Urban Structure and Unemployment

Does the urban structure in segregated neighbourhoods disconnect people from locations of employment?

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Introduction

Problems related to urban segregation in metropolitan areas is a highly prioritized political issue in Sweden. Several national initiatives have been launched in so-called segregated or excluded neighbourhoods in order to counteract segregation [1]. However, segregation and polarization seem to have increased rather than decreased despite these initiatives. Exclusion is not any longer seen only as a temporary condition; many immigrants remain in a permanent state of cultural subordination and social exclusion [2]. Employment is seen as one important key factor for breaking this pattern and many immigrants living in neighbourhoods characterized by exclusion experience difficulties entering the Swedish labour market. Focusing specifically on the role of built environment – what architecture and urban design might add to this discussion – there are primarily two factors that are relevant to explore further. Firstly, it is argued that there is a spatial influence on local unemployment rates and that proximity to locations of work is crucial [3, 4]. Secondly, labour market access is arguably influenced by whether local people in urban public space themselves have jobs (e.g., contextual effects) [5]. This raises questions like: To what extent does the built environment facilitate people to be co-present in urban space? Is there a potential for neighbours to share urban space? Is there also a potential for non-residents to mix with a local population? In this paper advanced spatial analysis and theories will be applied in order to study to what extent segregated neighbourhoods in Sweden give access to locations of employment, and to what extent urban form encourage co-presence in local urban space. The Place Syntax Tool [6] will be used to illustrate on a very detailed level the situation in a few neighbourhoods in the southern part of Stockholm which are characterized by low levels of employment and/or low levels of income.

The role and influence of urban form

Urban segregation phenomena are currently most often discussed in terms of residential segregation. This strong and one-sided focus on the residential parameter may limit the understanding of the role of the built environment and the effects thereof. Another angle of approach to urban segregation is to study how urban
structures – the built environment itself – affect relationships between people or groups of people [7]. Such an approach implies a stronger focus on urban design, and hence, such studies have the ability to increase the understanding of both the potential improvements and the limitations of urban design interventions within the field of urban segregation. Results from studies in Södertälje in Sweden highlight for example that segregation in urban public space – including impaired accessibility to locations of employment and contact with other people – is a very strong feature of segregated or excluded neighbourhoods. The neighbourhoods with high levels of immigrants also have high levels of unemployment and are clearly spatially disconnected from job opportunities, partly as a consequence of the properties in the urban structure, characterized by a spatial segregation in urban space [7]. Consequently there are strong disadvantageous for newcomers and this is of great concern. Studies in the UK within the space syntax field, show that there is a spatial mechanism involved in the creation of poverty areas [8]. It is suggested that the physical separation of poverty areas from the economic life of the city implies a lack of potential for the economically marginalized to integrate into society [8].

The study also examines processes that take place in urban public space. It is argued that routines of everyday life are fundamental to some of the most elaborate forms of societal organization and that such routines are partly revealed as co-presence in urban space [9]. This may be related to how different kind of social networks develop that in turn could influence labour market potentials such as contextual effects [5]. The idea is that people are influenced by who they see in open public space in their day-to-day life activities [9], [10]. One way to capture such potential for different kinds of elaborate forms of societal organization is to study the constitution of co-presence in public space. What makes this relevant from an architectural research perspective is that patterns of co-presence, as well as the possible mix between residents and non-residents among co-present people, are largely influenced by the properties of urban form, which in turn are generated by urban design and architecture.

This paper aims to refine these studies to more precisely correspond to urban design issues. The implication is that to accurately apply theories and methods the built environment needs to be taken into account. So too its structure and how this influences the potential for co-presence with regards to intensity and the mix of locals and non-locals. By making on site observations in Swedish suburbs it is possible to establish that there is not a problem of crowdness in urban space. Most of the time urban space – even at neighbourhood centres – is characterized by co-absence rather than co-presence [7]. This paper looks at how urban form on a very fundamental level influences people in their day-to-day activities.

**Methods**

The access to job opportunities – as in employment locations and other people in public space – will be analysed by applying advanced spatial methods and theories. In the argument the influence of urban form, how the built environment is shaped and structured will be taken into account. [11]. The empirical study was carried out in the municipality of Stockholm, where four different neighbourhoods in the
southern part of the city were studied in more detail. These four neighbourhoods are characterized by segregation, e.g., low levels of employment and income [12]. The spatial analysis is divided into three parts; first there is a configurational analysis, using space syntax analysis, to demonstrate the configurational position of the neighbourhoods in the overall city structure. Second, there is an accessibility analysis using the Place Syntax Tool, which captures the accessibility to locations of employment through public space at a very detailed level, (i.e., the accessibility through the street network from address points). This is analysed within three different radii, namely 1000, 3000 and 5000 meters, which are partly chosen to respond to other studies of commuting distances within the Stockholm greater area [13]. Third, there is an accessibility analysis of residents with work, as well as other people working in the local area. As a complement to this last accessibility analysis, a survey is carried out interviewing people co-present in urban space (e.g., at the neighbourhood centre). This analysis captures if people are local residents or if they live in other neighbourhoods, or if they work in the area. Finally there will be a comparison with census data regarding employment rates and income.

Results

It is argued that a configurational spatial analysis contributes to an increased understanding of the built environment regarding its role in relation to urban segregation aspects. These analyses show that urban structures in many of these areas limit permeability, and that these neighbourhoods therefore become spatially isolated. This has a negative effect on access to work places, as well as a negative effect on the local public life as the urban structure inhibits people to share public space. However, it is also possible to see how these areas differ when compared and how therefore any urban design interventions need to be adjusted according to local circumstances.

In conclusion an analysis of this kind would not have been possible using traditional analytical tools of urban space. Furthermore, these kinds of descriptions of urban systems may significantly influence how policies related to urban segregation and urban design will be formulated in future.

References


