

Enhancing the use of public spaces in cities

Charged by policy-makers with increasing community cohesion, civic identity and quality of life, expectations of public space are high. But is public space living up to its potential? This year-long investigation set out to find the shared spaces within three British cities, looking at a broad range of places (such as parks, shopping centres and civic spaces) that support public life through social interaction. The study, by Melissa Mean and Charlie Tims of Demos, found that:

- The issues that affect people's use of public spaces include the resources at their disposal, social norms and their individual values. Some people are highly mobile and confident in moving around their cities; others remain constrained by where they live or work.
- Many of the places that best supported sharing and exchange were not traditional public spaces. While parks and markets were often important, a wider range of places including car boot sales, allotments and supermarket cafés could also be significant social hubs.
- These more successful spaces showed that certain factors could stimulate interest and engagement between different groups of people. These factors included opportunities for novelty and surprise or for performance and display.
- Those spaces that most encouraged shared use included those which: left room for self-organisation, encouraged a broad range of users by encouraging diverse activities, and made spaces accessible at all times of the day.
- The researchers conclude that:
 - 'Public space' should not be defined by aesthetics or ownership rather by whether it can provide a shared space for a diverse range of activities created by a range of different people. In theory, any place, regardless of its ownership or appearance, offers this potential.
 - Spaces that support sharing cannot be created by designers and architects alone. Public space works best when it is 'co-produced' by the people who control or manage the space and those who use it; only then can it fulfil its democratic promise.
 - Policies which foster *social* behaviour might do more to create shared spaces and increase interaction in public spaces than regulating anti-social behaviour.



Defining public space

While we used to be fairly confident about finding the public life of our towns and cities in our parks, streets and squares, the rise of privately owned malls, out-of-town shopping centres and the 'virtual landscapes' of the Internet has cast doubt on old assumptions. This study set out to locate the shared physical spaces of interaction and exchange that support the public life of three cities: Cardiff, Preston and Swindon.

Current Government policies for public space in the UK are concerned with using investment in public spaces to regenerate places and making our outdoor spaces 'cleaner, safer and greener', focusing on their design and management. While there are some positive effects, increasingly public space is being pulled in opposite directions. At one end, the core ideal of public space – free and open access to all – is being undermined by a focus on safety. This is creating bland spaces with no real ability to draw in or retain people. At the other end, the increasing diversity of individual lifestyles is splintering public spaces into a patchwork of specialised enclaves, defined by income, age, ethnicity and taste.

People's views of public spaces

The research found that a new town square could be carefully – and expensively – designed but this was no guarantee that people would use it. Greater understanding is needed of the diverse motivations, needs and resources that shape people's capacity and desire to use urban spaces.

The researchers identified ten broad types of users of public space, covering a range of age, income and activities. The resources people have at their disposal (both time and money), their social norms and their individual values were important in shaping these patterns. The following three examples show how usage differs.

Urban safarian

"We went out last night – went to all the new bars and that on the quayside. Then we went down Bute Town for some spit and sawdust places – the real Cardiff."
(White man, 50s, Cardiff)

'Urban safarians' track down different places and types of places in search of novelty and authenticity. Their tastes are eclectic, but they tend to have a few favourite places that they think of as their 'locals' even if these are not actually near their homes. They take pride in knowing their cities and generally want to share their knowledge and their city.

Displayer

"I don't know their names but we've checked each other out. I've seen him before, him, him, him, that kid there, and her." (White male, teenager, Cardiff)

'Displayers' prefer to be in town than in the confines of home. They use any public space as their theatre, often finding unpromising corners to make their own. Everything about them – dress, body language, ring tones – is designed to be expressive, often aimed at impressing the opposite sex or their friends. They can bring a liveliness to public spaces and leisure venues but can be seen as territorial, making others feel unsafe.

Home birds

"Mostly I go round friends' houses, or they come to mine. If you don't drink alcohol there's not much you can do here." (Asian woman, 20s, Swindon)

'Home birds' focus on their homes, their work and essential tasks, such as going to the supermarket. Their significant places tend to be away from their hometown, centring on pleasant resorts or the homes of loved ones and family. Some feel constrained into conducting their social life around their own homes or those of friends and family, as social pressures or prejudice make them feel uncomfortable elsewhere.

From public space to public experience

In tracking the diverse uses of public spaces, the researchers identified ten different hubs of public life. These included an allotment, an arts centre, a supermarket café, a library, a youth centre, a park, a car boot sale, an adult learning network (University of the Third Age) and a skate park. The places supported different kinds of experience for different visitors. What made these spaces public was not who owned them, their physical design or aesthetic appearance. Instead, a better guide to whether a particular location was valued as a public space was whether it was actively used and shared by different individuals and groups. The following three examples give some insights into what experiences can foster social spaces.

Car Boot Sale, Preston

A twice-weekly bustling bazaar in the centre of the city, the car boot sale exemplifies:

- *Belonging*: people frequently bump into others they know, as well as passing the time of day with strangers. People easily share common interests and passions, such as books, antiques or old records.

- *Novelty and surprise*: the car boot sale is different every time, depending who is there. People liked the sense of exploration and that they might ‘discover’ something they had not seen before.
- *Different roles*: there are no fixed roles: shoppers can become traders with relative ease. Buying and selling is very active; picking up bargains requires knowledge and bartering is the norm.
- *Empathy*: seeing other people’s things gave visitors a glimpse into other people’s lives which, short of actually walking into someone’s home, they could not find anywhere else.

The University of the Third Age (U3A), Swindon

A self-organising network of study groups for retired people, groups can pop up in people’s homes, community centres or the spare room of public or private organisations anywhere with spare space they can occupy. The U3A offers people:

- *Confidence and learning*: the rationale behind the U3A is to share knowledge and learn new things. There is no established curriculum or restriction over the topics that groups should choose to learn about.
- *Mutuality*: the U3A is entirely self-created. It depends as much on the people who attend the groups as the people who run them, with a fluid distinction between leaders and learners – everyone is a participant.

Llanllyshannan Skate Park, Cardiff

A social hub for young people from across the city, the skate park enables:

- *Performance*: the skate park is first and foremost a space for people to perform for their friends and for the opposite sex. For example, many young men went home when the girls did: there was no point in being there if the girls were not around.
- *Autonomy*: the skate park provides a free space where skaters and observers can hang out with little interference from anyone else, particularly adults.

Placing the emphasis on how people use public space means that its public nature can be measured in terms of its ability to provide a platform for the creation of different types of experience by different people.

Ways of developing public space

Drawing on these ten hubs of public life, the researchers developed a number of principles for increasing the public use and public value of public, private and civic spaces. They also suggest ways in which these principles might be put into action.

These principles do not apply just to designers, town planners and architects. They may also require action from central government and local authorities, as well as civic and community organisations, commercial developers and businesses such as supermarkets and shopping centres. But any action will only be effective if it involves the everyday collaboration, participation and leadership of the people using public space. The report sets out these principles in full; three key examples follow.

Leave room for self-organisation

Many of the successful hubs of public life in Cardiff, Swindon and Preston dissolved the divide between the user and the authority controlling the space. They encouraged users to create activities for themselves and other users.

From policy into practice: Resources to promote activity

More flexible approaches to planning gain than conventional Section 106 agreements are currently being developed by central and local government. These include the proposed ‘roof tax’ to fund expansion in the Milton Keynes area: developers may be expected to pay a levy of around £20,000 per new house for building schools, hospitals, roads and other facilities. A similar approach could be adopted in other new-build areas, with a proportion of the fund set aside to provide resources to stimulate activity and participation in the public realm. This could be important for building a sense of social cohesion and belonging in new communities.

Diversify activities to encourage diverse people to participate

In the cities visited, the places that struggled tended to be spaces where only one type of activity or one type of user participated. People tended to feel more uneasy or even threatened when a space was dominated by a single group of people engaging in one type of activity.

From policy into practice: Public experience audit

A local-authority-led audit of the quality and range of public experiences within its area could help to identify the relative strengths of areas, enabling planners and other stakeholders to gain a view of the overall quality of the city’s public space network. This could help them locate where the domination of certain groups in public space needs to be balanced with the encouragement of others.

Maximise access and availability

Most of the hubs of public experience were available either all the time (as they were open spaces) or had long opening hours. The best spaces were essentially 'on tap'. All the spaces were either free or very low cost in terms of the activities or services on offer.

From policy into practice: Extended malls

The Extended Schools Initiative increases the role of schools in their communities by expanding their opening hours so that children can take part in more out-of-school activities and other community organisations can use school facilities. Shopping malls represent another underused resource and their use could be extended past their usual closing time. Shopping malls could offer a safe and familiar environment for a range of additional evening activities, such as tea dances, art classes, and other activities designed to appeal to groups of people that may currently be underserved. Business Improvement Districts could take the lead on developing extended malls in partnership with local community groups.

Conclusion

The researchers suggest that the public life of places does not principally derive from their aesthetic design or who owns them but from a combination of the quality of interaction between the people who use them and those who own or manage them. Realising the full social potential of public space requires taking account of the range of people's individual values and resources as well as various social norms. Public spaces need to engage with and cater for people in all their diversity of needs, aspirations, backgrounds and resources.

The public nature of our towns and cities is created by the interaction of people and their environment and would be impossible without people's everyday participation. Far from being delivered in isolation by an architect's design brief or the council's maintenance team, public spaces are 'co-produced'. This idea holds out a potentially powerful way forward in terms of closing the persistent gap between the promise and reality of public space, and countering the negative trends that are currently perceived to be undermining public space. Co-production:

- helps to counter the decline in trust in other people's behaviour by generating broader ownership of public space as well as exchanges between people;
- achieves inclusion, but not at the cost of blandness. Because co-produced spaces are partly self-organised, they tend to be much more flexible, responsive and therefore more able to meet diverse needs simultaneously;
- can work in a range of environments – public and private – to improve their quality.

About the project

This study is the first in a programme aiming to improve our understanding of how people use public spaces. It was a qualitative study including:

- interviews with 15-20 stakeholders from civic, public and private sector organisations in each city;
- nearly 700 interviews with members of the public in a range of public spaces in the three cities;
- in each city three focus groups with: people over 65, gay people aged 18-40, and people from black and minority ethnic groups aged 18-30;
- in-depth studies of five public spaces in each city.

For further information

The full report, **People make places: Growing the public life of cities** by Melissa Mean and Charlie Tims, is available as a free download from www.demos.co.uk or to buy from Central Books (mo@centralbooks.com; 020 8986 5488) for £10. For more information about demos, see www.demos.co.uk.

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