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STORIES FROM THE UNSEEN



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Published by:

University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Architecture (UL FA)

For UL FA: prof. Mihael Dešman, Dean

Design and layout: Aleš Švigelj

e-book (<https://eusafe.fa.uni-lj.si/>)

Ljubljana, Granada, Helsinki, Kiel, Bydgoszcz, 2025

First edition

Publication is free of charge.

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The publication is part of the Erasmus+ KA220 project strategic partnership Sustainable Accessible Future Environments (SAFE)

The publication was supported by:

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Katalogni zapis o publikaciji (CIP) pripravili v Narodni in univerzitetni knjižnici v Ljubljani

COBISS.SI-ID 256685571

ISBN 978-961-7032-71-0 (PDF)



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Introduction

This booklet presents fifteen case studies of representatives of the project's target groups, collected in Vantaa (Finland), Kranj (Slovenia), Bydgoszcz (Poland), Granada (Spain) and Kiel (Germany), to illustrate the challenges faced by migrant women, the elderly, people with disabilities, individuals on the autism spectrum and families with children in terms of safety and accessibility in their daily lives. These interviews were selected from a diverse range and then edited.

Case studies are useful for understanding the dynamics of specific environments and allow practitioners to learn from real-life experiences (Yin 2018, 305). By focusing on a single case or a small group of related cases, details and underlying mechanisms that might otherwise remain invisible to broader quantitative methods can be explored and lead to more informed decision-making and effective solutions (Rooney et al. 2016,148).

“ This booklet presents fifteen case studies of representatives of the project's target groups, collected in Vantaa (Finland), Kranj (Slovenia), Bydgoszcz (Poland), Granada (Spain) and Kiel (Germany).

Storytelling and interviews are two widely used qualitative data collection methods in case studies, each being uniquely effective at capturing individual cases (Olsen 2012, 34). Whereas interviews provide direct insights into

participants' perspectives and experiences in a more structured manner, storytelling captures individuals' personal narratives, providing deeper insights into the case by enabling participants to describe emotional and motivational elements in particular. The choice between these two methods largely depends on the objective and the desired type of data.

Although the EU application specified storytelling as the method to be used, the partners opted for interviews during the project because they offer a structured approach to data collection and are more efficient at gathering targeted information (Cook 2013, 200). Furthermore, interview responses can be more easily compared and contrasted across different subjects, helping to identify pertinent patterns or differences in relation to the case study's objectives. Storytelling, on the other hand, can lack structure potentially leading to digressions and inconsistencies. This makes it challenging to ensure that all relevant topics are covered systematically and can make it difficult to compare data across different participants (Rooney et al. 2016,154).

Each chapter of the booklet features three case studies of a specific city or district in each of the aforementioned countries, offering insights into distinct characteristics and challenges. Due to the requirements of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the interviews have been pseudonymised by assigning fictitious names that cannot be linked back to the real individuals.

Chapter 1

Case Studies from Kranj, Slovenia

Kranj is located at the confluence of the Sava and Kokra rivers in the central Gorenjska region, with its historic center situated below Šmarjetna Gora. In mid-2023, the municipality of Kranj had approximately 57,080 inhabitants (SORS, 2023). In terms of population, it ranks 3rd among all municipalities in Slovenia, after Ljubljana and Maribor (ibid, 2023). Traditionally expanding northward for central activities and along the Sava for manufacturing, it now includes predominantly 20th-century residential areas to the east and north, with a mix of apartments and single-family homes. This results in a compact urban landscape that integrates residential, industrial, and educational spaces. The highly urbanised core of Kranj has expanded into new residential neighborhoods, merging with

suburban areas to form a larger urban agglomeration. Its influence extends into adjacent settlements and business districts, connecting organically to the rural surroundings. As a significant regional transport hub, Kranj ranks as a major center of activity within Gorenjska, hosting numerous public, cultural, and educational institutions. Kranj's proximity to Ljubljana impacts its development and migration patterns. Despite negative population growth, the average age in the municipality is 43.3 years, lower than the national average, though like much of Slovenia, it has more elderly than young (Kranj, 2025).



Figure 1: Location of Kranj (Source: Aleš Švigej (2025). Position of Kranj [Computer sketch]).

1.1 Rolling Through Challenges

A Paraplegic's Perspective on Urban Accessibility

Andrej is a paraplegic navigating the complexities of urban life. Through his personal experiences and insights, Andrej highlights significant accessibility challenges and areas needing attention in his city. From steep ramps to unpredictable foot traffic, he sheds light on the realities faced by wheelchair users daily.



Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today. To start, can you share your thoughts on accessibility in public spaces, particularly the Brioni platform in front of Ravnika Palace?

Thank you for having me. The Brioni platform is a great example of how something intended to be accessible can actually be the opposite. The ramp is too steep, making it unusable for wheelchair users without an electric assistive device. On top of that, the paving is completely unsuitable—it's damaged, and my wheelchair's small front wheels often get stuck in the cracks. That's why I avoid it. Places such as the Theatre and a lot of churches are still inaccessible to people with disabilities due to inadequate infrastructure.

In general, do you think the municipality is making progress in improving accessibility?

Yes, I do see a genuine effort from the municipality. They are constantly working to make public spaces more accessible, and some major improvements have been made. For example, businesses in the city center have recently started installing ramps over raised entrances, which is a big step forward. However, some places remain completely inaccessible, like the Prešeren Theatre and many churches, due to inadequate infrastructure.

What other challenges do you face when moving around the city?

The biggest issue lately is sharing footpaths and pavements with e-scooter users, cyclists, and even pedestrians who don't pay attention. It happens far too often that someone speeds past me with no regard for my space, and there have even been times when I've been hit or knocked over by e-scooters or bicycles. It's really dangerous.

“Businesses shouldn't be able to claim they're wheelchair-friendly unless they actually meet the necessary standards.”

What changes would you like to see in the coming years?

I'd love to see stricter regulations on accessibility. Businesses shouldn't be able to claim they're wheelchair-friendly unless they actually meet the necessary standards. More attention should also be given to the safety of footpaths, especially with the increasing number of e-scooters and cyclists. And of course, accessibility should always be a priority when designing new public spaces, so we don't keep running into the same problems.

Thank you for sharing your experiences with us today.

1.2 Illuminating Obstacles

A Deafblind Experience in Urban Life

Luka navigates in Kranj with deafblindness. Through his experiences, he highlights the challenges faced by people like him in urban environments.



Thank you for speaking with us today. Can you share some of the challenges you face when moving around the city at night?

At night, poor lighting makes it even harder for us to balance. Uneven pavements are already a problem during the day, but in the dark, they're even more dangerous. The streetlights are too far apart, and they don't properly illuminate our path.

“Many of us have guide dogs, but certain transport options don't allow them, which limits our mobility even further.

How do interactions with pedestrians and cyclists affect you?

People don't realise we can't hear them approaching, so we often bump into each other. On shared footpaths and cycle lanes, this happens a lot, and it can be quite dangerous.

What is the biggest challenge for deafblind individuals using transport?

Many of us have guide dogs, but certain transport options don't allow them, which limits our mobility even further.

What difficulties do you face when using public transport?

In Kranj, bus stations rely on audio announcements, which makes it impossible for us to get information. Many stops lack visual timetables or displays showing when the bus will arrive. Also, high bus entrances can be a struggle for us due to balance issues.

What about urban infrastructure? Are there enough places to rest?

No, there aren't enough benches or resting spots, which is frustrating when we get tired. High curbs are also a problem because they're difficult to step onto with our balance impairments.

When you need assistance, is help easily available?

Not always. Interpreters aren't always available, and even when they are, they need to be well-lit. If they're backlit, it makes it difficult for us to see them clearly.

Thank you for sharing your experiences.

1.3 Navigating Kranj

A Blind Woman's Journey Through Accessibility Challenges

In this interview, Kaja, a blind resident of Kranj, shares the daily challenges she faces while navigating public spaces and using transport. Her experiences highlight the gaps in accessibility, from poorly marked pedestrian crossings to difficulties at bus stops. Kaja's story underscores the need for inclusive urban design that considers tactile and auditory cues, ensuring all city residents can move safely and independently.



Thank you for joining us today. To start, can you describe what a typical day looks like for you when navigating in Kranj?

Thank you for having me. My daily life is filled with challenges and risks at almost every step. Simple activities like walking down the street or taking public transport require constant attention and adaptation. One of the biggest difficulties is the lack of tactile markers and clear paths for navigation.

Can you elaborate on the specific obstacles you face when walking in public areas?

Absolutely. Many cycle paths and footpaths are not properly separated, making it difficult to tell where I should walk. Some paths are uneven or covered with paving that isn't suitable for scanning with my cane. Then there are obstacles that my cane goes under, like low-hanging signs or branches, which I don't detect until I hit them with my upper body. These should have tactile ground markings to warn of the hazard.

What about pedestrian crossings? Are they well-equipped to assist blind and visually impaired individuals?

Unfortunately, many pedestrian crossings lack the necessary guide markings. Without these, I can lose my way and accidentally continue onto the road instead of the sidewalk. Another major issue is traffic lights without audible signals, which leaves me unsure of when it's safe to cross.

Have you had any close calls or accidents because of these missing features?

Yes, multiple times. I've had a car run over my cane and break it while I was trying to cross the road. I've even fallen into a construction hole because the site was unprotected, and no workers were present to assist me. There have also been situations where cars and vans are parked on the pavement, forcing me to step onto the road just to continue moving forward.

“Many cycle paths and footpaths are not properly separated, making it difficult to tell where I should walk. Some paths are uneven or covered with paving that isn't suitable for scanning with my cane.”

Public transport is another challenge you mentioned. What are some of the main difficulties you face when using buses and trains?

One of the biggest issues is getting on and off the bus safely. If the driver doesn't stop close enough to the curb, I risk my cane falling between the gap or even stepping into empty space and getting injured. Bus stops also lack tactile markings and Braille signs, which has led to me waiting on the wrong side of the road and missing my bus entirely.

Are there any solutions that could help improve accessibility?

Yes, many of these problems have solutions! More tactile ground markings would help indicate hazards like steps, crossings, and obstacles. Audible signals at traffic lights, elevators, and sliding doors would also make a huge difference. Right now, some elevators don't announce their doors opening or what floor they're on, which makes it confusing. Similarly, sliding doors are tricky because they lack handles or sound cues to let me know where they are.

“ I've had a car run over my cane and break it while I was trying to cross the road. I've even fallen into a construction hole because the site was unprotected, and no workers were present to assist me.

It sounds like simple modifications could make a huge impact. If you had one message for city planners and public transport authorities, what would it be?

I'd urge them to think beyond just visual solutions. Accessibility isn't just about ramps or signs—it's about tactile and auditory cues too. A well-designed city should be inclusive for everyone, including those of us who rely on touch and sound to navigate.

Thank you for sharing your experiences.

Chapter 2

Case Studies from Vantaa, Finland

Vantaa is the fourth largest city in Finland by population, with approximately 251,000 inhabitants. Nearly 23% of its residents speak a language other than Finnish or Swedish as their mother tongue. Situated in the Uusimaa region, Vantaa is a part of the Helsinki Metropolitan Area, comprised of seven major districts and 61 city neighborhoods. Home to Finland's only international airport, Vantaa boasts a diverse economy and excellent transportation links (Vantaa, 2025). Amid its urban landscape, Vantaa also offers green spaces. Recognised for its forward-thinking initiatives, Vantaa was named Europe's Rising Innovative City in 2021, thanks to efforts in carbon neutrality and social innovations. The city is committed to being a bold and appealing leader in sustainability (ibid,

2025). One of Vantaa's key districts is Myyrmäki, which houses the large Myyrmanni shopping complex. With a population of 52,267, Myyrmäki is the most populous area in Vantaa. However, the district has faced challenges regarding safety, currently being regarded as Vantaa's most dangerous district (Vantaa 2024).



Figure 2: Location of Vantaa (Source: Aleš Švigej (2025). Position of Kranj [Computer sketch]).

2.1 Senior's Insight

Navigating Today's Challenges in Vantaa

Aada is a senior resident of Myyrmäki, Vantaa, who shares her experiences navigating the area's evolving landscape. She discusses the conveniences of transport connections and nearby services, while highlighting concerns about safety, accessibility, and the vanishing green spaces.



Thank you for joining us, Aada. You visit this area regularly, how do you feel about it?

I come here often for the health centre, shopping, and pensioners' meetings. The transport connections are good, and most services are close by. But the area has changed a lot over the years, and not always for the better.

What concerns you the most?

Safety is a big issue. I don't feel comfortable walking alone in the evenings, especially near the station and the Myyrmanni shopping centre. There are disturbances even during the day—windows have been broken, and I know of an elderly woman who was robbed in broad daylight. There are too many people drinking outside, and drug dealing happens openly near the station. It feels much safer to move around in a group.

How is mobility and accessibility in the area?

It's getting harder to move around. Overpasses and underpasses are being replaced with crosswalks, which makes it more difficult. The green light at crosswalks is too short for people with mobility issues. On the other hand, I do appreciate the flashing pedestrian warning lights. Public transport is convenient, but in winter, the sidewalks are dangerously slippery.

What about the environment and public spaces?

There used to be more green areas, but now they've disappeared under construction. We need more trees, benches, and trash bins. The area around Myyrmanni feels untidy, with too much litter and unfinished projects. Also, many banking services are disappearing, which is difficult for seniors like me.

“It's getting harder to move around. Overpasses and underpasses are being replaced with crosswalks, which makes it more difficult. The green light at crosswalks is too short for people with mobility issues.”

What personal challenges have you faced in the area?

The bus station also lacks shelter from rain and wind, and there aren't enough places to sit. These little things make everyday life harder.

Thank you for sharing your experiences.

2.2 Pathways to Integration

A Migrant Woman's Journey in Vantaa

In this interview, we sit down with Layla, a migrant woman from Tikkurila, Vantaa, who tells us about her journey using the services of the Uusimaa TE Office. The TE Office helps people find work. Layla's story highlights the crucial role this institution plays in her integration process, helping her to build a new life through education and employment opportunities.



Thank you for joining us today, Layla. Can you tell us about your experiences with the TE Office in Vantaa and why it's such an important service for you?

Of course. As an immigrant woman, the TE Office is crucial for me. It's where my integration plan is created, and I receive guidance on pursuing studies and finding employment. These services are essential as I work to build a new life here.

Have you faced any challenges in accessing these services?

Yes, finding the TE Office was quite challenging initially. There weren't any signs directing me there, and the logo on the building is small and placed high up, making it hard to see. Plus, there were logos of other companies on the windows, which added to my confusion. The office is also on the fifth floor, while other employment services are on the ground floor, which made it even more confusing at first.

Were there other accessibility issues you encountered?

One major issue is the lack of English instructions. In both the TE Office building and the surrounding areas like the Dixi shopping centre and train station, all the signs are in Finnish and Swedish. As someone who is still learning these languages, having signs in English

would significantly help.

In terms of navigating the area, how did you find the traffic and general layout?

The traffic in the area is quite busy, with many cars and buses. I noticed that buses, taxis, and cars seem to drive somewhat chaotically near the bus station. The crosswalk leading to the shopping centre is poorly marked, which can make it difficult and unsafe for pedestrians.

“As an immigrant woman, the TE Office is crucial for me. It's where my integration plan is created, and I receive guidance on pursuing studies and finding employment. These services are essential as I work to build a new life here.

I can see how that would be a challenge. You mentioned some aspects that were convenient or reassuring. Can you share more about that?

Sure, getting there by train or bus is quite easy, which is a plus. However, parking is a challenge since almost all spaces are paid and often full. During the day, I feel quite safe in the area with people around, security guards, and daylight. But it's a different situation at night.

What concerns do you have about being in the area during the evening?

The station area feels quite restless in the evenings. I've noticed, and heard from friends, that youth can be disruptive, and there are often intoxicated individuals around, which makes it feel unsafe. Vandalism, thefts, and fights have been issues, so I prefer not to be alone there after dark.

“During the day, I feel quite safe in the area with people around, security guards, and daylight. But it's a different situation at night.

That's understandable. Based on your experiences, do you have suggestions for improving accessibility and safety at the TE Office?

Absolutely. Increasing the visibility of the TE Office logo would be a great start, making it easier to find. I would also appreciate having a lobby service in the building. Many of us visit frequently because our Finnish language skills need to be excellent to handle matters from home. Signs placed at strategic locations, like corners leading from the station, would also be helpful. Introducing some free parking spaces for TE clients could benefit those of us who come by car. Additionally, better marking of the crosswalks near the station could enhance pedestrian safety. Moreover, having signs in English and ensuring consistent interpreter services would greatly improve accessibility for the immigrant community.

Thank you, Layla, for sharing your experiences and suggestions.

2.3 Transforming Spaces

An Autistic Perspective on Urban Accessibility

In this interview, Joni, who is on the autism spectrum, shares his firsthand experiences of navigating the Kivis shopping centre and the bus station. Through his unique perspective, Joni highlights the challenges he faces, from environmental stressors to inadequacies in safety and signage. He offers thoughtful suggestions for creating a more welcoming and accessible environment, emphasising the profound impact such improvements can have on well-being and urban experience.



Thank you for joining us today, Joni. Can you share your experiences when traveling around the Kivis shopping centre and the bus station?

Sure. Traveling that route can be quite challenging, especially during winter. I find that icy roads significantly increase my anxiety and stress levels. For someone on the autism spectrum like me, such stressors can have a profound effect on well-being. Even the sand and gravel used on the roads can be irritating when it gets into my shoes.

What about your observations at the bus station specifically?

At the station entrances, particularly at Keimolantie and Topaasiaukio, I've noticed a lot of bird droppings on the escalators and glass shards around the platform area. Vandalism is quite noticeable, with grey tape covering glass panels on the escalators for months. It makes me question both the safety and the overall comfort of the area.

How do you feel about the platform area's environment?

Honestly, it feels cold, bleak, and grey to me. I think it would be much more inviting with colourful paintings, vibrant signs, and an overall brighter visual appearance. It could really change how one perceives the space.

You mentioned signs. How do you find the current signage at the station?

The signage could be improved. There are backlit

signs for elevators and exits, but they don't really catch my attention. This might be because of how people on the autism spectrum, like me, perceive space. I actually prefer verbal signs as maps just don't make sense to me. Moreover, the existing signs are small, high up, and not in the most convenient locations.

“Honestly, it feels cold, bleak, and grey to me. I think it would be much more inviting with colourful paintings, vibrant signs, and an overall brighter visual appearance.”

Do you have any thoughts on safety at the station?

Yes, I believe more surveillance cameras and better visibility would enhance safety. Active security patrols on the platform would also help. While security guards are present sometimes, they mostly seem to stay at the entrance tops or outside, which doesn't help much on the platforms.

Do you have suggestions for improvements?

Certainly. Clearer responsibilities for winter maintenance would help. The station could also be brightened up with colours and paintings, maybe involving local schools and the Mosaiikki multicultural space in designing these changes. More train schedule displays and signs at shopping centre entrances would also be beneficial.

Thank you, Joni.

Chapter 3

Case Studies from Kiel, Germany

Gaarden, located on the east bank of Kiel, is a large district with over 18,000 residents, more than 60 percent of whom have a migration background. Historically a working-class area, Gaarden is favoured for its close proximity to the city center and the fjord, along with its green spaces and bustling local shopping areas around the pedestrian-friendly "Vinetaplatz." This dynamic square offers market stalls and street cafés, complemented by a pedestrian area on "Elisabeth Street." The district is also home to a burgeoning cultural and creative scene. The architectural landscape includes early 20th-century buildings, post-war public housing, and newly constructed residential complexes. While Gaarden has its advantages, it struggles with socio-economic challenges that have impacted

its public perception. Notable issues include alcoholism, drug addiction, domestic violence, widespread poverty, poor health outcomes, and a particularly high unemployment rate. The unemployment rate exceeds 13 percent, with 37 percent of residents relying on basic income support (Landeshauptstadt Kiel, 2024; Kreislere & Davies, no year,).



Figure 3: Location of Kiel (Source: Aleš Švigej (2025). Position of Kranj [Computer sketch]).

3.1 Rolling Through Life

Jens's Journey of Advocacy and Community in Kiel-Gaarden

In the neighborhood of Kiel-Gaarden, Jens stands as a testimony to resilience, advocacy, and community spirit. Having navigated life in a wheelchair since birth, he has become a beacon of hope and support within his community. As a volunteer at a local family and children's center, Jens reflects on the evolution of accessibility in Gaarden, discusses the challenges that remain, and shares his hopes for the future. Through his work and personal experiences, Jens illustrates the ongoing journey towards creating a more inclusive and compassionate environment for all residents.



Jens, thank you for joining us today. Can you tell us a bit about how Gaarden has evolved in terms of accessibility?

Certainly. It's been a long journey. Two decades ago, the idea of accessibility in Gaarden was almost non-existent. The buses didn't have ramps, and the streets felt like an insurmountable challenge. However, I have seen commendable improvements over the years. Now, ramps are much more common, which has made a huge difference for wheelchair users like myself.

Despite these improvements, you have mentioned there are still some dangers on the streets for those in wheelchairs. Could you elaborate on these challenges?

Yes, the streets can still be quite perilous. The main issue lies with drivers not being fully aware of pedestrians in wheelchairs. We are lower to the ground and, unfortunately, easier to overlook. This lack of visibility can be dangerous when navigating our bustling streets.

Beyond physical infrastructure, you have also spoken about a shift in the community's sense of safety. How has this change impacted the neighbourhood?

Well, it's been disheartening to see. There was a time when the streets of Gaarden were filled with

the laughter of children playing well into the evening. Now, it feels unsafe for them to do so. The sense of community and safety we once took for granted has shifted, and part of my work is trying to restore that.

“Two decades ago, the idea of accessibility in Gaarden was almost non-existent. The buses didn't have ramps, and the streets felt like an insurmountable challenge. However, I have seen commendable improvements over the years.”

Having lived with your disability from birth, how do you connect with those who are newly adjusting to physical limitations?

I feel it's crucial to support one another, especially when facing new challenges. My disability has been a lifelong journey, but for those who find themselves navigating these waters suddenly, due to accidents or aging, it's a massive life adjustment. I try to be there, to offer a helping hand, and to share knowledge that can ease their transition.

Regarding the development in Gaarden, particularly the discussions around trams, you have voiced unique concerns. Can you share more about your apprehensions?

My concern primarily revolves around the potential danger trams could pose, especially for those of us in wheelchairs. The thought of getting my wheels caught in the tramlines is quite frightening. While trams could bring congestion relief, for wheelchair users, they introduce a new set of hazards that cannot be overlooked.

Despite these hurdles, you have remained committed to your volunteer work and advocacy. What drives you to continue your efforts in the community?

It's all about fostering a sense of togetherness. I deeply believe in the power of community and unity. My aim is to contribute to creating a safer, more inclusive environment for everyone in Gaarden. We have made progress, but there is always more work to be done. My experiences have shown me that change is possible when we come together with compassion and understanding.

Jens, thank you for sharing your perspectives and for your tireless work in building a stronger, more inclusive Gaarden.

3.2 Glimpse into Gaarden Through Vika's Eyes

Embracing the Complex Tapestry of Urban Life

In today's discussion, we explore the multifaceted life in Gaarden from the perspective of Vika, a 38-year-old Armenian who has found a home to this diverse neighbourhood. Having lived here for six years with her two children, Vika offers a insight into the daily life of Gaarden.



Vika, thank you for joining us today. To get started, could you share your thoughts on Gaarden and what you find unique about this place?

Absolutely. Gaarden holds a special place in my heart for many reasons. The closeness to the city center, the beach, and the feeling of community here are invaluable. Despite the challenges, such as the drug problems and trash, there is a sense of belonging and resilience that I deeply appreciate.

How do you see the community centres influencing children's social lives and activities, particularly in urban areas like Gaarden?

They are incredibly important. The community center offers a safe and nurturing space for kids to grow, learn, and play. It's where they build friendships and learn social skills that are crucial in life. For parents and guardians, it's a supportive environment to discuss concerns and share experiences.

“Finding a job was a challenge, but I managed through determination and available resources. Gaarden offers various organisations and community courses aimed at helping women gain education, degrees, and certificates, which is fantastic.

Living in a diverse neighbourhood can have its own unique dynamics. How do you navigate the multicultural tapestry of Gaarden, especially with neighbours from various backgrounds?

Gaarden's diversity is one of its strengths. Living among people from different cultures has been enriching for both me and my children. We learn from each other, celebrate our differences, and often find common ground. The key is open communication and respect. It's easy to meet people here, and there's a sense of familiarity and warmth in those interactions.

Safety and discrimination are significant concerns in any community. You have mentioned feeling safe and not experiencing discrimination in Gaarden. Do you think this is reflective of the community's overall atmosphere?

Yes, I do. I have always felt safe here, and my experiences with discrimination have been minimal. Of course, there is always room for improvement, but Gaarden's inclusive nature makes it a welcoming place for everyone. There was an incident where a stranger tried to harm me, and it was actually a drug user from our community who stepped in to help. It's moments like these that remind me of the good in people here.

Finding employment and educational opportunities are critical aspects of settling into a new place. How was this process for you, and what resources were available?

Finding a job was a challenge, but I managed through determination and available resources. Gaarden offers various organisations and community courses aimed at helping women gain education, degrees, and certificates, which is fantastic. It's empowering to see such support for personal and professional growth.

“ Gaarden's diversity is one of its strengths. Living among people from different cultures has been enriching for both me and my children.

Lastly, you have mentioned your concerns about public cleanliness and your desire for Gaarden's future improvement. What changes do you hope to see in the coming years?

My biggest wish is for a shift in mindset regarding public cleanliness. The trash problem detracts from Gaarden's beauty and can easily be managed if people are more mindful. I hope for continued investment in community spaces, education, and infrastructure, making Gaarden an even better place to live. I am optimistic about the future and excited to be part of this community's growth.

Vika, we appreciate your insights and the time you have taken to share your experiences with us.

3.3 Voices from Gaarden

Louise's Reflections on Community Life and Changes

Louise, an elderly lady with three decades of residence in Gaarden and a decade of work in social projects within the area, shares her in-depth observations and experiences. She delves into the challenges of daily life, the evolving community dynamics, and her unwavering commitment to the neighbourhood.



Hi Louise, thank you very much for your time. Having lived in Gaarden for over 30 years, you have witnessed significant changes. Could you begin by sharing your thoughts on the current parking and pedestrian infrastructure, especially concerning Schulstrasse?

Thank you for having me. Indeed, parking has become a significant challenge, especially on Schulstrasse. Finding a spot can take up to half an hour, which is inconvenient for everyone. Moreover, on snowy days, the focus seems to be more on clearing paths for bicycles than for pedestrians, which complicates mobility for walkers.

As we discuss daily challenges, you had also mentioned concerns about the presence of individuals under the influence of substances at bus stations. How does this impact the community's sense of safety?

While those individuals might not be inherently dangerous, their presence, alongside the visible trash and belongings, contributes to a feeling of unease among residents and visitors. It reflects broader issues of substance abuse and homelessness in our community.

The issue of public restrooms, or the lack thereof, seems to be another concern you've raised. How do you see this affecting daily life in Gaarden?

It's quite problematic. The city's decision to sell off public toilets has left us with few options

unless we patronise a business, and that is not always feasible for everyone. This lack of accessible public restrooms is definitely a drawback for residents and visitors alike.

“Gaarden is lively, diverse, and, most importantly, it has soul. I love the authenticity and unity here. Plus, being able to help and be part of this community is deeply fulfilling for me.

You talked about the diversity in Gaarden, highlighting the immigrant background of half the district's inhabitants. How do you see this diversity shaping the community?

The diversity here is one of Gaarden's strengths. Despite our backgrounds, people live side by side and contribute equally to the community. We see a peaceful coexistence with minimal hate or discrimination-related crimes, which speaks volumes about the harmony in Gaarden.

The commercial landscape in Gaarden seems dominated by businesses owned by various ethnicities. What impact do you believe this has on the community?

These businesses cater to the community by offering affordable options, which is crucial given the economic constraints many residents face. Though it is sad to see a decline in German-owned businesses, this shift underlines the changing demographics and economic realities in Gaarden.

With a high turnover of residents, how do you think this affects the community's investment in the neighbourhood?

It is a challenge. Many people move to Gaarden for the affordable rent but leave as soon as their financial situation improves. This transient nature means fewer people are investing in the community's long-term wellbeing, which can hinder collective efforts to enact positive changes.

As an advocate for community improvement, you have noted efforts to attract local artists to the area. How do you see these initiatives transforming Gaarden?

It's a beautiful development. Artists bring creativity and a sense of community, working together to enrich our neighbourhood. Their presence helps counteract less desirable businesses like casinos and injects a positive, vibrant energy into Gaarden.

Despite the challenges, you have chosen to stay in Gaarden. What keeps you rooted in this community?

Gaarden is lively, diverse, and, most importantly, it has soul. I love the authenticity and unity here. Plus, being able to help and be part of this community is deeply fulfilling for me.

“ The diversity here is one of Gaarden's strengths. Despite our backgrounds, people live side by side and contribute equally to the community.

Looking forward, what changes do you hope to see in Gaarden, particularly regarding education?

The most significant change I hope for is increased support and encouragement for parents to understand the importance of

education in Germany. It's crucial that all children, especially those from immigrant families, attend school regularly to secure better futures for themselves.

Louise, thank you for offering such an insightful glimpse into life in Gaarden through your eyes. Your dedication to the community is truly inspiring.

Chapter 4

Case Studies from Bydgoszcz, Poland

Bydgoszcz is a major city in northern Poland, serving as a co-capital of the Kujawsko-Pomorskie Province alongside the historic city of Toruń. With a population of approximately 330,000 Bydgoszcz is a bustling urban hub located at the meeting point of the Brda and Vistula rivers, as well as being traversed by the historic Bydgoszcz Canal (Kazimierz Wielki University, 2025). Its strategic location, midway between Warsaw and the Baltic Sea, enhances its importance for transport, commerce, and logistics. Historically, Bydgoszcz has been a pivotal center for trade and industry, and it continues to play a vital economic in the region today. The recently renovated Mill Island, nestled in the city center, serves as a prominent cultural and recreational area favored by locals and tourists alike. The city boasts more than 970 hectares of green spaces, including parks, forests, and botanical gardens, positioning it as one of Poland's greenest urban areas. Despite these advantages, Bydgoszcz faces challenges in accessibility. Urban sprawl and suburbanization have increased reliance on car traffic. Although progress has been made in developing cycling paths and enhancing public transport with modern low-floor trams and buses, some suburban districts still lack easy access to the city center. The integration of railway services into the city's transport framework is a work in progress, especially around the modernised main railway station, Bydgoszcz Główna. Accessibility for individuals with reduced mobility

has improved, though it is not yet comprehensive. Many sidewalks and public buildings feature ramps and lifts, but older districts, particularly those with preserved pre-war or early 20th-century architecture, are not fully compliant with modern accessibility standards. Narrow sidewalks, occasional absence of tactile paving, and inconsistent signage can create difficulties for visually impaired and mobility-challenged individuals. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Poland became a key destination for Ukrainian refugees, accommodating nearly a million by early 2025 (Wikipedia, 2025). Bydgoszcz currently shelters about 10,000 refugees from Ukraine, mostly comprising women, children, and the elderly. In terms of safety, Bydgoszcz is largely considered a secure city. Crime rates have decreased over the past ten years, with public areas, especially around the Old Town, Mill Island, and shopping districts, being well-monitored and illuminated. However, some outlying residential neighborhoods may face higher levels of vandalism and social exclusion, often due to historical underinvestment or socioeconomic challenges (ibid, 2025). The city government has initiated various revitalisation programs aimed at improving living conditions and fostering social cohesion in these areas. Additionally, numerous educational and cultural initiatives have been launched to prevent social isolation and enhance the well-being of senior residents (ibid, 2025).



Figure 4: Location of Bydgoszcz (Source: Aleš Švigej (2025). Position of Kranj [Computer sketch]).

4.1 Journey with Asperger's

An IT Student's Journey with Asperger's in Bydgoszcz

In this interview, we speak with Damian, a 22-year-old IT student, who shares his journey of adapting to urban life while managing the challenges associated with Asperger's syndrome. From the comfort of his university campus to the overwhelming environment of the city center, Damian offers a look into his experiences and the strategies that help him navigate the complexities of city living.



Thank you for joining us today, Damian. Can you tell us about your move to Bydgoszcz and how it has impacted your life?

I come from a small town near Bydgoszcz and moved here at the age of 19 to start my studies. With my official diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome, I was able to secure a place in the dormitory, which was lifesaving for me. Without it, I don't know if I could have lived in another city at all.

What challenges do you face with living in the city?

One of my biggest challenges is orientation. As a child, I would often get lost, even on familiar routes. This issue has persisted into adulthood, and it's my number one concern about comfort and safety in the city.

“We need accurate, clear information in public spaces. For example, if a large building has multiple entrances, event details should specify which entrance to use.”

How does life on campus compare to the city center?

Life on campus is much easier. Everything I need—the faculty building, laboratories, and sports hall—is close by and well-marked with signs and arrows. I don't have to use public transport since I can walk everywhere. The city center, with its heavy traffic, crowds, noise, and lights, can be

overwhelming. I wear noise-cancelling headphones to cope, blending in with others who do the same.

What strategies do you use to navigate the city?

I save important places as pins on my smartphone map and keep photos of key buildings in a folder on my phone. When I go to familiar places, it's easier. But if my routine changes, like taking a different route with friends, I can feel anxious. A few trusted friends know about my challenges and offer support if needed.

What do you think could be improved in public spaces for people like you?

We need accurate, clear information in public spaces. For example, if a large building has multiple entrances, event details should specify which entrance to use. And if a room or elevator is out of order, there should be a notice. Also, some intersections lack street name signs, which can be confusing.

Have you found any spaces in the city that help you feel more comfortable?

Yes, green spaces like parks are very helpful. They're quiet and peaceful, which allows me to relax and calm my thoughts during stressful moments. Bydgoszcz has many such places, which is great.

Thank you for sharing your experiences, Damian.

4.2 Embracing Change

Milena's Reflections on Life in Bydgoszcz's Historic Centre

Milena is a 71-year-old retired nurse who has witnessed the dynamic evolution of Bydgoszcz's old centre. In this interview, Milena shares her perspective on the changes that have shaped her neighborhood, balancing tradition with modernity. From the bustling market square to the daily challenges faced by seniors, Milena offers thoughtful insights into the area's transformation while cherishing its enduring charm.



Thank you for sharing your story with us today, Milena. As someone who has lived in various districts of Bydgoszcz, what draws you back to the old centre?

The old centre is where my roots are. Despite the changes and rise of modern supermarkets, the market square remains a bustling hub. You can buy a variety of things, and there's a lovely atmosphere as you chat with the vendors. Many older people feel more comfortable paying with cash, instead of card payments. I only started using a card during the pandemic myself.

It sounds like a vibrant place rich in history and community. How do you feel about the changes the neighborhood has undergone?

I feel comfortable and safe here, although it's become more anonymous with many flats being rented and neighbors changing often, leading to fewer relationships. Another issue is the lack of elevators in older buildings. In Bydgoszcz and Poland in general, many four or five-floor buildings lack elevators. No one anticipated that the population would age or that people with disabilities would need better mobility options.

Have you noticed improvements in the area that make daily life easier for you?

Yes, absolutely. Streets and pavements have improved, with more greenery and fewer obstacles. This makes walking, especially with a

cane, easier for older people. I also appreciate the free public transport for seniors— it's convenient for getting around or attending lectures at the University of the Third Age.

“Many older people feel more comfortable paying with cash, instead of card payments. I only started using a card during the pandemic myself.”

What about safety in the neighborhood—has that changed over time?

There's definitely been a positive change. There are fewer disruptive behaviors and less petty crime. Whether it's due to people maturing or better police supervision, the area feels much safer now.

If you could improve one thing in the old centre, what would it be?

I would improve the maintenance of city lighting; not all street lamps function, making it easy to fall in the dark. More public toilets would also be beneficial, similar to the one at our market square.

Thank you, Milena, for your insights into life in Bydgoszcz's historic centre.

4.3 Balancing Safety and Community

A Mother's Perspective on Life in the City

Agata is a 34-year-old stay-at-home mom with a background in social rehabilitation. In this interview, she shares her insights and concerns about the changing landscape of her city. While Agata generally feels safe, she highlights underlying issues that disrupt her peace of mind, from neighborhood challenges to infrastructure concerns.



Thank you for joining us today, Agata. How would you describe the safety in your city?

I generally feel safe, but sometimes it's just an illusion. As I step out of my old tenement building, there's occasionally a sense that something's off. While thefts from stairwells are rare, incidents like basement break-ins and homeless people sleeping in stairwells do happen, as my neighbors have shared. Recently, someone even stole food from a neighbor's door.

“As a mother and a woman, I want to feel confident and secure at all times. That's the goal, and I see changes happening. With a little more time, it should get even better.”

How do these situations affect your day-to-day life, especially as a young mother?

In my building, we don't really know one another, so I never let my child outside alone. I'm always there to supervise them at the yard, playground, or during walks.

Beyond personal interactions, what other issues concern you in your neighborhood?

Infrastructure is a significant concern. Uneven sidewalks, broken benches, litter, and uncleaned dog waste make it uncomfortable. It's disturbing how little regard there is for public

infrastructure. Plus, I rarely see municipal police in the area, and I'm not even sure if there are patrols around.

Despite these challenges, do you also notice positive changes, especially in play areas. Can you tell us more?

Certainly. The condition of children's playgrounds has improved. Play equipment is now more suitable for young kids, and many surfaces have soft foam to cushion falls. Some playgrounds even have equipment accessible to children in wheelchairs. Such inclusivity is extraordinary for us parents, and it might help reduce barriers to social interaction in the future.

How do you feel overall about the changes in your city?

Things are improving, particularly along the Brda River with renovated walking trails, guard rails, and benches. It's safer and more pleasant for walks with my child. Overall, things are looking up, but there's still a way to go. As a mother and a woman, I want to feel confident and secure at all times. That's the goal, and I see changes happening. With a little more time, it should get even better.

Thank you for sharing your experiences and insights, Agata.

Chapter 5

Case Studies from Granada, Spain

Nestled in southern Spain, within the Autonomous Community of Andalusia, lies the city of Granada, home to approximately 230,000 residents. This city is a major tourist magnet, attracting 6.7 million visitors in 2024—a 4.4% increase from the previous year (Granada Hoy, 2025). A key draw is the iconic Alhambra and Generalife Monumental Complex, a World Heritage Site, which stands as one of Spain's most visited landmarks. Besides from the Alhambra Granadas offers way more. Rich in history, it was the last city to fall to the Catholic Monarchs in 1492, leaving an enduring Arab influence evident in its crafts and urban landscape. Gastronomically, Granada is famed for its tapas, and its cultural scene. Granada is also celebrated for its academic excellence, with

the University of Granada ranked among the top 3% of universities worldwide. Despite its many attractions, Granada faces significant challenges, particularly concerning accessibility and safety. The city's mountainous terrain results in steep, sloping streets, notably in historic neighborhoods like the Albaicín, posing difficulties for those with reduced mobility. Many of Granada's narrow and cobbled streets present additional hurdles. These lanes can be problematic for wheelchair users or those with strollers, as uneven cobblestones impede smooth passage. Many buildings and monuments do not have ramps or elevators, restricting access.



Figure 5: Location of Granada (Source: Aleš Švigej (2025). Position of Kranj [Computer sketch]).

5.1 Enhancing Accessibility

Elena's Perspective on Life Around Granada's Cathedral

Elena, who is from Granada, shares her experiences of the city's accessibility. As an academic, she draws on her academic knowledge and her experiences in Granada.



Can you elaborate on your feeling of safety in the area?

The sense of safety in the area around the Cathedral of Granada tends to be high due to constant police presence and well-lit streets, both during the day with sunlight and at night with streetlights. Additionally, the high tourist activity and vibrant atmosphere, with shops, restaurants, and cafes, enhance this feeling of safety.

“Clear and visible signage is vital, indicating accessible routes, services, and points of interest, with large text and high contrast for improved comprehension.

Are there any strategies or tools to help you make the environment more accessible for you?

To make the environment around the Cathedral of Granada more accessible, several strategies and tools can be implemented to address the needs of people with physical, sensory, and cognitive disabilities. These could include installing ramps at key points to aid access and egress for those in wheelchairs or with reduced mobility and ensuring these ramps are non-slip. Clear and visible signage is vital, indicating accessible routes, services, and points of interest, with large text and high contrast for improved comprehension. Additionally, tactile

and Braille maps, along with accessible seating and rest areas along routes, would significantly enhance accessibility. It is also crucial to measure street noise and explore ways to reduce it for a calmer environment.

Could you specify some "dangers" on the streets for people with walking disabilities or those in wheelchairs?

The cobblestoned streets around the Cathedral present significant challenges for people in wheelchairs or with walking difficulties, due to the uneven surfaces. Uneven terrain, potholes, and cracks in pavements pose serious tripping hazards and increase the risk of falls. Moreover, the inclined streets of Granada, characteristic of its topography, can be particularly challenging for individuals with reduced mobility. Entrances to some historic buildings and shops lack ramps, limiting accessibility, while curb edges without ramps create obstacles for crossing streets. The terraces of cafes and restaurants often encroach on pavements, reducing essential space for pedestrian traffic. Narrow streets, which might also experience vehicular traffic, and a lack of clear signage to indicate accessible routes and safe crossing areas further contribute to these challenges.

Could you share your thoughts on the current parking and pedestrian infrastructure in the area?

Although there are reserved parking spaces for people with disabilities near the Cathedral, the availability is very limited, especially during peak tourist seasons. Additionally, car access is complicated due to narrow streets and traffic restrictions. Nearby parking facilities exist, although they can be expensive and difficult to reach on foot. While pedestrian areas have seen improvements in accessibility, issues with irregular surfaces, obstacles on pavements, and poor signage persist in certain areas.

“ Uneven terrain, potholes, and cracks in pavements pose serious tripping hazards and increase the risk of falls.

Could you explain what makes the area special for you?

The aspects that make this area special are the vibrant atmosphere and cultural history of Granada. From certain points around the Cathedral, one can enjoy impressive views of the Alhambra and the Sierra Nevada mountains, creating a visually striking environment.

What changes do you hope to see in the coming years?

I hope that in the coming years, the area will become more accessible to people with disabilities while maintaining its cultural richness and welcoming atmosphere.

5.2 Navigating Heritage

Enhancing Accessibility in Granada's Cathedral Area

Hugo is an accessibility advocate. As a neurodiverse local of Granada, he brings personal insights and professional expertise to our conversation about Granada. He discusses the current safety and accessibility landscape and identifies ongoing challenges.



Can you elaborate on your feeling of safety in the area?

It is a very safe area throughout the day, as it is usually crowded with people, mainly tourists strolling around the Cathedral and patrons of the local establishments like bars and shops. Additionally, there is usually a strong police presence.

“Certain streets also have limited space, which can be overwhelming for the elderly and families with children.

Are there any strategies or tools to help you to make the environment/area more accessible for you?

Certainly. The ramp that facilitates entry to the Cathedral and a high level of signage are key components in improving accessibility.

Could you specify some "dangers" on the streets for people with walking disabilities or those in wheelchairs?

The main hazards include the stairs in Plaza de las Pasiegas and at the access to Calle Oficios from Gran Vía, one of the main streets. These require people with disabilities to take a significant detour to access the Cathedral. Additionally, the cobblestones on the streets surrounding the Cathedral make navigation difficult for those with reduced mobility. Certain streets also have limited space, which can be overwhelming for the elderly and families with

children.

Could you share your thoughts on the current parking and pedestrian infrastructure in the area?

In this area, unrestricted vehicle access is not allowed, and the majority of streets around the Cathedral are pedestrianized, which is positive for pedestrian traffic. There is a nearby public parking facility and at least one parking area belonging to local hotels.

Could you explain what makes the area special for you?

It is an area of great monumental value with a lively atmosphere throughout the year. It is pleasant to stroll through the area at any time of the year to enjoy Granada's rich heritage, as well as the abundance of shops, restaurants, and bars.

What changes do you hope to see in the coming years?

It is necessary to promote the accessibility of the area, making it easier for people with mobility issues to access the Cathedral without having to take a significant detour, as it is one of the city's main monuments. Additionally, considering that other groups such as families with young children, people on the autistic spectrum, or seniors require more space to avoid feeling overwhelmed, it would be interesting to try to limit the gentrification of the area, which, due to architectural barriers, does not leave as much space as it should for pedestrian traffic.

5.3 Cultivating Community

Clara's Vision for a Vibrant and Accessible Granada

Clara, a local resident, shares her perspective on the vibrant area surrounding the Cathedral of Granada. She discusses her experiences of safety, accessibility and cultural richness in this iconic neighbourhood. She also highlights the current challenges, such as issues with pedestrian flow and infrastructure.



Can you elaborate on your feeling of safety in the area?

My perception of the sense of safety in the area is high, however sometimes I feel a lack of safety when there are too many people in the area. When there are groups of tourists or a very high influx of tourists, along with people offering services and coupled with the thought that there might be people taking advantage of this situation to commit theft (common situations in tourist areas) leads me to feel less secure and stay alert. Additionally, the presence of people offering services also makes me feel that I need to be alert, thus not relaxed, which would be typical under a sense of safety.

This comment is considering that I have no mobility difficulties, and that I am a local (i.e., there is no cultural barrier). I think that this kind of feeling of insecurity and lack of orientation (due to too many people, noise, movement...) can affect much more and significantly with any person with some difficulty.

Are there any strategies or tools to help you to make the environment/area more accessible for you?

In my opinion, several strategies could enhance accessibility. To prevent possible thefts, increasing police presence and installing cameras would serve as effective deterrents, while informing visitors on how to securely carry items like bags and mobile phones can further alleviate concerns. Indeed, the actual number of thefts is relatively low, but providing information on this could help reduce any unnecessary

feelings of risk. Moreover, better management of pedestrian flows, traffic, and tourist activity could bring more order to the area. Measuring and addressing noise levels would also help, as excessive noise can significantly distort the environment. Finally, including staff to facilitate the flow of people and answer questions from passersby could greatly contribute to a more organized and accessible community space.

“ In my opinion, several strategies could enhance accessibility. To prevent possible thefts, increasing police presence and installing cameras would serve as effective deterrents, while informing visitors on how to securely carry items like bags and mobile phones can further alleviate concerns.

Could you specify some "dangers" on the streets for people with walking disabilities or those in wheelchairs?

In this area, there are quite a few "hazards" or limitations for people with mobility difficulties. For example, slippery pavements (due to the type of material used and its wear). The pavement also presents irregularities or different types of pieces or stones that hinder the use of wheelchairs or any similar support. On the ground, there are often steps and there is no colour contrast, which, in addition to being a limitation for wheelchair users or similar, is also a limitation for people with vision difficulties. I think there is a lack of ramp alternatives and handrails to facilitate the transit of wheelchair users or similar. This I consider the main limitation.

Could you share your thoughts on the current parking and pedestrian infrastructure in the area?

In my opinion, the current parking infrastructure is deficient. There are too few options and are expensive. This is a consequence of the large influx of people to this area (due to residence, work, studies, tourists...). It is also a consequence of many residents in this area and in the metropolitan area of Granada not having other alternatives (that are functional) to get to the centre of Granada, as they opt to use their car. I suppose that in the coming years, this trend will change, in the sense that other public transportation alternatives (that are perceived as more efficient) will be offered and can be used instead of private transport.

(a better regulation of tourist rental apartments), which could result in avoiding groups of tourists that create disturbances in the area. I hope that there will be progress in providing more efficient transportation alternatives to reach the area for both visitors and residents in the metropolitan area of the city. Also, an improvement in facilities that make the area more accessible for people with any type of difficulty, whether physical, psychological, sensory, etc.

“ I think that in the coming years, traffic in the area will be reduced and will be restricted to more environmentally friendly vehicles.

Could you explain what makes the area special for you?

In my personal opinion, the most relevant aspects of the area are its beauty and cultural, historical significance, as well as the social, multicultural, and "lively" atmosphere of the area. It is a very representative and emblematic part of the city. It is always nice to take a walk around this area, at any time of the year or on special dates such as Christmas or other holidays. There is always a good atmosphere, activities, ... as I said, in an environment of great beauty.

What changes do you hope to see in the coming years?

I think that in the coming years, traffic in the area will be reduced and will be restricted to more environmentally friendly vehicles. This could result in a reduction in traffic, pollution, and noise. In turn, it could contribute to creating a greater sense of tranquility in the area for pedestrians and visitors. I also think there will be a move towards better control of tourist activity

Conclusion

Across more than fifteen interviews, a clear and compelling narrative emerges about the diverse challenges and aspirations of individuals navigating urban environments. These stories collectively highlight the vital importance of accessibility, safety, and community in shaping the urban experience. From individuals with sensory sensitivities and mobility challenges to long-time residents expressing concerns about safety and community cohesion, these interviews reveal common threads. Many express a need for clearer signage, improved infrastructure, and more inclusive public spaces that accommodate a wide range of abilities and needs. The voices within this collection underscore the significance of both social and physical environments in fostering a sense of belonging and security. Moreover, there is a recurring call for

infrastructural improvements, such as better lighting, accessible transport systems, and safe, inclusive recreational areas. Together, these insights paint a vivid picture of urban spaces at a crossroads—poised to evolve into environments that are not only functional but also genuinely inclusive. By incorporating the lived experiences and perspectives shared in these interviews, city planners and policymakers have the opportunity to create spaces that are not only more accessible but also reflective of the diverse individuals who call these cities home. This collection of narratives serves as both a testimony to the challenges faced and a hopeful vision for a future urban landscape that prioritises inclusivity and accessibility for all citizens.

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Stories from the unseen