The urban public space and design as tools to promote social interaction

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Abstract

We live in a rapidly changing world, where the way we live, work and interact in the cities and with each other is constantly transforming. Through need finding, and understanding the community requirements that depends on the context, designers and managers could decide pertinent strategies and develop future scenarios for creating stories, designing services and experiences that happens in the space and reinforces social interactions and relationships. Is in public space where relations and encounters happen spontaneously. The scope of work suggests an approach to identify, design and develop more efficient places in terms of cost and social benefits, centered in the emotional process of interaction in order to find the meeting point between the system components. This research opens up possibilities for designing spaces through understanding and studying interactions from a human centered perspective and promoting social innovation, by identifying the community needs and involving them in the design process.

Keywords

HCD, public space, social interaction, experience design, systemic thinking

Introduction

In this communication era the only constant is change, we live in a rapidly dynamic world where the way we live, work, and interact with each other are in continuous transformation. People's lifestyle and interests had been modified; we interact in different ways and dimensions, also in new platforms. Living is constantly modified by new technologies, but life is shaped by common habits. People need to share and interact with each other even if the stage changed. We all enjoy sharing experiences, and public spaces are the natural place to coincide and interact with each other. The public realm is where people find the place for relationships, identification, expression of different opinions, coexistence among citizens, contact and exchange of ideas. It is the place where the community development is reinforced and the ideal platform for promoting social values such as respect, tolerance, compassion, empathy among others. Is in the public space, where people can build healthy, constructive relationships, between different society spheres. As everything in life, public spaces should allow new settings for community life development, and must understand the contemporary living and offer a common space to connect, interact and share our personal stories.

Public space is the setting where we perform our daily community life. The main concern is to develop stories and experiences in the space, reinforcing social interactions and relationships. It is necessary to understand that community needs depend of the context, in order to decide the pertinent design strategies and develop future scenarios for creating new stories. It is not just about designing the space, it is about creating stories, designing services and designing for experiences that are going to happen in the space. By understanding the most important needs of the community and involving them in the design process, the possibilities for constructing citizenship would generate more interaction and improve the quality of life. The importance of the experience resides in the idea that we relate to our environments emotionally, we live stories and situations in the space.

Public space and experiences

The emotional experience in the cities had been discussed by many theorists, in different disciplines like Urbanism, Sociology, Psychology, and Anthropology, among others becoming more relevant in recent times. The modern postu-

lates implied a way of life subordinated through technology, in which the people should adapt to a new order dictated by the Industrial Revolution and the technological changes. In the second half of the twentieth century some authors like Jane Jacobs and Jan Gehl started to question the way the public spaces were planned, and began to claim spaces designed for the people and subordinated by the use of cars (Gehl and Svarre, 2013).

Through history evolution, public spaces were modified with the society and changed to whatever they needed, but since industrial revolution, people started to change and adapt to the new possibilities that technology allowed, which is not necessarily a negative aspect. However, the evolution of the public spaces and life models should be a dialogue between people experiencing the public realm and new lifestyles dictated by technology, it should be a round trip language in which both parts interact.

We are currently experiencing changes in daily life. Overcrowded cities like Mexico City, where heavy traffic, insecurity and social differences are everyday problems, it looks like the transformation happens faster than normal. It seems that urban residents had been denied the opportunity to enjoy the public space; pleasures like sitting in the park and interact with each other, playing with the children, or stroll at night are becoming less frequent. We need to realize that the public spaces are means to a way of life. We just need to make decisions and start taking actions to achieve a lifestyle that provide us happiness.

Happiness and public spaces

Charles Montgomery (2013) argues in his book Happy City, The Power for Urban Design to Make Happiness, that the public spaces and cities are capable of improving people's happiness, through pertinent design decisions and the chance to interact with each other, with nature, and everything the public space offer itself.

To talk about happiness it is necessary to understand the meaning of happiness. Nevertheless, it is impossible to define it; it depends on the individuals, their ideals, aspirations, cultural context, emotional status, age, gender and endless aspects that make the concept of happiness personal and unique for each person. However, through history, psychologists, economists, philosophers, sociologists and other disciplines have studied happiness and how to measure it. What is most common is that everyone translates their ideas of happiness into experiences.

Greeks had the idea of happiness, and the concept to refer to it was *Eudaimonia* , each philosopher interpret their own version of the concept, however Aristotle argued that *Eudaimonia* implicated not only individual pleasures like health, power, good fortune and recognition were enough, but also that a man could achieve happiness only by embracing the high of his potential. He considered that the polis was the perfect vehicle to achieve *Eudaimonia*. (Montgomery, 2013)

This relation between the civic and the individual life was evident in ancient Greek cities, where people could gather together in a shared space to discuss, express opinions and interact with each other. Jeremy Bentham (1907) in The Principle of Utility argues that every action appears to have an augment or decrease of the happiness for the group whose interests are in question. He devised a complex set of tables called "Felicific Calculus" where he proposed a classification of 12 pains and 14 pleasures, by which we might test the "Happiness Factor" of any action. Emotions cannot be pigeonholed in a set; it is more complicated than that. Emotions are not easy to measure, understand, describe and lot less to design, however, understanding the cultural context, where people, tradition, and space converge is essential for planning spaces that reinforces well-being. Economists tried to measure happiness after Jeremy Bentham's theory into something calculable, so they studied money and people's decisions of how to spend it. However, happiness is not just about wealth and comfort.

Abraham Maslow (1970) described human needs in a hierarchy in which once people cover basic and safety needs such as food, shelter, employment and resources, the subsequent are not related with economic wealth, but to psychological needs such as friendship, family, self- esteem, and confidence, and at the top of the pyramid the need for self-actualization.

Carol Ryff (2016) research is centered on how aspects of psychological well-being are influenced by social structures. Her studies focus on six dimensions of well-being:

- Autonomy
- Environmental Mastery
- Personal Growth
- Positive Relations with Others
- Purpose in Life
- Self-Acceptance

Ryff comments *"Eudemonia is about getting up every day and working very hard toward goals that make your life*

meaningful" (cited in Montgomery, 2013 Kindle Location 558)

Another psychologist, Csikszentmihaly (1990) studied the optimal experience, abstracting on "Flow" model the reasons why people feel happy. He proved that the quality of life depends on two main aspects: The way we experience activities, and how we relate with other people. By nature, we are programmed for being around people, and interact with each other. The way we handle our relationships influences directly in our happiness. The most important psychological effect in public spaces is the way it establishes relationships between people, and providing satisfaction to our lives. But relationships are not just about sympathy with each other; it is also about trust, the more we trust one another, even with unknown person have a huge influence on happiness and well-being.

Human beings are social animals, we need to live in communities in order to survive; animals that live in groups and cooperate with each other are more successful and accomplish almost unbelievable tasks such as ants, bees and so many others.

Jonathan Chapman (2005) suggests that we should co-depend from each other in order to experiment the individual being. In other words, individuality couldn't exist without society, and vice versa, society depends on the presence of individuals.

Relations with others can make us extremely happy if they are good, or miserable when not working well. People are the most flexible and changing aspect of the environment in which we deal. The same person could cause a pleasant situation and after a few hours cause an unpleasant one. That is why the person who learns to get along with others makes a change for the better in their quality of life. People are not only important because of what they can give us; they are the most satisfactory source of happiness.

This flexibility of relationships is what allows us to transform unpleasant interactions into tolerable and even exciting ones. The way we define and interpret a social situation makes a big difference in how people treat each other and the feelings they experiment while doing it.

In Hassenzahl words (2013) the pursuit of happiness requires procurement of positive and meaningful experiences on daily life. Through a commitment to the world, people can take control of their experiences (as possible) and thus increase or reduce their happiness.

This gives designers a great opportunity to work in different spheres, if designers can help people experiment positive experiences in their daily life, the natural place for this to occur is in the public space where encounters happens spontaneously and all society spheres find a meeting point.

The potential benefits of designing for the experience of living spaces requires a better understanding of the cultural phenomena in order to develop effective design strategies that works satisfactorily in specific socio-physical conditions. Through discussing on how people feel about public spaces in different contexts and circumstances, we can come up with pertinent design solutions that enable social participation, consequently people could create significant connections.

Designing experiences

First of all, what is an experience? Psychologically, an experience emerges from the integration of perception, action, motivation, and cognition into an inseparable, meaningful whole. The intimate relation between those single concepts is reflected by Russell's (2003) model of emotions, which stresses the importance of cognitive processes, such as self-observation, attribution, and categorization, for the experience of emotions.

Most action theories (e.g., Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006; Carver & Scheier, 1989) assume close links between actions, thoughts and emotions. In sum, experience is "an episode, a chunk of time that one went through (...) sights and sounds, feelings and thoughts, motives and actions(...) closely knitted together, stored in memory, labelled, relieved and communicated to others. An experience is a story, emerging from the dialogue of a person with her or his world through action" (Hassenzahl, 2010).

If we focus on the term Experience Design, we can realized that is commonly used specially in the digital realm, its main concern is in how people feel while using a product or accomplishing an activity. Nonetheless the term "Experience or User Experience is not about technology, industrial design, or interfaces. It is about creating a meaningful experience through [any resource]."(Hassenzahl)

However, designing experiences is complex to achieve. As Elizabeth Sanders (1999) comments, experiences are constructing activities. It requires two parts, as in communications, the one that sends the message, and the one that receives that message. What designers work with is on the process of designing the communication for people to receive the message. Designers should have access to the experiences that influences the reception of the message.

To support this research (currently in progress) the framework developed by Forlizzi and Battarbee (2004) was adapted, it summarizes an interactive system, in three types of user-product interactions and in three types of experience. The task was to evaluate three urban spaces in order to detect which kind of interactions are happening in the context and what kind of experience are resulting from those interactions.

If we take as a basis that, the essence of design is: "making sense of things" (Verganti, 2009). And terms such as "experience" and "making sense" comprise a large part of what social scientists like anthropologist generally call culture - the practices, artifacts, sensibilities and ideas that constitute and inform our everyday lives (Plowman, 2003) this is where we have a wide field to find insights.

The importance of accessing the experiences allows designers to understand people and learn from them, Sanders enlisted different ways to learn from people and it let us know the scene from different aspects:

- Listen
- Interpret and make inferences of what they think.
- Watch what they do
- Observe what they use
- Uncover what they know
- Try to understand what they feel
- Appreciate what they dream

Each route allows us to connect in different levels, which Sanders divides in four:

- Explicit. Letting express themselves; however, they only show what they want others to hear.
- Observable. Watch what people do provide observable information that can give a different perspective than just listening; in this case every component plays an important role.
- Tacit. Understand what people feel gives the ability to empathize and sympathize with them.
- Latent. Although is a tacit knowledge, understanding what people expect from the future reveals latent needs that allows designers to work in different directions.

Table 1 – Interaction-Experience analysis

Type of interaction	Description	Lafitte Greenway, New Orleans Lousiana	Klyde Warren Park	Ville Spatiale
Fluent	Automatic and skilled interaction with artifacts and people	At the heart of the Greenway is a bicycle and pedestrian trail that facilitates travel among diverse, adjacent neighborhoods.	Klyde Warren Park is a 5.2-acre deck park, bridging Uptown Dallas to Downtown Dallas. The park includes a performance pavilion, restaurant, dog park, children's park, great lawn, shaded walking paths, water features, free Wi-Fi, ping pong and football tables, also reading and games area.	Adapts architectonic creation to contemporary' citizen needs related to physical and social mobility
Cognitive	Focus on the product at hand, result on knowledge or confusion/error	*"The Lafitte Greenway has been a catalyst for focusing attention to this previously desolate train corridor which has resulted in these and many more businesses plus residential picking up prime spots for development. What is happening around Carrollton Ave. has been phenomenal, in part due to the Greenway now cutting through"* (New Orleans inhabitant).	*"The heart of our city! It changed Dallas for the better!"* (Dallas inhabitant)	Information not available due this project was conceptually developed
Expressive	Help the user form a relationship among artifacts and people	Involvement of the community in the planning, design and implementation of the plan. Community is still involved in the conservancy of the park and also develops projects that reinforce social interaction.	Stakeholders were engaged throughout the planning process in community meetings (project workshops, charettes, and park-feature surveys). The park now in post-occupancy, continues to promote social interaction and community participation, and provides connectivity to the city.	A multi-story space-frame-grid, which is supported by widely-spaced piles […]. This infrastructure forms the fixed element of the city. The mobile element consists of walls, base-surfaces and dividing walls which make the individual division of the space possible; it could be called the 'filling' for the infrastructure. All elements which come into direct contact with the users

Type of experience				
Experience	"Self talk" that happens when we interact with artifacts and people	Developing shared-use pathways and promoting their use can help urban communities address problems of obesity, congestion and scarcity of open space.	The park has improved the quality of life primarily by reducing stress, providing a place to be outdoors and improving the area's sense of place.	Information not available due this project was conceptually developed
An experience	Can be articulated or named, has a beginning and end, inspires behavioral and emotional changes	Greenway awareness gains steam as more citizens become involved and offer their time, efforts, and enthusiasm toward ensuring the corridor comes together. Working workshops, recycle programs and Rails-to-Trails Conservancy Features Lafitte Greenway in their Case Study: Urban Pathways to Healthy Neighborhoods.	The park also hosts architectural tours, workouts (yoga, tai chi, boot camp) and such cross-species events as "Balance and Harmony with DogFit Dallas" and "The Secret Life of Pigeons."	Architecture should only provide a framework, in which the inhabitants might construct their homes according to their needs and ideas, free from any paternalism by a master builder. Although it was never constructed, because is an indeterminate urbanism, the project allows infinite possibilities, developing social innovation.
Co-experience	Creating meaning and emotion together through space use	Community engagement reached through public meetings (workshops) in order to gather feedback from residents.	Not only successful in fixing an urban fracture that isolated development and challenged the existing potential for the area; it also demonstrates that a long-term vision and commitment are critical to foster a sense of place and community, with lasting positive rippling effects	Information not available due this project was conceptually developed

There are numerous tools that allow designers to understand and empathize with people in these different levels. Even the traditional ones such as observation or non-conventional that includes acting and creating such as emotional toolkits (people create artifact to tell their stories and dreams) or cognitive toolkits (maps, 3d models, diagrams of relationship among others). What is important about these tools is that they allow end-user to get involved in the design process, and let them share their own needs and desires into their ideal experiences.

The more designers allow users to express and participate in the design process, the more effective and pertinent it would be for the community. Designers in all levels should understand and use different resources in order to be emphatic with the people, traditional design methods are not enough; different disciplines need to work together in order to develop new ways to approach the community.

Sanders concept of "Post Design" (1997) claims for a visual language that people can use to express and interpret ideas, an attitude, recognizing that everyone has something to offer, understanding the people who experience spaces; it allows the participation and collaboration, and it is a continuous process of changing and learning. It is a new way to conceive design included in a continuum of changes that depend on people using and appropriating the created artifacts and spaces.

Conclusion

Experience Design puts forward a more empathic approach to design the urban realm by understanding feelings and cognitive aspects of people.

We need a different approach for designing public spaces focusing on the potential to create relationships and interactions that offer freedom and autonomy to individuals and in this way, improving life quality. Our task as designers is to make public space "livable".

Through understanding people's context and specific needs designers can adopt an informed position and bring pertinent solutions in terms of social benefits.

Developing the ability to observe, listen and learn from those who experience the space is fundamental for the creation of optimal public spaces and happiness. Professionals should become more prepared to accept and learn from the spontaneous and unexpected situations of everyday life. This spontaneity is really significant for engaging individuals and groups in the citizen practices.

It is also necessary to be more flexible and empathic in the way the public spaces are planned and designed, it is urgent to evolve different disciplines in the designing process in a linear way; it is vital to understand the specific context and needs in order to purpose efficient and meaningful spaces.

The design practice is not static, and depends on various factors; however, it is important to consider leading ideas from different disciplines in order to enrich the experience of the public spaces. The more design-

ers concern about living experiences, the more individuals would relate and create symbolic and meaningful references to places, and create healthy relationships and citizen construction.

It is necessary to adopt theoretical methodologies that allow designers to generate social change through dialogue and commitment. There is no room for traditional practices based on imposition. It is urgent for designers to constantly look over and adapt their working methods in order to create a complete picture of the contextual situation that shapes the community and the space.

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