Urban public spaces: Different people, different wishes, different expectations?

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Many leisure activities, from walking and cycling to sunbathing and having a picnic, take place in public spaces. Leisure spaces are dynamic settings defined by spatial and social circumstances (Slavin, 2004). Some places are repositories for long histories of visitor interaction with, and creation of, place (Stedman, 2006). Sometimes the places where we practice leisure are chosen because of the fact that these spaces fit with our demands e.g. walking in a forest takes place in a forest. Besides, often places are not chosen accidentally but chosen because we have a relation to certain places. Leisure spaces can provide the context for personal, communal, and political growth, particularly in a culturally safe and relevant context. Therefore "individuals interested in leisure cannot ignore the control of space, the segregation of space, and the effective exclusion of certain social groups from certain leisure spaces and places at particular times" (Henderson and Frelke, 2000, p.23).

As public spaces are used for leisure activities, these spaces can be contested social arenas, sites of division as well as cohesion, of negative as well as positive engagement, and of unequal power relations (Brewer, 2005; Bridge and Watson, 2002). Several researchers (Gobster, 2004; Ravenscroft & Markwell, 2000) have paid attention to urban public spaces, such as parks and streets, as places where inter-ethnic interactions take place. Urban parks are seen as relevant because they are often accessible to all groups and therefore different identities can be represented in these urban parks. Moreover they can be seen as possibly favourable spaces for social interaction, because urban parks are visited equally by various ethnic groups. This is in contrast to, for example, nature areas, which are visited more by non-immigrants (Buijs et al., 2009). Next to urban parks, other public spaces in neighbourhoods can be seen as safe places: a space between the safe homes and the unknown places further away. It can be seen as a kind of transitional space in which women especially can walk freely, and which is perceived as being safe, familiar and comfortable to spent time.

This study aims at creating a better understanding of the use and meanings of urban public spaces in a multicultural neighbourhood in the Netherlands. It is based on qualitative research in a neighborhood of a middle-sized city in the Netherlands. The research can be characterized as explorative and involved an interpretive approach in which the findings were interpreted in terms of the meanings that people bring to them. As such, it was an appropriate way to understand and examine the meanings that people construct and use to make sense of their experiences within a phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). I used observations and semi-structured interviews to gather information about the interactions in, and the meaning of, spatial settings for their users. In the course of the interviews issues of use, meaning, and interactions in public spaces were touched upon. Examples of questions are: How often are you in this park? Do you have any contact with others? What kind of contact? How do you feel about these contacts? Because I was interested in a cross-section of perspectives based on ethnicity and gender, I used a stratified purposeful sampling to capture major variations rather than to identify a common core, although the latter may also emerge in the analysis.

From my research it became clear that public spaces are important spaces for the identity of a neighbourhood. Moreover, public spaces can be seen as everyday spaces and as transitional spaces. In some public spaces, people were confronted with diversity, while other public spaces were inhabited by "people like me" as one respondent answered. I will show that the inhabitants appreciate cultural diversity but that this appreciation of diversity does not lead often to multicultural interactions that go beyond small talk in shops. However, positive feelings for and experience with diversity have a significant impact on peoples' attitudes because it contributes to a more realistic view of multiculturalism based on everyday experiences. By taking individual experiences as a starting point, I will illustrate how various aspects like socio-cultural background and involvement in the neighbourhood intersect and can expose different leisure experiences in urban public spaces. Cultural integration occurs in common spaces and is furthered by

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mutual understanding. In an increasingly multi-ethnic society, the challenge for local governments is to support these processes of cultural change. Thus, a better understanding of the role that urban public places can play in these processes is very valuable.

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