Appropriating the city: teenagers’ use of public space

L’appropriation de la ville: les adolescents et l’utilisation de l’espace public

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Cette étude montre comment les adolescents utilisent les espaces publics de leur banlieue et leur ville pour donner une signification et un contexte à leur vie. Pendant une période de trois ans, plusieurs groupes d’amis, provenant d’une banlieue suédoise typique dans une ville moyenne au sud du pays, ont été suivis. Les méthodes utilisées étaient à la fois quantitatives et qualitatives, les plus importantes étant l’observation participative et la conduite d’entretiens-conversations structurées. Les travaux indiquent quels sont les endroits publics utilisés par les jeunes, leurs caractéristiques et la manière dont les jeunes les utilisent.


Mots clés: Jeunesse; mode de vie; espace et endroits publics; environnement urbain; rapports personne environnement.
Key words: Youth, lifestyle, public space and places, urban environment, person-environment relations.

A lot of studies discuss the consequences of suburban living on small children but little has been written about the effects of this particular physical environment on teenagers. This study seeks to determine how teenagers, 13-17 years old, use public spaces in their residential areas and their city, to create purpose and context in their existences. During a three-year period, different groups of friends from a suburb of Lund, Sweden were studied both in their housing area and in the downtown area. The various places used by these young people are described and characterized. The purpose of the study was to investigate how teenagers relate to the built environment in relation to 1) their real use of different places and environments in public areas, and 2) the symbolic significance this use has for the youths. The reason the study was limited to teenagers is because this period is an important transition in the lives of young people, who are now leaving the parental home and entering the public environment. The following issues are taken up:

- Where in the public environment do the young people congregate?
- What is characteristic for just these places? How do these places relate to their area and to the city as a whole?
- What kind of activities and actions do the teenagers engage in in these places? Why do they seek out these places? Does their use of these places differ from that of adults and other groups?
- What idea do youths have of their city, their immediate surroundings and their residential area?
- In what way do the young people use the physical environment for their development? What symbolic significance do public places and spaces have for different teenagers?

YOUTH AND MODERNIZATION

'Youth' as a category is far from uniform. It consists of many different groupings and subcultures of which each and every one has its own more or less individual styles, interests and directions (Heide 1979, Formis & Bolin 1990). In my study I chose to focus on the 'usual' teenager, the one who in modern literature belongs to the 'mainstream' culture (Brake 1987). An important starting point is to consider the young people as individuals who are active, creative and able to act, who (re)create their own environments and contexts (Willis 1990). Based on the background of sociological theories about youths, modernization and individualization (Gillis 1981, Bjurström &
Forns 1988, Ziehe 1989), and supported by theory building in social
psychology and developmental psychology (White 1956, Blos 1962, Piaget
young people today must prepare themselves for adult life. It is the task of
youth (March 1985), rather than a specific, chronological period in one’s life
span that should be the basis of the definition of ‘youth’.

This task of youth is made more difficult by the fact that this is a
period of transition for them, full of contradictions: on the one hand, they
are breaking with their childhood and their parents, while on the other, they
are qualifying and integrating themselves into the adult world. As a
teenager, one shall both liberate oneself from one’s parents and the values of
childhood and prepare oneself for the responsibilities and demands of
adulthood. It is in connection with this that the city, city life and its various
environments and contexts become important. In public life and when with
one’s pals, teenagers are confronted with different people, situations and
values. This can act as a kind of learning process to help prepare them for
what awaits them as adults.

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD CASE STUDY

The case study, which I report on in this paper, had as a starting point a
neighbourhood on the outskirts of Lund, called Norra Fladen. This part of
the town was chosen because it exemplifies a typical Swedish, residential
suburb. It is located about 2 km from the heart of the city. Its design was
greatly influenced by the same ‘neighbourhood ideal’ which was the
foundation for many of the housing areas built in Sweden during the 60’s
and 70’s. Closest to the shopping center, in the middle of the suburb, is a
green area (park) immediately behind which the various housing enclaves are
located. Since the first buildings went up in 1967, rental apartments,
tenant-ownership, terraced and free-standing houses, and student houses have
been added. This part of Lund quickly became a rather independent part of
the city, with shops, schools, day-care centers, an indoor swimming pool,
library, out-patient clinic and other municipal services. There is also a
stable, tennis hall and soccer fields in the immediate vicinity. Of the 67,141
inhabitants in Lund as of January 1, 1992, c. 8,500 of them live in Norra
Fladen. Of these, over 8% are teenagers.

METHODS

Data were collected in different ways, the most important being a teen
survey (questionnaires), essays, personal interviews and participant
observation. The approach can be described as a type of triangulation
(Denzin 1978:28), where the choice of method for data collection was
determined on the basis of the concrete issues and on which resources and
possibilities were available. The investigation was facilitated by the fact that
I have lived in the area for more than 10 years. My role as researcher varied
during the various phases of the study and changed gradually during the
three years it took: in the beginning I was an observer and regarded the
young people from a distance. As time went on, I became more and more
involved in their activities and the role of passive observer gradually changed
to that of active participant.

At an early stage in the investigation I asked 76 teenagers in three high
school classes from N Fladen to write essays about themselves and answer a
questionnaire about their free time activities and how they valued their
physical environment. I also asked them to draw mental maps (Lynch 1960,
1977) of the housing area and to point out their most important places. At a
later stage this was repeated for the center of the city. From this quantitative
part of the study, three main categories of teenagers crystallized, from which
I then chose the small groups (gangs) which I followed close-up through
behavior traces and participant observation in the qualitative part of the
study. I call the three categories 'home-oriented', 'association-oriented' and
'friend-oriented'. The type of interviews I conducted can most closely be
characterized as structured conversations (Taylor & Bogdan 1984). They
were based on a plan or set of questions determined in advance about a
number of themes and aspects. With few exceptions, the interviews were
conducted in the teenagers' own surroundings. They were made both
individually and in a group, depending on the aim of the interview. They
were taped and then transcribed verbatim. Following this they were reviewed
and sorted into different themes. In total, I interviewed 42 teenagers within
the three groups. Furthermore I made interviews with another 15 teenagers
and with 15 key persons (parents, teachers, youth recreation leaders, local
police-officers and other adults in the housing area. Public and semi-public
places in N Fladen and downtown were intensely observed over a 8-month
period (although I had been informally observing them for many years).

CLOSE-UP STUDY OF TWO GROUPS

The most important part of the field work consisted of following two groups
of teenagers from the area as a participant observer. The one group
consisted of eight girls between 14 and 17 years of age who were active in a
sports club and belonged to what I earlier referred to as the
association oriented teenagers. Five or six other teenagers of both sexes were
part of the group on and off. Most of them were active in the club but they also met often at each other’s homes. They put in much time on their homework, but were also out a lot, both in their own area and downtown. The other group consisted of a core of four boys and four girls, 15-17 years old. They met regularly at the recreation center or elsewhere in the housing area. None of them was active in any kind of association or club, and they did not spend much time on their homework. This friend-oriented group was not as stable in composition as the group of association-oriented girls: ten to fifteen other girls and boys at one time or another hung out with this group. I followed both these groups for a total of three years. Through participant observation in their most important places and with the help of repeated personal interviews, individual as well as collective, I gradually got a good picture of their everyday-life and activities at different public places.

RESULTS

The mental map study and the essays indicated that the teenagers’ individual knowledge and idea about their immediate vicinity was very good. To be sure, there were individual differences in both depth (richness of detail) and breadth (spatial spread), but the great majority presented integrated maps which were easy to interpret and orient oneself from. In general the boys made maps with more details, while the maps of the girls generally had a more artistic design. The personal relation - that is, what one has personal 

The results of the survey indicated that the N Franklin teenagers were very local in their use of public and semi-public places. They spent most of their time during the week within the suburb - preferably at home or at school, but the differences between individual persons and groups were considerable. Some teens spent almost all of their leisure-time at the local sport-club or recreation center, while others stayed home most of the time. It was almost only on weekends and holidays they went downtown. When asked to name their five most important places in order of preference, a higher percentage named private spaces - either their own or a friend’s home - than public or semi-public places (table 1). A gender comparison shows a slight female preference for private and semi-public places and a small male preference for public places, but the differences were not significant.
Figure 28.1  Teenagers’ use of time during a week.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Y (n=23)</th>
<th>A (n=23)</th>
<th>B (n=23)</th>
<th>Total (n=69)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outdoors near home</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend’s home</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping mall</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Park/green area</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Base station</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennis courts</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation center</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indoor swimming pool</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport grounds</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennis hall</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The clubs</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The library</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sum</strong></td>
<td><strong>72</strong></td>
<td><strong>74</strong></td>
<td><strong>76</strong></td>
<td><strong>222</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From the interviews and behaviour observations in the qualitative study I learned that the major meeting place for the association-oriented teenagers was the sports club and its premises. By participating in the club's trips, they came into contact with many other young people and places outside of N Fladen and Lund. They also spent time regularly at different places downtown. When they wanted to be undisturbed, they either met at someone's home (they all have their own rooms) or some less public place outside in the housing area. The friend-oriented group of teenagers used the recreation-center and the out-of-doors as their primary arena. They were well acquainted with the neighborhood and moved around freely in the entire area. In the warm months they could often be found in the square in the shopping center, where other young people from the neighborhood also gathered. Furthermore they had different 'hiding places' and 'secret places' which they could go to if they wanted to be undisturbed. They seldom went downtown.

According to the results of the qualitative part of the study - particularly concerning the young people's relationship to the built environment - the following can be stated: teenagers often try to get away from this type of one-dimensional space or else redefine it in terms of their own interests and needs. The spatial exploration of the environment was made more intensely by some teenagers than others, who instead chose other ways of finding out about social life. Also, what seems to be very important at this age is the distinction between privacy and publicity. By preference teenagers keep to stairwells, basements, corridors, corners and alleyways areas that I call close-to-home places. They also flock to border areas or localities situated 'between' different spaces. These are 'neutral' localities which connect clearly defined places, something I call fringe areas. Examples of such places in my material are the areas on the outskirts of N Fladen and the areas between the various housing groups or enclaves. A third type of place in the suburb where teenagers congregate is what I call hiding places and retreats. These are private places away from the public eye and control, for example, basement rooms, shelters, garages or concealed places out-of-doors, where the youths can be alone and create and develop their own thoughts and talents. Of particular importance for teenagers is what I call social and spatial free zones. These are created by the teenagers themselves and in general lack permanent borders. They are characterized by three things: first, there is no adult supervision and control. Second, there is no purpose or goal for anything they do. It is places for pronounced 'do nothing' culture (Corrigan 1979) but where the unexpected suddenly could happen. Third, the free zones are characterized by emancipatory patterns of action: that is, the actions taking place there are not interpreted or acted out in advance. Preferably all the actions are unique. It is not easy to give
examples of teenage free-zones because what is a free-zone to one group does not have to be one for others. But in my study some of the boys in the friend oriented group had found the secret entrance to an underground culvert system for rainwater transportation. During summertime, when the system was almost empty of water, these boys used to walk and creep into the immense pipes to explore the system and to find out who could penetrate longest (the record was 2 km). The exhilaration of exploring a unique place where no-one has put his feet before and the ambition to get the record are both important factors in this kind of emancipatory patterns of action.

The downtown area offers many possibilities which do not exist in the suburbs, for instance freedom from the watching eyes of parents, teachers and neighbours. It also offers opportunities to make acquaintance with other faces, and other threats; new scenes and games, with other rules to be learnt. Here there are also 'free zones', but they are of another nature than the ones in the suburbs. It one, like Goffman (1963), believes that the free spaces in the suburb act as retreats 'back stage', the time spent in the downtown area is rather confrontational and 'on stage'. In this way the center of the city becomes the teenagers' theater. Here they can appear in front of an 'audience'. Here they can feel the pulsating heartbeat of the city with its street life and the world of adults (at least during office hours). There is also entertainment and commerce here. The social and pedagogic function of the street must be stressed. Jane Jacobs (1965) underlines that the densely populated and functionally varying city core and city street is a positive antithesis to the monotony of the suburbs. These kinds of places develop a sense of belongingness, at the same time as they are safe and permit freedom of choice in contacts. Peter Noack (1988) suggests that public streets and sidewalks can provide the middle ground needed between private homes and teen hangouts - particularly for the sensitive group of adolescents - who might be overstressed in more active teen hangouts. Teenagers of N Fladen - especially when they appear in big groups - look sometimes strangely suspicious loitering on sidewalks "floating" between the shopping center and large parking lots, because there does not seem to be any legitimate reason for them to be there.

The youths in my two groups had completely different relations with the downtown. While the teenagers in the friend-oriented group stayed almost exclusively in the suburb where they felt secure and could act like "kings", the association-oriented girls in the girls' group stayed in the center of the city or in other places outside the suburb much more often. In this way they acquired a different view of the world around them and a different spatial experience than the more locally oriented teens. The girls often took the bus downtown to go window shopping or just stroll around. They were drawn in particular to places with life and movement, gathering places for
other people, what I call strips: for example, pedestrian streets and passages.
Sometimes they joined the crowds at one of the city's discos, cafes or
hamburger joints, some being 'in' places. I call these hang-out.

Due to their age and their lack of funds, teenagers are often excluded
from different entertainments and places. All that remains for them is the
streets and public places, which they take over and temporarily turn into
their own 'living rooms' or home areas (Lofland 1973). This phenomenon of
temporarily converting parts of public areas to private ones often causes
irritation and conflicts with adults and other groups who feel they also have
the right to be there. One example is a square in the middle of the city
which has become the special stamping grounds for a gang of punks.
Motorcycle gangs and 'hot-rod' hang out in other squares in the city. At
times, and especially on Friday and Saturday nights, they more or less take
over the entire square. The same phenomenon occurs in # Plaids when the
teenagers in the friend-oriented group turn the square in the shopping center
into their home area. The mechanisms of this process and how the youths in
different ways defend the home area from intruders is developed with the
help of the term territorialization (Lynn & Scott 1967; Petersson 1990).

The different places I have described above can be more or less
public. They are more or less open and accessible for teenagers and their
endeavor to come in contact with other groups. The variety of places the
teenagers seek, have spatial as well as social qualities that to a greater or
lesser extent fulfill the requirements and needs of the group. Hiding places,
close-to-home places and fringe areas are backstage places teenagers seek
primarily to avoid public control and adult observation. The most important
activities that may appear at these places is about the relations within the
teenage group. The spirit of community and tie together with other teenage
friends have high priority. Hang-outs, strips and favourite places are the kind
of on stage places where the teenagers themselves want to control adult
observation and public entrance. At these places the group as a collective is
emphasized. Potential conflicts tend to be about the relations between the
group and other groups of teenagers or adults outside the collective.

One of the most important aspects of teenagers' use of public spaces is
the possibility to control and shape their own existence without adult control.
This is a part of the modernization and individualization process in the sense
that young people today must take their own responsibility for their future
life. Because of their relative lack of free space (they have not yet reached
the age of driving licences) they are more dependent on the neighbourhood
and the local spaces than most other groups. To be sure, my results show
that different kinds of teenage groups can be more or less limited in space.
The members of the friend-oriented group were much more bound to the
local environment than for instance the association-oriented teenagers. But
whether they stay in the neighbourhood or in the city centre the teenagers almost always find places and situations that correspond to their needs and preferences. If there are no such places, they "recreate" the existing places, to give them new meanings and contents.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DESIGN AND PLANNING

There is a lot of open space in N Fladen, especially compared with the usual residential area. Foot and bike paths criss-cross through the area. There are open, free spaces and parks between the different housing enclaves. Parks represent a gathering place for a specific group of teenagers but with most parks hidden behind a curtain of trees, bushes and other vegetation, they do not provide a place for teenagers to look out and not be seen - no one can see in or out. Also, the large amount of space covered by parks in N Fladen serves no legitimate function at night and thus becomes deserted. One thing that all these spaces and areas share is that they are permanent, often functionally one-dimensional and intended for one specific type of activity. As I earlier stated, teenagers often try to avoid or redefine this type of places. They value a variety of places including natural and undeveloped landscapes, places where they can be alone and where they can look out and not be seen, gathering places, unsupervised yet safe places, accessible places and places they can call their own.

The problem with N Fladen, from the teenagers' point of view, is not that it is over-designed and that it really needs less design. Rather it is that N Fladen is poorly designed, both for teenagers and for human public interaction in general. Places where teenagers can feel independent while in an adult setting should be located within walking distance of their homes and should be safe. Commercial areas and streets, with a mixture of people and a diversity of activities, are ideal settings for these objectives. But when a commercial area or shopping center is separated from housing areas, public streets or main foot paths and left deserted during evenings and nights, the opportunity is lost for them to become truly legitimate hangouts. Instead, it is of great importance that these places have close contacts with a street or main foot paths where people are moving. Parks as well should not be hidden from view. Illegitimate behavior and criminal activities would be less likely in highly visible places.

CONCLUSIONS

To a great extent the analysis has consisted of characterizing the different places young people use. This characterization ultimately resulted in a
number of new concepts and categories. The terms used previously can be called "sensitizing concepts" (Blumer 1954) and can be gathered under two umbrella terms: places for retreat and places for interaction. Places for retreat are places where you can get away, both from other teenagers and from adults. Places for interaction are associated with places where you can see and be seen and where there is life, variation and possibilities to meet with other people, strangers as well as friends. The stability and the pattern of the local teenage environment depend a great deal on the access to this type of place.

One conclusion which can be drawn from the study is that young people need different types of places with different spatial and social characteristics. From the teenagers point of view and with references to Norberg Schulz (1980), I think it is relevant to talk about the city as an "existential room", as a sequence of multifunctional places. Alexander (1966) and Osth (1987) are some of those who have emphasized the importance of such gradual transition zones in the urban context. Despite the home-centred Swedish culture, the "over-planning" in the cities and the poor planning in the suburban housing areas, my study has shown that teenagers still find backstreet places for retreat and onstage places for interaction. They create their own home areas and free zones in the public environment, to a large extent dependent on the fact that they have nowhere else to go.

Together with a few other groups (immigrants and yuppies), youths appear as one of the most important actors in the public space. According to this view, there are two major developments of the public city life that should be discussed. The first is what can be called "the dangerous city" (Bruni 1992), where the picture of the street as a breeding ground for destructive actions, criminality and violence emerges. An interesting question is what happens if we minimize or exclude the presence of free-zones and back street places for young people. Probably, not all of them will go into the "norm zone"; engaging themselves in institutionalized activities. On the contrary, some of them will probably enter the "forbidden zone" and land up in criminal activities. The second development of city life, sometimes referred to as the "Fuss city" (Oosterman 1992), is one of an enriching environment where young people can meet, be together and get inspiration and strength to meet the demands and expectations of adult life. Young people have discovered more and more possibilities in the city. They see it as a resource and use it for many different things - to see and be seen, to hide, to learn and to acquire qualifications in order to create something of their own.

Notes

1 The complete results from this study are presented in my doctoral dissertation (Lund, 1994).
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