Public Spaces for Teenagers

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with how young people or teenagers interact with public spaces. It explores the needs of young people for public spaces and tries to seek what makes a public space interesting for them. It does this by reviewing the literature and by conducting field research in the city centre of Eindhoven. The research is conducted under teenagers ranging from 16-20 years old and is done to explore the needs of this group and to become aware of how they use the public space in general and Eindhoven in specific. Often, young people spend their free time in public spaces meeting with friends and simply be together without fixed plans, which is in research referred to as the '*geographies of hanging out*' (Lieberg, 1995; Pyyry & Others, 2015). Hanging out is a way for teenagers to explore new things, to meet new people, and to allow oneself to be surprised (Tani, 2014). By combining empirical research with literature this paper tries to investigate how hanging out takes place, how it is received by other people and how it can be used as an element to design better public spaces.

   Keywords: adolescents, young people, teenagers, public space, design, policy, hanging out, design guidelines.

Introduction

When teenagers occupy a public space their role and behaviour differ from that of adults (Childress, 2004; Pyyry & Others, 2015). Teenagers have their own needs and they need their own time, away from adults (Lieberg, 1995). Lieberg (1995) used the metaphor of a theatre - originally from Goffmann (1996) - to describe how young people, while hanging out create their own public realms 'backstage', hidden from the adult gaze happening 'on stage'. The reason why teenagers often hang out in public space is that they often have no other choice (Lieberg, 1995). Adults can withdraw to different places such as their residence or workplace while teenagers have no obvious right to such places (Cele, 2013; Childress, 2004; Day & Wager, 2010; Lieberg, 1995; Matthews, Taylor, Percy-Smith, & Limb, 2000). To escape the adult gaze they occupy their own places which adults do not visit - whether backstage or onstage - places that are 'won out' of the fabric of adult society such as backyards, stairwells, parking lots or other places they occupy and take over (Lieberg, 1995). One of the most essential elements of hanging out is its social dimension and the construction of identities. When teenagers no longer belong at establishments for younger children and do not suffice for the adult world it is the public space where they can come together and experience social life, friendship and fellowship (Cele, 2013; Lieberg, 1995; van Lieshout & Aarts, 2008).

An empirical study has been conducted to explore the perception of young people in public spaces and to discover their needs in it. By conducting questionnaires under teenagers - ranging from 16 to 20 years - in the Eindhoven city centre, the research tried to give an insight into how young people use public spaces.

Young people need, like everyone else, public spaces of good quality. And it is important to know what young people prefer in public spaces. In order to keep teenagers in public spaces and prevent alienating it is important to look at what public spaces - and in particular the design - can do for young people (Pyyry & Others, 2015). The empirical research has shown that most teenagers love the diversity of shops, the bar street in Stratumseind, the walkability and the friendly people. They dislike the lack of green and the attractiveness of the city centre. Brunelle et al (2018) argued that one of the most appreciated spaces by young people are natural environments. They need places to be alone with intimacy and privacy. Teenagers prefer landscapes, such as parks in a city, among the most valuable public spaces (La Rochelle & Owens, 2014; Lieberg, 1995).

In this paper, the empirical research has been connected with the literature to find out what teenagers prefer - in Eindhoven and in general - in public spaces. The *geographies of hanging out* is used to discover the needs and realms of teenagers. It tries to elaborate on the preferences of teenagers by investigating design elements that can be used to design better public spaces for teenagers.

Hanging out, a young people's play

One of the central themes of being a teenager is that they are *adults-in-becoming* and therefore are expected to act as such (Lieberg, 1995; Pyyry & Others, 2015). The way young people occupy spaces is therefore often a reaction to this expected behaviour and is in literature investigated as '*the geographies of hanging out*'. Geographies of hanging out give an interesting perspective on young people's lives in spaces that are not specifically planned for them (Lieberg, 1995; Pyyry & Others, 2015; Tani, 2014). For young people, hanging out it is a way of spending their time in public spaces without tight schedules or parental supervision and to escape the seriousness of the adult world. It is a rare time where they can meet and simply be together without fixed plans (Lieberg, 1995; Pyyry & Others, 2015).

However, when young people hang out this conflicts the thinking of becoming-an-adult and what we are taught to do, namely; be purposive and goal-oriented (Pyyry & Others, 2015; Tani, 2014). It is therefore from an adult perspective, often viewed as unacceptable 'loitering' and it goes against the preferred behaviour which adults would like to see (Lieberg, 1995; Tani, 2014). When hanging out becomes visible in public spaces it is therefore often seen as problematic and it may be seen as uncomfortable and inappropriate (Matthews et al., 2000).

When occupying public spaces, young people's role and behaviour in differs from that of adults (Childress, 2004; Pyyry & Others, 2015). Young people need their own time, hidden from the adult gaze and away from activities that are planned and supervised by other people, usually adults (Pyyry & Others, 2015). In being hidden from the adult gaze, young people create their own public realms backstage and on-stage as Lieberg (1995) described. Lieberg (1995) used the

metaphor of a theatre - originally from Goffman (1966) - to describe how young people, while hanging out, are being 'backstage' from the adult gaze. In a study by Pyyry (Pyyry & Others, 2015) young people gathered at garages, garbage sheds or abandoned houses to 'do nothing' and thus creating 'back stages' (Lieberg, 1995; Matthews et al., 2000). At the same time while hanging out, teenagers can also be exposed in the front region. At the front region, they can symbolically cut off and claim their own piece of stage, which is then temporarily transformed into backstage (Lieberg, 1995).

Hanging out is a young people play but places to hang out are often difficult to find. Adults can withdraw to different places such as their residence or workplace while teenagers have no obvious right to such places (Cele, 2013; Childress, 2004; Day & Wager, 2010; Lieberg, 1995; Matthews et al., 2000). To escape the adult gaze they occupy their own places which adults do not visit, such as a backyard, stairwells, basements, parking lots or other isolated places (Lieberg, 1995). Matthews (2000) describes these places as places where teenagers can meet, play and retain some autonomy over space. These places are 'won out' of the fabric of the adult society but at the same time are threatened of being reclaimed. Besides withdrawing to such places they can also take over space by marking it with for example graffiti or by their own way of using the space and objects (Lieberg, 1995). If they, for example, appear in large groups, dressed up specific, or move or express in a way that they attract attention then this behaviour can become clear and irritating for other people (Lieberg, 1995; Matthews et al., 2000; Pyyry & Others, 2015). By acting in such manner, teenagers mark their own spaces and create own territories - happening both backstage and onstage (Lieberg, 1995; Matthews et al., 2000).

Lieberg (1995) categorized this withdraw away from the adult world on the one hand and the need to meet and confront the adult world with two main categories of spaces; *places of retreat* and *places of interaction*. Both categories are linked closely to the personal development young people go through during teen years.

One of the most essential elements of hanging out - 'loitering' or doing nothing - in public space is its social dimension and the construction of identities (Cele, 2013; Lieberg, 1995; Tani, 2014; van Lieshout & Aarts, 2008). Hanging out is a way for teenagers to explore new things, to meet new people (both adults and other teenagers), and to allow oneself to be surprised (Tani, 2014). When teenagers no longer belong at establishments for younger children and do not suffice for the adult world it is the public space where they can come together and experience social life, friendship and fellowship (Cele, 2013; Lieberg, 1995; van Lieshout & Aarts, 2008).

Public spaces for young people

Young people need good quality public spaces, as everyone does, but the reality is that good quality spaces designed for teenagers are hard to find in a world that can be seen as an adult domain (Brunelle et al., 2018; Day & Wager, 2010). Young people, or adolescents, do not have the right to legally own property and are often excluded from public spaces through design, policy, and society's ambivalence toward them. In the process of designing and policy, power and decision-making are controlled by adults (Brunelle et al., 2018; Childress, 2004; Lieberg, 1995; Percy-Smith, 2015). Young people are in this process little more than adults-in-waiting or

less-than-adult, while they are planned out of decision making (Brunelle et al., 2018; Matthews et al., 2000).

While young people are frequent visitors of public spaces there is a tendency that teenagers do not feel welcome in public spaces (Brunelle et al., 2018; Childress, 2004; Lieberg, 1995). Young people are less tolerated in public spaces as there is a negative public perception of teenagers, and in particular teenagers in public spaces (Day & Wager, 2010). This is due to the negotiating of space between teenagers and adults. When teenagers occupy spaces backstage and onstage and creating their own public realm this 'social gathering' - or unwanted gathering - can be seen as threatening and intruding (Brunelle et al., 2018; Childress, 2004). Combined with young people's play of hanging out and going against adult's preferred behaviour, teenagers are often seen as a problem in public space (Brunelle et al., 2018; Childress, 2004; Day & Wager, 2010; Lieberg, 1995). This negative public perception and the feeling of not being welcome is concerning a disconnection from young people and the public space (Brunelle et al., 2018).

As a result, Owens (2002) argues that teenagers are often purposely designed out of public spaces and that with the design of for example skate parks new places for teens are created where adults can watch and control teenagers' activities. Isolating them from the social life of their cities by, for example planning them out, public spaces can increase alienation in the younger generation. It can limit young people their chance to express their opinion on the city and limits their sense of belonging and inspired engagement and therefore not receiving the support they need to become constructive, contributing members of society (Brunelle et al., 2018; Derr, n.d.; Owens, 2002). Public spaces for young people, therefore, are important places

for social participation and it is thus important not to alienate teens and plan them out (Woolley, Spencer, Dunn, & Rowley, 1999).

In order to keep teenagers in public spaces and prevent alienating it is important to look at what public spaces can do for teenagers while they perform their primary activity - hanging out (Brunelle et al., 2018; Woolley et al., 1999). Accepting and embracing 'hanging out' and see this as an opportunity to the design of the public space can serve young people and better help them integrate into public spaces (Brunelle et al., 2018; La Rochelle & Owens, 2014; Lieberg, 1995). Lieberg (1995) showed that teenagers are attracted to public spaces with different physical and spatial qualities. As they like places to retreat and to interact they like to be in spaces where are other people and were special things happen, whether this is 'backstage' or 'on stage'. Young people are, during their *adult-in-becoming* years, in search of a sense of belonging, welcoming, and community and they try to seek this in spaces meeting these types of need (Brunelle et al., 2018; Travlou, Owens, Thompson, & Maxwell, 2008).

One of the most appreciated spaces by young people are natural environments for recreation, restoration and socializing (Brunelle et al., 2018). Places for teenagers to be alone, whether natural environments or in public space, are however uncommon (Brunelle et al., 2018; Childress, 2004). Often places with intimacy and privacy are not considered when designing public space due to surveillance and safety instead (Brunelle et al., 2018). While it is secluded safe spaces, particularly those who provide a connection with nature, which young people prefer (La Rochelle & Owens, 2014; Owens, 2002). Teenagers prefer landscapes, such as parks in a city, among the most valuable public spaces. They value the beauty, the opportunity to be alone

and the natural green elements, whether in retreat or in interaction (La Rochelle & Owens, 2014; Lieberg, 1995).

Whether in a natural or urban setting, hangout spaces need to be flexible and need to accommodate different scales of groups. In order to do so, the scale of the spaces and the layout are an important aspect. Teenagers want to socialize with their friends in public spaces and therefore the arrangement of site furnishing is important in the design (Brunelle et al., 2018; Childress, 2000). Teenagers prefer seating arrangement which encourages gatherings and large-group conversation (Owens, 2002). They often prefer spaces that are enclosed on two or three sides, providing places where they 'cannot be seen' (Childress, 2000; Day & Wager, 2010; Lieberg, 1995). Public spaces for young people furthermore, need to bring people together in a way that seems accidental and which allows them to retreat easily. Such spaces are therefore often located beside paths through the public space and thus providing easy entrances and exits (Childress, 2000).

In summary, places planned explicitly for teenagers often would not work because these spaces are seen as an excuse to design teenagers out of public spaces and because they may see them as 'uncool' (Childress, 2000; Owens, 2002). Rather than developing special areas, a better approach could be to integrate a layer of teen-centric design into public spaces. Young people mostly have behaviours that do not need specific environments and that can be performed in a variety of settings (Brunelle et al., 2018; Lieberg, 1995; Owens, 2002). Teenagers favour many of the aspects adults like about public space, such as views of nature, opportunities for recreation, restoration, and socialization in safe environments (Childress, 2000; La Rochelle &

Owens, 2014). Therefore, public spaces that address these aspects and provide flexible design that considerate diverse and multiple users can encourage young people to participate in society rather than create an alienated generation of young people (Brunelle et al., 2018; La Rochelle & Owens, 2014; Lieberg, 1995).

Methodology

This empirical study contains a collection and analysis of primary data based on direct observations in the location Stadsdeel Centrum (Except TU/e), which consists of the districts: Binnenstad (partly), Witte Dame, Bergen, Fellenoord (partly). The research consisted of interviewing teenagers aged 16 to 20 years in the location: Stadsdeel Centrum (Except TU/e), which consists of the districts: Binnenstad (partly), Witte Dame, Bergen, Fellenoord (partly). It was difficult to find teenagers for the research, most people who use public space where students/young adults, which is probably due to the close presence of the University of Technology Eindhoven. The research covered 20 interviews with questions about: how they use the public space and with whom and what they like, dislike and imagine about the public spaces. Respondents were also asked to draw their favourite routes, favourite locations and places they would rather avoid.

All data from the interviews have been collected and analysed. During the field research, teenagers were observed in terms of which routes they take and how long they stay in one place. In addition, photos were taken to get a good impression of the public spaces in the mentioned locations. A literature study has been conducted to investigate the relationship of teenagers with public spaces.

Results

The conducted research shows that teenagers use public space to meet friends (28%) or go shopping (26%). What teenagers are missing in public spaces is a green park-like spot (25%), they also want the public space to become more cosy and attractive. 35% said they didn't want to change anything and 5% said they did imagine a completely car-free city centre.

What the teenagers do like the most is the vibrant Stratumseind at night, the shops, the 18 September square and the great accessibility of the public spaces by foot. It is, therefore, a missed change that the Stratumseind is only a place to visit at night and that the 18 September square is the only square well enough to stay in a city that is the size of Eindhoven. However, the intimate scale and that everything feels walkable can be seen as strong positive points.
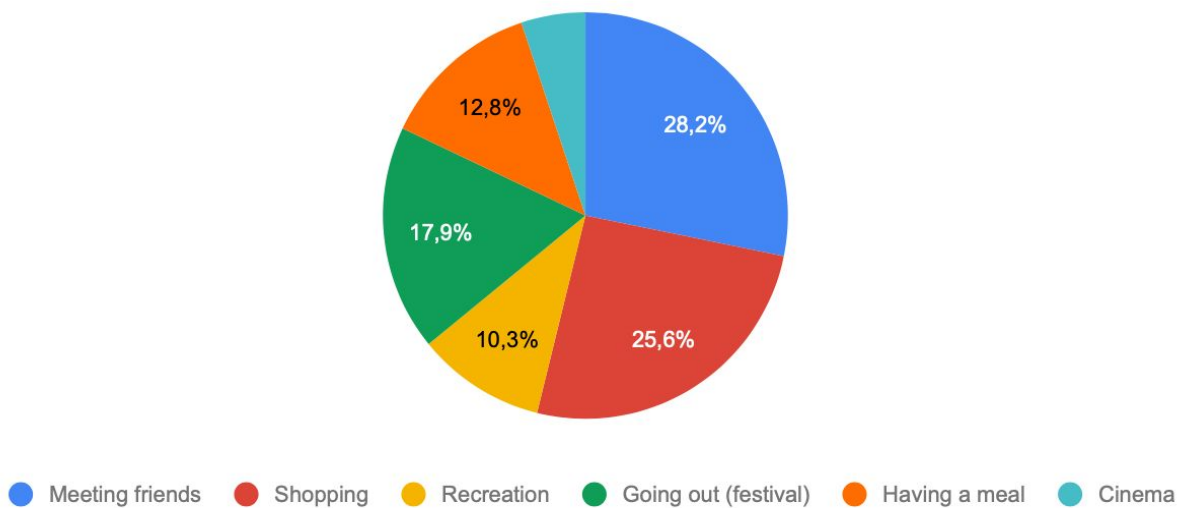

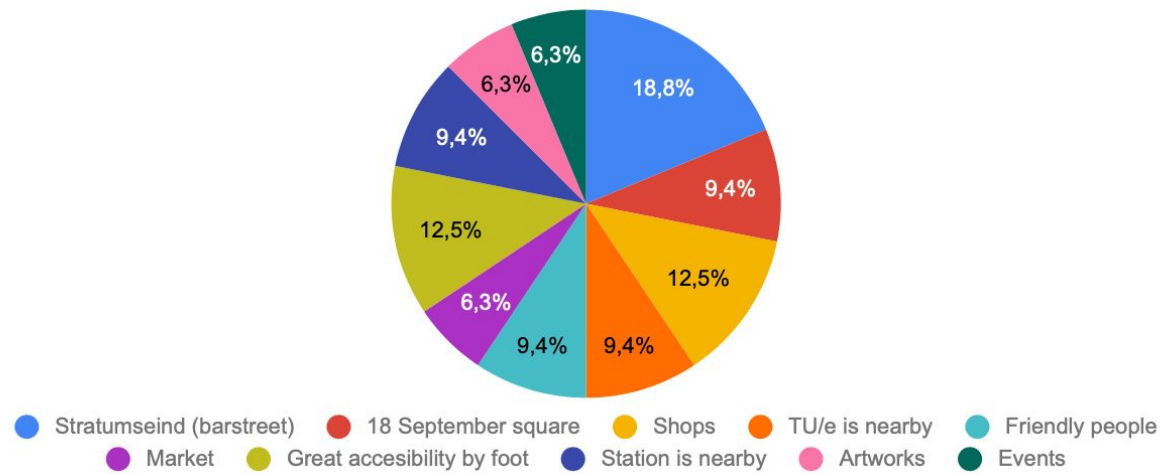*Figure 1. Results of the questionnaire: how teenagers use public spaces.*

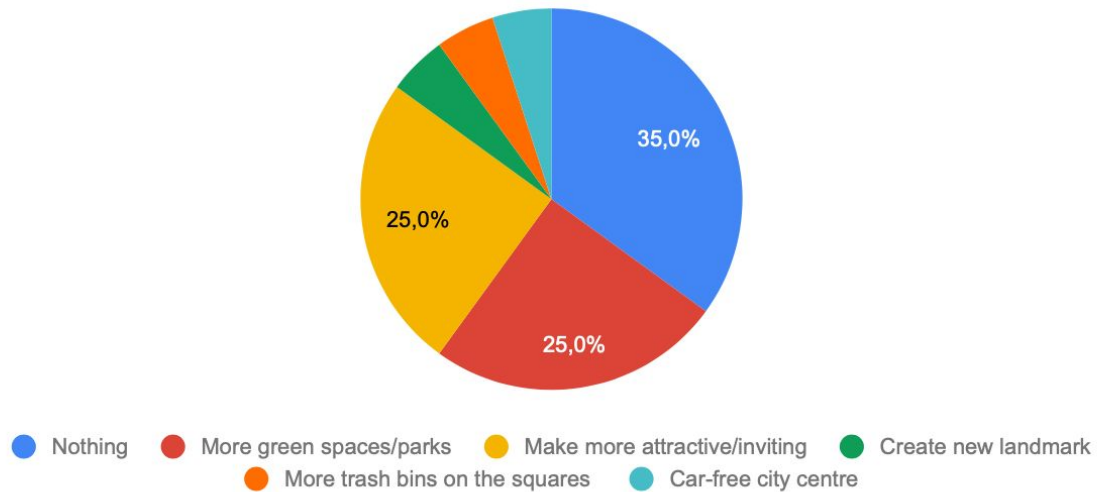*Figure 2. Results of the questionnaire: what teenagers like about the neighbourhood.*

Figure 3. Results of the questionnaire: what teenagers would like to change.

Interview maps

The analysis of all routes shows that teenagers only use one route the most. This is the route from the 18 September square to the bar street in Stratumseind. The map shows that teenagers created a kind of main route with different extensions to other squares. The results also showed that teenagers move mainly through public space with a goal, for example, they go past through a public square to go shopping but they do not stay at the square.

Figure 4. Results of the questionnaire: map of the favourite locations and routes of the teenagers.

Conclusion

The literature review shows that young people are frequent users of public space, but there is a tendency that teenagers do not feel welcome in public space (Brunelle et al., 2018; Childress, 2004; Lieberg, 1995). This negative public perception and the feeling of not being welcome is concerning a disconnection from young people and the public space (Brunelle et al., 2018). Therefore, it is important to know what teenagers do prefer. According to (Brunelle et al., 2018)), one of the most appreciated spaces by young people are natural environments for recreation, restoration and socializing. This is in line with the results of our interviews, which showed that teenagers are missing a green park-like spot and they also want the public space to become more cosy, attractive and inviting.

It is important that teenagers have their own place, hidden from the adult gaze and away from activities that are planned and supervised by other people (Pyyry and Others 2015). Our observations showed that there are hardly any places where teenagers have their own places with intimacy and privacy. The map results showed that teenagers move mainly through public space with a goal and do not stay in the public space, which is a missed opportunity. The results of the interviews also showed that teens want to socialize with their friends in public spaces and therefore the arrangement of site furnishing is important in the design (Brunelle et al., 2018; Childress, 2000), this will encourages gatherings and large-group conversation.

Recommendations

When looking at the city centre of Eindhoven there are a lot of opportunities to design better public spaces in general - but more specific for teenagers. In Eindhoven we see public spaces designed with safety and surveillance in mind, such as the 18 September plein, which results in places that can be overlooked but who are missing intimacy and privacy. When designing for teenagers it is important to create places where they can retreat and interact where there is intimacy and privacy and where they can have enclosure (La Rochelle & Owens, 2014; Lieberg, 1995). Enclosure can be accomplished by adding green and a better arrangement of site furnishing can provide teenagers with a place to interact (La Rochelle & Owens, 2014; Owens, 2002). Teenagers, just like adults, favour natural natural environments for recreation, restoration and socializing. However, what the city centre is missing, according to the teenagers, is a place with green, like a well designed park (Brunelle et al., 2018; Lieberg, 1995).

To design better public spaces for teenagers in Eindhoven there can be a role for the municipality and the city planning district but teenagers themselves can also attribute to better public spaces. Brunelle et al. (Brunelle et al., 2018) and Pyyry (Pyyry & Others, 2015) see an important role for teenagers engaging in the design of public spaces. Teenagers can get involved in design and policy making to make better public spaces and they can also engage through placemaking (Brunelle et al., 2018; Pyyry & Others, 2015). Placemaking is a bottom-up initiative where there is a strong community-based participation at its centre which tries to make public spaces a better place, through design and local initiatives ("What is Placemaking?," n.d.). More and more local initiatives are taking place around the world and inspire people to make

better places ("What is Placemaking?," n.d.). Placemaking therefore, can be an act where teenagers have a vote and where they can design their own places by working together and thus creating a physical, cultural and social identity that defines a place and one that fits teenagers. (Brunelle et al., 2018; Lieberg, 1995; Pyyry & Others, 2015; "What is Placemaking?," n.d.). Where Eindhoven is known for its creative scene, such as GLOW, the Dutch Design Week, the Design Academy and the TU/e, one could imagine that this scene can also play a role in placemaking.

By addressing the preferences and various design elements specific for teenagers in public space, the public spaces in Eindhoven can be a better place for teenagers. There can be a role in this for placemaking but also for engagement with the municipality and other instances. Rather than rejecting 'hanging out', a city can embrace this young people's play and incorporate it in their public spaces. Which can result in better public spaces for everyone, from young children, teenagers, adults to the elderly.

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