

ACTIVE MOBILITY AND SOCIAL QUALITY

Lecture for the Tagung 'Cyclescapes – Radfahren und Raumgestalt' on 7th November 2014.

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Extract

In her lecture Iefje Soetens tells how active mobility is related to social quality. Shaping social quality is a strategic challenge and the community should be involved. She introduces the method of Placemaking © which is very valuable for community involvement.

Intro

Central topic of the conference was 'how to design cities and regions in which active mobility is a leading topic'. The question 'how to' can be answered on different levels. On a practical level. Then we discuss the asphalt and exact

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measures. On a tactical level. Then we discuss the architecture, the exact route and the interference with other street-objects. And on a strategically level¹.

Social Quality as a strategic challenge

In the last case we talk about what a 'Fahrrad structure' contributes to the city. It's about: how does active mobility make me happy? How does it contribute to our community? Why is it important? In my point of view planners and designers need to understand how active mobility contributes to communities. They also need to know how to integrate that value in plans before they start talking about asphalt and street designs.

Social quality and active mobility are closely connected. A focus on social quality can help to define the strategic challenge for the 'Fahrrad-structure'. To illustrate the definition of social quality I would like to first talk about what's the function of the city.



Cities were originally created to facilitate human cooperation. In this way we arranged a surplus of food and other useables. The distribution of this surplus was the start for structures of Trade, Power and Religion. Those structures were materialised in habits, administration, craftsmanship and art. Cities are materialised human cooperation.

If we add the quote of Peter Goheen to this '*Citizens create meaningful public space by expressing their attitudes, asserting their claims and using it for their own purposes*' we start to feel that our duties as a planner or designer are rather small and should be humble and facilitating. Because it's not the administration that counts, it's the community. People are important to cities. Buildings etc.. they're conditional.

Timeline active mobility

If we take a look at the timeline of active mobility in the city, we can recognize three periods in time. The period before 1950 when the cities was completely

¹ if you're interested in photos of Fahrrad-solutions in the Netherlands or you're looking for any other information on Fahrrad-policies, I can recommend: www.fietsberaad.nl

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about active mobility. It was all there was. Leaving out an occasional bus, carriage or maybe a train. All facilities were arranged in a way that they could be reached by foot. The city was formed with active mobility as a leading principle.

In the fifties the automobile got a dominant position in city planning. Now cars were leading in all city- and street design. Instantly this dominant position was sided by opponents. One of the first, and perhaps most famous, was Jane Jacobs. She states that the huge amount of car facilities makes the cities anonymous, abandoned places where no one feels connected. And there for building cities around cars would lead to failing cities in the end. She wrote her famous work: 'the life and death of the great American cities' in 1961. Her first article on the topic although, she wrote it in 1957. At that moment in Europe we were still recovering from our great wars. Here only few people possessed a car.



Today we have a complete different challenge. We now have great structures for automobiles, planes, trains.. Almost everybody has a car of his own and can afford a plane ticket every now and then. We can go anywhere! And besides of this, we have the great possibilities of the internet. We can shop at home, contact our friends and relatives easily, and find any information we want on whatever topic anytime.

Current Challenge

So if we're no longer dependent on our cities for cooperation, what is then the remaining function? What is nowadays the value of local communities? And how can that value be expressed? What's the duty of planners and designers in that process? And why, in this perspective, do we want and need slow transportation? I've been working on the topic 'quality of public space' since 2000. And only recently a midsized city next to Rotterdam asked me to define this qualities from the perspective of its inhabitants. The inhabitants had been participating in this process. Together we found out that if you 'level up' (upgrade) all wishes and information, you'll find that public space should:

- have a local identity, connection or history
- be welcoming and nice to use
- be suited for active involvement of local people
- contribute to health of the people and health of the environment

This recipe can be copy-pasted to use for the needs of pedestrians and bikes. It's similar! Structures for active mobility which are constructed along these values will add to social quality.

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Involvement of the community

However, the exact meaning of these values in particular situations is difficult to 'guess', and should always be considered together with the community. To emphasize the importance of this community involvement I would like to quote a colleague and a poet

'The great paradox in public space is the necessity to unite personal and conflicting values and interests. That is at the same time necessary and impossible...' (Jos Brok)

True value, can't be measured. (Alles, was Wert hat, ist wehrlos) (Lucebert)

As these quotes illustrate, it is impossible to define social quality in an exact, academic way. Because it's fluid and personal. So the challenge is to feel comfortable with this fluid perspective and concept of social quality. And as a professional get comfortable with the fact that you can never define social quality in an exact, academic way. Nevertheless you will have to make it a leading aspect in your plans. Because if you don't, you ignore the essence of your duty in creating cities and you will be working on conditional aspects.

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Because of the impossibility to define social quality, it is necessary to involve the community. Only they can give you the broad perspective on the local values and wishes that is needed. But creating good, thorough debate on this perspective, it highly skilled work in which proven methods can be of great value.

Placemaking

For community involvement I prefer the methodology of Placemaking © by 'project for public spaces', because Placemaking is designed to make the community the expert. It was initially developed to enable communities to improve their public spaces. But I also prefer Placemaking because in the almost forty years of existence, they've constantly been improving the method and created a Placemakers-community².



Placemaking the method brings you a process, language and method to thoroughly debate with the community. For a better understanding of Placemaking I prefer to redirect you to their website: www.pps.org.

² the works of Jan Gehl from Copenhagen also should be mentioned. This approach also determinates great spaces. The difference is Gehl stays closer to a professional's perspective

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For a quick impression and explanation on Placemaking:

- <http://www.pps.org/about/>
- <http://www.pps.org/reference/grplacefeat/>
- <http://www.pps.org/training/speaking-engagements/>
- <http://www.pps.org/services/>

Conclusion

Central topic of the conference was: how to design cities and regions in which active mobility is a leading topic? In this lecture I illustrated that:

1. Working on active mobility is similar to working on social quality
2. Social quality should always be a strategic focus in every plan
3. Social quality cannot be defined, but only 'approached/estimated'
4. Let the community be the expert on social quality
5. Placemaking © is a good methodology to involve the community.



I sincerely hope this lecture helps you to put your important works in a broad perspective of good living in the city and that it helps you to create facilities for active mobility that contribute to the social quality of your community. *For ideas, debate and questions, don't hesitate to get in contact with the author.*

About

Iefje Soetens helps local governments on the topic: 'How to achieve a better living in urban environments?' By creating methods, strategies and plans for cooperation, based on bottom-up involvement. After her master urban planning and design and post-master courses urban management, she was educated in New York to be a Placemaker ©. A method to enable communities to create better public spaces.



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