findings

Social interactions in urban public places

In town centres and local neighbourhoods, public spaces provide social arenas for all kinds of people – residents, workers, shoppers, visitors, and children at play. This study draws on research by Caroline Holland, Andrew Clark, Jeanne Katz and Sheila Peace at The Open University, with the involvement of community researchers. They observed interactions between people of different ages across one year in Aylesbury, a town in a growth region of South East England. The study found that:

- Different age groups tend to use public spaces at different times of day and for different reasons. Older people and children in particular appeared to be influenced by the presence of other age groups. Older people are frequently absent from public places, especially after dark.

- In addition to the social function of public spaces, some people use them for privacy or to support a sense of territorial ownership – this particularly applies to groups of young people and marginalised groups.

- Places acquire reputations (fairly or unfairly) that persist and affect whether and how people use them. But people are drawn to spaces that offer interest, stimulation, comfort and amenity. These aspects can positively change reputation and overcome the physical barriers experienced by some users.

- Management can enable a broader spectrum of the community to use public spaces by providing and maintaining basic comfort amenities such as seating, lighting, and toilets.

- Regulatory approaches range from strong intervention to light touch, reflecting different emphases on security and reputation. But there is also a need for spaces that are unregulated.

- Issues are not solved by moving on people and activities that are deemed undesirable or out of place – this merely moves the perceived problem somewhere else and discourages integration.

- The researchers conclude that public spaces retain a democratic and civic function, alongside commercially driven uses. They suggest that policy-makers can support this by encouraging diversity and harnessing people's tendency to 'self-regulate' to avoid conflict: over-regulated environments are not conducive to vibrancy and integration.

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Background

How do people of different ages, gender, culture and status really interact within public spaces? Do different types of space encourage a variety of interactions? How do the seasons, day of the week and time of day affect their use? This study sought to answer these questions in Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire (population c.69,000), a town with a range of different public spaces within a compact centre. Aylesbury is part of a growth area and therefore faces challenges in developing its public spaces for an expanding population with a range of needs.

The research was carried out in green open spaces, town-centre squares and shopping streets, indoor shopping malls, and two residential areas with small shopping centres.

How people used their public spaces

People of different ages, ethnicities, cultures and class were often seen at the same time in the town-centre market squares and the high street. While most residents and visitors used these places to encounter both difference and familiarity, there could be disincentives for some groups. In particular, older people and many under-18s were discouraged from using the cobbled market square and redeveloped piazza-style square at night because of the dominance of bars and clubs based around these areas.

Two town-centre shopping malls provided protection from the weather: people used them all year round for shopping, leisure and meeting others. At predictable times of the working day, people also passed through on their way to and from work, school, and other business. These were the town's most highly regulated publicly accessible places – certain groups were encouraged and others discouraged. Although young people were drawn to these centres, they were often asked to leave by security guards because they tended to socialise in large groups.

The use of green open spaces was most affected by the seasons, time of day and prevailing weather and light conditions. The municipal park and the canal basin towpath were both places where people could spend time without spending money, and behave in less formal and sometimes more intimate ways. Unlike the commercial town centre, these areas were not highly regulated, which gave them an uncomfortable edge of insecurity for some people, but which attracted others. Regular users included people who were 'excluded' from many town-centre meeting places, either by prices (e.g. in coffee shops) or because they were underage, barred or discouraged. Certain groups of young people, and

a group of street drinkers, homeless and unemployed people, used the municipal park all year round.

In two residential areas, local centres with shops provided physical focal points but their use differed between the older housing estate and a newer, more affluent, urban 'village'. On the whole, use of the newer housing area's public spaces was much less visible. Relationships between adjacent neighbourhoods were sometimes played out in these places, with different groups of young people asserting territoriality and adults re-claiming it.

Use of public spaces by different age groups

People in their 20s and 30s dominated parts of the town centre at night, within an economy based on pubs and clubs. In contrast, older adults were present in the town centre mainly in the mornings and early afternoon, but strikingly absent almost everywhere by evening. Older people said they avoided many public places, especially after dark, because of inadequate facilities and transport, security concerns, and a lack of interesting activities appropriate for their age group.

Young children were rarely unaccompanied in the town centre, but older teenagers and young people gathered in large groups in all of the public spaces, especially out of school hours and during holidays. In interviews, these large gatherings were cited as off-putting for others and a likely source of bad behaviour and petty crime. Examples of specific pressure points included street skate-boarding and large groups gathering in shopping centres. However, the young people regarded these gatherings as essential to their social lives and felt their discouragement from town-centre locations was unfair and discriminatory. These public places provided neutral ground away from home and direct adult surveillance, so for many younger people they were essential for self-expression and development of social skills.

There was little interaction between generations, particularly between strangers. Groups of different ages tended to avoid contact, often by occupying different sections of the same space. This minimised the potential for conflict, but represented a distinct separation between the public lives of younger and older people.

Managing and regulating public spaces

The persistence and influence of reputation was an important aspect of place identity, and a matter of underlying concern for those managing the street scene. People commented on Aylesbury's reputation based both on media representations of events and on the physical

attributes of the town's public spaces. Some locations had specific reputations of their own; for example the older-established local neighbourhood centre had a reputation for petty crime and disorder. Where safety was perceived as an issue, local authorities had taken steps to manage particular spaces, frequently through regulation and surveillance – community safety officers had been appointed to patrol the suburban centres, and police attended the late-night clubbing area in the town centre, where street drinking was controlled. Regulation also took the form of signs prohibiting a range of activities in the park, where there was also a park-keeper during the day. As an early part of the town centre's regeneration, the redevelopment of the piazza-style square aimed for a different, more reputable public space, and alterations in design were used as a management technique to improve the area's identity.

However, attempts at regulation by authorities were not necessarily effective. For example, some new notices in the park, prohibiting activities such as cycling and playing ball games on the grass, were generally ignored by regular park users. The study underlined the importance of self-regulation as another source of public order. While all observed sites showed some competition for space, there was little overt conflict between different groups – individuals and groups generally accommodated the presence of others.

People often managed to co-exist in public areas through self-segregation – sitting apart from those they didn't know or occupying different parts of a place. Provided that public spaces are as inclusive as possible, allowing people to be alongside others both similar and different to them, this self-segregation can contribute to community development.

This study emphasises the essential tension in public spaces between the need to 'live and let live', and the need to manage and regulate. Successful management needs to involve constant negotiation between the extremes of over-regulation and laissez-faire approaches. Public education, information and involvement are essential to this process. The research suggests the need for some gradation of security, drawing on community support and harnessing the general inclination of people to self-regulate to avoid conflict.

Developing, designing and regenerating public spaces

The physical attributes of the observed places contributed to their local reputations and the ways that different groups used them. The provision (or lack) of toilets, suitable seating, lighting, car parking and signage

influenced people's attitudes to the public spaces. Inadequate provision of these facilities discriminated against some groups more than others – for example older people, those with young children, and people with disabilities were disproportionately affected by the lack of public toilets in the town centre.

The study suggests the following are important elements in planning for inclusion:

- design that aims to include people of all social strata and age groups (including children and older people);
- design and management that draws on public consultation and involvement; and
- spaces with a range of security regimes.

Regeneration of public spaces is often a key aspect of plans to revive town centres. The study observed how groups and individuals reinterpreted two new public spaces: a regenerated town-centre square, and a new 'urban village' suburb. In the latter, residents were generally satisfied with the physical environment, yet for most of the time, the public spaces were devoid of people or activity, except for undesired ones such as youths hanging around the bandstand: an iconic rather than functional feature in the central square. The romanticised 'traditional village community' failed to materialise in practice, suggesting that factors such as architecture and neighbourhood design had not helped to stimulate the public life of the estate. By contrast, the older social housing estate was more vibrant, with people commonly seen in the communal areas around the shops.

Public spaces as democratic places

This study showed that different social groups often co-existed in the same spaces without paying much attention to each other. Yet apart from people passing through, the most common activities in all the observed spaces were sitting, waiting, watching and chatting. The public spaces provided opportunities for all individuals and groups to see and be seen by others. People who would not otherwise routinely share space could do so in the town centre. The study suggests that merely 'moving on' people and activities that are considered undesirable or out of place displaces problems rather than solves them. Displacement also discouraged those involved from integrating more fully into the life of the town. The effect of all social groups being visible within civic public spaces, including people of different ages, class, cultures or ethnicities, goes some way to enabling everyone – children and young people in particular – to observe and perhaps accept difference.

For some, security and accessibility are the most important considerations in creating good public places, while for others the unexpected and an element of risk-taking are essential to living well. The evidence from this study suggests that the contestation of spaces, variety and the need for unregulated spaces are inevitable and necessary in the process of place-making. By being involved in what happens in public spaces, people can have a sense of personal investment that may otherwise be denied. This sense of ownership is fundamental to understanding interactions within the public domain and crucial to maintaining a democratic urban arena.

Conclusion

Many people were deterred by the stark newness of 'cleaned up' spaces devoid of features and activity, and these spaces drew in 'alternative' uses to those intended. Residents, designers and planners have a particular vision of new developments that does not necessarily accommodate the full diversity of everyday life in towns. It is important to question why particular unplanned activities should be seen as unacceptable when they are conducted in spaces that are rarely used as they were intended.

Responses to the piazza-style regeneration of one of the town's main squares suggest that while authorities can attempt to provide pristine public spaces, it is the people that make them places. Sterile and over-regulated environments may help people of all ages to feel secure but are not the most conducive to urban vibrancy and integration. Towns need places where people, regardless of their age, culture or appearance, will feel secure but also free.

The study showed that public spaces in the town provided places for the mundane, the expected, and the banal. This important function should not be overlooked in the rush to develop innovative, dynamic-looking places. Small, cost-effective improvements can be made to enhance public spaces simply by breaking up monotony. Everyday good management, for example attention to seating, lighting, and accessibility, made a large difference to the usability of space. Providing entertainment and attractions, such as street musicians, market stalls, or something 'different' to look at, brought them to life. The vitality of the urban scene requires some degree of human unpredictability. Indeed it is often the offer of chaos, chance, or coincidence that makes many want to celebrate the potential of public space.

About the project

The research involved 200 hours of observation conducted over a year (October 2004 – September 2005) by the authors and a trained team of 46 members of the general public (aged 16-73 years), mostly Aylesbury residents. In addition, 28 interviews with local stakeholders, and 179 street surveys/interviews with people using the spaces, were carried out by the authors. The research method was highly participatory, with the team of local observers contributing to and informing the data analysis.

For further information

The full report, **Social interactions in urban public places**, by Caroline Holland, Andrew Clark, Jeanne Katz and Sheila Peace, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press as part of the Public Spaces series (ISBN 978 1 86134 997 2, price £12.95). You can also download this report free from www.jrf.org.uk.

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