round recycled plastic picnic table for gathering
- Log stumps and wildflowers for natural, sensory elements
- Branded signage, co-designed by the girls to signal that this was their area

These features aim to support both movement and stillness, offering options to relax, talk, or play in a welcoming, informal way. The space also includes natural and sensory elements including log stump seating and wildflowers, and integrates visually with the rest of the park.



co-created space in Rowntree Park

implementation

- Funding: £15,000 secured from local ward grants, a York charity, and the Sweaty Betty Foundation (£5,000 each);
- Liaison with City of York Council ensured material standards and long-term maintenance;
- Installed in Spring 2024, with an official launch event attended by girls, families and councillors.



impact

The area is regularly used by teenage girls, as well as families and other park users of all ages. Feedback highlights an increased sense of welcome, ownership and pride.

The aim is to continue to add to this area by creating zones with more equipment and allowing different groups to use areas at once. The next phase evolves around higher climbing stacks that can also be used as seating/platforms. We need to fund raise around £25,000 to achieve this.

In addition, to support the whole park feeling more welcome there has been an increase in general signage for wayfinding and belonging, hedges are kept low to open up sight lines, both gates to the skatepark are kept open for 'exit' routes and there are a range of events for all ages in the park. Such things are highlighted as good practice in the 'Safer Parks: Improving access for women and girls' guidance.

"This space isn't just about swings or seating - it's a symbol of inclusion and a visible commitment to valuing teenage girls in our parks."

Impact and outcomes

Make Space York has achieved measurable cultural and spatial change, empowering teenage girls and influencing city-wide thinking

participation metrics

350+ girls engaged via sessions, events and surveys

300+ girls at each Make Space Festival (2023–2025)

Increased visibility and regular use of new park space

qualitative outcomes

"I feel empowered after the festival... I want to do as many workshops and activities as humanly possible! Long live Make Space York!" - Poppy, 14

"The festival gave me ideas of things I can do in the park, even when there aren't events on. Like art, identifying plants for remedies. That kind of thing".

Anna, 15

"My daughter is 12 and she has speech and learning disabilities. This is the second year she was able to take part in the festival. As a parent, it's so wonderful to see that everyone is welcome and she felt at ease... All professionals considered her additional needs and made her feel very included. A massive thank you!"

Parent, 2025

Case study: One girl who normally avoided after-school clubs joined an art session because a friend was attending. She ended up attending multiple activities, trying sports for the first time, and walking to the park independently -growing in confidence, social connection and activity.

Impact and outcomes

festival feedback

"The project in Rowntree Park means that I will start going to parks to socialise after attending these sessions because I will now know that there is somewhere I can go where I won't feel like I don't belong as so many girls do."

Emily, age 15 (2023)

"I feel empowered after the festival and I have been passing on the things I've learned to my friends at school and at home. I cannot wait for next year if it happens as I want to do as many workshops and activities as humanly possible! Long live Make Space York!"

Flo age 14 (2025)

"The 'Make Space in Rowntree Park' project has made me feel more comfortable. I loved trying something new with a big group of girls and didn't have to worry about being embarrassed in front of older boys."

Millie, age 12 (2023)

"I really enjoyed the Make Space sessions... I particularly enjoyed the nature sessions and the fitness sessions. It was quite fun to be and talk with other girls similar and the same age as me."

Darcy, age 13 (2024)

parent/carer feedback

Parents and carers consistently report benefits for their children's confidence, social skills, independence, and mental and physical health. Key motivations for attending included:

- Building confidence and resilience
- Supporting mental health and wellbeing
- Encouraging physical activity
- Meeting new people and developing friendships
- Learning new skills in a non-intimidating environment

"Thanks to the first Make Space Festival, my daughter now has an important new hobby in basketball, has learned new skills and has an inspiring female role model in her life in the form of her basketball coach!"

Parent, 2025

Impact and outcomes

early indicators of change: co created space

- Increased visibility of teenage girls in Rowntree Park, observed by volunteers, general community and reports from families.
- Photographs and comments shared by families directly and via social media reflect pride in seeing girls using the park confidently.
- Quotes from girls about the new space highlight a shift in sense of ownership:

"It's great to know there is a place we can be - that we are welcome in this area. It's not like the small kids' playpark where you get side-eyed as parents don't think you should be there".

Alice, age 13 (2025)

"Me and my friends do hang here - the new area. We walk around and tend to end up here as we can sit and swing, and chat."

Ida, age 14 (2025)

"I have a tear in my eye. I thought the days of pushing my girls, age 13 and 15, in a swing were over - but we've just spent a leisurely 20 minutes pushing them in the basket swing as they lay there and chatted. Thank you so much."

Anna, local parent

ongoing engagement & outreach

In addition to the new area co created with teenage girls and the festival of events - the project has maintained an ongoing cycle of engagement through:

- Creative workshops and pop-up consultations.
- Public exhibitions, newsletters and digital content.
- Presentations, speaking engagements and briefings for councillors and officers.

broader influence

Make Space York has become a model of inclusive practice, proving that when we design public space with empathy, creativity and equity, we create places where everyone can thrive.

- National recognition: **Winner of the 2023 Green Flag Award for Best Initiative to Increase Park Use by Women and Girls** - the first year this award category existed, signalling a national shift toward more equitable park planning.

Raised awareness among decision-makers:

- Meetings with local councillors and city officers to share the work and perspectives.
- Met with the **Director of Public Health for York (2024)** to inform the annual report on young people.
- Spoke at/presented:
 - The **Lady Mayoress International Women's Day event** (Nov 2023)
 - The **Women of the World (WOW) Show** with Jude Kelly (Oct 2024)
 - The **Here is Hope Festival** (July 2025) as part of a panel on play
 - Presented the project at the **'Planning for Play' seminar in Ireland** arranged by the Department for Children, Disability and Equality (October 2025)
 - Presentations to a range of other organisations including **North Yorkshire Women and Girls Health Network**.
- Ran a **public exhibition at Spark, York** (May 2025) to raise awareness and share good practice.

other parks

Interest from other parks: Homestead Park hosted Make Space Festival events from 2024 onwards, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation who manage the park.

consultancy & influence

Consultancy and influence: Make Space York has informed wider local planning - including acting as an external consultant on a public consultation for a new recreation space in another area of York in 2025, ensuring teenage girls were included in the design process from the beginning

review

Throughout the evolution of the project, Make Space York has uncovered valuable insights about how working in one specific space can create truly inclusive public spaces for teenage girls. These lessons can guide others looking to do similar work.

what worked well

Letting the project evolve:

Starting without a rigid plan allowed for creative, flexible responses to what girls actually said they wanted and needed.

Supporting leadership and ownership:

Girls were not simply consulted, they saw their ideas become reality. Visible impact builds trust, engagement and momentum.

Effective communication:

Ongoing updates through posters, social media, school channels and newsletters ensured community buy-in and managed expectations.

Celebrating joy and possibility:

The project focused not just on gaps or problems, but on building joyful, safe, imaginative spaces that girls felt belonged to them.

Inclusive design for all:

While designed with girls in mind, the interventions benefited many others - proving that inclusivity doesn't mean exclusivity.

challenges & how they were managed

Funding Limitations:

Equipment for a council managed park, hard to find funds.

Financial Sustainability:

Finding grants to continue and grow a successful festival.

Volunteer Sustainability:

Long-term coordination needs to be paid.

Limited equipment options:

Need to think outside the box/existing catalogues!

review

tip for others:

Build strong relationships with community, schools and any youth organisations - they are essential partners.

Be transparent about intentions and processes; trust builds from openness.

Work alongside councils: learn their systems, provide evidence, impact and solutions and co-develop where possible.

Prioritise design elements that support creativity, relaxation and conversation - not just sport.

Celebrate every win and share success stories widely to build credibility and energy.

personal reflection:

The project benefited from being rooted in an existing community network (Friends of Rowntree Park), which supported early communication and engagement. The Make Space project founder had established relationships with council officers and brought experience in event planning, risk management, and community engagement - critical for navigating both creative and bureaucratic elements.

In 2023, a Community Interest Company (CIC) was established to grow the project beyond Rowntree Park. While this structure opened new opportunities, it also came with funding limitations and administrative responsibilities. The journey underscored the need for resourced leadership when scaling up volunteer-led grassroots initiatives.

How to replicate this work

steps to follow

- Start small: Use surveys, pop-up events, and workshops to listen.
- Involve girls throughout: Co-design events, spaces, and branding.
- Show results: Feed back ideas and act visibly.
- Celebrate: Use festivals and exhibitions to shift public attitudes.
- Build partnerships: Community groups, Schools, councils, youth groups, other organisations etc



avoid

- Assuming what girls want - listen instead.
- One-off consultations - make it continuous.
- Treating girls as a single group - engage inclusively and intersectionally.

policy & planning recommendations

Gender-inclusive design should be embedded across parks, public space and transport.

Equality Impact Assessments must go beyond access- assess use and relevance.

Section 106 and similar funds must also support recreation and being active, not just sport facilities.

Planning frameworks should explicitly consider gender in public space.

what's next for Make Space York



with more support, the project hopes to:

- Grow the Make Space Festival to new areas.
- Add to the area girls are helping co-create in Rowntree Park.
- Advocate for spaces co-created with girls in other York parks.
- Develop a toolkits for others.
- Advocate for national policy change.
- Share learning with others .

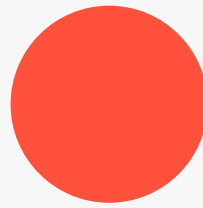


final word

Make Space York is more than a project. It's a movement toward fairness, visibility and belonging in public space. When we design with empathy and equity, we make parks and places better for everyone.



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