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Signs of Children's Presence in Two Types of Landscape: Residential and Park: Research on Adults' Sense of Safety and Preference: Premises for Designing Sustainable Urban Environments

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Abstract: This study aimed to check whether physical signs of children's presence in the urban space have an impact on sense of safety and preferences. We based the study on an intra- and inter-group design, whereby respondents assessed two types of space: housing estates and green areas. The photos were manipulated to create three scenarios: control (without elements related to children), denotation (spaces supplemented with children's playgrounds), and connotation (spaces containing elements associated with children). Each scenario was assessed by a separate group of respondents, who were further split between men and women. Analyses have shown that in residential districts, spaces with child-related connotations foster a feeling of safety and enhance the general appeal of the place, especially among women. In turn, direct signs of the presence of children (denotation) have a lesser impact on the positive assessment of the space. In green areas, adding child-related details did not affect women's feelings but lowered men's evaluations of safety and preference. The findings suggest that elements associated with children should be used selectively, taking into account the type of space and differences in perception between the sexes. These observations can support the creation of sustainable urban environments: safe and inclusive housing estate and park designs, especially in the context of building cities that foster social integration without exclusions. This is a preliminary study that paves the way for further exploration of the topic. In order to be able to analyse adults' preferences and safety in more depth, it seems interesting to investigate the shared perception of landscape by children and adults and the possibilities of participatory design of public spaces.

Keywords: playgrounds; environmental psychology; urban parks; green space; housing estates; safety; sustainable urban environments

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1. Introduction

The issue of perceived safety in urban areas, especially in large cities, is—despite various actions taken and strategies devised for safety—still relevant [1–3]. Numerous studies have attempted to analyse this difficult, multi-faceted phenomenon to help grasp the interrelations between features of space and people's feelings. This is a major challenge because lack of safety evoked by a given place does not always result from the actual occurrence of crime. This is due to the difference between objective safety related to actual

criminal acts and perceived sense of safety. Perceived safety stems from people's subjective feelings and perceptions—a personal assessment of how safe they feel [4]. Personal assessment, in turn, depends on many factors, including individual concerns or personal experience [5]. However, this challenge must be faced because living in fear of crime has serious consequences—it reduces the quality of life and causes problems with mental and physical health [6,7].

Housing estates are often studied in the context of perceived safety, e.g., [8,9]. From the point of view of city residents, these places are of key significance because essential traffic routes tend to run through residential districts. For this reason, many strategies focusing on design against crime include these types of areas in their recommendations [10,11]. Moreover, many acts of violence are known to occur near places of residence [12–14]. Indeed, even if actual crimes do not occur, the lack of perceived safety that they might have can effectively limit physical and social activity among the residents. Gradually, they begin to withdraw from certain spaces to avoid places and situations they perceive as dangerous [15]. This perception may be caused by the visual aspect of the neighbourhood itself, suggesting physical disorder. Some studies have proven a link between physical disorder and reduced engagement in physical activity [16–18].

Urban green areas are another type of space where lack of perceived safety has been noted to be an issue of concern (e.g., [19,20]). They constitute very important and frequently visited spaces in the urban fabric for environmental as well as health benefits [21–24]. Green areas pose a major design challenge for architects and urban planners alike because many spatial elements and forms (especially plants) can strongly affect the perception of space. Specialists often face a dilemma when creating sustainable space that will prove both beneficial to the environment and, at the same time, to the urban community. This is because some actions might promote environmental aspects more and social aspects less. A frequently cited example is the introduction of vegetation for a host of environmental reasons, such as biodiversity, climate regulation, or air quality improvement [21,25]. However, in some places, vegetation that is too dense or located in sensitive spots may be disadvantageous because it can undermine sense of safety. Criminals have been shown to use dense vegetation [26], inter alia, to conceal illegal activities [27]. This hideout effect is often associated with shelter for potential attackers, significantly reducing sense of perceived safety [28,29].

Vegetation in green areas is a key element, but not the only one, that affects anxiety levels. A decreased sense of perceived safety may result from the fact that green areas are often under-lit or unevenly lit [30–32]. The lack of lighting means that people refrain from visiting a particular spot after dark [33]. Another factor that may cause a given space to be negatively perceived is its visual reception. Places characterised by a poor state of maintenance evoke a stronger sense of anxiety among visitors since this signals a lack of supervision over a given area [34,35]. For this reason, landscapes with natural vegetation also sometimes cause a feeling of anxiety. This is due to the fact that some city dwellers tend to associate features such as diversity or naturalness with a lack of upkeep. Therefore, cultivated, artificially manicured greenery and well-kept greenery will probably have a positive impact on sense of perceived safety [36–40].

Urban design for housing estates and green areas is a fraught process. Despite more knowledge about mechanisms and theories, which have formed the basis for numerous strategies and recommendations, effective changes in space require large financial outlays, which often do not fit into the budget. In addition, the steps taken tend not to work immediately but their effects are more long-term. This state of affairs may be influenced by the phenomenon of space stigmatisation [41,42]. For this reason, it may be worth considering the application of low-budget actions that could positively affect an area's image with less effort, transforming it in the direction of a sustainable space.

In our study, we decided to check whether adding elements associated with children to two types of urban space—housing estates and park areas—would change how they are perceived. We used two types of elements: (1) ones that directly indicate their purpose—such as children's play areas (denotation of method of use) and (2) indirectly associated with children through style, colour, form, presence of toys and children's paraphernalia, etc. (connotation of meaning—presence of a child).

We therefore formulated the following hypotheses for these two types of spaces:

H1. *Elements of residential areas and park areas that are directly (denotation) or indirectly (connotation) associated with children increase sense of safety and preference for the particular space (adding elements associated with children makes the space perceptually safer and more attractive).*

H2. *Adding elements associated with children affects perception of safety and preference to varying degrees depending on sex.*

1.1. What Might Trigger Fear in a Given Space?

Lack of sense of perceived safety is a very complex factor affected by physical (people or their actions) and social elements. The most widely studied in this context are negative behaviours (incivilities) and their impact on sense of safety. Incivilities are most often associated with places that give an impression of neglect or improper use, where a breakdown of social control could have occurred [43,44]. This disorder (e.g., in the form of litter, vandalism, graffiti, homes in disrepair, or unkempt lawns) signals to visitors that the local residents (and the relevant authorities or services) are unable or unwilling to defend it. Similarly, it is interpreted similarly by criminals, assuming that probably no one in such an area will interfere with criminal activity—either out of fear or indifference. The significance of this relationship—between disorder and sense of fear and the likelihood of crime occurring in the area—is illustrated by the Broken Window Theory. This states that signs of disorder, including a general poor state of upkeep, creates the impression of a lack of supervision and control over the area, thus sparking a chain reaction, the last element of which is serious criminal behaviour such as rape or murder [45]. Research seems to confirm the assumptions of this theory—links have been demonstrated between signs of disorder not only with fear of crime [46] but also with actual criminal acts recorded by the police [47,48].

The second category mentioned consists of social elements and, likewise, with the physical ones, negative behaviour has tended to attract most of the research. This primarily involves types or groups of people who arouse fear in others. This eroded sense of safety may result from the size of a given group or their behaviour (smoking, fighting, drinking alcohol), perceived as a sign of potential danger [49]. Groups associated with this type of behaviour include youths, perceived through the prism of threat or problem behaviour [50,51]. Another group, often studied, consists of men, generally young, who may undermine sense of safety, especially among women. This is primarily for fear of sexual harassment or assault [52–55]. The way people look can also cause anxiety among others—for example, visible signs of poverty, such as worn-out clothes or a shabby appearance, often associated with broader social stigmas or disorder [56]. One particular group studied in this respect is homeless individuals [37,49]. People who look different—whether for ethnic or subcultural reasons (style of clothing, hairstyle)—may evoke a similar reaction. Immigrants and people belonging to out-groups are some examples [57]. People who look suspicious in some way (due to their appearance or behaviour) also elicit a similar response. Such people are referred to as suspected bad elements or thieves [58]. A slightly more complicated issue is the fear children may feel towards others. Children, like adults and the elderly, may be afraid of the groups and behaviour described above, but in public spaces, they simply tend to be afraid of strangers. This is most often due to parents' warnings,

their perception of the environment, and societal narratives [59,60]. Children may also be afraid of aggressive peers and their violence, bullying, and abuse [60,61].

In terms of positive impact, several groups have been studied. The first is women, whose presence in public areas makes most visitors of the same sex feel safer [62–64]. The second group is children—especially younger ones, who, for obvious reasons, are not perceived as a threat. A study conducted in parks in residential areas showed that men not accompanied by a child are often perceived as a potential threat, especially by women [65]. This may be because, in many cultures, a child is perceived as a symbol of innocence and safety. This may influence the behaviour of adults, who will avoid actions that may be perceived as aggressive and inappropriate. Moreover, the presence of children is even described as beneficial—the sight of children playing in public spaces is generally regarded by adults as something pleasant [66,67]. This could be explained by the fact that children and a child-friendly environment can awaken the 'inner child' in adults and contribute to more positive interactions [68].

1.2. Sense of Safety Among Women and Men

Emotions and reactions to stimuli are a personal matter, conditioned by various factors. Attempts to explain these relationships have been undertaken by many fields of science, including evolutionary psychology. Regarding the differences between women and men in terms of perceived safety, the aforementioned science argues that the cause is rooted in evolutionary adaptations that have shaped gender-specific behaviours and risk perceptions [69]. Studies on safety in urban areas have found that women feel less secure than men [37,70–74]. They are also much more likely to experience higher levels of anxiety and are more concerned about their personal safety. Therefore, they adopt more safety strategies (avoidance and precautionary measures) than men [75,76]. One of the main concerns felt by women visiting public spaces is sexual assault [62,77]. Women's low level of perceived safety is not necessarily related to actual victimisation but instead is an evolutionary trait developed to protect offspring and ensure survival [78]. Men also experience anxiety about lack of a sense of safety in public spaces, albeit less frequently (as research shows) and primarily related to violent crime. However, they are less willing to admit to this than women. This may be due to social pressure: men do not want to admit to feeling anxiety for fear of being judged harshly by a society that pressurises men to be 'fearless'. Another reason may be men's evolutionary tendency to engage in risky behaviour, especially in the presence of observers, which can be explained by costly signalling, showing-off hypotheses, and sexual selection theory [79,80]. Men also adopt safety strategies less frequently, and when they do, they primarily boil down to asserting confidence in public spaces as well as awareness (vigilance and preparation for potential violent encounters) [81,82]. When it comes to women's anxiety, it is strongly dependent on various spatial elements and arrangements. Women pay particular attention to lighting, general state of upkeep, and the presence of recreational areas [83]. Visual accessibility is also important—women strive to minimise blind spots and appreciate the presence of transparent spatial barriers that offer a sense of control. They also like landscapes that offer refuge, mystery, and complexity, while men prefer an unobstructed view with clear lines of vision [84–87]. This is consistent with a study conducted by Nasar and colleagues [88], where men, in opposition to women, preferred an environment with fewer places offering refuge. On the other hand, perceived safety and the effectiveness of concealment are strongly correlated, influencing landscape preferences more strongly in women than in men [89]. Social dynamics also play a role—men tend to feel less safe in crowd-activity-rich public spaces due to perceived pressure and potential conflict, while women feel more social support, which is conducive to feeling safer. Moreover, women are most afraid of

the presence of individual men in the space (due to sexual violence), while men are more fearful of the presence of other groups of men [90,91]. Women also feel safer in spaces with social integration and natural surveillance, such as areas with active street life and vigilant community members [92,93]. Whenever streets are deserted or rarely used, women may feel less safe, which limits their mobility in public spaces [94,95]. What is more, women are also much more sensitive to neighbourhood circumstances, such as serious crime and social disorder [96].

Little research has been conducted on whether the presence of children increases perceived safety in women or men. However, there is some general evidence that children's presence can indeed have a positive effect on adults' sense of safety. For example, the sounds of children laughing or playing have been demonstrated to enhance feelings of safety, as can the sight of children at play [97,98]. Both of these stimuli can make an environment seem less threatening because they give the impression of being actively used and supervised. This supervision, as well as the collective responsibility for the area that it fosters, results from the fact that playing children are often observed by their guardians to ensure their safety [99]. The activity of youngsters in public spaces can also strengthen a sense of community. For instance, this may happen by encouraging families to be active outdoors to increase the involvement of these groups in creating a safe environment [100]. Both of these factors—sense of community and supervision are important elements of both Biophilic Design and Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED), whereby it is crucial to create an environment that integrates its components in a manner that promotes safety [101–103]. Therefore, both concepts consider that effective design ensures the visibility and accessibility of a given area [104]. These two factors foster natural surveillance, which is required for people to feel safe. The aforementioned supervision is exercised by other visitors who use the space in an expected and accepted way. They play a positive role in the sense that they might react appropriately if something arouses their concern or they notice a threat [105–107]. This type of surveillance and social involvement is relevant to areas frequented by children, which are perceived as safer through this lens. Parents and caregivers who spend time in spaces designed for children (such as playgrounds or schoolyards) often describe their feelings as free and relaxed [108,109]. Designed and well-maintained spaces adapted to the needs of children can therefore foster positive social behaviours and interactions between adults [110]. Moreover, children tend to evoke positive responses from adults, such as empathy and the need for protection. This is often seen in the way parents and caregivers are involved in actively monitoring their children's activities in public spaces, caring for their well-being, and supporting their physical and social development [111]. This increased sense of responsibility and care can contribute to a more empathetic and community-oriented environment.

1.3. The Aesthetics of Children and Adults

Public spaces feature various architectural forms, colours, and textures, and their reception—whether we like them or not—is determined by many factors, including age. Children's aesthetic preferences evolve as they grow up. Younger children may have a different perception of aesthetics than older children or adults and prefer functionality over aesthetic appeal. Older children, on the other hand, may definitely value aesthetics more [112]. Cultural patterns play a key role in determining our perception of what is beautiful. Each culture may have its own aesthetic standards, and these cultural patterns can be internalised by children as they grow [113]. In addition, children's ideas of what is beautiful or ugly are also influenced by sex, the immediate environment, the media, or their interactions with parents [114,115]. A child's perception of beauty differs from that of an adult and is conditioned by sensory, emotional, and cognitive reactions. They are

often very expressive, with clear signs of a desire for self-expression, individuality, and participation [112,116]. Abstract paintings and artwork created by other children have been demonstrated to be the most inspirational for children in the context of art and design [114]. Adults, including parents, often have completely different aesthetic criteria than youngsters and often have different priorities [117]. They also differ in terms of landscape preferences. While adults prefer natural landscapes, children prefer urban landscapes [118], although this preference tends to weaken with age [119]. This may be due to the fact that adults appreciate the restorative and aesthetic values of the natural environment, associating it with numerous health benefits. These include stress reduction and improved mental health [119,120]. In turn, children who have less contact with nature in urban areas show an early attachment to the urban environment with which they are familiar [121–123]. They perceive it as safer and offering more opportunities for play [124]. Urban environments featuring natural elements (such as plants, trees, and colourful flowers or water features) are popular with children due to the rich sensory experiences offered and the opportunity to play and explore [125–127]. Clearly, the aspect of play is extremely important from a child's point of view. This explains why a variety of recreational facilities, including ones combined with greenery, are particularly appealing [128,129]. Visual attractiveness that influences children's first impression and their further interaction with a given space is also influenced by the variety of sizes and number of individual landscape elements, the combination of cartoon-style and more traditional elements, vivid and varied colours, and appropriately adapted lighting [128,130–132]. A space that offers many possibilities of use—i.e., one that is very diverse and engaging—will be most appealing to children, according to the affordance theory [25,133,134]. Although adults perceive and experience space differently [135], they can also positively evaluate such a space, seeing that it has a positive effect on children's interactions and usability [136,137]. Spaces that are often equally liked by children and adults are ones that offer appropriate challenges and imaginative play [138].

One cannot unequivocally state whether children's aesthetics regarding urban spaces will appeal to adults. However, there are some indications that bringing elements of children's aesthetics into the urban environment may translate into an increased perception of safety among adults. For example, colourful and playful designs can influence a certain location's image, making it less intimidating and more welcoming [139,140]. Moreover, it has been shown that displaying children's artwork in public spaces has a positive effect on people's well-being (including their sense of happiness) by making the space seem more vibrant and friendly [141]. Little research has been carried out on how adult preferences are determined by sex. However, there are some general differences between women and men that may translate into aesthetic perception. Women pay more attention to the aesthetic value of urban green spaces, which has a stronger impact on their well-being. They also appreciate playful and colourful elements that improve their mood [142]. Women are also more active in such spaces and engage in their recreational aspects more than men [143]. Although both sexes appreciate the inclusiveness of playful environments, women show a greater appreciation for them [144]. They also feel a stronger preference for environments that are playful and vibrant [83]. This may be due to the fact that men present less sensitivity to the visual elements of space and its aesthetic values [145]. In addition, due to their maternal role (not limited to biological mothers), women are more likely to develop a higher degree of empathy and understanding for children and their emotions [146].

To sum up, we do not know whether children's aesthetics will definitely appeal to adults, whether they will have a greater effect on women or men, and whether introducing these aesthetic values into a given area will dramatically improve its reception. However, there are indications that some elements of this nature may be perceived positively by

shaping impressions of an inclusive, friendly, and mood-enhancing space—especially among women.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Plan

We based the study on an experimental, intra- and inter-group design, whereby three groups of respondents assessed two types of spaces presented in some photographs: housing estates and green areas. They assessed them according to two criteria: safety and preferences (Table 1). The photos were manipulated to create three scenarios—each assessed by a separate group. The first—the control scenario—did not contain any elements related to children. The second scenario presented the same spaces supplemented with elements of child's play (swings, slides, sandboxes, etc.) in a traditional form, with vivid colours and shapes and materials typical of traditional playgrounds, thus constituting a direct indication of the function and addressee—through elements denoting the purpose of the space. We called this scenario 'denotation'. The third scenario featured elements suggesting, by connotation, that the space is used by children. We applied a children's style (vivid colours, sculptures, and devices referring to the world of children, e.g., cartoon characters, pinwheels, etc.) as well as objects that could be used by children, such as toys and bicycles, etc. We called this scenario 'connotation'.

Table 1. Summary of research and methodological assumptions.

Intra-group factors						
Type of space	Housing estate			Green areas		
The nature of space	New	Old		Landscaped	Wild	
Inter-group factors						
Scenario	Control (without interference)		Denotation		Connotation	
Sex	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Dependent variables (measured on a Likert scale)						
Safety	Answer: 'Rate how safe or dangerous you would feel in the place from where the photo was taken. Answer the question on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 = very dangerous and 5 = very safe'.					
Preference	Answer: 'How much do you like the setting? This is your own personal degree of liking for the setting, and you don't have to worry about whether you're right or wrong or whether you agree with anybody else. Answer the question on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 = not at all and 5 = very much'.					
Sample selection—procedure steps						
1. Recruitment (invitations to randomly selected respondents)	360 respondents					
2. Division of the selected sample according to sex	189 women			171 men		
3. Randomisation—random division into three groups	Control 63 women	Denotation 63 women	Connotation 63 women	Control 57 men	Denotation 57 men	Connotation 57 men
4. Summary: Characteristics of the groups	Three groups (Control/Denotation/Connotation) of 120 people each, including 63 women and 57 men					

A total of 12 photos were selected for manipulation—6 photos each representing two types of area. In the case of housing estates, half of the photos came from a fairly well-maintained high-rise communist-era housing estate from the 1980s (the Kozanów housing estate in Wrocław) and half from an estate built in the 19th century, with dilapidated tenement houses (the Przedmieście Oławskie housing estate in Wrocław). We called the first type the 'new' housing estate and the second the 'old' housing estate.

We also divided the green areas into two types. The first consisted of fairly well-maintained park spaces, which we called 'landscaped' greenery. The second type was spaces with a more natural character, wild and poorly maintained. We called this 'wild' greenery.

To summarise, the experimental factor was the introduced signs of the presence of children (denotation–connotation–no signs). Experimental rigour was applied to this factor—the conditions differed only in terms of this factor. In addition, we introduced factors related to the type of place studied—however, the experimental rigour was not applied because the assessed situations (old and new estate, landscaped and wild greenery) differed in terms of many characteristics. Therefore, this factor should be considered in terms of testing the experimental factor (signs of the presence of children) in different spaces.

Figure 1 shows how one set of sample photos was manipulated according to the type of space and scenario.

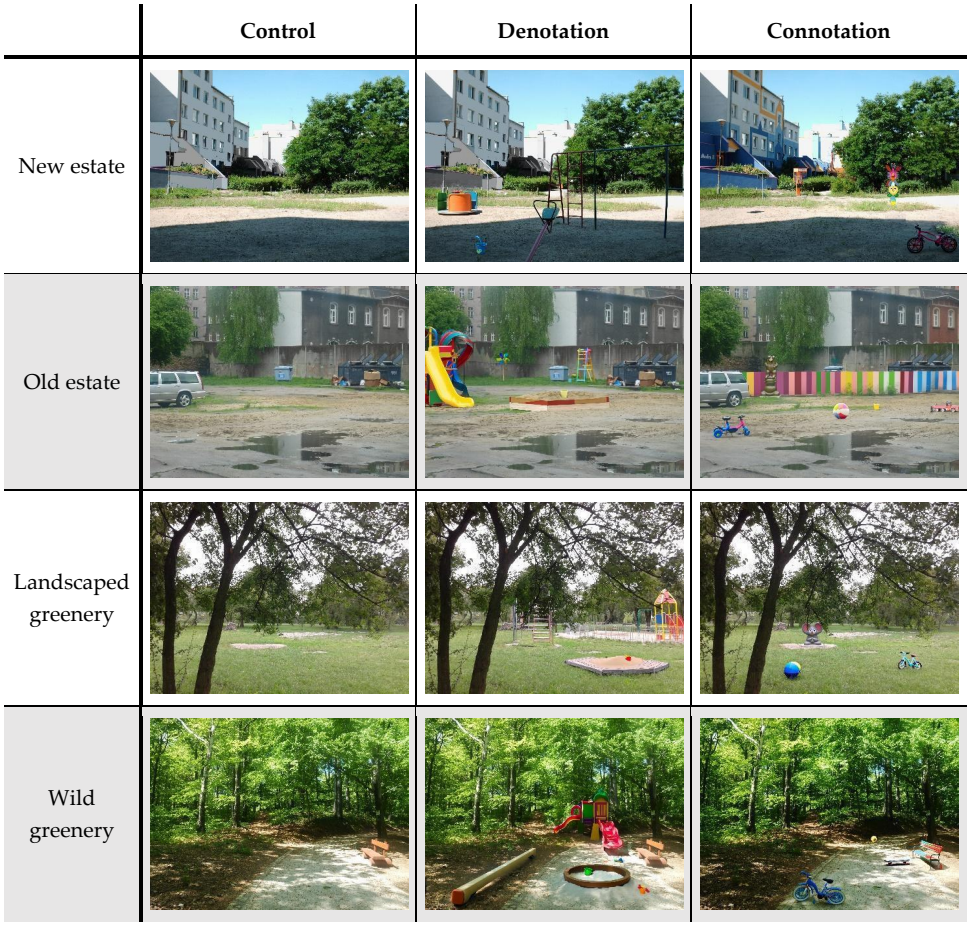

Figure 1. Set of sample photos manipulated according to type of space and scenario.

The assessment was made by two groups—women and men. As a result, we used a three-factor mixed design 3 × 2 × (2): 3 (scenario: control, denotation, connotation) × 2 (group: men, women) × 2 (type of space: new housing estate/landscaped greenery, old housing estate/wild greenery).

We drafted three surveys for the study—a separate one for each scenario. Each survey contained 12 photos relevant to a given scenario (3 photos × 4 types of space). In addition, we added a separate group of photos to each of the surveys, which were the same for each survey. These photos were taken in similar spaces (housing estates and green areas). Some of them contained children's paraphernalia. By adding the same photos to the three surveys, we could check whether the subjective scores given by the participants

filling out the individual surveys did not differ from each other. We added a total of 16 photos that were the same across the board. We put eight photos at the beginning of the survey to familiarise the participants with the material to be assessed and to help create subjective rating scales. We randomly added the next eight photos to the pool of photos for a given survey (scenario) so that the participants could rate different photos, not only those relevant to a particular scenario, thus maintaining the integrity of the experimental factor. As a result, each survey contained 28 photos (12 + 16)—assessed according to two dimensions: sense of safety and preference. The order in which the photos were evaluated was random for each respondent. The research plan is presented in Supplementary A.

The questionnaire took the respondents 10 min to complete.

2.2. Survey Design

In order to create individual scenarios, the photos were manipulated using Adobe Photoshop 25.9.1 using three functions: 'generate', 'generative fill', and 'replace colour'. In one photo, the colour of the building walls was changed by selecting and filling with the target colour. In the case of the remaining photos, the colour of the building walls was changed by replacing the colour brush and selecting a different target colour for these walls. All elements removed from the photos, as well as those added to them, were processed using the 'generative fill' function, which is based on artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms. When removing elements, only the area containing the element to be removed was chosen, and the 'generate' option was selected in the 'generative fill' window without any additional commands. The procedure was different for elements added to photos—here, after selecting the location and marking it, in the 'generative fill' function area, a command was entered so that AI could add what was required (for example, 'round wooden sandbox for children with sand and toys', 'colourful slide for children', 'small children's bicycle', 'a low colourful fence along the path', and others).

The dependent variables were measured by the study participants according to their perceptual evaluation of the presented photos. The participants rated each photo on two aspects—safety and preference. The rating was scored on a 5-point Likert scale, where 5 was the highest and 1 the lowest (e.g., [147–149]). The questions were formulated based on commonly accepted operational definitions (e.g., [39,150]), as presented in Table 1.

The study used a Likert scale to measure the respondents' preferences and sense of safety, as this is one of the most frequently used research methods in social and psychological sciences [147–149]. A scale can capture the tendency and intensity of feelings, which is important in the context of studying preference and sense of safety. Both usually lie along a continuum—the strength of the feeling—rather than being binary (yes/no) statements. The questions are included in Table 1.

2.3. Sampling Method

The participants were recruited by an external company, Biostat Research and Development Center, using a registered database of respondents. Consent to participate in the study was voluntary. Each participant had the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time. The study was conducted in the form of an online survey. The participants had to meet the following criteria: be of legal age as well as physically and mentally fit, and not have had any traumatic experiences related to visiting urban areas.

We chose the sample through randomisation and matching (quota).

First of all, we aimed to recruit 360 participants. The company sent invitations to randomly selected respondents from a registered database.

Next, we divided the recruited participants into two groups based on sex (189 women and 171 men) and then randomly divided each of these groups into three so that each

contained 120 respondents of the same male/female proportion. As a result, each research group included 63 women and 57 men (age range = 20–82; Mage = 48.39; SDage = 14.95).

Additionally, to prevent the order in which the photos were assessed from influencing the survey results, we randomised the order of individual photos for each participant.

The analyses took into account the sex of the respondents (women vs. men). Relevant tests revealed that neither age nor size of place of residence had any influence on the respondents' answers (Supplementary B).

3. Results

3.1. Preliminary Analyses

The statistical analyses included two groups of analyses of variance (ANOVA): for housing estates and for green areas, respectively. These analyses followed a mixed format: 3 × 2 × (2): 3 (scenario: control, denotation, connotation) × 2 (group: men, women) × 2 (type of space: new housing estate/landscaped greenery, old housing estate/wild greenery).

Before analysing variance, we tested the assumptions for intra-group and inter-group schemes. To this end, we conducted a descriptive statistics analysis and conducted tests to check the distribution normality (Supplementary C.1). The Shapiro–Wilk test turned out to be significant for all scenarios, which could have been due to the relatively large respondent sample. However, skewness and kurtosis with an absolute value of less than 1 [151] suggest that the distributions do not differ significantly from normal. It is also worth adding that, for sample sizes above 100, ANOVA is generally resistant to the non-fulfilment of the normality condition due to the central limit theorem [152,153].

We checked the homogeneity of variance via Levene's test (Supplementary C.2). The assumption turned out to be met in almost all scenarios. Individual cases of test failure should not have a significantly negative impact on the validity of the *F* test due to the large, equally sized groups of respondents.

Additionally, to check whether the groups assessing the different scenarios used the subjective rating scales in a similar way, we compared the mean ratings of the same photos. The analyses did not show any significant differences between the ratings made by individual groups (Supplementary C.3).

3.2. Testing the Research Hypotheses for Green Areas

Initially, we checked the research hypotheses in relation to sense of safety. We performed a variance analysis (ANOVA—Analysis of Variance) in a mixed scheme, where the intra-group factor was location (old estate vs. new estate) and the inter-group factors were sex (female vs. male) and experiment scenario (control vs. denotation vs. connotation).

The findings (Table 2) indicate that the experiment scenario differentiated the ratings ($F = 6.4$, $p = 0.002$) independently of other factors (place and sex). At the same time, post hoc tests (Supplementary D.1) showed that the connotation scenario was rated the highest, with denotation scoring lower and control coming last, while the difference between control and denotation turned out to be statistically insignificant.

We performed similar analyses for preference. The results indicate that the experiment scenario differentiated the ratings, but—as shown by the between-subject effects analyses (Table 3) with a significant interaction effect Scenario * Sex ($F = 5.09$; $p = 0.007$) and post hoc tests (Supplementary D.2)—this only occurs in the group of women. The control scenario was rated the lowest, the scenario with children's facilities (denotation) was rated higher, and the scenario with paraphernalia associated with children (connotation) scored the highest. Among the men, the difference between the scenarios turned out to be insignificant. These relationships did not depend on the type of housing estate (Table 3)—the results turned out to be similar for new and old housing estates.

Table 2. Safety on the housing estate—intra- and inter-group effects.

Safety on the housing estate—intra-group effects					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	*F*	*p*
Place	221.45	1	221.45	676.33	<0.001
Place * Scenario	0.79	2	0.39	1.2	0.302
Place * Sex	0.21	1	0.21	0.65	0.421
Place * Scenario * Sex	0.04	2	0.02	0.06	0.939
Residual	115.91	354	0.33		
Safety on the housing estate—inter-group effects					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	*F*	*p*
Scenario	14.15	2	7.07	6.4	0.002
Sex	2.33	1	2.33	2.11	0.147
Scenario * Sex	3.1	2	1.55	1.4	0.248
Residual	391.27	354	1.11		

Table 3. Preference on the housing estate—intra- and inter-group effects.

Intra-Group Effects					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	*F*	*p*
Place	206.71	1	206.71	722.01	<0.001
Place * Scenario	1.13	2	0.57	1.98	0.14
Place * Sex	0.11	1	0.11	0.37	0.545
Place * Scenario * Sex	1.44	2	0.72	2.52	0.082
Residual	101.35	354	0.29		
Inter-Group Effects					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	*F*	*p*
Scenario	15.73	2	7.87	7.7	<0.001
Sex	1.59	1	1.59	1.55	0.214
Scenario * Sex	10.41	2	5.21	5.09	0.007
Residual	361.83	354	1.02		

3.3. Testing the Research Hypotheses for Urban Housing Estates

The second part of the analyses involved checking the research hypotheses regarding green areas. For this purpose, we performed similar analyses as with the housing estates.

Initially, we tested the hypotheses concerning sense of safety. The findings (Supplementary E) indicate that the effect of the experiment scenario on safety was differentiated by both sex ($F = 3.99$; $p = 0.047$) and location ($F = 9.94$; $p < 0.001$). Post hoc tests (Supplementary D.3) showed that the experiment scenario only influenced the ratings in the male group. The area with the children connotation was rated lower than the control. The denotation scenario scored intermediate ratings, although the differences between the ratings were not statistically significant.

Post hoc tests also demonstrated that the scenario differentiated the ratings only in relation to the wild-looking areas, where the connotation scenario was rated lower than denotation and control. The difference between the denotation and the control scenario turned out to be statistically insignificant, as did the differences in the ratings of the different scenarios in the landscaped green areas.

The final analyses looked at preferences for green areas. The findings (Table 4) indicate that, similarly to safety, the effect of the experiment scenario on preference was differentiated by both sex ($F = 5.64$; $p = 0.004$) and location ($F = 15.51$; $p < 0.001$). As illustrated by post hoc tests (Supplementary D.4), it was significant only for the ratings given by men, who scored the scenario with the connotation of children's presence the lowest, whereas

they rated the denotation scenario higher, and the control scenario, devoid of any elements associated with children, the highest.

Table 4. Preferences for green areas—intra- and inter-group effect.

Intra-Group Effects					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	*F*	*p*
Place	0.07	1	0.07	0.35	0.556
Place * Scenario	6.11	2	3.05	15.51	<0.001
Place * Sex	0.37	1	0.37	1.88	0.171
Place * Scenario * Sex	0.24	2	0.12	0.6	0.549
Residual	69.7	354	0.2		
Inter-Group Effects					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	*F*	*p*
Scenario	18.33	2	9.16	9.04	<0.001
Sex	0.75	1	0.75	0.74	0.392
Scenario * Sex	11.44	2	5.72	5.64	0.004
Residual	358.81	354	1.01		

Post hoc tests also showed differences in ratings depending on the type of green areas. The control scenario was always rated the highest and the connotation scenario the lowest. In the case of landscaped green areas, the connotation and denotation scenarios were rated similarly, while in the case of wild greenery, the denotation and control scenarios were rated similarly (Supplementary D.4).

The estimated marginal means for the conducted analyses are presented collectively in Figure 2 and in Supplementary F, while a detailed distribution of ratings and their values for all the locations assessed is included in Supplementary G. A summary of all results is presented in a hierarchical diagram (Figure 3).

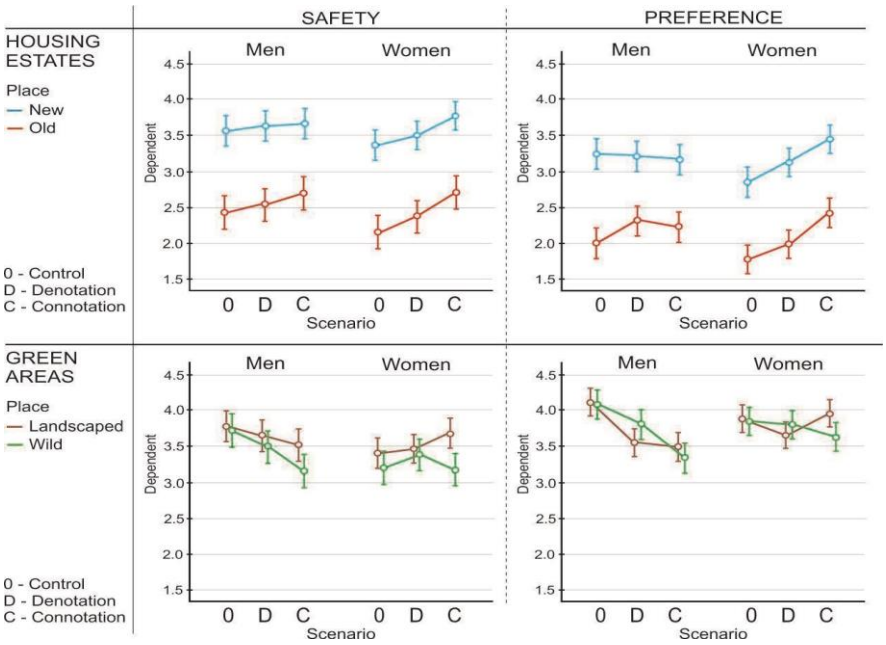

Figure 2. Safety and preference in housing estates and green areas—estimated marginal means: Scenario * Place * Sex.

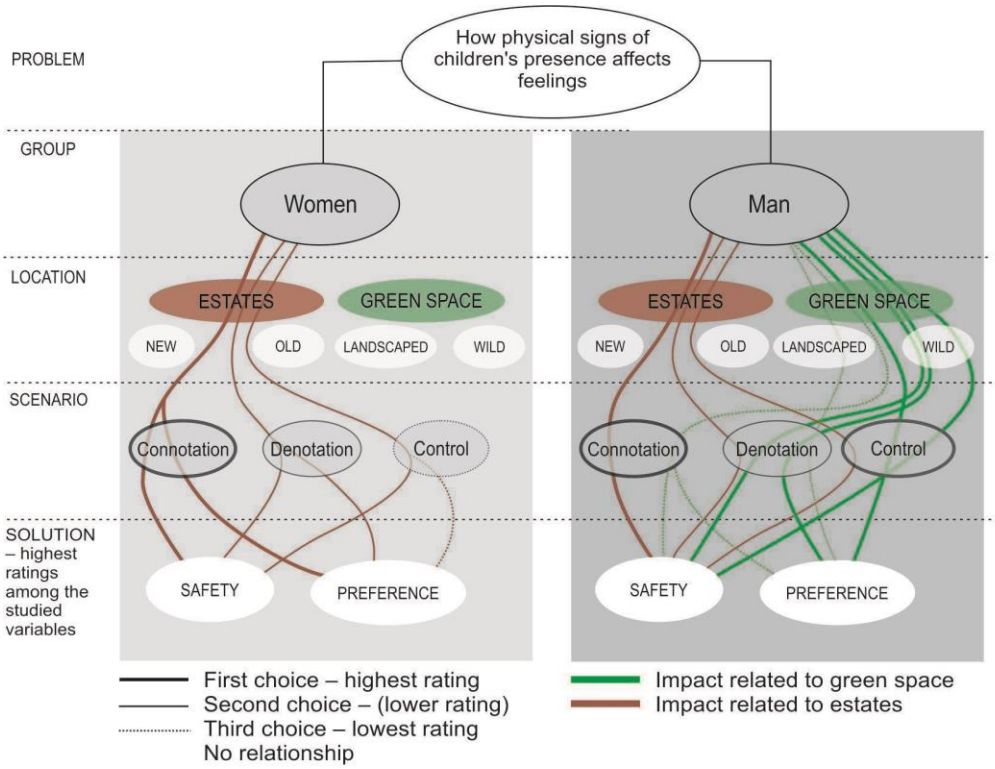

Figure 3. Schematic summary of the findings.

To summarise, we present the results of the comparisons described above in Table 5. Hypothesis H1, which assumed that adding elements associated with children would enhance sense of safety and spatial preference, was partially confirmed but only for the residential districts. For both women and men, the introduction of elements indirectly associated with children (connotation) resulted in a stronger sense of safety. In the case of preference for the housing estates, the hypothesis was only confirmed in the case of women—spaces connoted with the presence of children were rated the highest, followed by denoted areas, while spaces without interference were rated the lowest. The elements we added did not change the preference ratings among men.

Table 5. Summary of the comparisons.

Place	Scenario	Safety		Preference	
		Women	Man	Women	Man
Housing estate—old/new	Connotation	a	a	c	b
	Denotation	b	b	a	b
	Control	b	b	b	b
Green areas—wild	Connotation	b	b	b	b
	Denotation	b	a	b	a
	Control	b	a	b	c
Green areas—landscaped	Connotation	b	b	b	b
	Denotation	b	b	b	b
	Control	b	b	b	a
The order of values is in ascending order: a-b-c, the same colour indicating subsequent values that do not differ in a statistically significant way		a	b	c	

Colors are essential for the graphical presentation of specific values.

In green areas, denotation and connotation of the presence of children did not change the ratings among women, while for men, contrary to our prediction, it lowered them. This effect was more pronounced in wild areas, where, compared to areas without interference,

areas denoted with the presence of children were rated lower, and those connoted with them were evaluated lower still. In the case of landscaped areas, only connotation reduced preference among men.

The differences between the assessments of women and men found and described above confirm hypothesis H2.

4. Discussion

The results of the conducted research turned out to be only partially consistent with our assumptions (Figure 3, Table 5). The findings regarding safety and preference will be discussed separately. In each point, we discussed the influence of the experimental factors simultaneously (differences between the control group, denotation, and connotation) and the variances in the findings obtained from women and men, taking into account the type of space (residential or green areas). Looking at just these three factors simultaneously created a comprehensive picture of the findings, enabling interpretation to be made. The discussion ends with a diagram that summarises and illustrates the interpretation of the findings presented in the discussion (Figure 4).

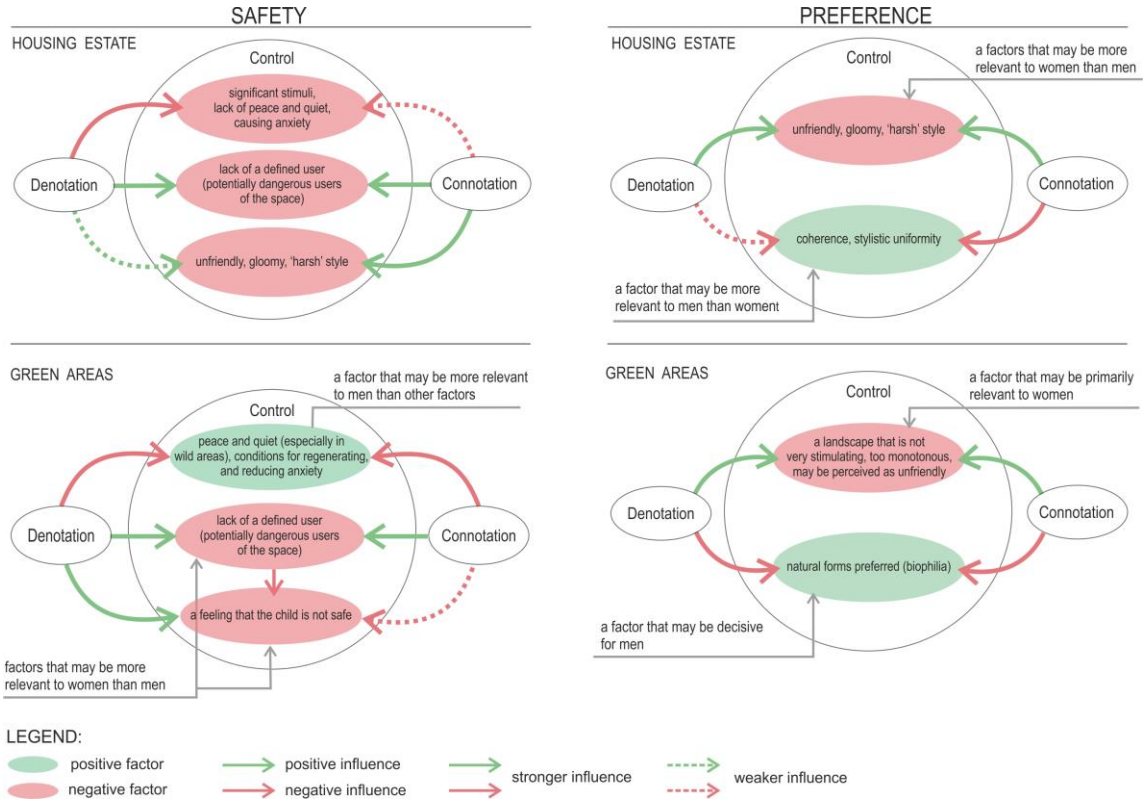

Figure 4. Diagram illustrating the interpretation of the findings (a summary of the discussion).

4.1. How Signs of Children's Presence Affect Safety

The findings indicate that signs of children's presence in housing estates have a positive impact on sense of safety—more so and statistically significant when the presence of children is merely suggested (connotation). The scenario with a children's play area (denotation) was rated lower for safety than the connotation scenario and does not differ statistically significantly from the control (without signs of children's presence. These findings confirm hypothesis H1 and did not cause any major surprise until we compared them with those obtained for green areas. In this case, hypothesis H1 was not confirmed. Moreover, the safety ratings differed significantly depending on the group (in line with

hypothesis H2). For women, adding signs of children's presence did not change their assessment of safety, while for men, it lowered their rating. Why was this so?

There are many possible interpretations (Figure 4). First of all, we searched for reasons for the probable feelings towards different situations. Housing estates, which are built-up and heavily frequented areas, are an environment overloaded with physical [154] and social [155] stimuli. Numerous and diverse visitors combined with car traffic do not generally create an atmosphere conducive to peace and quiet. At the same time, a lack of features that might designate particular areas for particular types of visitors entails the possibility of encountering dangerous or undesirable people [156]. Such situations (lack of clear designation of space) are presented in the photos from the housing estates included in the study. By adding playground elements, the target visitor was defined, but this could, at the same time, suggest an increase in stimuli (e.g., noise) that might exacerbate anxiety. Perhaps that is why the 'mild' suggestion of children's presence, indicating that this area might attract this type of visitor but not necessarily a crowd, turned out to be more conducive to sense of safety. A decor featuring vivid colours could also have a positive effect—especially in dilapidated or grey housing estates, which may give a gloomy impression. As a result, the studied spaces might evoke positive associations with the safe world of a child without suggesting the possible danger of excessive stimuli related to the use of the area (playground).

Signs of children's presence were perceived differently in green areas, which contradicted hypothesis H1. Wild areas especially may be associated with a reduced sense of safety [157–160] because of a lack of social control [161]. Here, too, due to a lack of visual cues regarding the target visitor, a dangerous person may be encountered. Adding signs of children's presence changes the situation in that the target visitor is defined—one who no longer poses a threat of assault, for example. So why, after adding these experimental factors, did women's safety assessments not increase (as they had with housing estate areas) while men's evaluations were actually lower?

The answer to this question may lie in the different characters of these two types of areas in terms of stimulus load. Numerous studies have shown that green areas are much better adapted to human needs in terms of stimulus intensity than built-up areas. The natural environment generally sends far fewer or less intense stimuli compared to the urban environment. This is primarily due to the fact that humans have an innate tendency to seek connections with nature and other forms of life. The biophilia theory explains this relationship as key to achieving physical and mental well-being. For this reason, various natural elements (water, vegetation, natural light) are added to urban spaces to reduce stress and promote relaxation [162,163]. These elements can also help mitigate sensory overload, making us feel more relaxed and safer [164].

Green areas can help reduce physiological stress (by lowering hormone levels), which, according to another hypothesis—the Stress Reduction Theory (SRT)—can also help improve mood [165]. Moreover, exposure to the natural environment helps ease mental fatigue and regenerate cognitive resources, as discussed by Attention Restoration Theory (ART) [166]. Considering the above, it may be that in green areas, safety is more closely associated with a sense of peace and privacy, plus a reduction or lack of unwanted contact with people. The presence of children may spoil this—through noise, lack of privacy, and the possibility of accidental conflictual contact (e.g., collision with a child, accidentally being hit by a ball, etc.).

The fact that women's ratings did not change may not be because a given experimental factor has no effect but because this effect is bidirectional: on the one hand, sense of safety may be increased by defining the type of target visitor; on the other hand, it may be reduced by depriving the space of its peaceful atmosphere. Another factor may influence

the reception—namely, the children's sense of safety. In less frequented, depopulated green areas, places designed for children may seem unsafe. The reduced feeling of safety for oneself in such areas may therefore be reinforced by a sense of children's lack of safety. This perception may also be suggested by the fact that photos containing playground equipment were generally rated higher than those featuring only indirect suggestions of their presence.

The fact that the photos feature signs of children's presence who are not there may even raise concerns that children had played there in the past, but something bad happened to them. These contradictory feelings could therefore be caused by the lack of a statistically established relationship between the independent variable (experiment scenario) and the rating where different factors cancel each other out. This mechanism has been noted, inter alia, by Lis and colleagues, e.g., [31,148], who emphasise that there may be an apparent lack of relationship between variables, and this might result from the opposing effects of mediators (intermediary variables).

While women's evaluations did not change after adding the experimental factors, men gave lower ratings. However, it is possible that the mechanism by which the experimental factors affected both women and men are essentially similar, and only the strength of the opposing mechanisms is distributed differently. Perhaps women instinctively react to elements of the child's world more strongly, and these elements have a more positive meaning for them. At the same time, it is possible that they react less strongly to possible negative signals conveyed semantically by a given space—such as the possibility that one's peace may be disturbed by groups of children playing. The reasons for such reactions may lie in the evolution of women. Since bearing and raising children incurs high biological costs, they have evolved psychological traits conducive to caring and nurturing. Men, on the other hand, have evolved to prioritise finding mates and may exhibit less direct caregiving behaviour [167]. Additionally, women tend to manifest stronger empathy and emotionality, which are conducive to raising children. This heightened emotional sensitivity may affect how women respond to children [168].

4.2. How Signs of Children's Presence Affect Preference

A comparison of preference ratings for different scenarios revealed even stronger differences between women and men (hypothesis H2). For women, adding the experimental factors to housing estate areas clearly evoked positive sentiment, which was stronger in the case of the connotation scenario (confirming hypothesis H1). It can therefore be assumed that the child's style is accepted by women, and its application in housing estate areas makes women like these spaces more. This mechanism did not work for men—this style did not alter their evaluation of the area.

Differences between women and men in terms of their aesthetic perception (hypothesis H2) were also observed in the case of green areas. For women, the children's style—in the form of playground equipment or other elements—did not modify their ratings. However, for men, the differences are clear—the child's style lowers their aesthetic perception of green areas, while playground equipment (more accepted) had less of an impact than elements indirectly suggesting children's presence.

Likewise with the evaluations related to safety, here we also suspect that the mechanism by which the experimental factors affect how the aesthetics of a given space are evaluated is not clear and is multi-level. On the one hand, a certain area, especially if perceived as monotonous or unfriendly, may be positively enlivened by associations with children and their joyful world [141]. Perhaps this had a stronger effect on women than on men. On the other hand (which may be more relevant to men), stylistic deviations from coherent, uniform, or even austere forms can be perceived as disharmonious (in the case of housing estates). Furthermore, unnatural forms that disrupt natural aesthetics can

undermine the perception of spatial aesthetics. In general, natural landscapes are rated as more attractive than man-made or transformed landscapes. Artificial interventions introduced to natural landscapes generally undermine positive aesthetic impressions [169]. One reason for this is the fact that the presence of artificial elements can alter perceptual and cognitive processes, reducing the satisfaction derived from experiencing the natural environment [170]. Of course, much depends on the scale of the modifications, the degree of artificiality, and the type of natural landscape, but the fact is that major changes (including artificial additions) tend to lower the aesthetic appeal of natural landscapes [171]. Likewise, with additional colours, some additions may prove beneficial, but this depends on many factors, including context or spatial arrangement [172].

4.3. Limitations

Our study had several limitations that should be mentioned.

Firstly, we based our study on photos modified via Adobe Photoshop, whereby we added or removed elements in photos taken in the field at different times. For this reason, there may be some discrepancies—for instance, in light intensity—that may affect the consistency of the photos and thus make them difficult to assess [173].

Secondly, by using visualisation, the impact of stimuli occurring in the environment was eliminated—for example, sounds [174], weather conditions [175] and temperature [176], or other environmental factors affecting other senses in a real landscape [177]. Therefore, it should be acknowledged that the lack of influence of any real or complex environmental conditions may affect the reliability of the research findings.

Moreover, having to rely on visualisations meant that the study participants were deprived of a dynamic view [178]. They did not have a full picture of the environment because they evaluated a specific frame that they were unable to manipulate and were therefore also deprived of the opportunity to explore [179].

However, the biggest limitation, in our opinion, is the small number of scenes evaluated. As a result, we cannot determine whether the ratings were influenced by random features of the elements we added or whether these ratings would have been different had the playground forms and children's paraphernalia been different. It should be emphasised that the evaluated situations (old and new estate, landscaped and wild greenery) differed in a number of features (including those not solely due to the type of landscape—like colour differences in the photos, the area of sky, sunlight, or shaded areas. As we mentioned earlier, the different types of scenery used allow us to test the experimental factor (signs of children's presence) in different spaces. However, we cannot, with such a research plan, explicitly infer the influence of a particular feature of the space (e.g., the naturalness of the landscape or the age of the neighbourhood) on the results and conclusions about the influence of the experimental factor on the feelings of users depending on the type of space should be treated with caution. Certainly, this thread needs further in-depth research, as it indicates that perceptions such as safety or preferences depend on many, sometimes non-obvious factors [180–185].

The above limitations indicate that our research findings should be treated with some caution. The research is pioneering in nature, so it requires extension and replication. It is certainly worth considering and testing how the factors studied might work differently in further research—for example, through studies testing complex relationships (analyses of mediation or structural equations).

In addition, we analysed the individual characteristics of the participants, albeit to a limited extent. Our analyses only showed that age and place of residence do not differentiate the results. However, we do not know whether other factors, such as education,

occupation, and socio-economic status, could affect the findings. It might be worth including the omitted variables in subsequent studies.

5. Conclusions

Our analyses can be summarised by the following conclusions:

- In housing estates, spaces with the connotation of children's presence were assessed as the safest—adding children's paraphernalia to a given area did not significantly increase the sense of safety;
- In housing estates, adding signs of children's presence boosted their attractiveness, but only among women, while children's playground equipment enhanced the attractiveness ratings to a lesser extent than elements indirectly associated with children (connotative);
- Adding signs of children's presence to green areas had no effect on women's feelings, whereas among men, they undermined sense of safety and preference;
- In general, traditional features associated with children (vivid colours, playground style) have a better effect on women than on men.

Our research findings may also have some practical implications. Introducing elements clearly associated with children is worth considering in housing estates—especially in areas considered less safe. In particular, good outcomes can be achieved by adding features associated with children—for example, colours or style. These not only enhance sense of safety but also make the space more popular among women. However, introducing similar signs of children's presence—vivid colours and playground style—will not yield good results in green areas. Here, it is better to add features that do not disrupt the aesthetic appeal of nature by using natural forms.

Our article reveals that even elements such as traces of children's presence can differentiate the perception of space by adults depending on sex. These results can help create sustainable designs for housing estates and parks, making them safer and inclusive. It should be noted that the areas we studied, housing estates and parks, are key in the global effort to improve the quality of life of residents. They have become a central topic of discussions on city planning in many countries, implementing one of the Sustainable Development Goals: Make cities and human settlements safe, stable, sustainable, and inclusive. We assume that our observations will contribute to the development of further studies aimed at analysing urban environments, needs, and feelings of users living in housing estates and using park spaces.

The presented research findings should be treated as a preliminary fact-finding venture. We assume that further exploration of the topic and research replication may help formulate practical guidelines for creating, modernising, and revitalising various types of landscapes where signs of children's presence make adults feel more positive about the place. In light of the conducted research, an interesting direction for further consideration might be to seek commonality in children's and adults' perceptions and to make recommendations for participatory landscape creation.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/su17094098/s1, Supplementary A—The research plan. Supplementary B—The impact of the size of the place of residence on the assessment results. Supplementary C—Supplementary: C.1—Preliminary analyses; Supplementary C.2—Homogeneity of variances tests (Levene's test); Supplementary C.3—Comparison of ratings of the same photos in groups assessing different experiment scenarios. Supplementary D—Supplementary: D.1—Post hoc comparisons—scenario; Supplementary D.2—Comparison of ratings of the same photos in groups assessing different experiment scenarios; Supplementary D.3—Safety in the green areas—post hoc com-

parisons; Supplementary D.4—Preferences for green areas—post hoc comparisons. Supplementary E—Safety in the green areas—intra- and inter-group effect. Supplementary F—Estimated marginal means: Scenario * Place * Sex. Supplementary G: Supplementary G.1—Safety in a housing estate with a comparison of results for individual housing estates; Supplementary G.2—Preference in a housing estate with a comparison of results for individual housing estates; Supplementary G.3—Safety in green areas with a comparison of results for individual areas; Supplementary G.4—Preferences in green areas with a comparison of results for individual areas.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The authors state that data supporting the study's conclusions are available from the authors and will be made available upon request.

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