Towards a Post-Occupancy Methodology for Measuring Conviviality in the Public Realm

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ABSTRACT

Conviviality is a term which is used widely in sociology (Ivan Illich 2002, Deegan 1989, Bonnett 2010, Flanagan 2010), but not as much in urban planning and design. Various scholars of urban space have identified a lack of interaction (Gehl 2011, Peter Hall 2011), absence of life in the streets (La Cecla 2012, Scully 2003), loss of social capital (Putnam 1996, Oldenburg 1989), and diminishing equity (Zukin 2010, Harvey 1997) in public spaces. We view this as a need for conviviality (Simon & Beltran 2015). This paper continues our ongoing research, identifying a set of factors of conviviality and proposing metrics for post-occupancy evaluation of existing public spaces.

Three broad branches are identified as necessary conditions for convivial environments: physical spaces that are flexible, changing and adaptable; processes and outcomes based in equity, integrity and democracy; and urban uses and solutions that correspond to people’s needs and desires. Within each branch we propose key factors that influence the level of conviviality, as well as ways to identify and evaluate them. The combination of all these factors ultimately creates convivial environments. A better understanding of design for conviviality can inform architects, landscape architects, urban designers and planners to improve the public realm at the scale of the street, the neighborhood and the city.

Keywords
Conviviality; urban landscape design; post-occupancy.

1. Introduction

The main interest of this study is to foster conviviality in urban spaces in the city. The use of the term convivial is not arbitrary. It is picked precisely because it is not commonly used in urban studies and therefore is doesn’t have some of the ‘baggage’ and connotations associated with other terms more widely used. Most scholars promoting lively, sociable, neighborly, and friendly streets, make an emphasis on the expression “sense of community”. Community generally refers to a group of people who are alike in one or more important ways – for example, the African-American community, a community of artists, the faith community, etc. In our opinion, “sense of community” no longer serves us well to characterize successful and vital places, as cities and neighborhoods are becoming more diverse. Therefore, we have adopted a word that is used in everyday language to describe social relationships and certain kind of behavior among people. Conviviality can serve us well to study how people interact in public spaces, but without the connotations of homogeneity associated with the term community.
More broadly, this research is concerned with a widespread symptom of urban trends in the past decades: an excess of design and planning but a lack of social life in streets and public places. While rapid urbanization drives an increase in population and globalization is making world cities more diverse and socially and ethnically varied (Sandercock 2003, Burayadi 2003, Briggs 2008), at a more granular scale, many places are experiencing a loss of social interaction. Some theorists and scholars describe the lack of vitality or social interaction in the contemporary city as “the death of the street” (La Cecla 2012, Scully 2003, Augé 1995, Venturi 1968) and others are concerned with the gradual privatization of public space (Zukin 2010, Madanipour 1998, Harvey 1997).

This research has two main goals:

1. Incorporate the term convivial to the pool of knowledge of urban design studies, as a quality of the public realm that helps explain social life in urban places. This is done by reexamining the theoretical and conceptual background revolving around the study of public life and social behavior in the built environment. The literature review undertaken led to a more technical definition of the term ‘conviviality’, applied to urban spaces. This informed the conceptualization and operationalization of the term ‘convivial’, composed of three main indicators or dimensions: flexibility, equity and adaptability. The use of these three dimensions bridges the gap between studies in landscape architecture and architecture, social justice and community planning, and urban planning and design. (Conceptual Background)

2. Inform on best practices that could take place in real life in order to “grow” convivial places. We will revise and rethink the way urban places are being planned and designed, in terms of strategies, time frames, agents or actors involved, etc. We will develop a methodology to test the implementation of design changes. (Methodology)

The starting point of this research is that life between buildings, in many parts of the contemporary city, is disappearing. This is due to a combination of factors, such as the growth of urban population to the detriment of the rural, the advent of the automobile, new dominant economic systems and new approaches to urban planning and the consequent emergence of highways, large shopping malls, functional segregation and privatization and "incarceration" of meeting space. This entails not only physical and aesthetic degradation, but also social and economic problems at the neighborhood level that have deeper roots. These include among many others, an increase in crime or the closure of small businesses that depend on daily life in the streets. Also, relevant for this research, is the loss of social ties, which are essential not only for our psychological well-being but for our overall survival, through the exchange of favors or networking to find a job or offer, for example. The fact that today, even with the technological advances that allow communication without going outside, people still claim a decent public space, of good quality, where social activities can happen, is even more disturbing (Gehl 2010). All this makes it more urgent and important to look for ways in which to include the “social” into the design and planning of cities in general and public space in particular.
2. Conceptual Background

Incorporating a new concept for the study of social life in urban space

This research aligns with international research evidence from organizations such as the Young Foundation in the UK (“Design for Social Sustainability, a Framework for Creating Thriving New Communities,” Woodcraft, Bacon, Caistor- Arendar & Hackett; Foreword by Peter Hall, 2011) and the Grattan Institute in Australia (“Social Cities,” Kelly 2012), on the importance of social interaction and conviviality for every individual’s wellbeing. One of the things that make cities livable is social interaction in the public realm, and this seems to be lacking in more and more places. It is a worldwide concern, affecting cities all over the globe, which makes it relevant and of great interest both at the research and academic level but also at the professional and political one.

Through a literature review, we define the concept of ‘conviviality’ rigorously, in direct relation to urban environments, and we identify the indicators of conviviality, as a first step in laying the foundation for analysis of particular urban places. This will result in a better understanding of how to make the public realm more supportive of social interaction among diverse users. When incorporating a new concept for the study of social life in urban space– we need to (1) define it within the body of knowledge, from which it draws many findings –the main one being the 3 dimensions or indicator; (2) explain how it can be studied; (3) provide guidance into how it can be “grown”.

3. Research Methodology

Designing a follow-up study on urban landscapes to evaluate conviviality

One of the goals of this research is to inform on best practices that could take place in real life in order to “grow” convivial places through the design of a Methodology or follow-up study. This can lead to confusion when talking about research methods in general. To avoid that, we will use a small “m” for “methods/methodology” when we are referring to the research methods that I will use in my dissertation or study. We will use a capital “M” for the “Methodology” proposed as part of that study.

3.1. Methodology: Follow up Action Plan

The main challenges we confronted when finding possible ways to promote convivial environments, were to (a) account both for built form –static- as well as people’s actions and behavior–dynamic-, (b) to think of urban places as dynamic processes with a life cycle more than a life timeline, and (c) to question the traditional roles of the agents related to or involved in urban landscapes. All of these have been summarized in the diagrams below (fig.1):
Many cities are building streets, mixed use redevelopments, neighborhoods, etc., as part of their city’s branding strategy, using worldwide known designers. The first problem, is that many of these designers may be more concerned about their worldwide fame, their image and style, than solving that particular context and giving the best possible solution to the citizens who sill use their park during the next years, decades, even centuries. This, we will see, can easily be noticed if we study the level of conviviality of those parks, and not the number of awards it won or pages it covered in design magazines. The second problem, As Brand (1994) points out, is that very few architects and planners revisit the developments they helped form to see how they have fared over the years.

On top of coming up with ways on how to deliver “good practices” in design and planning, and of looking at places and people in a continuum spectrum, versus a static point in time, as ways of promoting conviviality in the public realm, we thought of the specific target groups or professionals that could have an impact. This took us to question the usual role of designers, city planners, and neighbors or users. And how the existing roles and their connections, might not be the best way to create successful and convivial places. Even though today we are starting to give more voice to the users, their opinion might not be heard and incorporated to places as it should.

We came up with various ways in which conviviality could be promoted in public places, and therefore various possibilities for research proposals. The first one we considered was to design a tools kit that could inform practitioners on how to act and what to include in terms of design when they have a commission. The problem with this proposal is that it would primarily be aimed at designing new urban landscapes. This first line of research would inform on how to intervene only at one point in time on the specific place: when it is being ‘thought’ or designed, right at the beginning of its lifecycle. This research path would therefore lead to incomplete proposals when promoting conviviality.

A second research path we considered was to inform on the kind of policies, ordinances or codes that could promote convivial attitudes among people in particular places. Although this one –in contrast to the previous one- could have a continuous effect in time, and could be implemented more than once, it still had its flaws. Law usually goes slower than social change and social processes; therefore it would be continuously outdated. This research path was also incomplete.

After considering these options, we faced then the challenge of finding a way of influencing places positively –making them more convivial- on a dynamic way in time, and with a tool that could adapt in time and not become obsolete after a couple of years. At this point, we changed the verb “make” to “grow”, implying
that social life is more a process than an outcome, and conviviality is something that cannot be created from scratch, just from design or planning; it is a quality that can only be grown. Christopher Alexander’s explains this idea through the metaphor of a flower and its seed. Alexander explains how successful buildings and towns cannot be made, only generated through people’s ordinary actions; the same that a flower can only be generated from the seed. (Alexander 1979, 157)

We also noticed how most maintenance plans for parks in cities in the United States and Europe were only accounting for changes related to the built environment and the plants or trees, completely ignoring the social context and the users of the parks. They also act on a fixed agenda, not really accounting for changes or adapting to the changing needs of residents and users. This presented itself as a void that could be improved. The same that trees and plants need certain agenda to enable their healthy growth in time and benches and playgrounds need new coats of paint and certain replacements to be maintained, people using those spaces may also need certain follow up plan to ensure healthy interaction between them. Both things are connected. And if you are already investing money each certain period of time in the maintenance of a park, you may as well, direct those resources in the most ecologically but also socially efficient way: growing trees but also growing healthy relations among people.

This is how we came up with the idea of a follow-up action plan for landscapes. Instead of trying to create a convivial landscape out of scratch, directing our efforts towards ‘teaching’ designers, or to enforce certain kind of behavior through law and ordinances, ‘teaching’ planners, we thought that to really “grow” convivial landscapes, both had to be targeted at the same time. The follow-up action plan aspires to be both a normative tool that can be ‘enforced’ through a determined period of time, but also an evaluation and design tool, that can direct in what direction and quantities improvements have to be made. This would mean collaboration between planners, landscape architects, designers and users, all involved in the maintenance or how we call it “follow-up” of urban landscapes, instead of just being at their regular roles/positions (see fig. 2).

**Fig. 2.** Left: Traditional way of thinking of the lifetime of a landscape. Right: retrofitting way of thinking of a landscape, with the follow-ups being small actions that maintain the place.
3.2. Research methods used

The research will benefit from a mixed methods approach. The data will be collected by qualitative methods (observation and descriptive social surveys) but will be mixed: quantifying as well as qualifying the urban environment –static- and people’s actions/behavior –dynamic-. Part of the results will be presented and further analyzed using mapping techniques (qualitative and quantitative). Another part of the results will be coded in numeric values, presented in tables and graphs.

The research will consist of 2 iterations. The first one will be a pilot study that will help refine the methodology used on the second and final iteration. Both iterations of the will consist of two case studies, using a Comparative Case Study Approach. The two sites chosen, ‘Madrid Río Park’ (Madrid, Spain) and ‘Superkilen Park’ (Copenhagen, Denmark) were found to be especially relevant in the study of conviviality and pose interesting scenarios to test the methodology (see fig. 3). Both are contemporary urban parks, built as a result of public and/or private partnerships, with an emphasis on participatory practices and social integration goals. They were both designed by internationally acclaimed design firms, have won various prestigious awards, but there seems to be some evidence (on different media, non-research based) that they may not work as well as it is told by politicians and designers, in terms of their conviviality.

Fig. 3. Main characteristics of Madrid Río (left) and Superkilen (right)
3.3. Types of data

The diagram in fig. 4 represents how the Methodology would work and the types of methods it involved. The grey area is the time when the study is being conducted, when the researcher goes on site to gather data (observe and ask). To complete the study we also need to look back, and research on how the place got to be what it is, and at the end of the study we will write a report (looking forward) in order to inform on useful changes so that a place is more convivial (more flexible, equitable and adaptable to people’s needs). Before going to the site and conducting the fieldwork, we had to understand the context and how we got to the present situation of the two urban landscapes. This required historical and archival research—primary resources such as newspaper articles, interviews, maps, etc).

Fig. 4. Methodology Diagram

On site we will collect data “first hand” from two main sources and methods: (1) Through an observational strategy (of places and people) and (2) through Descriptive Social Surveys (asking people directly about specific issues). We will need to examine physical space and the material qualities and attributes, as well as the social behavior and people’s actions and processes. To do that we will use observation as well as descriptive social surveys. On both, we will try to gather data for the three dimensions (flexibility, equity, adaptability), but while through observation we will be the ones observing and collecting data through maps, counts, photographs, videos, sketches, etc.; through the social surveys, we will be collecting that same information from the users and residents of the two case studies.

This kind of qualitative exploratory research, studying a characteristic of social life in the public realm in constant flux, like conviviality, requires most of the data to be collected in first hand by the researcher, hence the necessary condition of conducting the research in real life settings. On top of being exploratory, it is based on deductive reasoning (theory, hypothesis, observation and confirmation). Therefore pilot studies are extremely helpful and common before the broader and definite research takes place. They will give me the chance to test, at a smaller scale, some of the most relevant factors in my ongoing research, through observation and confirmation, and then go back and refine the final methodology, before the second iteration research starts.
4. Final considerations

The contributions of this research would be first, to incorporate the term convivial to the pool of knowledge of urban design studies, as a quality of the public realm that helps explain social life in urban places. Second, to inform on best practices that could take place in real life in order to “grow” convivial places through the design of a Methodology. On one hand, the definition, conceptualization and operationalization of the term conviviality, can benefit the general framework and debates among researchers and scholars of social behavior in the built environment. Those who study on a scholarship and academic level the social life in the built environment, may have another term to discuss, along with others more frequently used like “sense of community” or “liveliness”. It can certainly create a healthy and interesting debate, either if they agree or disagree with the use of the term “convivial”.

On another line, the Methodology proposed or Follow-up Action Plan for Urban Landscapes can benefit users and residents in general in any city or neighborhood were it is adopted. On one hand, it can make maintenance plans for urban parks more competent and efficient, introducing the social component on them. And this would have a direct impact on the daily lives of residents and users of those parks: having a saying in the way they are designed, built, maintained, and seeing how spaces might be better adapted to their changing needs. Also, the money governments direct to the maintenance of public parks, might be spent in a more reasonable direction and a more democratic one, being more efficiently used.

The objectives and benchmarks for this research are the following:

1. Define conviviality
2. Identify dimensions/indicators of conviviality
3. Develop metrics
4. Identify relevant urban landscapes as possible case studies to test the Methodology proposed
5. Conduct pilot studies: apply first iteration of metrics in 2 urban landscapes
   a. Collect Data
   b. Analyze data
   c. Analyze effectiveness of Methodology
   d. Revise metrics based upon the previous (7)
6. Conduct study: apply refined metrics and second iteration of Methodology to the same 2 urban landscapes
   a. Collect data
   b. Analyze data
   c. Draw conclusions
5. Bibliography


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