

# THE VALUE OF A GEOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE ANALYSIS OF URBAN PUBLIC SPACES

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## **I. WHAT DOES THE GEOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE MEANS AS APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF PUBLIC SPACES?**

Public spaces are basic resources for the city, because of its physical dimension, its symbolic value and its character as place for collective use. Therefore, it has become an essential reference on the debate about city. Thus, there are many disciplines that have shown interest in public spaces in recent decades, and they have developed various several perspectives on understanding them. In this context, geography can offer original readings that are complementary to other more established ones. And this is because: First, knowledge tends to interact nowadays. Second, geography has the ability to understand the city and its elements from both two social and constructive dimensions. Third, it is essential to consider, as a precondition for analysis, the uniqueness of every city, every system of public spaces or every single place.

The aim of this paper is to outline the possibilities of diagnosis and prognosis of public space provided by the geographical perspective, both to understand and to offer management criteria.

This paper is organized into two sections. In section one, it is present the theoretical basis and the proposed analysis. The section two illustrates different methodological decisions on specific examples.

## **II. PUBLIC SPACES AS COMPLEX SYSTEM. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL BASIS FOR THE PROPOSED ANALYSIS**

### **1. The development of the city and the creation of a patchwork of public spaces**

Public spaces include a wide range of types, shapes and functions, especially in the context of urban and metropolitan areas today.

While other urban spaces and facilities can be a resource for developing a complex system of open spaces, the traditional public spaces remain essential. They are open to all citizens, can be managed from public administration and show the results of applying new ideas and contents, as well as participation-oriented proposals.

Throughout the history of the city, the types and functions of public space have changed. In the pre-industrial city, with a compact structure, public places bring together the political, social and symbolic contexts. In the nineteenth century, city public space is spread across all the urban territory; however some places stand out from the rest. Since the Second World War, as a result of the zoning strategies, the complexity of public space is reduced and these places began to resemble single-minded places; public spaces for traffic, aesthetic, recreational functions or other, but separately. Finally, public space of the contemporary city shows many contrasts. In this context, trivialized spaces usually coexist with others, such as those that have been revitalized, or those converted in a consumer product.

Consequently, a public space system is created and it is made of different types of places and functions. At each scale of the city, these spaces have a variable capacity to structure the territory and its social life. Moreover, the expansion of the current city determines that other elements, as landscape, will acquire public value as a citizen right.

## **2. Understanding public space as an unique system**

The network of open spaces is the result of the evolution and overlapping of different models and scales in the city. It is therefore necessary to take into account its diversity and particularities according to several dimensions. On the one hand, in relation to its spatial dimension, analysis that distinguish this network at different urban scales as well as the particular characteristics of the different pieces that make up the urban mosaic, are interesting. On the other hand, regarding the manner in which public space develops its possibilities, it is important to understand that its functions and needs are not the same as those of other public facilities.

Therefore, a systemic and qualitative consideration of public spaces allows us to understand their status inside a city or a specific urban area. In that sense, this paper considers that consolidation of a system of public spaces is based on three issues:

1. Balance and accessibility of the network of public spaces.
2. Diversity and complementarity of roles between different places.
3. Integration and sociability generated through citizen participation.

Analyses to detect the diversity inherent in public space and the importance of relationships among its components are very useful to understand the whole open space as a system that requires spatial and functional complementarity.

Among them, network analyses are especially interesting, applied to the case of urban public spaces and according to their territorial dimension. Thus, by understanding the organization of the network of public spaces and the properties of their nodes we may recognize their current status, its potential for use and some appropriate strategic lines of action. We may also recognize urban and social features at each part of the network. This

does not imply a deterministic approach. On the contrary, the organization and functions of this network may vary when it has been well planned and managed.

### **III. EXAMPLES OF ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC SPACES. FOCUSING ON SPECIFIC ISSUES IN EACH CASE**

The theoretical issues about conformation of a system of public spaces become more applicable as far as they are developed in real situations. In these situations we can adjust the analysis tools, get more accurate diagnosis and generate different proposals.

This paper presents two examples of the local dimension of public space: first, the historical urban area of Seville; second, a metropolitan site as Atarfe, Granada. It is present two different urban realities, stressing the importance of getting to understand the dynamics of each place. In addition, it allows exposing the different approaches and analysis tools, applying the same methodological principles.

#### **1. The system of public spaces of the historical urban area of Seville**

Within the historical urban area of Seville, there are many components of an extensive system of public spaces and they show different types of organization of the physical, social and political dimensions of the city. Their distribution provides also other relevant information.

But the most interesting information emerges from the network analysis. In this case, every public space has been characterized by type, size, character, or provision of minimum elements for multi-use. The main results of this analysis are the followings:

- The number of positive open spaces -at least with some basic elements for multi-use- is sufficient to maintain the structure of the system.
- The more dense and compact subset of open spaces appears at south. It has high heritage value because of its historical centrality as a site of the civil and ecclesiastical power. Today this is the tourist center and shows a cosmetic treatment.
- The central subset is divided into two parts. The first one, at south, encompasses the civil and tertiary network and consists of mixed spaces in terms of forms, functions and vitality. In this case, the main places maintain the symbolism of its historic role as political places. The second one, at north, has undergone a transformation of its appearance, and depends of commercial and service activities.
- The northern subset is the most degraded and conservation issues are a great handicap here. In addition, we can recognize paradoxes about gentrification and revitalization processes at some central places.
- At the southern end there is a subset composed by gardens. Some of them come from the early nineteenth century urban expansion, when the civic centrality of the city moves towards the south. The Ibero-American Exhibition in 1929 increases this green network, and in the nineties new gardens are added. Some of these public places stand out for their idiosyncrasy, sociability, strong symbolism and high quality.

- A remarkable final subset is structured around the promenades of the left bank of the Guadalquivir River. However, their treatment of urban space and the provision of content have not always been sufficient.

## 2. The system of public spaces of Atarfe, Granada

Urban and social impact of the sprawl city model is quite clear at a metropolitan site as Atarfe. In addition, these processes have conditioned the development and simplification of its public spaces. In this context, it is interesting to characterize their attractive, as a result of understanding of their potential and their dynamics.

In the case of Atarfe we propose a second analytic option. And this is carried out through detailed and qualitative identification of areas of influence of all open spaces. In this way, we can get a graphic expression of the various aspects of the public realm and their relationship to the different neighborhoods of Atarfe. In addition, through housing densities we can deduce the relationship between the attractiveness of every public space and its users.

The results of this analysis show a distribution with few overlaps in three areas of influence. Firstly, in the south, on a low-density urban area, there are few and unattractive public spaces. Secondly, on a central and high-density urban area, there are quality and multifunctional public spaces, in some cases with symbolic values. Thirdly, in a north area, low-density and recently built, linked to some few attractive spaces.

There are many areas in this city that are outside the influence area of some public spaces. But also, the overlapping of influence areas and the complementarity between public spaces are very basics. As a result, we could identify two main management lines for revitalizing the public realm of open space. First, by adding elements and implementing usability. Second, by considering the urban facilities according to their possibilities as public places.

## IV. CONCLUSIONS

Public spaces are a conspicuous theme in the quality of urban life and, consequently, the way in which they are valued and recognized by its different stakeholders will be crucial in revitalizing the city's public realm. In relation to what the paper presents, successful public spaces in a urban context that is defined by high-speed changes, require of territorial readings of scales, spaces and process of the contemporary city, emphasizing the concepts of diversity, distinctiveness and complementarity of public spaces. From this purpose, geography can provide conceptual, methodological and technical resources.

Thus, geography can contribute to the research on public spaces. But, in order to understand the urban frames, the underlying socio-spatial codes or the characteristics of public spaces' systems, the wide range of theoretical and methodological discussion are an opportunity for the discipline.

At the same time, the relationship between the geographical perspective on the analysis of public spaces and the treatment of individual cases makes this perspective interesting to implement new planning and management proposals.