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Where do young people come together: A study of how the public spaces rooms are used by older teenagers in an urban environment

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Abstract

This paper reports an ethnographic investigation of teenagers' patterns of movement in public space, undertaken by university students as part of their learning. The project is useful for the students in their future professional role as teachers. We show the importance of teachers knowing about young peoples' activities during their free time, because teachers have opportunities to come closer to pupils' interests and to understand their learning arenas outside the school. We found interesting aspects of genus and ethnicity which can help develop awareness for educators in school. We also develop understanding of these questions and show its use in university teaching.

Background

During recent years we have had a developing co-operation between two disciplines in Teacher Education in Malmö. We have combined content about geographical perspectives on the city with different visual methods for learning. The students have solved tasks which they have accounted for in ways which point out the visual as important material and method in a learning process.

During the autumn of 2006 we worked with students in a course named *Ethnogeography - the development of the city* which deals with the question about how and why young people use different environments and settings where they can come together. The students worked in groups, which each accounted for a small ethnographic investigation. This method is inductive and students meet their informants in their natural environment in a fieldwork study. They observe, talk and use interviews to collect empirical data. Depending on where they find their informants they can even participate in an activity together with them (Kullberg 2004). The students had to focus on teenagers' movement patterns in the city. We were especially interested in 16-18 year old people (late adolescents) because they are between child and adult age and have to balance between different worlds. Young people in this age may have some problem because they are too young to gain entrance to pubs and discos and they are too old to go to recreation centres. The students got their own ideas about where to find the informants and showed us a broad richness of ideas. The students pointed out during the accounts that both gender and ethnicity means a lot when teenagers choose activities and company outside school. Even class background was obvious in some environments. Identity is a key word of the results and we want to look upon this as a sign in the modernity.

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The account of the students

Group 1: The market place - a place with many functions.

One group chose a market place which is named Gustav Adolfs torg and which has a lot of functions. In the daytime a lot of people just stroll around or are walking from home to their jobs. People also buy vegetables and flowers because there is a market trade. In the evenings and at the weekends the market place changes completely because the youngsters are entering the market in mostly one purpose, to be visible.

Some of the students observed youngsters' movement patterns. What did they see? The students saw that the market place was an arena where people expose themselves, a landmark which helps people to find their way and a place with lots of restaurants and hamburger bars. You also find many shops selling different things. Where did the youngsters stand and why? The youngsters were standing in groups and seemed to be cocky, some were standing alone and just tried to look cool, others just stood talking. The young people also moved a lot. They walked from the bus-station and crossed the market place to the pedestrian precinct. They went in and out from restaurants and hamburger bars and strolled in to Wallenbergs Park. All this had probably one purpose, to be looked at. This is an environment where many things happen during evenings and weekends, also a lot of violence.

Because of all this the students have suggestions on improvements to make the market place with its surroundings more comfortable and safe in the evenings for all of us.

Suggestions: More adults / parents walking around in the evenings,
 More patrolled polices,
 More lighting,
 Transform one of the restaurants to a youth centre.

Group 2. Coffee culture

This group of students picked out to look at Espresso House as a meeting point. This café is situated in the centre of Malmö close to two upper secondary schools. Who is visiting this place? Youngsters between 16-18 years old are in the majority and in the café age. They are visiting the public room which is a kind of practice for an adult life. The students observed different movement patterns in the room. Some guests moved around between different tables talking. They seemed to know each other. Some just sat talking in corners. But the students also saw families with children, students from the schools nearby and gentlemen working on their laptops.

The students asked themselves the following questions:

Who are excluded? None
 What kinds of ethnicities exist? All kind.
 Which sex is dominating? More females.

Are the guests in a special age? Mixed.

What could prevent people from visiting the place? The price and the style of the visitors and fittings.

This is what the students observed but they also interviewed a waitress and she told that many guests were 15-18 years old, they often sat in groups of 2-5 persons and they visited the café when they had free periods. Among the visitors were as many girls as boys. This information contradicted the students' observations. On weekends and on holidays the café had more visitors. The students also interviewed youngsters from the upper secondary schools that had left the café age and moved into the pub age. They told the students that they visited the café in the daytime, not in the evenings.

Group 3. The Brewery and the Slipway Park

This group has chosen two meeting points which had the same purpose, namely a place where you skate. But these two places we are going to introduce to you are different in some aspects.

'The Brewery' is situated in a working-class district. This project is financed through cooperation between some organisations. This is a place, a hall, where youngsters hang around, three percent are girls and the rest are boys. Here you can play sport spontaneously but it is also possible to use this sport as a lifestyle. Who are those youngsters coming here? The students say that the visitors have different status because of socio-economic conditions. You can see youngsters that obviously have money, but they want to use a worn board. But you can also see the opposite. The inside environment has a good mood. There is a café where many girlfriends sat admiring their boyfriends.

The youngsters start skating at the age of 10 and continue up in age. As a visitor you can notice some groupings in the hall connecting to school or age. The Brewery is not a place only for boys or professionals. All girls are welcome to skate on Mondays.

The other place named The Slipway Park is situated in a newly planned part of Malmö named the Western Harbour. This is a very exclusive part of the city. When the community planned the Slipway Park many young people were involved in planning the project. The community meant that it is important with young people's opinions. This is a project where democracy is at a nearby level to the inhabitants. Those who skate do it in a preference which means that the best skate first and so on. Boys are in majority, girls are mostly hanging around because their boyfriends are skating or biking mounting bikes.

Reflections from the students:

In the Brewery you have a mix of Swedes and people coming from other countries. Many of them are living in the labour district.

People skating in the Slipway Park are living all over Malmö and many are coming from other countries. The students did not have any information about skaters' socio-economic background.

Both groups are united through their love for skating.

Group 4. The arcade

This group visited an arcade which is known as a 'concept arcade' for youths from twenty to thirty years old. The advertising says we are 'young and crispy'. The arcade is situated in the centre of Malmö in the old Telia head office, which was rebuilt in glass and is very bright and modern. The building has received a planning committee prize because of its spectacular look.

Who is strolling around here? It is mostly girls in pairs walking around and looking at the beautiful clothes and things and they seem to have this as a social activity. Many of the girls were well dressed and not many seemed to buy anything but window-shopped. The boys were coming alone or in gangs and looked very purposeful. The arcade is excluding many boys because of fewer supplies intended for men. People over fifty-five years old are not an attractive target-group.

Many people are passing because the arcade is situated on a pedestrian precinct on the way to the big market place Gustav Adolfs torg. The youngsters in Malmö say that all ways go to Gustav. The students did interview some young people who told them that it was important to stroll around here because you meet a lot of people, especially from different upper secondary schools. Again the purpose is to be looked at. The students did not think this shop would be long-lived.

The result based on literature

Thinking, feelings, aesthetics and forms of social life constitute a system of representations which show the position people have in the society. Culture and identity are created and transformed through the meeting of people. It can be a struggle over power and prestige (Sernhede 2001). Young people have to construct their identity constantly and they get their impressions about ways of living presented through different mass media in multimodal forms. It becomes important to participate and sustain a feeling of self-identity and the body is prominent when you want to show the surrounding world who you are (Giddens 1997). You can talk about an aesthetic surface which signals affiliation. But also the environments you choose to stay in have importance. Processes of shaping an identity are depending on the socio-cultural context in which the individual lives in. The public space has certain qualities which influence people, but people also influence the space through interpreting qualities and through attributing special import. The place cannot be divided from the experience of the place and the way the place becomes purposeful (Friberg 2005). In Malmö, which is a segregated city, we can see much of sharp boundaries. In this project we were interested in what way young people can come together crossing the limits and meet beyond patterns. We wanted to know in what way groups of young people find out different manners and forms of living. Which things can unite people? Today the industry

concerning teenagers invests in complete packages of lifestyles. This is integrated with the culture of media (Lieberg 1992).

From fresh research we can establish the fact that shopping has become an interest, a hobby, especially for young girls (Axelsson 2007). It is especially the fashion which gets attention. It can depend on whether that fashion is represented and discussed in all media. Fashion is a form of culture consumption. Clothes create meaning and you can understand from a distance what type of person you have in front of you. But many young girls stay in shopping galleries for hours without having any money. Probably they try out garments and that can be enough to satisfy them. Anthony Giddens means that clothes are more than just to cover your body with. Together with make-up and a well-trained body it is a form of symbolic communication. Research points out that from the beginning, in the late 1800, the department stores were places where women could feel safe and protected. Zola writes in the book *Women's paradise* about the dichotomy concerning the devaluation and the delight of consumption. Today we talk in the same way about this phenomenon. The students in our group visited a department store which has people who are younger than thirty years in view. In that way it is an excluding place for others. But the young boys are in the minority. Still it is a place for women who can stroll around and enjoy the great variety of articles, all sorts of ballyhoo, luxury and fantasise about beauty and fortune. Shopping is a social activity and it is focused on enjoying. (Friberg 2005)

According to an investigation about young people and the city we read that young people estimate some different things when they leave their homes in the suburbs and get into the centre, and that is firstly the atmosphere (Lieberg 1992). There is a mix of people and they can study other groups, for example elder people without being obliged to participate. This was just the result one of the group accounted for when they talked about teenagers visiting Espresso House. You can study and learn in this situation. The second is that the young people mean that in this environment anything can happen. This is a difference from the predictable suburban area. It is both thrilling and tempting.

There are signs that tell us that the life of the city is renewing and developing (Lieberg 1992). The group that went through their investigation in two different places for skating showed this evidently. They compared the two places put in to order for skating. In many cities near the water new environments with dwelling houses, shops and restaurants have been created. The apartments often are expensive which exclude many people to move into them. Even shops and restaurants are addressed to the rich. But the students found an interesting thing when they visited the skate-ramp in Western Harbour and got the history about the establishment and decision-makers.

We can establish that the results of the students agreed with present research concerning young people and their habits.

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