

Research Article

## The Role of Public Spaces in Promoting Social Interactions

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### Abstract

A physical space is needed to answer the social requires and create essential opportunities to gain social experiences; public space has a significant capacity to answer this aspect of human's life in societies. Therefore, considering this significant capacity and emphasis on social aspect of a human and space, this article is going to survey the effective factors on preserving community and quality of sociability in public spaces.

**Keywords:** Public spaces, community, sociability, social interactions.

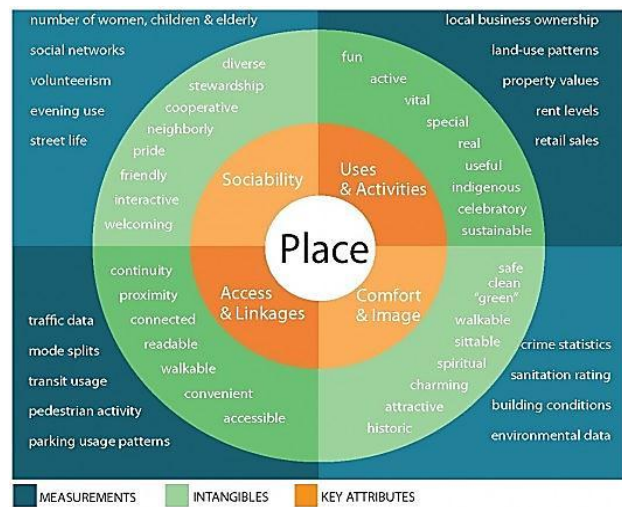
### 1. Introduction

Nowadays urban planners and designers consider human aspects of public spaces more than before and also people are more enthusiastic in participation in these spaces (Gehl, 2004). Physical quality of public spaces is the first factor to activate these spaces socially due gathering people and then keeping them in the space. Although factors such as access, visual attraction, natural elements and many others are significant, creation of social events is more important than physical features in social presence and interaction since it can provide participation opportunities in social activities and improve the sense of belonging to the place (Lennard, 1984). On the other hand, for creating successful public spaces, using their social abilities and improvement of participation opportunities in community depend on the recognition of the space, its different features and the global view of urban planners and designers.

### 2. Urban Public Spaces

Public spaces are where people and different social groups participate; they provide an opportunity for sharing thoughts and information due social nets formation. In addition public spaces are more than just an experience of a space (Hajar et.al, 2001). The result of these interactions and experiences among people will be the communal identification, self-esteem, communal skill improvement and social participation. This interpretation of public spaces about social bubbles of people is considered by urban designers and theorists (from Aristotle till now) (Douglas, 2003). Public spaces include streets, paths, squares, roundabouts, plazas, play grounds, city halls, malls, beaches and shores and other forms of spaces for

gathering or have more sociability as a result of physical and activity variety like squares and plazas (Car, 1992). As shown in figure 1 these spaces have different aspects:



**Figure 1:** The different aspects of public space PPS.org, 2000

#### 2.1 Sociability

One of the most important aspects of public spaces is creating essential opportunities for social interactions. When people interact with others, they feel stronger bond with their society and the space. This factor can be measured and evaluated by the amount of different social groups' presence, social nets and life in a day.

#### 2.2 Use and activity

Social events, type of activities and uses in the space and its ability to attract different groups of people are the most

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important factors to activate public spaces in different times and seasons, and this factor's index is the frequency of people's coming and going to the space and their participation in different activities.

### 2.3 Access and linkage

Linkage is related to circulation and spatial connections, and access is related to visibility of the space and how we reach it that Tibbalds calls it as a physical and visual access which can affect the positive function and safety of the space. Access possibility, movement and the presence of social groups such as children and senior citizens in different parts of the space, enough parking spaces and agreeable connection to transport system are important factors.

### 2.4 Comfort and image

Image is related to physical arrangement of the space and the comfort taken from the space. Durability (protection and maintenance of the space) and visual attractiveness influence the people observation to a place and mental comfort. This feature leads people to choose a space to stay, walk and experience (www.pps.org).

## 3. Human, Public Space and Community

### 3.1 Human's need of public space

Physical places are needed to provide human's need of liking and being in public spaces. Moreover, public spaces have the most capacity, but it's not possible without answering the primitive needs. A space that can attract human should provide following needs:

#### 3.1.1 Mental and physiological comfort

Since providing this quality is related to human's primitive needs, the way of answering them affects the perception of other qualities, and providing this need can be evaluated by the number of people in the space.

#### 3.1.2 Relaxation

Calm atmosphere, natural elements, privacy and ban of transportations and vehicles are the most important factors to provide this need.

#### 3.1.3 Active occupation

This need is based on people's direct connection with environment (Whyte, 1980) and shows the direct experience of the space, people and social activities such as: interaction with relatives, friends and neighbors, reunion, walking, playing, entertainment, sport, physical activities, competition... that directly play a role in agreeable mental image of the space, excitement, new experiences and environmental education.

#### 3.1.4 Passive occupation

Providing the possibility of watching people and events around is one of the most important factors to answer this need.

#### 3.1.5 Discovery and mystery

To answer human's need of complication and space discovery, creating various spaces and landscapes, various activities and attractions and causing visitors' movement through the space are effective factors.

#### 3.1.6 Visual beauty and aesthetic features

Harmony, order, space recognition and many other factors can provide visual attractions and physical and sensuous desirability.

#### 3.1.7 Social desirability caused by interactions

It is based on sociability aspect of a space which means people and groups' social presence and interactions (Loftland, 1998).

#### 3.1.8 Security

Mental and physical security is one of the basic needs of human in space that has different aspects:

- Visibility, with different activities and organized events to increase and consolidate the presence of people in the space, visual infiltration and evidence of the space can be provided.
- Environmental perception with appropriate lighting, open views, elimination of unsecure places and use of signs, which are helpful to understand people's position in the space.
- Controlling in mechanical way (Camera, gate ...), natural way (defining space and region) and organizational way (guard, police ... (Crowe, 2000) (quoted by Avila, ted).

### 3.2 Sociability and community

Community is an opportunity to feel free of daily routine tenses, passing spare time, social interactions and reunion for freedom of speech. Community in public spaces is bonded with social interactions (Sennette, 1974, 215), people absorption, social security and encouragement to increase different groups' tolerance (Whyte, 1980) in a space leads to more sociability (Marcus & Francis, 1998) and creation of an active space. Sociability in public spaces is based on people's need of the sense of social belonging and interaction, and this can happen in a supportive social space with providing physiological comfort (Lnag, 1994), region claim, sense of possession and justice in the space (Alexander, 1968), social interaction and communication may be a physical issue, a look, a conversation and a communication that are needed

to define the proper events and activities as a result of sociability and their membership in groups and social nets. On the other hand, community is affected by following forces and factors:

1. Geographical features of the public space site (climate...)
2. Physical characteristics and activities in public spaces
3. Economic aspects
4. Social health
5. Social – cultural features of the society
6. Political aspects

Pattern for spending spare time (Car et al, 1992) and also it is related to feature such as: type of dominant social activities, culture, and the time of events that take place in the space.

#### 4. Features of Sociable Public Space

In general speech, creating a successful public space that can serve people and groups needs following factors:

1. Providing region, security, and united structure, stability, being in evidence, and being able to predict the space.
2. Proper facilities in the space environmental comfort and functional.
3. Amount of information, enthusiasm and environmental excitement:

That needs complication and mystery, education, possibility of self-express, variety and contrast, choice, finding identity, privacy and sense of belonging to the space.

4. Social interactions (Avial , etd, quoted by Lars Lerups, 1972 ) among factors that are mentioned, elements such as privacy, region, being in evidence, comfort and security show physical aspect, and elements such as awareness and environmental experiences, social presence and interactions show activity aspect of the space that are going to be studied in following lines:

##### 4.1 Physical features

Physical qualities of a public space are related to the access, position, physiological comfort in different climate conditions and security. In addition, natural elements in public spaces that lead to more excitement and liveliness of the environment, and invitation of pedestrians to these spaces and possibility of relaxation, nice experiences and more health for people, also play an important role (Kaplan & Kaplan , 1998) the elements such as: monuments, stairs, ponds, and other effective factors encourage people to present and interacts in the space and they are considered as effective factors on physical improvement of public spaces (Whyte, 1980). Designing qualities such as: unity of the space, Dimensions, flexibility, geometrical form, materials, enclosing, facades, physical and spatial unity can also be helpful for space perception as a whole, so that it can have a desirable effect

on human perception. But in contrast, if following factors be neglected, present public spaces cannot fulfill the needs of sociability:

- Physical opportunities for sitting, pausing and thinking more in the space
- Focal spaces for people's gathering like: play ground, bus station, dining place ...
- Visual and physical inviting entrances and access to the space
- Prediction of practical elements beside aesthetic aspects
- Controlling the vehicles' access and pedestrians' security
- Proper spatial connections and paths to conduct people through the space which is in evidence.
- Defining facades and their identity
- Connection with transportation system
- Anticipation of attractive activities (pps,2000).

##### 4.2 Activity features

Studies show that although visual and aesthetic factors are necessary in sociability of the space, they are not enough. Functional features of a public space can affect the quality and quantity of people's absorption for interaction in these spaces. Existence of enough spaces for sitting and special events in the space like street theatres, public arts and such activities that connect the people, improve the attractiveness of the space Whyte says that in process of this events, opportunities are created for communication and conversation (Whyte, 1980, 94). However, activity aspects of public spaces are related to the function of environment (Whyte, 1980, 94). For instance, in Jane Jacobes, article called life and death of American Metropolises it is said that combining civilization with commercial and residential functions in local scale and neighborhood are one of the most important factors to improve civil life. Studies show that the public spaces in which people are occupied by watching others, sitting, dining, selling things, physical activities (Carr & Francis, 1992), cozy events (Whyte, 1980) or as (wooley, 2003) says, active and passive entertainment, are more attractive. These activities and many other physical and activity features identify the spaces and affect the amount of comfort and enjoy. Additionally, successful spaces in social interactions are the ones that support dynamic interaction, environmental education (Cahko, 2002), free information exchange in form of presentation and Skills instruction, environmental experiences, possibility of Self-expression of creativity for people and groups. This matter leads to improvement in sense of social unity and as a result more satisfaction. But it is necessary to mention that this fundamental goal for designers (Pierce, 1978) isn't achieved without considering activities in the space, interviewing people and collecting information, because they are helpful for understanding the effect of these spaces on community. And it's needed to redesign the spaces based on people's needs and qualified management

**Table 1:** various aspects of sociability and community improvement of public spaces

| Qualities           | Aspects   |   |  |
|---------------------|---|---|--|
| To be inviting      | Visual and physical access  | Functional position and functional of the space   | - Spatial and activity variety to absorb different groups<br>- Social, mental and economical<br>- Access for people with different social levels                   |
| Security            | Traffic control   | Protection against crime:<br>-Lighting<br>-Control<br>-   | -Access of special social groups<br>Climatic protection  |
| Desirability        | Scale:Sensuous and behavior effects on the space  | Possibility of enjoy in different climatic conditions   | Visual attractiveness:<br>-Desirable design<br>-View and landscape<br>-Natural elements<br>-Being in evidence  |
| Activity functional | -Possibility and continuance of pedestrian's movement<br>-Desirable rhythm of pedestrian movement | Possibility of standing and pausing:<br>-Effective edges<br>-Focal points                             | Distribution of living spaces with different patterns  |
|                     | Passive occupation (observing, ...)<br>-Desirable view<br>-Lighting                               | Interaction and conversation spaces:<br>-Benches' arrangement<br>-Acoustic comfort<br>-Friendly space | Active occupation:<br>Different activities<br>In different times   |
|                     | Variety and liveliness of educational organizations variety of usage space activation in 24 hours | restaurants and cafés   | -Spaces for cultural interaction and communication<br>-Space for street theatre, music, entertainment and retailing<br>-Democratic public spaces for everyone<br>- |

of the space in a relation to events and activities with active users of the space.

*4.2.1 Obligatory activities*

Repetitive activities that take place without considering the quality of the space like passing through the space, going to school and work and etc.

*4.2.2 Optional activities*

Activities that are possible to take place if the space is inviting, and the climate is comfortable and secure and they depend on the quality of space.

*4.2.3 Social activities*

Activities that take place when the people are present in the space such as: watching, listening, and experiencing and active and passive participation in the environment that make the space live and dynamic.

**5. Discussion**

Social aspect of public spaces is based on a triangle of human, space and community that answering these aspects need to consider the following factors:

1. Recognition of human's needs related to the space and recognition of different groups of users include:
  - Daily users: urgent activities
  - Visitors or shoppers (daily entertainment activities)
  - Entertainment visitors

- Visitors of an event (organized activities, participation and visit)
  - Different groups specially children, teenagers, youths and senior citizens
2. Recognition of physical aspects of public space and its abilities related to sociability aspect of the space include:
    - Pedestrian and vehicle's position and access, and the connection of with transportation system
    - Formation and arrangement of public spaces
    - Form, geometry, order, harmony, identity, dimension variety and ratios and other aesthetic features.
  3. Recognition of effective features on community in present cases and creating essential opportunities for social activities:
    - Evaluation and interpretation of the type and position of pedestrian activities, number of pedestrians and passerby in activities and their essential facilities
    - Survey in function of spaces in different seasons
    - Method of using public spaces
    - Conditions and characteristics of spending spare time in the city
    - Problems and obstacles for pedestrians' movement

## 6. Conclusion

Among mentioned factors about sociability, physical and activity aspects of public spaces, process of sociability and community improvement of public spaces are based on following steps:

1. State of being inviting : inviting space for different people and groups
2. Security: providing mental and physical comfort
3. Desirability: enjoying being in the space for people and social groups
4. Activity functional: active and constant social presence in the space

That it's various aspects can be presented in the table1.

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