



Public spaces: urban landscapes renewal

A cultural approach for design focus

Amsterdam South East is a potential area for future development projects, including its multicultural Bijlmer District. To improve the image and environment of this urban landscape, a renewal project has been proposed to revitalize the living, recreational, functional and socio-cultural spaces of the area.

This article provides an insight of this public space based on people's use, meaning, multiculturalism and attachment to it. It also explores how culture can be a design tool for renewing public spaces' images. Physical and social spaces are the arenas for this analysis. The main links between public space, people, culture and design are presented.

Public spaces are important elements of cities in order to provide areas of recreation and relaxation for people. Revitalization of these spaces will contribute to transform an ordinary space to a pleasant place, where outdoor activities will attract people to enjoy life in urban landscapes.

Experiences in public spaces have an impact on people's reaction to return or stay in a place. Their perception and image of the space is related with the importance given to the qualities of the environment, which could have fundamental effects on spatial behaviour and the distribution of activities as sitting, talking, walking or staying (Zacharias, 2001).

The main objective of my thesis was to analyze the use and meaning of public spaces by people in their daily life. Consequently, how people's culture can change through design experiences, the image of public spaces and their own attachment.

How public spaces work?

Dynamics of urban landscapes provide hints to understand how public space works, which activities and attached meanings are bonded to these spaces. Social life is performed into public as well as private places (Whyte, 1980, Gehl and Gemzøe 1996). There are two main scopes that make a public space alive: physical dimension (built environment) and the social dimension (people). Four criterias that play a fundamental role in understanding how a public space works are: uses and activities to be performed in that

space; comfort and image, in order to attract visitors and provide an enjoyable place to be; access and linkages, a well oriented pedestrian network; and mainly sociability, presence of people.

Culture, Meanings and Sense of Place

Public spaces are also stages of cultural scenery (Pagliai, 1988; Maya, 2001), where meanings and values are shared at the public arena influencing the environment, people and socio-cultural customs. Public spaces can contain different meanings from cultures and social groups, but it also explains how this meaning represents identity and values for people. Cultural meanings of spaces are related to lifestyle and people's identity. The meaning that people attribute to a place is strictly linked with their culture, in terms of values and attachment, their sense of place is developed into the idea of belonging to that place.

Culture and place can be expressed in terms of attachment and sense of place. Altman & Low (1992) describe it as the "bonding of people to places", that might contribute to a sense of place, nurture the local pride and stimulate learning about the place.

Likewise identity and collective cohesion facilitates "cultural mobility" (Hajer and Reijndorp, 2001), in terms of social networks and freedom of expression. Dynamics of public spaces can be shaped through cultural interventions, like living squares as cultural phenomenon's, and experienced in different ways. This analysis is enriched with multicultural so-

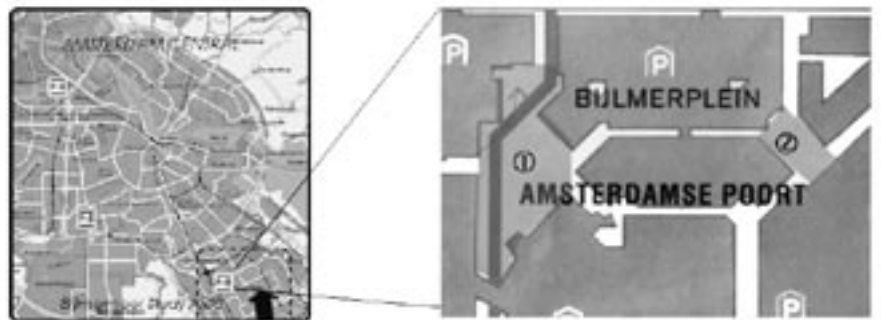


Figure 1: Study area, the Bijlmermeer district.

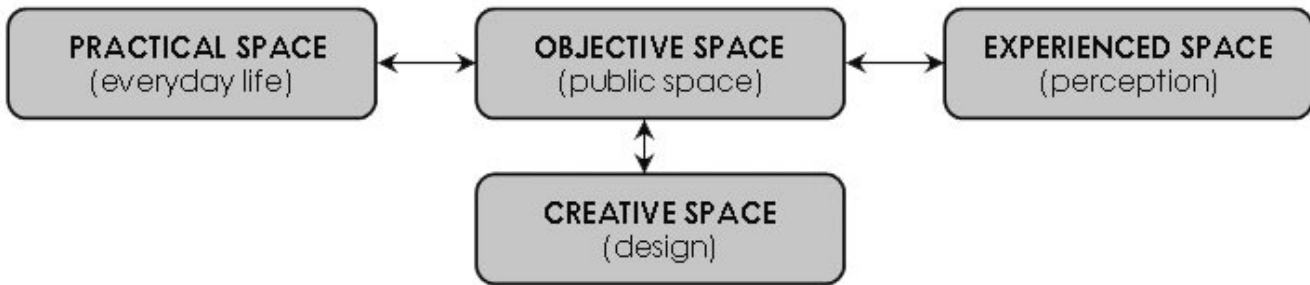


Figure 2: The relationship between the different kind of spaces.

cities, where the representation in spatial practice can be linked to the exchange of values, beliefs, food, music, experience, language and meanings.

Design for multiculturalism

Design can contribute to enhance and facilitate the integration of public spaces in a socio-cultural realm. It can also generate a starting point to recover forgotten people's values and create a sense of community, places for setting cultural and social activities.

In practice, design has made much use over time and across cultures of traditional forms reinterpreted or reproduced, including recognizable layouts as well as symbolic and representational design elements (Zacharias, 2001 p. 12). The linkage between functionality and aesthetics in a multicultural environment can create a more interesting design, considering the richness of the cultural values of the users of that space. What people imagine and see in the public spaces in terms of their own urban landscape appreciation and interpretation can be valuable for designing purposes. Successful environments are those places which are designed with the pedestrian needs kept in mind.

Core elements of the dynamics of public spaces

Nowadays squares, gardens, parks, shopping malls, markets, playgrounds, streets and open spaces can be identified in the social life of urban landscapes as enclaves of culture and social domain. Figure 2 gives a general overview of these enclaves in real life and how places function in

practice. The scheme describes the relationship between the objective space (public space and urban landscapes), the practical space (people's everyday life) and the perceived space (people's culture experience). Moreover the figure shows how the different spaces could be transformed through a creative space.

The Street of 1000 Cultures

The study area of my thesis is Amsterdam South East, the Bijlmermeer District. It is part of an urban design and renewal project from the municipality and different organisations. Two squares in this area are the centre elements in my analysis. The main project for the renewal and urban design development is the "The Street of 1000 Cultures"¹. Participation of users and residents was an objective of the project. The interest is to analyse and understand the link between people's culture and design practice to revitalize urban landscapes.

Research was carried out in the framework of a qualitative survey and quantitative analysis. Observational methods were applied and descriptive statistics. Public space analysis was structured in physical and socio-cultural spaces: functionality and aesthetics.

Gathering of data was restricted to the Bijlmer squares. Data was collected through a survey conducted among users; questionnaires with open end questions were obtained. Surveys were distributed over weekdays and weekends, at different hours of the day. Interviews were collected from users and experts of the surrounding areas. Statistical analysis was

done in order to evaluate the differences between observed and expected frequencies in ethnic groups' analysis.

Users' assessment

People from Bijlmermeer understand their environment through a multicultural perspective. In this sense, the survey showed an interest and a common denominator in people's image and meaning of the Bijlmermeer relating them to "multiculturalism". An interesting finding was the fact that people perceive these squares as part of "their home extension", because they found out many features and symbols that remind them at their countries of origin. People's meaning was *Space to Socialize* and *Shopping time* representing the 28% and 21% of users, respectively. Patterns of use reported were *socialization, shopping and sit or talk* (Figure 3). Concerning people's image of the squares, 41% identified themselves with a *multicultural society*, evidencing the variety of ethnic groups in the area.

Dutch, Surinamese's and Antilleans, Asians, Africans and Latin people were asked to assess qualities people would like to find in this public space. Two main categories were designed: 'likes' and 'dislikes'. However, results should be interpreted carefully, due to small sample size but mainly because the lack of security for the observer during night time. In this assessment, the 'likes' category was related with what people like to do: is their experience pleasant, which image and meanings provide a sense of place through the experience, how used is this space,

and how design can be a clue factor to attract people to visit the place and stay there in terms of functionality, safety, aesthetics and furnishing.

On the contrary, 'dislikes' category was related with what people would not like to experience and if there is not any meaning or lack of value for their environment perception, why the space is not used and what is lacking in the public space. Issues concerning bad image, unsafe atmosphere and un-functionality were the main factors to evaluate among respondents.

Results showed no significant value for 'likes' and 'dislikes' qualities, respectively, assessed on every ethnic group responses. Based on these results it was decided to analyze the data without ethnic groups as a class variable to see if there was going to be a change in the values, and it would explain if people in general would have the same choices for public spaces in common matters. The results showed that there were differences between categories, which give importance to the assessment of people to spatial and visual elements (Zukin, 1995) and functionality. There are big concerns about security, image and antisocial behaviour.

At the Bijlmer squares, the need for social interaction and experience of the urban landscape is implicit (Altman and Low, 1992), but also the recognition of a multicultural space. Public spaces created by societies serve as reflections of their public and practical values. Findings also indicated that people perceive the public space with a sense of attachment and shared meanings, developing stronger

sense of place (Demerath 2003) and between people and places.

Projects proposed from the "Street of 1000 Cultures", made people to represent their own culture: patterns, sculptures, artwork, transforming the urban landscape. Cultural barriers do not affect the choice related with functional and aesthetic values of public spaces.

Conclusions

Public spaces are socially constructed by people and are full of representations and experiences. People in the Bijlmer visualize their environment in terms of multiculturalism and socialization; therefore shared meanings and values can provide a sense of place and enhance the ties between cultural issues.

Cultural background does not always play a significant role in using and evaluating public spaces, but people in general have more common perspectives (Risbeth (2004). For a multicultural design besides considering the cultural background of users, designers should think more about the functionality and the aesthetics of the space as clue factors to create and design a public space, to make it attractive and moreover successful in time.

Projects presented in "Street of 1000 Cultures" reflected the cultural identity of the designers, the local residents and users, like the African market, the botanical garden and the Portrays of different cultures.

Culture is alike everywhere in terms of using and accessing public space. Nevertheless, a public space can be identified by the richness and design features embedded in the cultural symbols and

aesthetics representations through artworks as a mean of communicating and free expression of any culture.

Factors that undermine the use of public spaces are poor design, poor management, traffic, antisocial behaviour and crime and lack of facilities. Factors that contribute to enhance the public realm were: spatial aesthetics, functional spaces and safety features.

The present research project contributes to the analysis of public spaces with the methodology presented, which can be replicable in any other space. Finally, urban renewal and management policies could create better spaces by implementing design and planning strategies concerning the functional, aesthetics and security issues for public spaces. The goal is a radical improvement in the quality of urban landscape and therefore people's life.

This article is based on a thesis by Daisy Bravo (2005) in Socio-spatial analysis which is part of her Master of Science program 'Landscape Architecture and Planning' at Wageningen University.

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¹ This project was originated with the idea that users and residents of the Bijmermeer could have a direct intervention with the transformation of their environment. A Design Project Concourse where people could explore their creativity through their own cultural identity as a symbolism of a multicultural society.

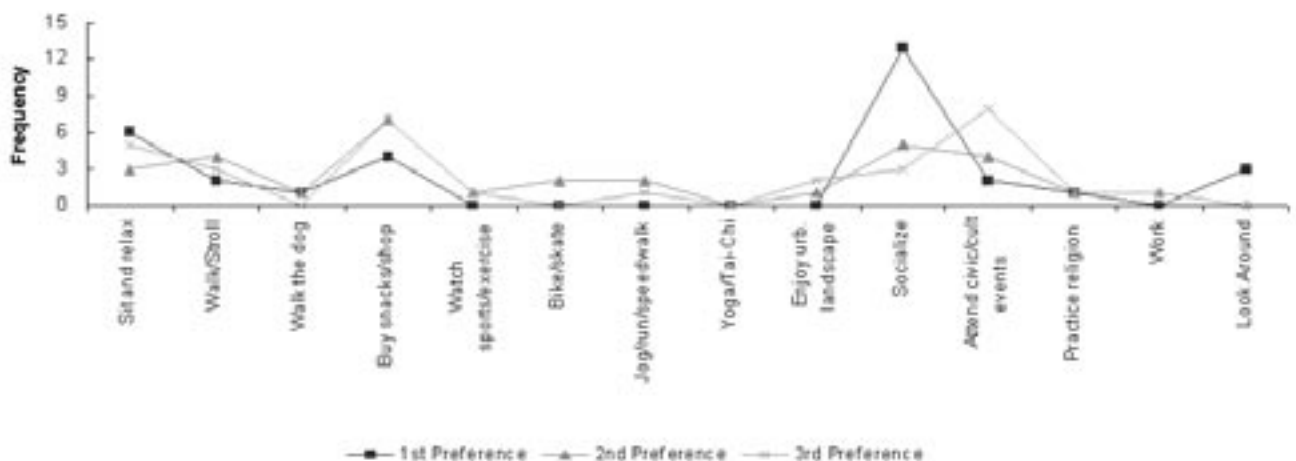


Figure 3: The frequency of preferred activities that were mentioned by users of the public space.