



A New Reading of Sociable Public Spaces: The Nexus between Urban Design and Microsociology*

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ABSTRACT: Over the past 50 years, while the development of intermediate texture of Tehran has focused on spatial dimension and physical structure, neglecting the user experience and social dimensions has become a design challenge. This paper has focused on Social interaction in public space neighborhood via integration of social and spatial dimensions which is essential more than ever. In this paper, a research has conducted through a literature review of theoretical and experimental researches in urban design and micro-sociological researchers. The aim of this paper is to develop a new perspective for reading sociability in public spaces. For reading contemporary social spaces, this article implements the combination of two observation methods to achieve better understanding regarding sociability of the public spaces. Firstly, Direct and walk-by observation tools have been used for creating behavioral map to better understand of the relationship between the temporal and spatial forms of social settings and secondly participant observation tools have been used. For being among the participants and identify the expression of their feelings and emotions, we used informal interviews and listened to their narratives and stories. The selected case is a neighborhood that has been developed in the intermediate texture of the city, "Koy-e-Nasr", commonly known as "Geisha", in Tehran, Iran. Although these spaces have no significant physical features, they are more popular for including the general interest of people. The findings offer new insight on what commonly have considered about the use of public spaces and illustrate the places and their locations such as streets edges and frontages, entrances and urban equipment, and variety of active and lingering or fleeting and passive social interactions and conditions.

Keywords: Sociability, Social Public Spaces, Participant Observation, Direct Observation, Microsociology.

INTRODUCTION

The nature of social life and public spaces are tied together with social interactions and collective memories, which creates a scene for the presence and socializing of different people. There are theories and beliefs concerning the knowledge of urban design and especially public places which have always focused on the role of the spatial characters of space in production of sociable urban spaces. However, as a dynamic social reality, cities

have still many challenges in public spaces so that the public interest in these spaces is the main concern of decision makers, urban managers, and designers. Despite significant studies carried out to stress on the social context of public spaces in 70s and 80s by researchers like Gehl (1971), Alexander (1977), and White (1980), social topics started to fade their significance beyond the emergence of environmental issues. Nevertheless,

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the fact is that social dimension does not mean the same in different contexts; it is dynamic and variable. Unfortunately, the relationship between literature on sociology and urban design is seen mostly where the focus is put on the product of urban spaces (Banerjee, 2001; Nemeth & Smith, 2011). Nonetheless, due to much focus on the macro aspect of social issues, the depth and impression of interactions have been neglected. In some cases, with an independent view of social life and public spaces, the irreducible tie of these concepts has been ignored and the issues have been dealt separately (Low, 2006). In this study, we study a deeper view of sociable public spaces and make a closer connection between the knowledge of sociology and urban design, attempting to clarify the importance of the social and experimental structure of users beside spatial characters.

Theoretical Fundamentals and Framework of Reading Sociability in Public Spaces

To clarify the research problem, we need to review the theoretical and experimental literature on sociable public spaces in different areas. First, the focus is mostly on the concepts related to publicness and the public realm as the context of social interactions from different viewpoints. As this study work on the realm of micro-sociological theories; social interactions and their connection with public spaces was reviewed. Finally, the urban characters of sociability in public spaces were classified by reviewing the outcomes of theoretical and experimental studies made about urban design.

The Concept of Publicness and Public Realm

The concept of publicness can be considered as a quality that allows accessibility of different people to public participation in different activities. Moreover, public spaces as a scene of daily life is where persons and groups deal with others beyond the cycle of formal friendships (Young, 1990; Shaftoe, 2008). A public space, as a spatial subset of the public realm, is the symbol of the link between public realm and public space, and has a crucial role in expanding and sustaining the public realm (Sennett, 1977; Parkinson, 2012). Urban sociology has well studied the interests of the society in public realm and has helped us to get information about the main patterns, changes, and issues facing the public social life. The emphasis on the importance of social life and regarding the cases of using the approaches for increasing the presence of people, urban design is still lacking a thorough theorization of the social life, contrary to sociology (Marshall, 2012; Southworth et al., 2012). There is a notable point that some researchers in urban

sociology

make attention to the fact that the sociological discussion about public space is lacking the existence of spatial sociology (Urry, 2001) and there is a need for a place sensitive sociology, emphasizing on need to dialectics and negotiations between urban design and sociology more than ever.

Social Interaction in Public Spaces

The concepts of social sustainability and sustainable society have a conceptual convergence in a way that they both response to objects of sustainable development (Dempsey, 2013). As the core of these concepts, social interaction has a vital role in the sustainability of social life in the public realm. Presence of people and social interactions in society is a part of basic needs of human, which enables the individuals as a social reality, to develop itself, its role and its social relations under various conditions and change it during the life (Lang & Moleskey, 2010, p. 89). Further, as a representation of human behavior, its presence or absence among people will lead to the emergence of indications of participation, inattention, comfort or wrath (Lofland, 1998). Social interactions are main aspects of social capital which in turn is a substructure for social cohesion (Putnam, 2000) and which is followed by strengthened social attachment among people. In absence of social interactions, individuals live separately and apart from others and therefore, fade the sense of attachment and belonging to society, leading to jeopardized mental and emotional health (Alexander, 1992; Dempsey, 2013). Goffman (1963) has defined social interaction in a micro-sociology attitude as a process that is produced by our act and interact to those around us. Concisely, social interaction includes those acts that people perform toward each other and the responses they give in return. Therefore, it becomes clear that there is a need for study of various types of social interactions, whether more routinized, brief and short-term interactions, which are more frequent and may have the potential to be changed to long-lasting and noteworthy interactions (Goffman, 1963; Milgram, 2010). Focusing on informal social interactions seems highly significant particularly in large cities where traditional family relationships have undergone drastic changes to support live public urban spaces where strangers do not fear and interact with each other instead. As shown in table 1, classification of various types of social relations and behaviors have been taken into account. The literature emphasizes on the importance of edges and thresholds, conditions of open regions (Goffman, 1963; Stevens, 2006), people-watching, ceremonies and events and triangulation (Whyte, 1980) in support of informal



social behaviors. There is a growing body of knowledge through a review of the existing studies about the social life and interactions in public spaces and the role of urban design. Unfortunately, these studies have no interest in the deep understanding of micro-sociology aspect of space. Thus, using the literature available in both scopes provides different definitions and categorizations

of social interactions, states and activities that support them. In the urban design literature too, the activities that encourage social interactions such as sitting, standing, waiting, people watching and their relationships with the details of the existing context are emphasized (Gehl, 1971; Alexander et al., 1977; Whyte, 1980; Bentley et al., 1985; Shaftoe, 2008; Mehta, 2013).

Table 1. Types of Social Conditions and Interactions

	Types of Social Conditions	Descriptions
Goffman 1963	Formal Interactions Informal Interactions	Informal social interactions: their encounters are by nature unplanned and risky – they are very dependent on the spatial and social context.
Lofland 1999	Fleeting Relationships Routinized Relationships Quasi-primary Relationships Intimate-secondary Relationships	Both fleeting and routinized relationships are probably most fruitfully analyzed in terms of the interactions they produce.
Milgram 2010	Routinized, Standardized or Brief Long-lasting Relations	Routinized, standardized or brief, which are more frequent, as they may also have the potential to evolve into something more significant and long lasting.
Gehl 2010	Passive Social Interactions Active Social Interactions	Passive contacts, that is, simply seeing and hearing other people. These activities could also be termed as “resultant” activities because social activities occur spontaneously, as a direct
Mehta 2013	Passive, Fleeting, and Enduring Social Behaviors	Passive sociability: need for human beings to be in the presence of other people without seeking any direct verbal contacts.

The body of urban design knowledge has an extensive literature in relation with the main characters of urban design that support social interactions in an extensive spectrum of urban spaces from traditional and old urban spaces, third places, main streets of the city and ancient squares (Table 2).

Literature and Experimental Studies on Sociability of Public Spaces

Whyte (1980) tested this issue in relation with the failure of many urban spaces developed in the last 50 years. In “the street life” project, he stressed on direct observation method and used interview and drawing behavior maps. He was of the idea that direct observation could lead to completely different results. The study showed that the presence of people particularly children in streets was indicative of the attraction of street for them despite that there were special playgrounds and parks.

Appleyard (1980) used report-writing in “livable streets” project to identify the effect of traffic on social interaction with people. Jacobs (1993) in the book “great streets” states that a good street is the one that encourages forming societies and social interactions. He focuses on systematic observations as a strategy for analytical studies and decision-making tools. He believes that observing the interaction of public life and public space instead of

a superficial view of blueprints and drawings could help us prevent many decisions that have unpleasant effects on peoples’ lives.

Gehl (1960-2010) stated that “first we form cities but then the cities form us” and carried out numerous research based on extensive observations in Copenhagen, Melbourne, and New York. In these studies, he tried to understand the relationship between built environment and behavior to increase liveliness and strengthen the social life of the city. He attributed the activities in public realms to their extent of necessity. He does not believe that necessary behaviors are much dependent on environmental qualities. Instead, he refers to the importance of optional and social activities. Stressing on the combination of usage in increasing the duration of the stop, he considers the extent of staying activities as the most important factor in strengthening social life. Hence, from his viewpoint, the number of staying people is more important than those who walk because they would have more experiences of the place qualities.

In a research in Melbourne, New York, London and Berlin, Stevens (2006) dealt with extending and reevaluating of Lynch’s model and its five elements and tried to study develop a comprehensive, robust model of urban morphology from a phenomenological and behavioral perspective. Through systematic observation, photography, and recording behavioral maps, he stressed



on the playability of public realm. He informs us about props and thresholds highlight the closeness, richness, and dynamism of bodily experience of urban space, and the spatial framing of roles for other people who are involved in one's actions.

In his most recent paper on The Place-Shaping Continuum, Carmona (2014) illustrates the process of shaping social public spaces both for and through use and refers to this component as one of the most important factors that shape public space, plus management, designing and physical shaping process. He criticizes the urban design processes, which mainly focus on built environment and tries to reconcile these understandings bringing a social science and design (scientific as well as normative) perspective to bear on the analysis of urban design.

To answer the question "to whom public spaces belong" in his research, he points out to users and considers them as the meaning of space. Through

observation how they were used, whilst interviewing users revealed by whom and with what purpose; he has categorized the public spaces preferences in London. As an urban designer and architect, Mehta (2013) has directly dealt with stationary social interactions in Local Street and illustrated the need for researcher to give attention to user's preferences and perspectives.

Using extensive behavioral mapping and users interviews, that paper focuses on identifying the specific characteristics that support social interaction on neighborhood commercial street. After quantitative and qualitative analysis of the existing data, he provided a conceptual framework for research about commercial Street of neighborhood. Although his studies were welcomed by many critics on a phenomenological perspective, many qualitative methods has been suggested for expanding Mehta's tripartite identification of passive, fleeting, and enduring social behaviors (Mousner, 2015; Bhattacharya, 2015).

Table 2. Characteristics of the Environment that Support Sociability of Urban Public Spaces

	1961	1966	1970	1976	1977	1980	1987	1989	1992	1999	2003	2004	2008	2008	2008	2009	2009	2010	2010	2011	2013	2014	
	Jacobs	Hall	Appleyard	Relph	Alexander	Whyte	Lang	Francis	Carr	Dovey	Mitchel	Madanipour	Saleens & handy	Bosselmann	Lee & moudon	Shafoc	Watson	Carmona	Main & Hannah	Francis	Mehta	Carmona	
Traffic			*					*								*					*		
Control										*		*											*
Seating						*		*	*				*							*			
Proximity		*					*													*			
Prospect		*							*											*			
Hard, Soft Landscape						*						*				*		*		*			
Protection						*			*							*		*				*	
Social width						*																*	
Land-use Activities	*				*	*										*						*	
Shop Displays												*						*				*	
Sense of Safety	*															*						*	
Sense of Belonging														*								*	
Personalization																					*	*	
Sense of Pleasure																							
Sense of Comfort									*													*	
Social Functions	*			*							*			*		*						*	
Human Activities																		*				*	



METHODOLOGY

The data required for this research was collected by direct and participant observation. Direct observations provided the main body of information on human behavior. This study has used the direct observation method who, when, how long and where and with whom. Participant observation with informal interviews use to answer some questions about the participant's social interactions and their feelings and emotions. Spatial analyzes to examine the spatial conditions give a new insights on the behavioral potential of public spaces and provide a critical understanding the nature of public spaces and public life. Following what Gehl (2012) and Mehta (2013) focused on their studies; the research population was selected from the participants with stationary activities.

In "direct observation", data were collected during 37 days within six months (August 2016 to January 2017) spread out on weekdays and weekends from 8 am to 11 pm. The researcher recorded its observation in different hours of different days to gather a variety of data. To understand the relationship between the temporal and spatial forms of the physical setting and people behaviors it has been selected 18 blocks in the existing plan of the main street and edge of Goftegoo Park (Fig. 1). Then the observer slowly walked back to the complete length of each block in the study area and recorded essential information then observer located at a discreet vantage point for maximum visibility of activity at each of the block-segments and recorded activities in detail for 10 minutes.

Activities such as sitting, standing, waiting, watching stores, talking, eating, drinking and smoking were coded for ease of recording. the combination of façade and street plan drawings used as a Behavioral mapping to link the design features of the setting or location with behavior in both time and space. The average counts and duration of stay in each block was gained in excel software and shown in the analytical maps. In "participant observation", the observer joined to the people and participates in stationary social activities through informal interviews and conversation and listen to their narratives, then noted its face sheet and personal descriptive notes, immediately after leaving the street. The number of observations is 27 letters were gathered in various days and documented with other noncreative measures for content analyzing.

The Study Area: Geisha Neighborhood in the Intermediate Texture of Tehran

Taking into account the spatial structure of urban development in Tehran, the city neighborhoods were developed by gridiron layout over the last half century. In an optimistic view, local public spaces are just limited to standard per capita of green and recreational spaces (Ziari, 2010).

The selected neighborhood has appropriate characteristics in terms of research question as it as well designed and organized with rectangular blocks and structured in the intermediate texture of city and its residents are mostly from middle-class.

The focus of the current studies in traditional or organic areas and new developments in sub urban caused negligence and lack of attention to the neighborhoods lacking historical value or distinctive spatial context. These are neighborhoods, which make a high percentage of Tehran population due to the extensive land area and residential density.

Geisha is a neighborhood that is different from its traditional definition; as if many inter mediate neighborhoods, it has not a clear social boundary due to regional land uses. The shopping centers and offices in the main street and Goftegoo Park with appropriate designing and notable site area have all important roles in the reputation of Geisha neighborhood over around areas.

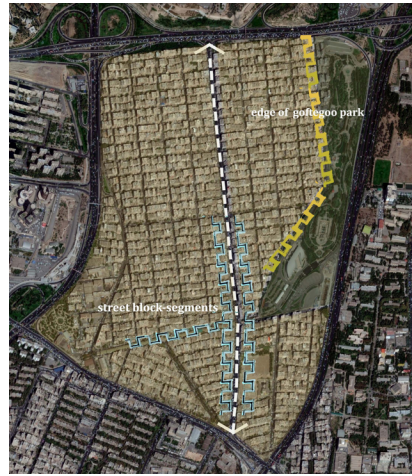


Fig. 1. Selected Public and Semi-public Spaces for Observation at Geisha Neighborhood

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Regarding the walked by observations made in selected parts of the neighborhood, and taking into account the information in participant observation reports and informal interviews, a gained content was different from what was introduced as the spatial characters that support social interactions in a review of urban design literature. People did not desirably welcome the designed spaces as a place for social interaction like Goftegoo Park; instead, they used these spaces for optional and purposeful activities such as walking, sporting, exhibition days and weekend family picnics.

The noteworthy thing about people's use of parks for interaction is the edge of the park; a place for a wider view to the spaces outside the park was chosen for

sustained, lingering activities, everyday encounters and chatting with each other. On the contrary, people used the minimum items such as nooks, corners and alcoves of street's edges and urban steps and entrances of building adjacent to the street, particularly beside the commercial edge, to produce sociable spaces for encounter and relations with strangers despite lack of street furniture for seating, high noises and environmental pollutions and safety issues.

Results of these observations and behavioral mappings indicate that category of the characters which has been much focused in theoretical literature has not been seen in selected settings and place-based social structure made by people (Fig. 2). Even, the users show a greater tendency toward these spaces than the standardized spaces available in the neighborhood.

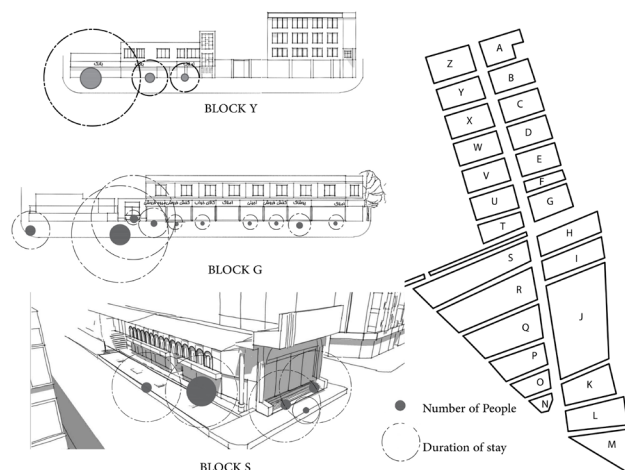


Fig. 2. Behavioral Mapping (Right Figs: The Plan of Marking Selected Blocks in the Area. Left Figs: Examples of a Combined Plan and Elevation of Blocks Studied on Geisha Street)



DISCUSSION

To explore more of this phenomenon which clarifies using uncommon settings on main street of neighborhood, the distinctive spatial and social characteristics of these spaces were considered and the gathered information was classified and explained.

Street Edges: Edges defined as the soft and built boundaries within public and semi-public spaces such as public green spaces, street facade, and other building edges that make a visual and physical Permeability of a street front, which is more than mere transparency and besides structuring neighborhood's physical world, edges also structure social behavior, offering refuge and comfort. Yet, in line with the sociologist De Jonge (1967), besides structuring our physical world, edges also create social behavior, offering refuge and comfort. When people are in a public space, they tend to sit first at the edges of that space. He theorized this phenomenon as the 'edge-effect'.

The most used settings around Goftegoo Park were

the most permeable where have wider views of the neighborhood street. People had lingered and engaged in any social activities where there was something to do or see in their surroundings. Stores, which revealed their interior activity, attracted more attention.

Window-shopping: Including looking at goods in show-windows, looking at signs or watching activities going on inside the stores, often encouraged to stay and created a reason to further generating conversation and other social interaction Building façade at street-level with nooks, corners, alcoves, small setbacks, steps, and ledges. People used these spaces to seek shelter from the sun or rain, to sit or to get out of the pedestrian traffic flow for a moment, to stop and rearrange their belongings, or to use a cell phone, and so. Vendors stand in front of the building or at the edges of the curb-side. The footpaths are used for people watching, informal socializing, gossiping and informal chats. Vendors chat with each other and with their regular customers. Fig. 3 shows Geisha's residents use the footpaths as a venue to people watch, meet friends, and socialize after they finish their shopping.



Fig. 3. Examples of Photo of Edges for Passive and Social Conditions

Transitional Spaces and Entrances: Entrance of shopping malls, offices, stores and other entrances are places that are used for informal stationary activities. These passive social activities such as killing time and people watching take place due to outside facilities such as retail sellers, shades, extensive view of the surrounding, People who spent notable time on the street particularly look after to use shaded or semi-shaded spaces in entrance alcoves of buildings adjacent to the street. The empirical findings showed that entrances could fulfill many other social uses and attract a variety of users because of the

possibility to control entry and exit, constraints in using internal spaces such as not smoking and time limit for short-term stays. They have become the best spaces of retreat, short or long- lasting appointments and social interactions (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Photo Examples of Social Life in Transitional Spaces and Entrances

Street Frontages: Some stores, which are allowed to project into the frontage zone as the section of the sidewalk play a role as an extension of the building, whether through entryways and doors or sidewalk cafes and sandwich boards among the clear examples for social activities, being it brief and fleeting.

Despite the acceptable width of sidewalks, the restrictions and rules made by local authorities and decision makers for preventing the extension of store's frontage at the sidewalks of the main street in the neighborhood have caused lack of appropriate furniture for lingering and stationary activities. Subsequently, people choose the curbsides, curb extensions with

inappropriate spatial quality due to proximity and access to low-cost food, drink, eat, and engage in conversation with friends and strangers. At the Sidewalks of the main street, an appropriate width of sidewalk has embedded the activities at the edges of buildings, some articulations in the facade provided spaces for owners to personalize their interface with the street by, for example, the placement of information boards, decorations, signs, planters, flower boxes and items for sale. This personalization provided an opportunity for people to see or do something on the street without entering the store, often encouraging passive or active social interaction (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Photo Examples of Street Frontages and Stationary Social Activities

Bus Stop: Lacking the presence of appropriate urban facilities and furniture because of some weaknesses in addition, causes less transparency in urban management regulations and interventions. As shown in Fig. 6, people

have forced to use the seats in bus stops to stay and produce informal gathering spaces for daily meetings. The only public seating at the street is a bus stop where the researcher could no differentiate between those waiting



for the bus and those involved in social/recreational/resting activities at first observations.

This phenomenon is among interesting points because urban transport infrastructures which have made to facilitate resident's local movements explored by people and used as a place for staying, interacting and

lingering conversations. The constant users of bus stop have a chance to meet and interact with others that wait for the bus. Waiting and Queuing at bus stops is able to increase social interactions by gathering the variety of people together, especially in locations with great dynamics of use.



Fig. 6. Changing the Function of Bus Stop for Active and Passive Social Interactions

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE AND THEORY

The major achievement of this research is highlighting the social aspect and experience of people in sociability of urban public spaces and introducing conditions that facilitate an active public life and social settings produced by the people. During the study, a new look into the public social spaces in the intermediate texture of the city indicates excessive attention to the spatial aspect in urban design and ignoring social aspects and experience of people using these spaces. The study revealed the need for a new reading of sociable public spaces nexus between urban design and micro-sociology in the combination of spatial, social aspects. In this regard, the noteworthy point is the sociability of public social spaces that have been produced and used by the people despite lacking the physical characteristics and amenities raised in the review of the literature.

In sum, findings of this paper illustrate the importance of edges, transitional spaces and entrances and urban equipment such as bus stops. These spaces enable people to enact more active and unplanned social conditions and spaces for informal encounters and conversing through less control and order in physical term and flexibility of norms.

These spaces are more sociable distinctive spatial and social characteristics compared to the spaces specially designed for people and familiar social spaces like green open spaces and cafés where much private, secluded and hidden areas and have much security and control.

Research documentation in this regard direct the decision makers and urban designers to focus on the favorable social conditions that attract and enact public socialization and informal spatial structures for a creative decision-making through designing much flexible and adaptable neighborhood planning.

Due to using appropriate methods in exploring the experience of people and provide more micro-sociological research and more depth than the type of studies about social life in public realms could be highly important in creating and supporting sociable public spaces that can support our public life.

There are some sociable settings introduced in this paper that have been produced by people but how the people use these spaces and the process of production of these settings, remain unknown and it needs a deeper study to expand it with a phenomenological perspective.



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