

# MOBILE LOITERING: A RESPONSE TO PUBLIC SPACE NEEDS IN NIGER'S HIGHLY GENDERED URBAN CONTEXT

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## Abstract

*By their very nature, city streets provide an opportunity to create a life “in-between” the more strongly defined entities of home, school, office, and markets. In this space, one can easily appear to be on the way to somewhere, but never actually be on the way to anywhere. The act of “mobile loitering” is a tactic that is commonly employed by young girls in Niger’s capital of Niamey, in order to socialize with one another. In the context of a Muslim city situated in a predominantly Muslim (albeit secular) country, women’s presence in the public realm—for purposes other than running errands, conducting business or going to school—is easily questioned by society. In their free time, young girls often pay social calls to each other, using their itinerary as a journey through which they can see and be seen, interact with acquaintances, while enjoying relative privacy through movement.*

*This paper proposes a new type of public space that is uniquely adapted to the cultural norms of the city of Niamey, Niger’s capital. It outlines a proposal for an activity circuit that links major public spaces currently used by the youth of the city, while adding program components along a defined route to augment them. The design proposal shapes neighborhood streets to give girls destinations and justifications for being outside, offering them a right to a city that has increasingly become less accessible, within a society that is growing more conservative.*

## Keywords

Public space, gender, city streets, Niger, Niamey, subversive actions, subversive urban design, Islam and women, informality, right to the city.

## INTRODUCTION

Though we might not always be conscious of it, equal access to public space is almost never a given. Whether in the Developed World or the Developing one, open or conservative societies, there are codes of behavior and inequalities that make these spaces more or less accessible. Women seldom feel safe walking in a deserted street or park, be they in Seattle or in Paris, which is akin to saying they are out of place in those spaces at that particular time. A homeless person is not wanted on the sidewalk or park bench, prompting city officials to design ways to make those places undesirable for them. In Niamey, these “designed ways” are embedded in the city’s conservative culture. A person’s reputation and honor is paramount in the eyes of the society, and said society decides what guarantees one’s reputation and honor. In this context, women often have a tenuous relationship with the world outside their home, even when they are not confined to them. Consequently, unless they are going to school, to work or running errands, there are no opportunities for them to experience the city. This project provides them with such an opportunity while offering them activities that keeps them from being judged for being out in the open. Because there are very few public spaces and public amenities in the city, the streets are the main theater of public life and the public realm *par excellence*, at once belonging to everyone and to no one. They are therefore a resource up for grabs in economic survival tactics and struggles to maintain a communal social life while navigating societal constraints. The project takes advantage of this, proposing a designed public space that is culturally and contextually adapted to the realities of Niamey by using its streets as main conduit.

## A SEGREGATED AND CO-OPTED PUBLIC SPACE

### Limitations to public space access

The republic of Niger is a previous French colony with 85% of its population being of Muslim confession. As such, public behavior and usage of the streets is codified by gender, age, class and education level even though exceptions can be observed when it comes to economic activities and communal events. With a country-wide literacy rate of 25%, the majority of the Niger's population does not fluently speak, let alone read or write, French. This educational gap produces a class gap in the way people use public spaces. For instance, public amenities such as pools and libraries tend to be the territory of the educated high income class.

Age is another determinant of who can go where. Children have unlimited freedom, come and go as they please, play in the streets, hopping from house to house and going on neighborhood adventures together. Teenagers and young adults are also fairly visible, as this is the age where their lives are much more layered: they go to school on foot for the majority, they are sent on multiple errands throughout the day, they visit each other and they meet for study groups. For married adults, being out and about is limited to weddings or naming ceremonies as well as running household errands. The elderly have a very special place in African communities. They can come and go as they please and lounge in front of their houses with friends if they like. As elders, they command a tremendous amount of respect and there is an understanding that they can do no wrong.

But in Subsaharan Muslim societies, gender is probably the strongest determinant of who gets to go where and what they get to do there. Although Nigerien women are rarely subjected to the confinement or *Purda* typical of some Muslim cultures, their presence outside their homes for purposes other than running errands, conducting business or going to school is easily questioned. For instance, one would be hard-pressed to find young women sitting leisurely at a café or sitting in front of their compound, chatting with friends.

This layered codification of the public realm is made more complex by an aggressive co-opting of streets and public amenities by a population facing strong economic and social imperatives, causing the city to perhaps be used differently than intended by its initial designers.

### Co-opting the streets for economic projects and social interaction

African city dwellers have had to be creative to survive in the face of often severe economic hardship. Thus it is that "across Africa, a new urban infrastructure is being built with the very bodies and life stories of city residents" as AbdouMaliq Simone states in his essay *Remaking Urban Life in Africa*. These occurrences, actions and those who partake in them create a network where people, events, situations intersect with one another in subtle ways. Simone asserts that people and their "bodies", in the way they move, cross and create networks, eventually define the actual fabric and culture of the city (Simone, 2003). This human infrastructure inscribes itself in the movement of people through the city lanes to accomplish economic projects, but also as ways to get around the lack of spaces that can accommodate their social needs. The streets therefore provide a ready infrastructure for these human networks, becoming a mega-public space and a source of infinite loopholes exploited by its inhabitants in imaginative ways. For instance, social projects are often fulfilled by the streets when weddings or baptisms spill over to them, often causing joyous street-shutdowns. But they also provide unusual lodging opportunities. It is not uncommon to find entire families squatting in makeshift tents and huts at leftover street corners.

Streets are also the main infrastructure in the lives of the city's youth. As children reach puberty, a fundamental difference surfaces in the way young men and young women use the streets to socialize. The most prevalent activity for teenage boys and young men involves sitting in front of their house, playing cards and drinking strong mint tea (called *Shayi* or *Attaya*) while swapping stories and people watching. These assemblies (called *Faadas*) can go on until very late at night and represent an important part of their lives. *Faadas* have become such established social institutions that



Figure 1: Large boulevard in Niamey turned into an informal market



Figure 2: Neighborhood sidewalk used for frying and selling snacks



Figure 3: Young men selling ice along road

the larger ones have names, membership rules, and compete against each other in poker, foosball, ping-pong and other contests. Though satellite televisions and video games have eroded their numbers in the city, *Faadas* remain the main way most young men socialize and relate to the city.

Young women will rarely be found in a *Faada*, except for a few brave ones. In Niamey's Muslim society, hanging about is considered a sign of loose behavior and borderline moral depravation in

a woman. That is not to say that women are banned from the streets altogether however. They participate in the street's informal economy by conducting commerce; they can sit alongside everyone else in front of homes during communal events, and go about their day running errands. Being idle in the street is what causes trouble and attracts judgment. So while girls are seldom subjected to home confinement, this puts them in the paradoxical situation of being able to come and go as they please but having few places that will tolerate their idle presence. Young girls occupy much of their free time paying social calls to each other, using their itineraries as a journey through the streets of their neighborhood. This allows them to see and be seen, to interact briefly with acquaintances, to take the pulse of their neighborhood while enjoying complete privacy in their interaction with each other. But even this behavior has experienced a decline in the recent years as some neighborhoods have grown more conservative.



Figure 4: Young women running errands.

## **UNCOVERING POSSIBILITIES**

### **From the bottom up: A conversation with female youth in Niamey**

Part of this project involved meeting with and talking to a groups of teenage girls from a local middle school in Niamey. The school is located at the crossroads of five mixed to low-income neighborhoods characterized by a rich level of activity, ethnic and cultural mix, making them a good sample of the city. The goal was to find out how they viewed themselves in the public realm, how and if they use public spaces and what their concerns are considering the Muslim context they live in. There was a lively debate where some felt that always being out and about was not good for a girl and that they should stay home and help their mothers instead. A larger portion of the girls, however, expressed a strong desire to venture out with their friends, putting an accent on the importance of partaking in activities that increase their knowledge of the world. In the same vain, they expressed the desire for spaces where they could study with their friends outside of school or home confines.

The young women also spoke of longing for quiet, safe, gawker-free, well shaded surroundings to loiter and conduct activities in. Perhaps this is why Niamey's National Museum was mentioned many times as a destination of choice by the girls. It is an open-air domain of 60 acres marked by a series of pavilions for the museum collection and a zoo section. The museum is well shaded and lends itself to quiet strolls with the spectacle of zoo animals, various exhibits and artisans making and selling their best work. It also figured on the list of public spaces the girls felt they could go to without parental objection, as it has long been a popular family destination teaming with children. Finally, the city's main stadium was another top choice the girls mentioned as a safe place their parents approve of, with its offerings of tennis, basketball, martial arts and even Zumba classes. The conversation around the topic of walks as a form of loitering offered glimpses of opportunity for creating spaces that provide gently subversive possibilities which in time might allow for changes in behavior and norms to occur. In stead of the usual public/private dichotomy, a different typology of space might hold the key to navigating strong societal mores by having a "both-and" relationship rather than an "either-or" one.

### **Finding new spatial possibilities**

As shown earlier, streets are uniquely appropriate in providing the opportunity of creating a life "in-between" the more strongly defined entities of home, school, office, market. People claim the street as their own, sometimes abusing it, but always taking full advantage of its possibilities. This behavior provides glimpses of a spatial typology whose elements are not all tangible and visible, but a mixture of real or imaginary boundaries, virtual connections and the physical spaces that make these possible. Formalizing such behavior in designing public space could producing one where the barriers of age, education and most importantly gender loose their potency. Rather than conceiving a public building that would safely house activities for young women, the idea is then to create a space that takes its queue from the mobile loitering many girls already partake in.

Walking circuitously in neighborhood streets in Niamey is the ultimate escape and represents a loophole in behavioral rules for girls. In a city where the overall poverty, in the capitalistic sense, often means little state or private initiatives towards providing public spaces of leisure or education, the walks provide an endless source of entertainment and sometimes even education. For the streets are where tailors display their latest and most desirable creations, it is where one might witness a weaver in front of his compound tirelessly repeating age old gestures that produce beauty and function. Perhaps more powerfully however, walking with friends provides the valuable space for young girls to exchange and share each other's thoughts, dreams and aspirations without fear of judgment. The project thus proposes a designed route that offers girls a series of destinations throughout the city while providing a justification they can use to step outside the family compound. Because there are already activities they enjoy that are accepted by their parents and

society at the National Museum and the National Stadium, “spin-offs” of these activities can be sprinkled along the created route, enriching it and creating greater influx of women along the way.

## A DESIGNED MOBILITY AND LOITERING

### Project program

Programming the route is critical in insuring girls are not questioned by a society that looks on as they loiter along it. The interview with the young women revealed their enjoyment of sports, watching concert rehearsals, studying, dancing, and strolling on the grounds of the National museum the most. Most of these activities are currently housed within the National Stadium and the National Museum. Consequently, spin-off activities are proposed to populate the route, taking the form of a series of interventions along the way that provide benefits for the girls and for the community at large. The program is organized in 3 main categories:

- *Mixed-gender activities*: these are the majority of the activities. They consist of:
  - Study carrels that provide spaces for studying in groups in quiet neighborhood streets.
  - Multipurpose amphitheaters that accommodate fitness classes, concert rehearsals and plays.
- *Girl-centered activities*: these are useful in currently deserted areas that require a big influx of women in order to feel safer. In this proposal, they take the form of a women-oriented market
- *Girls only activities*: these are particularly desirable in areas that have higher traffic concentration and are more densely populated. They refer to structured community or organization led programs geared towards outreach, health education and mentoring of young girls. The spaces that house these activities need a higher level of privacy and lower visibility from the public.

### The project site

The city of Niamey has been interested in developing the *Gounti Yenna* valley - a stretch of green space that splits the city North to South - as a public amenity for the population as part of an ambitious restructuring plan called *Niamey Nyala* or “Niamey the Beautiful.” The valley was historically a natural barrier between the French and the Indigenous quarters. Fifty years after independence, these historic divisions have morphed into socio-economic divisions, with the upper income class located in the historically French part of town (Figure 7.) This division follows religious lines as well, as poorer neighborhoods show stronger levels of religious conservatism than better off neighborhoods (Figure 8). This provided a starting point for identifying site boundaries that encompass the two current public spaces mentioned by the girls while capturing a significant portion of the valley, an area that provides opportunities for relief from the city’s hustle and bustle.



Figure 5: Early route concept studies



Figure 6: Niamey aerial view and site location

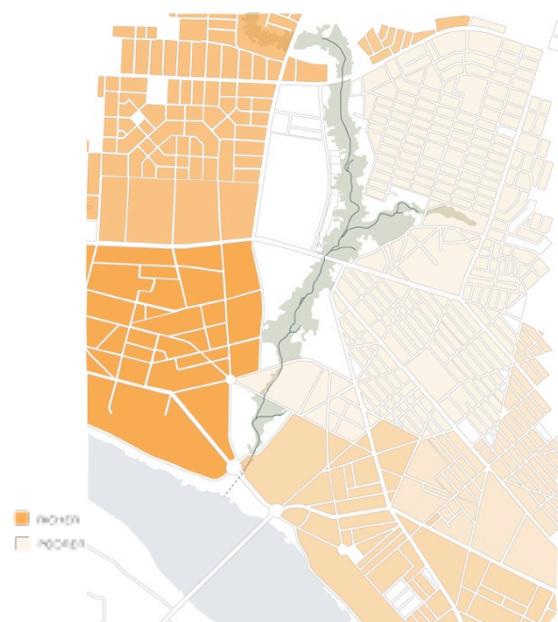


Figure 7: Site economic divisions selling snacks



Figure 8: Site religious divisions selling snacks

## Route design

Many social and geographical aspects were taken into account to determine the streets to use as part of the route (Figure 9). The result is a four-mile long itinerary linking the main public spaces and most of the schools on the site, providing a good base on which to add program to give the girls additional reasons to use it. The route is designed in a recognizable way with a consistent material palette and design in order to create the impression of an alternate world as one strolls through the city, queuing people in to its presence and special nature as they approach it.

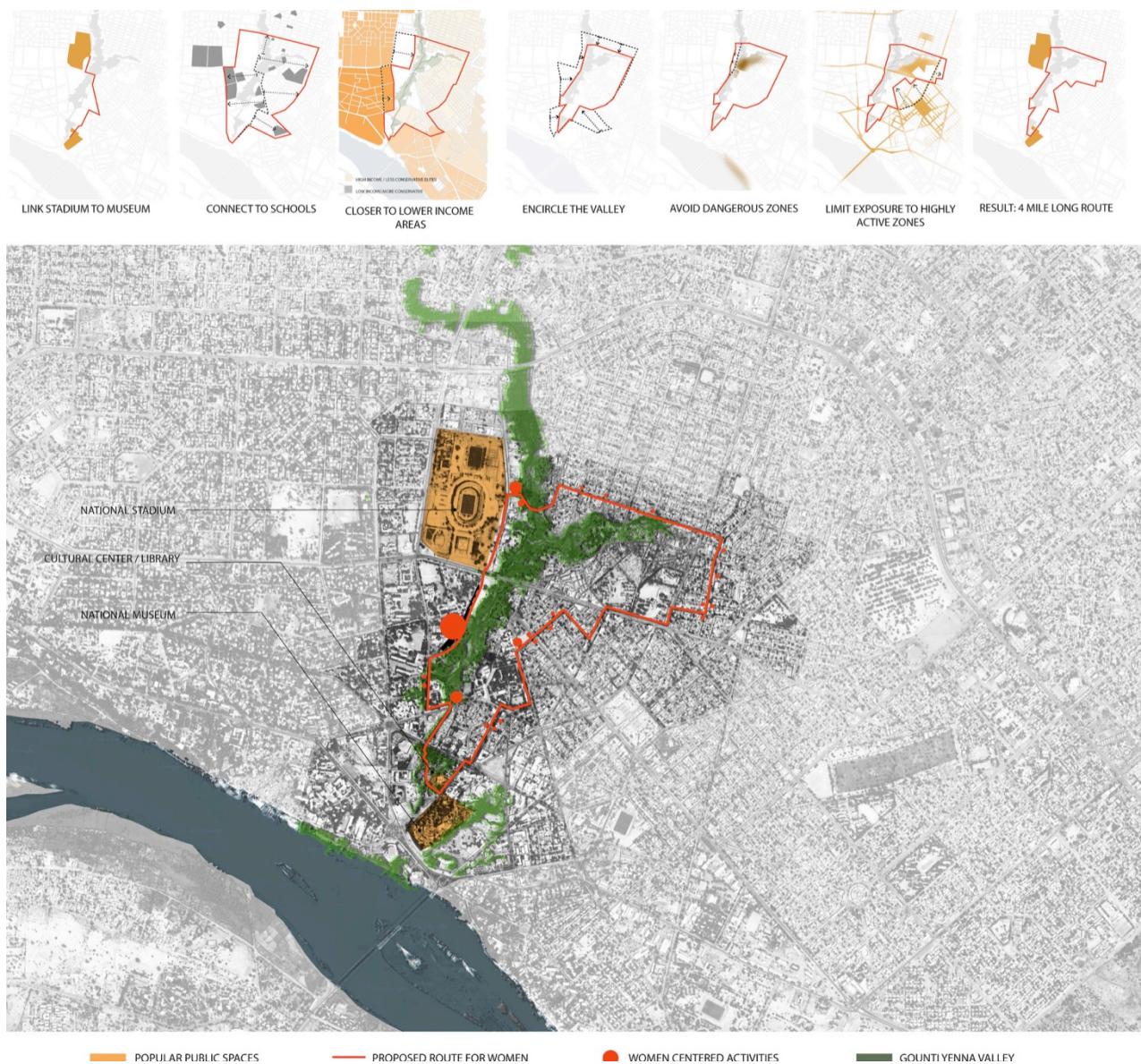


Figure 9: Route design logic

## PROJECT DESIGN: A FRAMEWORK FOR CO-OPTING PUBLIC SPACE

### Using local materials and craft

Materials were the earliest components determined in this design process and defined the look and feel of the route and its interventions. The majority can be sourced from the *Katako* market, which is located on the project site. This market is an intensely active place where one can find virtually anything from used parts, plywood, bricks, water bottles, water jugs, to household items. Other materials such as compressed earth blocks and thin, fired brick pavings for the route are sourced from the city's river banks. Using materials sourced from within the route also represents a relative degree of community participation and involvement in the project.

### Loitering in the shade

A roof helps define space, but also and most importantly, provides crucial thermal protection in a city where temperatures can reach 45 degrees Celsius in the shade. Along the route, levels of thermal comfort were assessed to see where shading would be most needed (Figure 11). This laid the ground logic for the types of shading strategies that would be proposed depending on the street condition. Barren streets are fully shaded and transformed into community amenity that can be used for celebrations. On partially shaded streets, only the route pathway is shaded when needed, bringing focus to the route. In landscape portions of the route (the *Gounti Yenna* valley) more substantial, low maintenance and durable shading structures, made with halved water jugs, are used. Inside the city street, the route is made comfortable with shading from woven mats, 4 feet by 6 feet in dimension that are assembled together as shown in Figure 12 . The mats are linked together

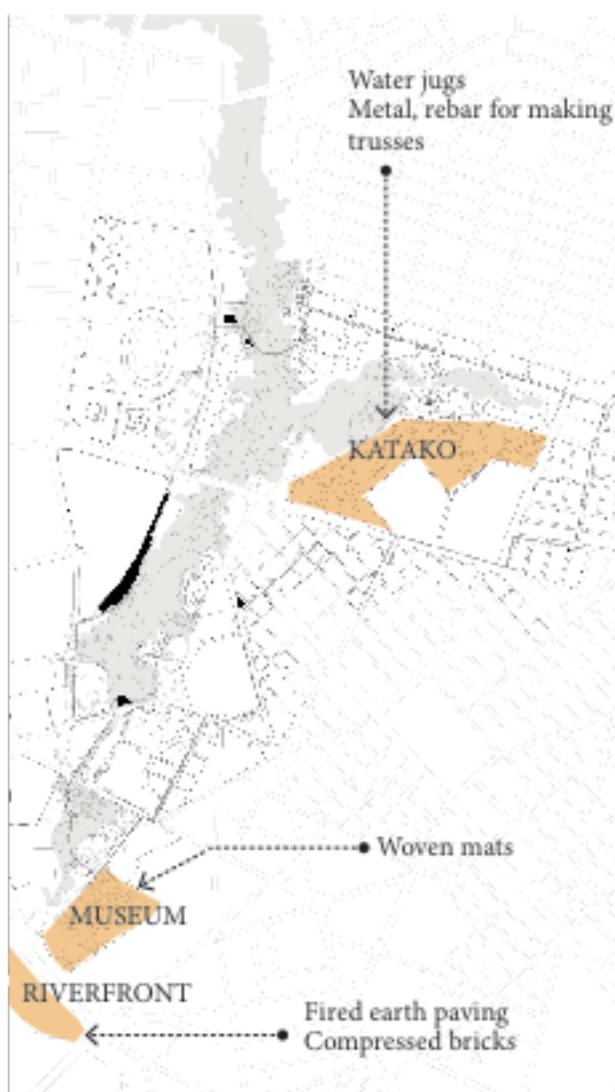


Figure 10: Materials procurement

with simple metal connections and suspended from metal trusses. Because the structure that holds them is hidden above, they appear to be floating over one's head (Figure 13). Furthermore, this roof on the city route is woven intimately into the existing fabric of the city by making use of its walls as partial structural infrastructure. Figure 13 shows compressed earth block columns fused to the existing compound walls, providing support for the trusses.



Figure 11: "climate" along route

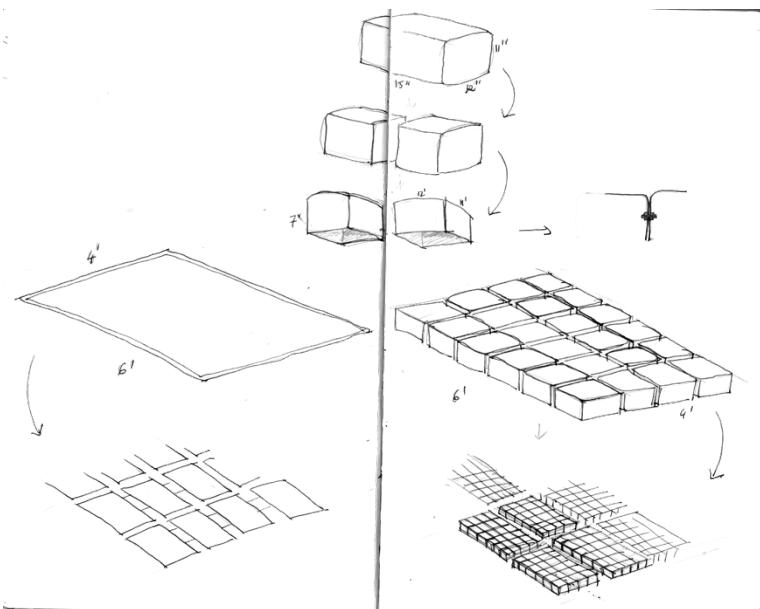


Figure 12: Shading system framework



Figure 13: Fully shaded neighborhood street

The market showcases the second type of roof as described previously, which is intended for the environment of the valley. The market is a quarter mile long flexible space with a shading structure that provides both thermal comfort throughout the day and an infrastructure for dividing the space up into stalls by suspending partitions from its truss members. Just like with the woven mats shading

the streets, the shading being suspending from the structure obscures the latter while floating the former over one's head as Figure 14 shows.



Figure 15: Market site plan



Figure 14: Inside the market

## Co-opting streets and walls

Niamey, like many Muslim cities, is a place of walls. The traditional architecture is one of compounds where walls define the streets rather than sidewalks and motor roads. These walls are key to the aforementioned co-opting behaviors in the city as they provide a support against which people set up small businesses or meeting spaces with friends and a few chairs. In the same spirit, this project uses the walls along or near the route as an infrastructure for place-making and housing programmed activities. The project manipulates the wall's boundary and thickness to create spatial separations, usable convivial space or protected passages. This use of the wall complements the wall buttressing approach described for the route's roof, which solidifies existing compound walls and uses them as structural support for the shading structures. A more overt manipulation allows the creation of seating space and niches seemingly carved in the wall that can serve a variety of purposes as the following example of the study carrels program shows.

In Niger, one can often notice students assembled on weekends or even at night under a street lamppost, going over their lessons. This is particularly true in low income neighborhoods where homes routinely aren't equipped with electricity. To accommodate studying, the wall is thickened and manipulated using compressed earth blocks, creating stepped seating of varied height and sizes. The proposed arrangement allows up to three groups of students to study side by side as shown with the perspective in Figure 16. Sited in quiet side streets that see little car traffic, they take over what would have been sidewalk space, unapologetically biting off a piece of public space the same way food sellers or tailors' shacks do throughout the city.

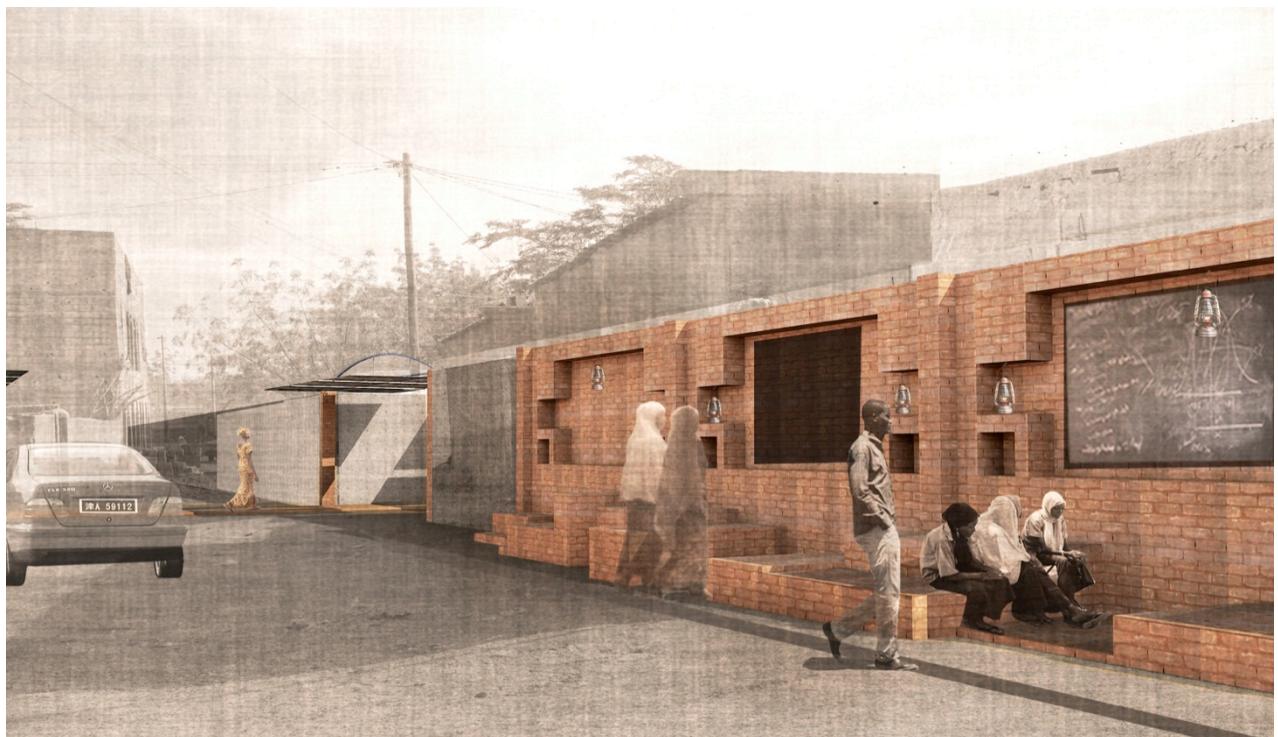


Figure 16: Study carrels in quiet street



Figure 17: Street section through route and study carrels

## Creating privacy in the open

Program elements such as rehearsal, fitness and otherwise multipurpose spaces call for a certain amount of privacy. Manipulating the ground allows for a greater degree of separation between program spaces and their surroundings while maintaining the activities in the open.

The multipurpose amphitheaters are sited in the *Gounti Yenna* valley for its greater level of privacy and cooler temperatures, providing a better environment physical activities. Here, the ground is manipulated to provide sitting and viewing space for concerts or simply watching rehearsals as one passes by. The space is stepped in an irregular manner, creating platforms that can be used for individual fitness classes or small gatherings.

To provide a greater amount of separation and privacy, an enclosure designed to be both public and private is proposed, housing spaces for youth outreach programs. A gradation of spatial privacy is produced from the street to a covered corridor that straddles a partially walled open space. The result is a space that blurs the line between inside and outside, but protects the “inside” portion by sinking it lightly into the ground to reinforce the spatial separation, a useful device when outreach programs are in session (Figure 19.)



Figure 18: Multipurpose amphitheater



Figure 19: Outreach program space



Figure 20: Outreach program site plan

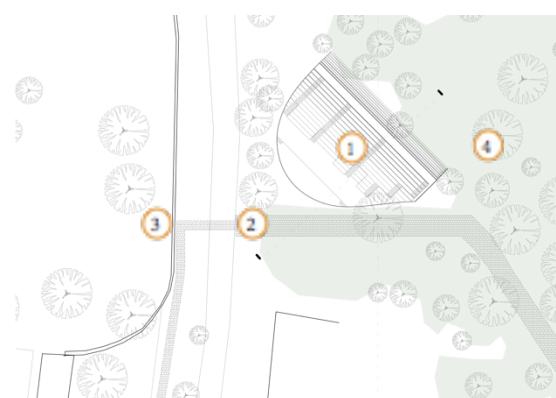


Figure 21: Multipurpose amphitheater site plan

## CRITICAL EVALUATION

In many Muslim cities the *Medina* lanes provides a readily available public space for women to socialize freely as they run their errands. Another amenity is the public bath, which is an important part of women's lives in countries from Morocco to Iran. But, these places are not inherent in either the culture or the urban design of Niger. And while such sanctuaries provide women with a measure of sociability and city experience, they also keep them confined to specific zones. The same can be said of the spaces mentioned and currently used by the young girls interviewed in Niamey. They are valuable public amenities in of themselves, but access to the rest of the city remains elusive. This project complements them and proposes a way young women can experience urban life in all its complexities instead of being walled off in alternative female-friendly public spaces that maintain them out of view.

While designing the proposal, a concern around the idea was that while it tries to provide space through the city of Niamey that frees young women to be engaged with its streets and daily life, it might not be forceful enough in taking a more subversive approach as a solution. Perhaps it does not go far enough as a feminist tool to level the plane field among genders in terms of spatial use. On the other hand, perhaps some revolutions need to be quieter in order to have an effective long term impact. This paper's position is that while it is revolting that young women aren't as free to do something as simple as sitting in front of their house with their friends, reversing such a cultural norm requires a societal change, not a strong-armed approach that would make the larger society balk and resist. The project offers an activity program that serves as a camouflage, allowing girls to be part of a city in a more acceptable way for their society. Not only do they reap the benefits of having a fuller right to the city, but they do so without fear, without feeling uncomfortable, which might be more effective in the long run and in insuring a maximum number of girls use the spaces. Their presence in greater number in a sustained manner in the city, both as they stroll along the route or loiter in one of the intervention spaces makes their visibility in the public realm more of a norm in the long run. What was yesterday suspicious or intolerable can thus become normal and unquestioned overtime.

Another concern is that the framework for co-opting the streets presents some inherent drawbacks. Because it is a tactic that is widely practiced for other uses, the intervention spaces are vulnerable to being taken over as well. Programed spaces such as the study carrels are uniquely exposed to being co-opted by street hawkers and other types of vendors. Their location in quiet streets that might not provide much in way of customers provide a certain level of protection from this, but not entirely. Only if the spaces are intensely used, will they be further protected from take over by other actors in the city. Ensuring such use would require a more careful look at the proposed program and, more importantly, involving female youth, their parents and other community members in a dialog that could ultimately yield an even stronger program. Ideally, a strong community involvement in a project such as this would be crucial both for making sure the girls are never criticized or uncomfortable, but also that their parents are not suspicious of their activities there. Of course, this would also go a long way toward insuring that intervention spaces are not taken over as they would be viewed as community assets everyone would have a vested interest in safeguarding.

## CONCLUSION

This design proposal takes the approach of co-opting public space in the city in the same way it is already being “hacked” for social, communal and economic imperatives today, using available spaces and resources such as leftover zones, walls, vegetated areas, as well as readily available materials to guide an architectural response. Programmed interventions are thus produced, sometimes even designed to be used only by women in order to reinforce the route’s identity as a women friendly space. They are visible and accessible to the public and easily identifiable in their look and feel in order to give them a sense of being part of a whole, a four-mile long space spread through a city. These types of take-over actions are often fought by city officials who routinely demolish informal stands and shacks that mushroom along main thoroughfares in an attempt to force what is viewed as a more “civilized” (read “closer to western standards”) city where streets and sidewalks have distinct uses and inherent order. This project embraces these survival approaches and argues that they might hold the key to new and more culturally adapted typologies for what cities can be and how they can function to fulfill social, economic and cultural needs. The project thus formalizes mobile loitering as a subversive action by girls in the city, using a framework that is itself deviant. This results in two forms of active subversions: one brought on by the women being able to loiter freely, the other brought on by the provocative use of public space by co-opting it in a way that might be considered anarchist in traditional city planning.



Figure 22: Route approach

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