

Streets as Fragmented Sensitive Public Spaces - Toward an Evaluation Methodology (Case Study of Tirana)

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Abstract: *Streets are the most representative and democratic public spaces for the city sheltering collective activities, interaction and exchange. As physical places, they are in high demand for their use from different actors (pedestrians, bicycles, and cars), or for different functions (open bars, parking, meeting points, pedestrian lanes etc). This makes them very sensitive places and subject of changing and modification process according to very short-term goals, and fragmented especially regarding the local situation. Recent literature is focusing on defining criteria to qualify or evaluate the performance of public spaces and critiques reveals a range of public spaces types and means of classification. This dynamic character of the street as public space raises an important issue regarding how streets perform as public spaces. Based on analytical review of the literature and empirical work, the article focuses on some main streets in the city of Tirana, examined by using some basic criteria to assess their performance. The article concludes that street could be considered as a chain of fragments of public space performing differently, although they might be close or next to each other, or being part of the same street. It also focuses on some factors that have a direct influence in reducing or increasing the positive performance of streets as public spaces. At the end, it gives some highlight on the idea that streets are very sensitive and perform as compound and dynamic public spaces.*

Keywords: street, public space, sensitive, evaluation

Topics: street, evaluation, Cities, plans and projects of urban resilience

1. Introduction

How does the street perform as public space and which are the factors that influence this performance? When analyzing such sensitive place as the street, first we have to give a definition of the two main concepts, public space and the street as public space, in order to get a better understanding of this study.

This paper analyzes the street as a physical setting in the social context. The first part is about the literature review. Based on this, we will outline some key points of study about public space and the categorization of this spaces, which are the basis of the study methodology.

Second, we empirically analyze the urban street environment, framing into smaller spaces the streets with similar configuration.

The final phase of the study consists in the empirical evaluation of the public street space confronting the analysis of the physical urban environment with the literature, through which we will draw out some interesting conclusions.

2. Conceptualizing streets as public space

As public space is only one part, physical manifestation, of public realm (Tomas, 1991) than streets are an important part of the open public space in the city and being

‘accessible to all, these spaces constitute public space in its purest form’ (Carmona et al 2003 p111). For many urbanites, it is the street that represents the outdoors (Jacobs, 1993). Representing the majority of the area of public space (Vernez- Moudon, 1991) many scholars agree that streets are places where people interact play and meet with others. Furthermore, people depend on the street for traveling, shopping and other functional, social and leisure activities.

It is the streets, plazas, squares, parks and other public spaces that have the potential to be the stage upon which the drama of communal life unfolds (Carr et al 1992 p3), but referring to Mehta (2007, p 2) the discourse about public space is often a discussion of the street, and the efforts to revitalize the public realm are often efforts to revitalize the street.

Although it is the streets, plazas, squares, parks and other public spaces that have the potential to be the stage upon which the drama of communal life unfolds (Carr et al 1992 p3), streets differ from the rest because ‘in principle, they are dynamic spaces with the sense of movement (Carmona 2003... p 141). modulated into a number of discrete sections or episodes, or given elements that puncture the flow of space (Carmona 2003 p 146).. leading to the concept of a continuous linear space compound of many fragments of public spaces placed next to each other.

Streets as fragmented public space

In the whole public space network of the city streets differ from the rest (squares, parks etc) because ‘in principle, they

are dynamic spaces with the sense of movement (Carmona 2003... p 141). modulated into a number of discrete sections or episodes or given elements that puncture the flow of space (Carmona 2003 p 146). Regarding the physical setting the street might be considered as a web leading to the concept of a continuous linear space compound of many fragments of public spaces placed next to each other.

Each of these segments most of the times has its own character based on some other important urban elements such as objects and artifacts therein and the building edges that help to define the physical boundaries of the streets and their space. These buildings, objects, and functions attached to them, with their design and use, create these kinds of distinguished places, by acting as landmarks or point of references, highlighting that part as an appointed place of the street.

This paper considers street as a set of fragmented public spaces joined together in a continuous physical urban space. Although they are part of the same urban space they differ according to their urban configuration, physical and virtual boundaries and attraction of users, which based on their interests, often separate themselves in those public spaces over time and space.

Street as sensitive public space

As a public space, the street has four social roles: as an arena for public life, a meeting place for different social groups, a space for display of symbols and images in society and as a part of the communication system between urban activities (Thomas 1991, 210). But more specifically they accommodate ‘the overlapping realms of movement space and social space’. Referring to Carmona et al (2003 p 67) pedestrian movement is compatible with the notion of the streets as social space, whereas, by contrast, the car-based movement is pure circulation.

Being a specific and limited space between buildings, street as a public space struggles to fulfill all required activities in

it, which many times are in conflict with each other regarding the use of space. Referring to Mehta (2014) street as public space seems to be contested territory between various groups, between private and public, and between regulating authorities and the citizenry (p 54). It, also, behaves as a ‘controlled environment that ‘modify our needs in public life by separating, segregating and filtering both uses and users (p 56), ever changing to accommodate the activities and behaviours of its users.

What makes them more sensitive is its duality character. Because social space provides opportunities for interaction and exchange, development facing onto it will tend to be ‘socially’ active. By contrast, movement space has few opportunities for interaction, and development facing onto it will tend to be ‘socially passive’ (Carmona et al 2003 p 69). Furthermore, because of performance qualities, they tend to be positive or negative spaces (Carmona 2003 p 138).

This paper intends to suggest a theoretical framework to evaluate public space performance regarding their qualities.

Conceptualizing the evaluation model

What qualities must a public space have, in this case, the street setting, to perform as a successful public space? Mehta V. (2013) elaborates some criteria that evaluate the scale of the street to be considered as a sociable public space. He divides them into four main categories: -Physical comfort, -Usefulness and convenience on the street, -Sensory pleasure on the street, -The sense of belonging of the street.

Carmona, et. al., (2003, 2008) through conceptualizing of public space and its management, provides a list of twelve positive qualities and sixteen negative qualities of the public space, which affect its performance. The relationship between these two theoretical approaches is established at the chart of qualities of public space, positive and negative ones, showed in figure 1.

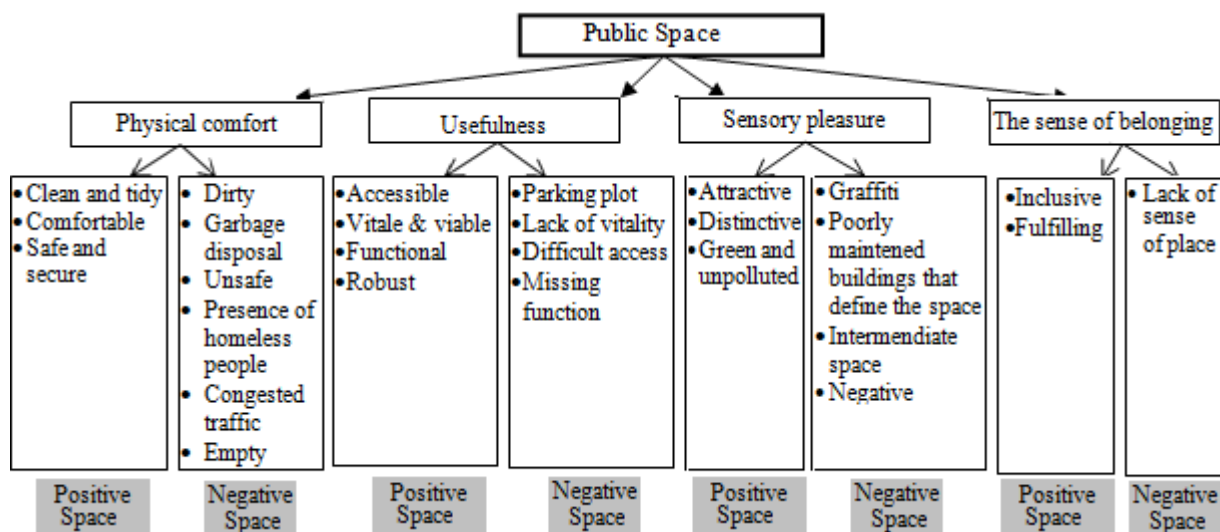


Figure 1: Categorization of public space qualities

This chart will be used as a guiding framework of analyses, attempting to create a theoretical evaluation structure based

on empirical observation by using these qualities to evaluate the performance of the streets as public space.

Public spaces that perform positive qualities have more social interaction, pedestrian movement, different activities, different groups of users and have the sense of a friendly environment, corresponding thus to more sociable places that this paper classifies as socially active spaces.

Whereas negative qualities of public spaces appear where social interaction, pedestrian movement, different activities and groups of users are less present increasing the sense of fear of the space, contributing thus in creating socially passive spaces corresponding to less sociable spaces.

The model presented in figure 2, establish the relationship between the qualities and the sociability scale of public space.

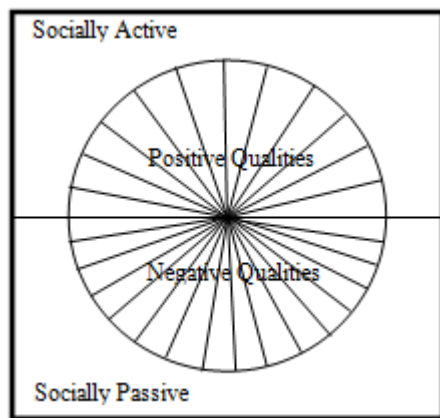


Figure 2: Graphic relation between public space qualities and sociability

3. Case Study

The study is conducted in one of the most important streets, in the city of Tirana, called ‘Unaza’. With a perimeter of about 8 kilometers, this road constitutes a linkage to the city's road system, thus bringing a very high flow of vehicles and pedestrian users. Furthermore, this area contains different urban patterns. Most of them are of commercial character. Although it is perceived as a single urban identity ‘Unaza’ it's made of different segments of streets with different names. Looking to a closer scale it is characterized also from many community or neighbourhood areas, identified with local names. As we conclude forth, that street is a fragmented public space where each of them has its own identity.

4. Methodology

Based on the theoretical approach above, this paper considers the street as a range of linear fragmented public spaces interconnected between them. Each of them is considered to have its own identity and performs regarding their qualities, directly linked with the activities in them and the quality of their physical and social environment.

The first part of the study consists in dividing the street into segments of public spaces that have a similar physical configuration based on the following criteria: 1.Urban furniture; 2.Buildings that define the space;3.Variety of goods and services For the purpose of this study, the study

area is divided into segments based on similar configuration. As a result of this study methodology, the street is divided into 115 study areas. Figure 3



Figure 3: Location plan of study area

Qualities	
POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
-Accessible	-Dirty
-Vital and viable	-Garbage disposal
-Functional	-Graffiti
	-Congested traffic
	-Poorly maintained buildings that define the space
	-Unsafe
	-Negative contribute
	-Parking plot
	-Lack of sense of place
	-Intermediate space
24.9%-positive qualities	62.5%-negative qualities
NEGATIVE SPACE	

Figure 4: Table of qualities

The second part consists of collecting data through a direct visual survey. Observations are made for a period of three months for all 115 spaces. Provided data for each fragment of the street are analyzed by using qualitative methods in order to classify them according to the types of the qualities of public space. For that, a table of detailed qualities is provided (Figure 4). The table consists in two columns on of positive and one of the negative qualities. In those columns are presented all the founded qualities for each segment, and they are confronted with the total number of respected qualities. Each column presents the percentage of the presence of these qualities in the selected area

The third part consists in the use of the model to evaluate the performance. For each public space, positive and negative qualities are placed on respective sectors of the methods are used to evaluate the scale of positiveness and negatives of each public space, within the group. At last the comparison between the two groups is made in order to groups of the model. Quantitative evaluate the overall performance of each public space, providing an overall chart for each evaluated segment figure 5.

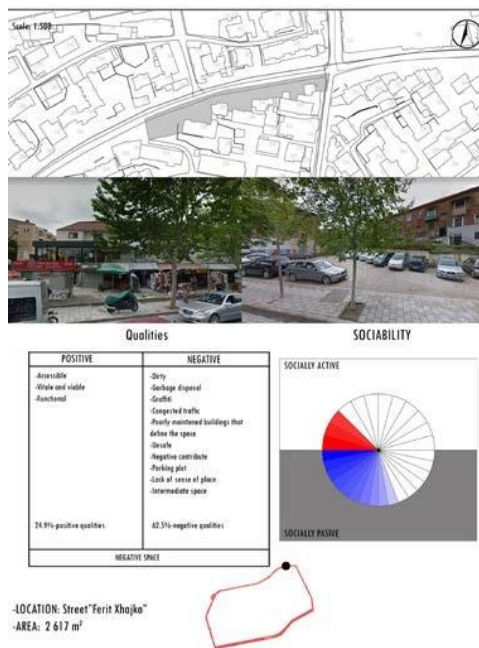


Figure 5: Example of informative schedule for each space

5. Results and Conclusions

Structured and unstructured direct visual surveys and observations showed that the street could be divided into segments of public space, and Urban furniture; Buildings that define the space; and Variety of goods and services could be used as good criteria for such reason.

Each assigned space reflects both positive and negative qualities, but none of them fulfill all positive or negative qualities for each category. This should be considered as a reason that they perform differently. The performance of the public space, positive or negative, does not depend on the number of respective qualities but on the ratio between these two categories, thus spaces that have more positive qualities are positive and vice versa.

Regarding the socially active or passive spaces, the study shows that negative spaces are always socially passive. But, on the other hand, positive spaces are a necessary but not sufficient condition for a space to be socially active. The result shows that from 50 positive spaces only 7 can be considered as socially active. Figure 6



Figure 6: Pie chart of final results

Although the model is based only on empirical surveys taken by a very limited number of researchers (the authors) and in a relatively short time of three months. It can be used as a method for evaluating the scale of positiveness and overall performance as well as the sociability of a public space.

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