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Perception of Open Urban Space – Bevk Square in Nova Gorica

The question, how can a planner by implementing different approaches, which apply to the psychological view-point, include users in the planning process, was the motive for the paper 'Experiencing urban open spaces', carried out in the postgraduate course of Landscape architecture. The findings of the research are, that users of space have to be understood as the goal of the endeavor, i.e. they are the purpose and motive of any open, public place. The indirect inclusion of people in proposals for activities was thus justified.

1. Introduction

Open urban spaces are intended for public multipurpose activities. A modern urban place has to be responsive, varied and dynamic. The necessities of maintenance and design have long surpassed the specialised and limited capabilities of experts involved in government and planning agencies. For this reason involving the public in planning processes is becoming ever more necessary. Public participation is needed when defining problems and in their evaluation. Therefore the modern expert has to find ways of obtaining as much information as possible from the users and indirectly integrate them in design proposals.

Experiencing and understanding space in analysis and design is an important category closely tied to the psychological function of space. We are however dealing with subjective feelings and values, that are difficult to define or respect and for this reason, the psychological view-point has given greater significance.

Establishing different approaches and methods in research of psychological understanding of space by users, thus facilitating their indirect involvement and participation, was the rationale behind the seminar paper we carried out in the subject of Ecological psychology during the postgraduate course in landscape architecture.

2. Open Urban Places

By judgment of philosophers, the town is a kind of large house and vice-versa, the house is a small town (Alberti, DE Re Aedificatoria, 1485)

Every house has a central space for meetings, association, main events and every town has or should have at least one such public, open place. Open urban spaces are intended for all public needs, public life and are therefore maintained by public funds. They are places of gatherings, meetings and rest, intense criss-crossing of different routes, happenings and activities, which form their limits.

Urban open spaces are squares, parks, streets, passages, playgrounds, parking lots, etc. However the open space with town building, focal meaning is usually a central area, designed

as a square or as contemporary variations of it, e.g. shopping streets. Modern public urban spaces have to provide comfort, pleasure, relaxation, mystery and numerous activities.

3. The Socio-psychological Function of Open Space

Public urban spaces function as socio-communicational areas in a town. Their psychological function is gaining in importance. As described by Gantar and Kos (1993), every urban place where people gather or pass through, functions on two levels: the **functional level**, where the meaning of the place is defined by its utility (comprehended by possibility of achieving our goals or purpose) and the **communicative level**, viewing and examining of others and the place itself, different kinds of verbal and non-verbal communication, (especially expectation of 'surprises'; the character of this communicative dimension is, that it is its own purpose and is not defined by other goals – its origin is in the human need for different modes of communication with their peers).

All public urban places include both dimensions, however, some places are better defined by the first and some by the other.

Variety is on itself a quality of urban space, actually any space. Open urban spaces enable much greater freedom of different spatial uses and the town itself. In comparison with built-up areas they allow much more flexible, in-formal and creative uses.

The psychological view-point on public space manifests itself through values of open space such as: responsiveness, democracy and bearer of meaning.

Responsive spaces are those which accommodate the needs of their users. The basic needs which people satisfy in public areas are: comfort, relaxation, active and passive activity and research. Relaxation is needed to alleviate daily stress, while occupation with others stimulates the well being and sociability of the individual.

Democratic spaces protect the rights of their users. They are accessible to all groups and allow freedom of activity, as well as temporary possession and control. A public space is one where there are less limitations than at ones home or work-place. We can change it by public actions. It offers a sense of power and control and is limited only by the same rights of another individual. They are places where people learn to live together. Accessibility is the basic element of spatial use. The first aspect is physical accessibility, i.e. lack of obstacles and connectedness to neighbouring areas; by using obstacles we can sometimes lessen use of space: Visual access is just as important, if we want people to use a space. People must see, that before them there is a public place which they can use. Visibility is also important when assessing security of a place: However, visual access doesn't coincide with ones desire for privacy, i.e. to prevent being seen. In a certain way, a public place must provide for both possibilities.

Different activities should be promoted so that no specific group could prevail. Variety must be harmonised. Of course, physical properties of a place can allow or prevent particu-

lar activities. Different spaces offer different possibilities. Structured places with many different spaces are especially suited for different activities.

Meaning of space can enable bonding between the place, the individual and the World. People respond to their physical and social environment. A constantly used public place filled with memories helps an individual to anchor ones being in a rapidly changing world. Positive meanings of a public place develop when such an environment becomes an important part of ones life.

4. Defining the Research

To carry out our research and test the method we selected a public place in our home town, because we are aware of the problems and because we perceive it as possible users or potential designers.

The project is based on the assumption, that the place – Bevk Square – occupies the central area of Nova Gorica, that it is a valuable asset of the town and that it should be changed, i.e. a variety of activities should be added, and it should be redesigned, to facilitate richer, more active and pleasant perception of the place.

We believe that it is possible to channel public interest into creative co-operation in design and selection of new activities. By carrying out analyses and using the method of research on psychological perception of space, we believe that needs and wishes of users can be formulated, thus providing a good foundation for design purposes.

The place and the problems

The area of Bevk Square is the central, public, open space of Nova Gorica, which, together with the commercial centre and Lenin Street forms the central pedestrian zone in the town. The area was built gradually, even by coincidence. We could describe it simply as a proto-town square at the end of a commercial street, still vital, but never completed asphalt platform.

It's characteristic is, that it is the only such space in the town and represents the focal point of different routes (directions) and events in the town. It is easily passable and because of the activities around it, allows gathering of many people. However, although it occupies the central position in the town it is very dull, boring, the street equipment is badly placed or inadequate, there is no greenery. Many people come to this place, but because of its undynamic lack of programme, they also leave rather quickly. Other than in restaurants and pubs nobody stops or stays here.

The method

First we obtained varied information about the place and its surroundings and the town itself. After analyses we discovered particular levels of the place, development of activities, the structure, the street equipment, problems and qualities of the area. The analyses were carried out in three stages:

- structural analysis and evaluation (text, sketches, photos);
- model of time sampling (literature, video, tables, graphs);
- survey on public opinion in which we used the technique of cognitive maps, semantic differential questionnaire and

questionnaire with enumeration and ranking (the results were presented in written and graphic form).

The results from the survey and model of time sampling directly strengthened our findings from the professional analysis.

The aim of the project was to establish basic guidelines for public participation in the planning and design process and in the design and improving the programme of the town centre.

5. Models of Time Sampling

The method we used was adapted from examples carried out in USA (also Cherulnik, Zeisel). The method helps the planner to attain better results, since it describes behavioural patterns of individuals. Experiencing space pertains to what individuals feel, see, how they communicate and how they move through a place. The method is intended for examining how people behave and react to the place (e.g. whether they prefer to sit, lie down, stand, stop and talk to others or simply pass through a place), how they perceive contemporary architecture or historic settings, how tourists and visitors experience an unknown place.

The results of the research are primarily used for solving spatial problems. That is why, it is useful to use different methods, depending on the specifics of the place undergoing change and possibilities for conducting the necessary research. The best results are achieved when using various parallel methods, i.e.:

- observing routes of motion: how people move through the physical environment (traversing a place);
- observing places of gathering (stationary points): observing behaviour in a particular part of the place;
- interviews for establishing how individuals perceive specific conditions of a place;
- surveys on observation, behaviour, knowledge about a place, wishes;
- analysis of written documents, newspaper clippings, literature about the selected place, which can be useful for the solution.

Implementation

We began by observing events in the square and reached some rough conclusions, i.e. when the square is most vital, when least; which routes are used most frequently. We decided to test the method, and find out, whether it is suitable for solving our problem.

We selected a place from which the square could be easily surveyed. Documentation of events was done by video-camera, placed in a parked car. We shot 15 minute clips at different times of the day, during working days and on weekends.

The pilot results of the method showed, that the chosen technique was suitable for our research. From the filmed material we could select the periods of the day that could benefit our research. The periods selected were; between 10-11 AM, when people take a break and/or run errands (on Saturdays and Sundays between 11-12 AM), and between 3-4 PM, when some people are on their way home from work, while others are in pursuit of afternoon activities.

When we examined the results they confirmed the preliminary observations we made while filming the place: there were two main transit routes and two main stationary points. From the clips we defined the transit routes and stationary points, counted the users, their sex and their age (two groups: children and adults). We paid attention to their activity in the place and the time they spent doing it. Using a video-camera was useful because we could also observe the events repeatedly and concentrate on one specified objective while preserving other objectives or information.

The choice of method was suitable because we obtained a real image of events in the place, which is quite objective in comparison with other methods.

The routes and areas observed

Five main transit routes run through Bevk square (denoted A to E). There are six main stationary points (marked with numbers). Each time-sample was represented by a table, where the number of users of routes and stationary points was noted. The table includes data on the sex, age, activity, number of people in the activity and time spent in the activity. We produced six tables, later presented as graphs of events in the place.

Particular routes are shown as lines, stationary points as circles, their width corresponding to the number of users.

Presentation of findings (tables and graphs)

Saturday proved to be the day with the largest number of users and with distinct differences between morning and afternoon users. On Saturday morning Bevk square is definitely the most vital. There are many passages on routes A, B and C, even passage on route B is frequent. Many people stay in the place, especially at points 4, 3 and 6. People stop and chat.

In the afternoon, the number of users drops substantially on all routes. Route A is still most important. The stationary points are also less frequented, there is some gathering at points 3 and 4.

Conclusions

Bevk square is most vital on Saturday morning, when people come to shop and in the afternoons during working days. Gathering and stationary behaviour corresponds, in the mentioned time-slots it is intensified. Sitting, meeting people and socialising is more frequent especially if it is sunny.

On Sundays the place is almost empty – the shops are closed and just a few restaurants are open. People from Nova Gorica tend to spend their weekends outdoors, in the countryside. The only observation is, that passage along route A is worth mentioning, as well as the number of pub users.

Transit routes are in use most of the time although intensity changes in different time-samples. The most important and constantly used route is the promenade (route A), especially on working days and Saturday morning. Routes B and C are also important, especially on working day and Saturday afternoons. The other routes are more or less equal and less used.

6. The Survey

Public opinion was established with a survey, a part of the methodological framework of physical recognition, evaluation and planning. The purpose of the survey was to articulate the perception of the inhabitants about the place as a whole, especially the open space, as well as the surfaces, street equipment and activities in the place. We wanted to hear their opinions, needs and wishes about the place and its utility.

The survey and method

50 participants (inhabitants and visitors) were involved in the survey (employees and scholars of both sexes, average age 39 years (between 9 and 67), all levels of education). Most of them live in Nova Gorica (80%), 28% were born in Nova Gorica, 52% moved from elsewhere (living in Nova Gorica between 1-39 years, on average 21 years). The pattern of survey was random, meaning that all the inhabitants of Nova Gorica had equal opportunities of participating while the actual participants were selected from different parts of the town and coincidental visitors.

The questionnaire consisted of 11 questions. We used the technique of cognitive mapping, questions designed as semantic differential, questions with enumeration and questions with ranking (open description). We conducted the survey individually and ourselves.

The questions were:

- reasons for visiting Bevk square
- general impression of the square
- general impression on activities in the square
- facilities and equipment
- estimate on present street equipment on the square – quantity and image
- activities that the visitors miss and would like to have
- the square, the people and their relationships

The Cognitive Map Method

By using the method of cognitive mapping, i.e. socio-physical pattern (English psychologist T. Lee, 1968), we wanted to discover, how people visualise the town centre – the town square, how they perceive it and which parts of the square they like or dislike.

We conducted the exploration by asking the participants to encircle the areas we were inquiring about on a prepared map. Social behaviour and physical aspects of a place are linked, that is why the method includes both physical and social characteristics of a place.

On the cognitive map, participants had to mark or rather encircle:

- a) areas, where they like to go to, stay and feel good,
- b) areas which they don't like, do not go to and don't stay.

Popular areas

When observing the map of popular areas we discovered that participants encircled almost all of the area, except the parts which were extremely unpopular.

Unpopular areas

Views about unpopular areas were much more consistent. The interesting fact is that users of the place were almost unanimous about what they don't like, rather than what they do, i.e. there are much more marks on one part of the area, that is the whole square itself. The edges of the square are predominantly marked as unpopular. There are also some other unpopular areas as well, but not very pronounced.

The results show us that the square itself is indeed the most unpopular area. At the same time it is the such place in the town! Its users however need it, want it and would like to improve and enrich it.

The descriptive answers on why certain parts of the square are or are not popular are also interesting. Some of the participants didn't elaborate on their opinion, but almost 2/3 did. The answers were then grouped, i.e. for popular and unpopular areas.

Cognitive mapping is a very direct and illustrative method. The results were presented graphically and with written descriptions. This method of survey appears to be very popular, since the survey is much more varied. In some cases respondents were confused by the graphic presentation. Therefore it is important to have a very simple drawing, which can be understood by most respondents.

7. Design Guidelines

The results of the project are guidelines for possible designers of the place. An example of a possible design proposal was also presented.

Conclusions from the survey and model of time-slot patterns:

- Inhabitants and visitors come to Bevk square for shopping and cultural events; other activities are of lesser importance (meeting, walking, restaurants and playing); the whole area is more of a shopping street than a classical town square
- The users find the square suitable or satisfactory although it doesn't offer special visual or perceptive benefits; they find the square safe, although most agree that there is 'too much concrete'
- The users are not very satisfied and are quite critical about the activities in the square; the activities are not sensibly connected, they are dull, nevertheless useful, but there are not enough of them

Problems, pointed out by users:

- The area for sitting and socialising in the square is very popular, but there are not enough benches and definitely no shade
- The area with restaurants and the commercial area are very popular, especially for shopping, breaks from work in working hours; it also allows meeting other people while taking part in these activities
- The area with new shops in the Meblo building is very refreshing, especially its numerous programmes and 'nicer', better designed window-displays
- More attention in programme definition and design has to be given to the Bevk square itself, it seems to be the most unpopular part of the place

- The street equipment of the square is acceptable when it comes to lighting, and design of lamp-posts, paved surfaces are satisfactory, although there are too many of them; there is definitely not enough shade in the sitting areas, there are no water elements, not enough benches, garbage cans, bicycle stands and tended greenery
- The activities missed by users are many, such as: cultural events happening in the open space (concerts, theatre, workshops, exhibitions), real 'urban' elements (water – fountains, a town cafe overlooking the square, specialised shops), urban equipment (green surfaces, flowers, shades, sitting) and social activities for children and entertainment
- From the time-slot pattern we can understand, that the place is dead when the shops are closed (Saturday afternoon and Sundays all day) and there are no visitors; in the Summer months an added inconvenience is the almost unbearable heat, caused by too many paved surfaces and lack of greenery and trees.

Guidelines for designers:

From the results we can distinguish the basic guidelines for designing the square and the activities which the users want:

- New design solutions have to be established to complement the existing ones and add new ones
- Sitting areas have to be designed in a manner where much more people will be able to stay in the square, with green surfaces, vegetation, with a more suitable micro-climate (the weather in Nova Gorica is sunny and hot); the respondents want a fountain in the square
- When designing urban equipment, one has to be especially attentive to the needs of the users and to use different, possibly multi-purpose elements
- The users want improvements in quality and variety, therefore the programme of the square has to be refreshed
- The offer of the area has to be competitive, distinct and attractive
- Bevk square has to have a rich and varied programme, similar to older towns (a coffee shop, gallery); above all it is necessary to remove a shop selling electrical equipment and replace it with numerous, smaller specialised shops
- When designing the whole area, attention has to be given to 'weekend programmes' and activities which can be carried out in the open and in the evenings

8. Conclusion

Users of open space are often left out of planning processes. Public participation in planning processes means, that the opinions, needs and values of users are heard and the users are given a possibility to control their environment while their demands are respected. The planner should approach the project objectively, while the user will always perceive and understand subjectively. We respected this fact in our research and methodology, as well as in analysis of results.

Therefore, including the public in planning activities is – according to studied theoretical examples, examples from other practices and analysis of conditions in Nova Gorica on Bevk square – more than justified. Significance is given to co-operation, its direct and indirect effects, and at the same

time the continual communication between professionals and users on always changing arenas. Professional knowledge however doesn't lose in importance. Quite the contrary. The mode of its inclusion in planning activities changes.

We discovered that the inhabitants are interested in their environment and possible development which they know about and are subject to, but have to be stimulated to strengthen their abilities to articulate their needs and desires.

With this research we wish to encourage all planners, administrators, government employees to begin thinking and acting in a similar manner, i.e. to promote public participation and use methods of inquiry which give answers about actual use of urban public places.

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Footnotes:

- ¹ Bratina, N., Lah, Sušnik, M.: Experiencing urban open spaces (Seminar paper in Ecological psychology, mentor: Prof. Dr. M. Polič, post-graduate course), Faculty of Biotechnology, Department of landscape planning, Ljubljana 1997, 68 p.
- ² After: Polič, M.: The town, public space, people. In: Design of open spaces in the urban environment (compendium), Society of Landscape Architects, Ljubljana 1996, pp. 38-40

Tables and illustrations:

Table 1: September 1996

Figure 1: Saturday afternoon 11-12AM, sunny (method of time samples)

Figure 2: Saturday afternoon 3-4PM, sunny (method of time samples)

Figure 3: Cognitive map showing all popular areas

Figure 4: Cognitive map showing un-popular areas

For sources and literature see page 68

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Ivan STANIČ

Infrastructure Can Be Beautiful

Urban Design Workshops, A View Into the Future

Urban design workshops are becoming a commonly used method in the urban design practice. The fact was confirmed when a conference, titled Urban design workshops and competitions – instruments of urban design, was or-

ganised at Brdo pri Kranju, 12th November 1997. The conference was organised by the Office for Physical Planning of the Ministry for Environment and Physical Planning and the Urban Planning Institute of Slovenia to promote World Habitat day (6th November) and Urbanism Day (8th November). The motive for organising the conference were the activities of the Office for Physical Planning of the last two years and their incentive and sponsorship given to local governments to organise urban design workshops.

In Izola, for example, in the last week of September, we have already organised two workshops. We are convinced, that workshops are, because of their negotiation character and the spatial problems in the local community (defining dilemmas and strategies), a better mode of professional endeavor than, for example competitions. The point is, that in competitions each participant is oriented to adapting his own views to a better (individual) solution where no agreement is possible. Such solutions are by definition, individual views of one author or group, and they compete for the acceptance (victory) of their concept versus the concepts of other authors or groups. In workshops, the proposed solutions are seldom the result of better accessibility to information. Quite the contrary. During the workshop in Izola we organised a very intense and diverse series of lectures. Besides information on views and experiences of experts from different professional fields we also wanted to learn about physical plans of the local community, central government, particular sectors, landowners and potential investors. It became clear, that the level of communication, between these individual participants was very low and that the workshop was an opportunity for strengthening communication, i.e. getting them together. The number of participants in the workshop in Izola was 36.

The position of Izola in the Slovenian coastal region is specific: in the physical sense it represents a critical point on the coast – the point where two different images join. The project group run by the Dutch architect Maarten Struijs observed Izola as a place between an area which is undergoing heavy urbanisation and industrialisation, i.e. in the direction of Koper, and an area with protected environmental and cultural qualities, with potential for tourism development, i.e. the coastal area towards Strunjan and Sečovelje. The topic of the 1997 workshop was, to check the route of the planned highway from Srimin and Koper to Izola and Lucija and to assess the influences of the possible routes of the highway on the urban structure of Izola with its periphery and hinterland. At the same time the possibilities of maritime traffic were evaluated (nowadays somewhat neglected), connections to other traffic modes, as well as the possibility of establishing a maritime customs and border crossing point in Izola.

The architects, leaders of project groups, were invited from different regions and countries. Gorazd Kobal was representative of the coastal region, Ivan Stanič, came from the Urban Planning Institute, dr. Sonja Jurković from the Faculty of architecture in Zagreb (Croatia) and Maarten Struijs from the Town planners office in Rotterdam (The Netherlands). Despite the various backgrounds (experiences and environments, where they operate), they were unanimous that most of the problems in Izola were concentrated in the East part of the town. Nevertheless, their proposals were quite different, but all of them included proposals, which could be used