A Framework to Assess Publicness in Multicultural Streets

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Abstract: Public space is the domain of interest for urban designers and streets are one of the most relevant forms of public space. In multicultural societies, public space users come from a diverse range of social and ethnic backgrounds with varying interests and needs. Therefore, streets should act as inclusive spaces that are intended for use by a broader public. While the streets may be public, to what extent is it their publicness that plays a significant role in promoting multiculturalism? This paper aims to develop a framework for assessing publicness in streets in multicultural societies. In other words, it responds to the question of “what constitutes a good and ideal model of publicness (regarding cultural diversity) of streets in multicultural societies”. The study builds on the dimensions of publicness described by previous models and adjusts it to the street environment. The central dimensions of publicness include: accessibility, management, and inclusiveness.

Keywords: Streets, Multiculturalism, Publicness, Cultural Diversity

1. Introduction

Public spaces are known as the ‘theatre of everyday life’ where individuals and groups can observe and encounter other people beyond their normal circle of acquaintances, people who might have different customs, behaviours and cultures (Berman, 1986; Shaftoe, 2009; Walzer, 1986; Young, 1990). One way to promote social tolerance of diverse communities and peaceful relationships between people is to ensure that urban spaces where all groups join each other and mingle remain public and open. Such places allow for everyone to learn, recreate, and relax, where “interpersonal and intergroup cooperation and conflict can be worked out in a safe and public forum” (Low, Taplin, & Scheld, 2005, p. 3). Good quality public spaces are known as spaces that are multicultural “where ethnically and culturally diverse groups can co-exist peacefully” (Mulgan et al., 2006, p. 28). In diverse multicultural societies the design of public space becomes more challenging since people from different ethnicity, age and socio-economic backgrounds have special space requirements for their preferred activities (Carr, Francis, Rivlin, & Stone, 1992) and “symbols are neither fixed nor shared” between different cultures (Rapoport, 1982, p. 45).

Streets and their footpaths represent an important part of urban public open space systems and have a significant role in enriching public life of cities. Many urban scholars and practitioners have stressed the importance of streets as social spaces in addition to their role as movement channels (Appleyard, 1981; A. Jacobs, 1993; J. Jacobs, 1961; Mehta, 2013). Streets can provide a means for sociability, including a range of passive and active encounters, each of which can also be formal or casual. Therefore, as with other urban public spaces, streets can be places to encounter differences, to educate and learn about different viewpoints, to tolerate and to resolve conflict (Mehta, 2013). In order to allow for a civilizing social life and social encounter among citizens, streets in multicultural societies need to be open and inclusive to a wide breadth of ethnic groups. The term “democratic street” was first coined by Mark Francis (1987) in the field of urban design. Francis defines “Democratic streets” as “streets that are well used, have meaning for people, invite access for all, encourage use and direct participation, provide opportunities for discovery and adventure, are loved, and are well cared for and locally controlled”. He argues the fact that “street democracy” grows out of the concept of publicness.

Publicness is a quality that evaluates the public character of public spaces. Publicly accessible places are where all members of the public engage in different types of activities (Mitchell, 2003). Few studies in urban design address the subject of culture-related social behaviour with reference to the street. This research interrogaes the idea that streets are public spaces capable of fostering multiculturalism. But what are the characteristics of streets in multicultural societies that make them become more or less public? How do streets meet the goal of publicness in multicultural societies? The aim of this paper is to develop a framework for assessing publicness in streets in multicultural societies. The proposed model gives a new insight into the assessment of multicultural streets.

2. The dimensions of publicness

Scholars and urban practitioners have developed specific dimensions to assess and evaluate the publicness of public spaces. The main dimensions of publicness have been defined by various commentators. These dimensions are slightly different, although there is a high degree of congruence among them and with definitions of public space, as this term includes the concept of publicness. Madanipour (1999) develops a framework provided by Benn and Gauss (1983) and highlights “access”, “agency”, and “interest” as the main dimensions of publicness. Access refers to having access to a place and activities within, agency relates to the consequences of control and decision making of an agent (acting privately or on behalf of a community), and interest refers to the targeted recipients of particular engagements impacting on a place. Kohn (2004, p. 11) identifies “ownership”, “accessibility”, “inter-subjectivity” as the main dimensions of public space. The term inter-subjectivity relates to the types of encounters and interactions that are supported in the place. Franck and Paxon (1989) claim that the publicness of public spaces is based on a range of characteristics, which include design, location and provision/management. Del Magalhães (2010) suggests rights of access, rights of use and ownership/control as the dimensions that determine the public character of public spaces. Nemeth and Schmidt (2011) propose a model that categorises publicness as the interaction between ownership, management and uses/users of a space. Varna and Tiesdell (2010) provide a more in depth and situated exploration of publicness of public spaces. They identify ownership, control, civility, physical configuration and animation as the five key dimensions of publicness. Each dimension ranges from more public to less public. Ownership refers to the legal status of a place. The dimension of control refers to the presence of an explicit control; civility refers to the management and maintenance of a space; physical configuration refers to macro scale design-oriented dimensions of publicness and animation is a
design-oriented dimension which regards micro design of a space. Langstraat and Van Melik (2013) provide the OMAI model. They summarise the main indicators of publicness as Ownership, Management, Accessibility and Inclusiveness. (ie OMAI). Ownership refers to the legal status of a place. Management refers to maintenance and civility of a space; it also comprises the practices of control such as the presence of CCTV or security guards. Accessibility refers to the physical connectivity of a place as well as the design of the place itself. Inclusiveness is about the level that the needs of different individuals and groups are met in the place. Mantey (2017) presents as new model that assesses the publicness of publicly accessible places. Her model includes three dimensions, each of which consisting of two indicators: diversity (diversity of users and diversity of activities), management (type of management; and freedom of access, use and behaviour), and accessibility (financial and spatial barriers).

3. The proposed model for assessing publicness in multicultural streets

This study builds on the dimensions of publicness described by previous models and adjusts it to the street environment. The four central dimensions of publicness include: ownership, accessibility, management, and inclusiveness. Streets are considered as space in municipal ownership and as an area that is open and accessible to the general public. Therefore, this study contributes to the ongoing discussion on publicness alongside its other important dimensions such as accessibility, management, and diversity/inclusiveness. Figure 1 shows the proposed model for assessing publicness in multicultural streets. The following sections discuss each dimension in more detail.

![Figure 1: the model for assessing the publicness of multicultural streets](image-url)
4. Accessibility

One of the essential qualities of public space which is basic to its use is accessibility; it is one of the fundamental dimensions of publicness (Langstraat & Van Melik, 2013; Staeheli & Mitchell, 2008) and a mean for public spaces to become more successful. Many urban commentators and practitioners declare that good urban spaces are ones that are accessible and are well-used by a wide range of people (Cooper Marcus & Francis, 1998; Gehl, 1987). A public space becomes “open” when it is “publicly accessible” (Jackson, 1984; Lynch, 1981; Madanipour, 2004). In other words, without open and unconditional access a public space is not completely public. Carr et al. (1992, pp. 138-151) identify three different forms of accessibility to public space; physical access, visual access and symbolic access.

The current models of publicness mainly focus on the physical access and the extent that the location of public space is central and connected to the city’s movement pattern (Varna & Tiesdell, 2010). The existence of entrances and gateways may obstruct physical accessibility to an public space and negatively affect its publicness (Varna & Tiesdell, 2010). Other aspects that can also have an impact are the quality of the built environment, public transport routes, and the provision for walking and cycling (Dempsey, Bramley, Power, & Brown, 2009). Visual access relates to the extent of visibility of public space. It is considered an important issue, according to one’s feeling of safety and comfort, in making a decision before entering a public space. Public spaces that obstruct visual access are likely to be exclusive (Loukaitou-Sideris & Banerjee, 1998).

4.1. Socio-symbolic access

But what makes a neighbourhood street more accessible for different ethnic groups residing in the community? Spatial barriers (including physical and visual) is not an issue for obstructing community access in neighbourhood commercial streets. The openness of public spaces should not only be limited to physical accessibility but also should include social accessibility which means having access to the place and to the activities within it (Madanipour, 1999, 2004). In this regard, Low (2000) suggests that a place or landscape could be interpreted through “the social behaviour accommodated by the place, and the symbolic and communicative aspects of the place”. Staeheli and Mitchell (2008, p. 116) suggest that “access is conditioned by feelings of receptivity, welcome, and comfort”. Therefore, socio-symbolic accessibility could be related to the social behaviour and activities that a place accommodates as well as their symbolic, communicative and meaningful features.

Symbolic access concerns the presence of visual symbols and cues, in the form of individuals and groups of people or design elements affecting an entrance to public space. The presence of individuals or groups can be perceived as threatening or pleasing and inviting. Particular design elements also, for example, certain shop frontages, act as symbolic signage and cues suggesting the type of people who are welcomed. Socio-symbolic access regards different non-human factors such as specific facilities or design elements as cues and symbols which invite the intended type of people; the type of shops and activities may be both inviting and repelling to the public; for example; the presence of affordable shops, eating places, vendors may act as a signage that welcomes the general public. On the other hand, the presence of expensive shops and cafés (the beautification and modernization of the businesses) has the potential to alter the sense of place, leading to a luxury and prosperous atmosphere and therefore
orienting towards more affluent and middle class users, excluding users with lower socio-economic status (Loukaitou-Sideris, Blumenberg, & Ehrenfeucht, 2005; Zukin et al., 2009).

Figure 2 and 3: Certain shop frontages, act as symbolic signage and cues suggesting the type of people who are welcomed. Great South Road, South Auckland.

4.2. Economic Access

Carmona et al. (2010) mention economic access as another form of access to public spaces which is most common in quasi-public spaces such as cinemas and theatres and less common in public parks or civic spaces. This type of access can exclude some groups of society by charging entry fees. However, there are also other, more indirect ways people can be kept out, such as the way space is organised suggesting that consumption is a prerequisite for access. Thus, although no fees or entries are charged, these spaces are treated tentatively and become uncomfortable, undesirable and unwelcome.

Figure 4 and 5: A second-hand shop and an Asian flat-rate shop. The type of businesses and the way they express themselves in their frontages conveys different meaning for different users.

Ethnicity and economic disparity are often tied together in the formation of ethnic minorities (Pearson, 2012). Therefore, socio-economic circumstances play an important role for leisure participation among
ethnic minority groups in public spaces (Rishbeth, 2001). Economic access in streets is mainly related to the semi-public space (businesses lining the street). Financial barriers may affect the accessibility of different ethnic groups to the street environment. In this regard, streets could become more public if a wide range of goods and prices are offered by the semi-public space. On the other hand, streets become less public where there is a narrow range of goods and prices.

5. Management

Management and governance of urban spaces have “a key role in shaping the terms on which inter-ethnic relations are organised and conducted” (Fincher & Iveson, 2008). Management relates to maintenance (civility) and control in the investigated models of publicness. Maintenance is one of the qualities of good urban spaces (Carmona et al., 2010). The level of required maintenance in public spaces could be different and is related to their social, economic and environmental context (Dempsey & Burton, 2011). Management of public spaces may control freedom of use, access and behaviour (Mantey, 2017). In the star model control is related to security guards and systems of surveillance which is mostly applicable towards privately managed public spaces such as shopping malls and some urban plazas. But management could also happen through the types of businesses that line a street and their associate characteristics (the spatial and political representation of different ethnic groups in the street environment).

5.1. Characteristics of business agglomerations along the street

Retail tenant mix is the most significant factor in attracting people to a street (Teller, 2008). In multicultural streets the familiar and unfamiliar together shape the environment. Therefore, their level of success is mainly dependent on the right management of the mix of its retailers. The businesses, elements and characteristics which are familiar for one culture might be unfamiliar for the others. If business activities along the street create an exotic and non-familiar image for ethnic cultures, it is less likely to be used as place for recreation. Having a right mixture of activities on the street that supports a wide range of necessary, optional and social activities for different cultural groups is critical for streets to become more public.

5.2. Engagement, spatial, and political representation of different groups

Malone (2002, pp. 166-167) mentions three political guidelines of an open street that lie in the organised and conceptual means for recognising and supporting different groups and their needs in spatial terms; “first, by giving political representation to group interest; second, by celebrating the distinctive cultures and characteristics of different groups; and finally, by re-imagining the role of streets as sites of collective culture, and culture production and reproduction”. Therefore, political representation is an important aspect to support different groups on the street. Social accessibility of a group to public spaces is also reliant on their political representation. According to Madanipour (2003), political exclusion is another type of social exclusion, which follows on from a lack of political representation. This form of exclusion develops when some groups of society and immigrants are underrepresented or even excluded from political decision making. But it is not only decisions that are taken by politicians that can serve to exclude or to be inclusive of people from different backgrounds and means. Private owners of land, buildings and the businesses that establish along the street also make decisions that affect public space. The management and the operation of a street’s retail spaces could also be an important factor in terms of political representation and social accessibility. Social relations within a space, and the ethnic group(s) that a semi-public space is managed by might have a
great influence on how welcome and comfortable users of varied ethnic cultures feel about adjoining the street environment. These trades (buying and selling) activities might be associated with important social interactions (Rapoport, 2005) between cultures.

Many shops are owned and operated by ethnic minorities in ethnic enclaves; for example, over half of the shops in Korea Town in Japan are owned and managed by Koreans (Hester, 2002) and about 85 percent of the shops in Little Shanghai in Sydney are Chinese small businesses (Lu & He, 2013). This could be considered as one of the reasons ethnic enclaves become popular destinations among ethnic groups of the countries of origin (Koreans in Korea Town). Managing a shop by a specific cultural group however does not necessarily mean that they would run a cultural shop or ethnic restaurant. Businesses owned or operated by immigrants do not target ethnic populations necessarily; many serve mainstream markets and non-ethnic clients (Qadeer, 1997).

Representing different ethnic groups in the social and cultural characteristics of premises is an important aspect to retain a meaningful place for people of various backgrounds and help streets become more multicultural. The trade communications between patrons and sellers are associated with social interactions between cultures (Rapoport, 2005) and have a potential in creating a sense of social comfort among ethnic minorities.

6. Inclusiveness/Diversity

Inclusiveness is one of the main dimensions of publicness that has been discussed in different definitions and models of publicness, although with slightly different terminologies. The extent that a neighbourhood commercial street is inclusive could be measured and understood by the type and range of activities and the actors that it supports (Mehta, 2014). In their proposed model for publicness, Nemeth and Schmidt (2011, p. 12) indicate that between the three axes (ownership, management and uses and users), uses and users is the most difficult axis to be measured and needs a multistage methodology; “operationalizing the uses and users axis, for example, requires a multistage methodology likely requiring both unobtrusive observation techniques and user-intercept surveys. Once all axes have operationalised, one could potentially plot several spaces to compare their relative publicness”. The percentages of each ethnic group participating in stationary, static and social activities of a street could be recorded and compared with the percentages of each ethnic group residing in the relative neighbourhood. Similarly, the range of activities (necessary, optional, and social) of each ethnic group can be used to measure how each street serves different ethnic groups. Whether each ethnic group visits the street alone or in groups, and their types of activities is an indicator on how well each group perceives a streets environment as a social space. Table 1 summarises different dimensions in a multicultural street that make it more or less public.
### Table 1: Descriptors of ‘more public’ and ‘less public’ for access, management, and inclusiveness dimensions in a multicultural street

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>More Public situation</th>
<th>Less Public situation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access</td>
<td>Economic access</td>
<td>Wide Range of goods and prices offered on the street [for socio-cultural groups]</td>
<td>Narrow range of goods and prices support for a limited range of potential users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Socio-Symbolic access</td>
<td>Each culture’s signs-symbols/products available on the street based on population ratios</td>
<td>One or two culture’s signs-symbols/products dominate the space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Business agglomeration</td>
<td>The mix of businesses target a diverse range of cultures</td>
<td>The mix of businesses target the mainstream or specific ethnic groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>Engagement, spatial, and political representation</td>
<td>Percentage of Businesses owned by each cultural group is based on population ratios</td>
<td>Percentage of Businesses owned by cultural groups is not based on population ratios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Diversity of users</td>
<td>The percentages of each ethnic group participating in stationary, static and social activities coincide with the percentages of each ethnic group residing in the relative neighbourhood</td>
<td>The percentages of each ethnic group participating in stationary, static and social activities does not coincide with the percentages of each ethnic group residing in the relative neighbourhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusiveness</td>
<td>Diversity of activities</td>
<td>All different ethnic groups participate in a range of necessary, optional and social activities on the street</td>
<td>Some groups only take part in necessary activities on the street</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 7. Conclusion

With an increasing cultural diversity, a key challenge for urban planners is to consciously manage public spaces so that people having different socio-cultural backgrounds can gather there. Streets are known as external public space, “accessible to all” and which “constitute public space in its purest form” (Carmona, Heath, Oc, & Tiesdell, 2003, p. 111). In multicultural societies, they become places where different ethnic groups meet, encounter and socialize. However, not all streets may be able to support social activities of diverse cultural groups equally. While the idea of an inclusive street (as any other public space), a street claimed and used by people of diverse backgrounds at the same time, is seldom possible, it is worth to pursue. This paper provided a framework to understand how streets can meet the goal of publicness in multicultural societies. The central dimensions affecting publicness: accessibility, management, and inclusiveness, each of which having their specific definitions. Figure 1 shows the model for assessing the publicness of streets in multicultural streets. Based on the provided dimensions and their indicators, different streets or different sections of a street can be studied and compared together for being more or less public to a broader range of ethno-cultural groups.
References