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Teenaged Girls and Liminal Spaces in Turku

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Key messages:

- Gazes, approving gazes and absence of other people's gazes affect how teenaged girls experience public spaces. In addition, it can make the public space perceived as private and friendly.
- Spaces having a potential to be used in an un-planned way are welcomed. When planning public spaces, it is important to take the possibilities for versatile ways of using them into consideration.
- Liminal spaces, such as alleys, parking lots and pedestrian crossings, are ambiguous in their in-between character, but they can be perceived as significant by teenaged girls who use them in un-planned ways.

Introduction

Urban space is not neutral, but influenced by socio-cultural processes. This means that certain urban spaces can be understood, used, perceived and described in several different ways. In this research briefing, I study urban space from a gender and age perspective, focusing on teenaged girls. While youth often have been taken into consideration in planning of urban spaces for them, the outcome, such as skate parks, areas for climbing and graffiti walls, have been generally gendered as masculine, and therefore, often dominated by young men and boys. By enquiring teenaged girls' relationship to urban space, gender inclusive and gender equal solutions could be applicable, and a sustainable urban transformation, promoting an increasingly equal use perspective, could be carried out. There are 19 youth centres in Turku, of which 2 are provided for girls only. House for Girls of Turku (Turun Tyttöjen Talo), has a meeting place located both in the city centre and in Varissuo neighbourhood. Both are meant for all girls and young women aged 12 to 28. These youth centres are described as "home-like and safe-house for girls, where they can meet new people, use computers, get individual support and take part in different hobby and conversation groups".¹ However, it is necessary to remember that all girls do neither spend time nor want to hang out at these or other youth centres. The starting point for my research project has been first and foremost to study where teenaged girls do hang out, and how these spaces are perceived by the girls themselves.

The prior research on youth hanging out in urban space, both in Finland and internationally, has often focused on shopping malls.²⁻⁶ Likewise, a review of local newspaper

articles⁷⁻⁹, letters to the editor¹⁰⁻¹¹ and local blogs¹², focusing on youth and urban spaces in Turku, show that the Hansa shopping mall is most often mentioned as a place where youth hang out. The expansive interest in this particular shopping mall, including a nick name 'hansa kids'¹³ to address the phenomenon, demonstrate a local version of the hegemonic discourse around youth and urban space. This discourse, in which 'hansa kids' have a questionable reputation, is illustrated in a collective blog¹², written by youth aged sixteen to twenty-one, published as a part of the local daily Turun Sanomat:

"The Hansa block is very much a kind of cradle of youth culture in Turku. In afternoons, it is a hang-out place for bored-looking, angst-ridden hip hoppers, teenyboppers, rockers, and small-adults representing all possible skin colors."

Instead of following the hegemonic discourse, the ambition of my research is to take a broader perspective. The briefing is based on my ongoing postdoctoral research, which aims to provide new understating of how girls are gendering urban space and how urban space is gendered in relation to girlhood.

Instead of choosing a specific urban space to study, I collected my research material by asking 97 girls aged 15-16 to mention five urban places or spaces that are particularly important or significant to them. The data showed that there are numerous places of interest, apart from Hansa shopping mall¹⁴, to study teenaged girls' relation to urban space(s) in Turku. In this briefing, I focus on liminal spaces such as streets, alleys, pedestrian crossings and parking lots, mentioned surprisingly often by the girls in my survey. Liminal spaces are in-between spaces, such as real or symbolic borders or 'no man's lands' characterized by separation and marginalization, but also potential for regeneration. In addition, they may have transitory functions, are located between buildings, are often public instead of private (e.g. homes) or semi-public (e.g. cafés, cinema), and might have very planned functions, even though they are used also for something else, including hanging out. In this research briefing, I study the ambiguity of such public spaces for teenaged girls. More precisely, how the (in)visibility in public spaces is perceived by teenaged girls, and how they (re)construct the spaces through their practices? The focus is on the uses of these places.

Girlhood and Space

For understanding teenaged girls' relation to urban space, I have fused the theoretical contributions of Henri Lefebvre¹⁵, and Judith Butler¹⁶ into a flexible conceptual framework comprising two intersections: production of space and performativity. Urban space is understood as highly influenced by socio-cultural processes, identifications and political formations.¹⁵ Consequently, space and human social practices are intertwined, which implies that space in itself is nothing until it is filled with bodies and bodily practices. There are norms on what a specific body is expected to do in a specific space. According to Lefebvre¹⁵ each living body is space and has its space: it produces itself in space and it also produces that space. It implies that a space is constructed when bodies register the space. In addition, spaces are both influenced and influencers of human practices. For this research project, this means that the body of the social subject, in this case a girl, is simultaneously produced and is part of the production of space, subject to all of the determinants of that space. Therefore, space is important for the construction of gender.

Understanding girlhood as performative implies that girlhood is identification rather than an identity, and socially constructed rather than essential, biological or psychological. Therefore, girlhood is constructed, for example, through repetitions of practices and language use.¹⁶ It is, however, important to remember that one cannot freely construct oneself, as culture, norms and expectations also play part. It does not matter if a person, a girl, identify herself with femininity, as she will be ascribed specific properties by others because of her body. Space is one denominator of the different constructions of girlhood. In other words, parks, market squares, shopping malls, school-yards and forests may construct different girlhoods.

As shopping malls are often ascribed to youth, specific constructions of youth are furthermore constructed in relation to shopping malls, which I described in the introduction. But there is also a hegemonic discourse connected to girls or women in parks or forests, where issues of safety and fear are dominant. Bodies are ascribed different meanings depending on what they look like, for example youth/adult, girl/boy, black/white, but

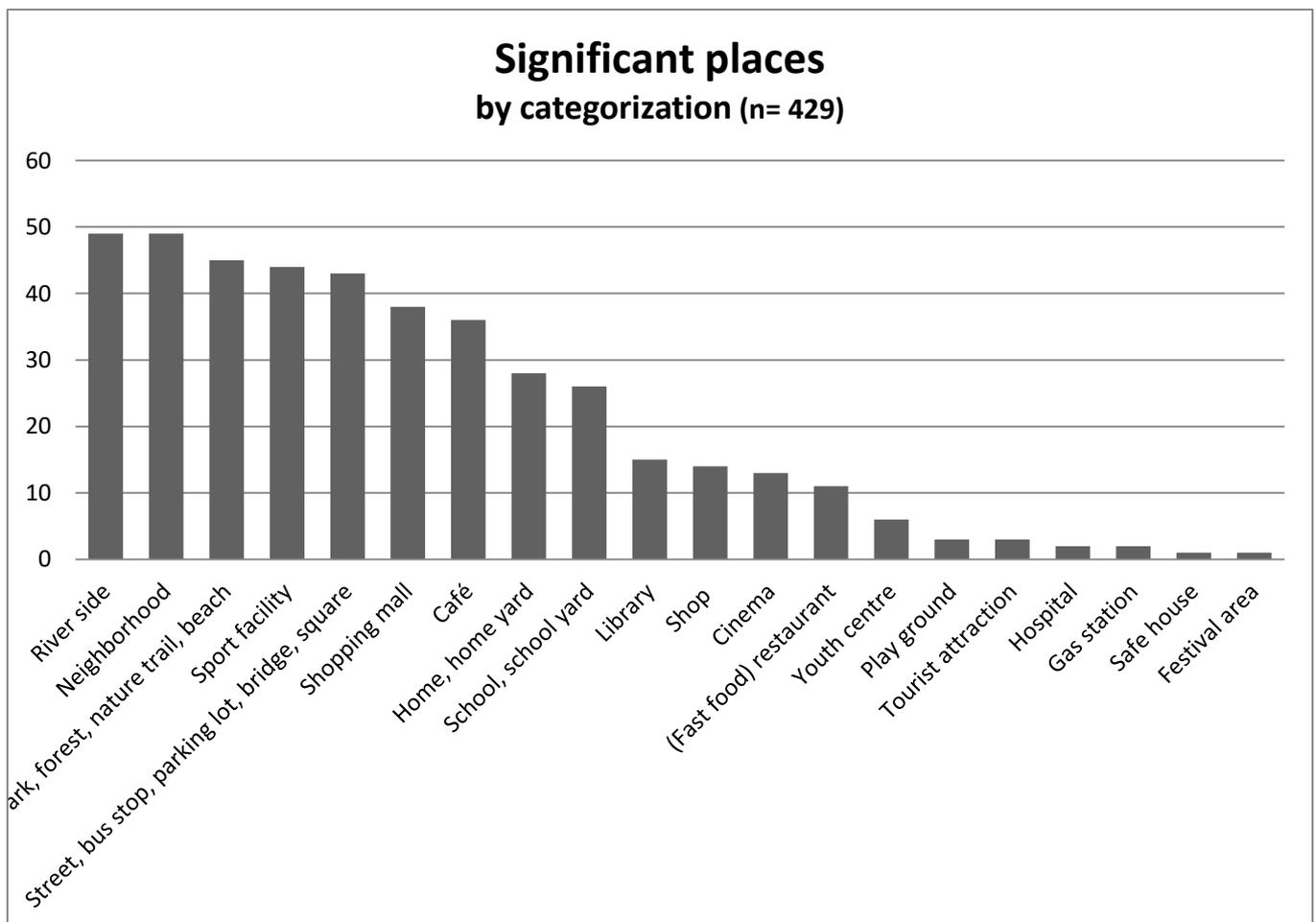
this is also connected to the space; where the body is. In previous research, girlhood scholars have mainly focused on what kind of cultural spaces are constructed by and for girls, what kind of meanings of these spaces are given by girls and how girls are perceived or given space in a specific culture.¹⁷⁻²⁰ In addition, girls' need for a place of their own, within the limits and the critical gaze of the public space, has been studied to a great extent.²¹⁻²² The space and girlhood can therefore not be intentionally constructed by the girls, but the construction is a nexus of practices, repetitions, socio-cultural processes, possible gazes and blurriness between public/private, collective/individual and material/symbolic. Still, space is a result of repeated practices¹⁵ and it becomes possible to perceive its meanings as performatively constructed¹⁶.

Research method and data

My research method consisted of a survey, including collecting memory work. The questionnaire was distributed by one or several class teachers or study advisor in 18 schools, as well as posted on the home pages of House for Girls of Turku (Tyttöjen talo) and the City of Turku's youth services (Nuorisopalvelut).

The girls were asked to mention interests, residential area, mother tongue and ways of transportation in the city. In addition they were asked to mention five places that are significant to them and to write memory work for two of these places. Participation was voluntary, and questionnaires and 138 memories were collected from 97 girls, attending nine different schools.

Table 1. Significant places mentioned by girls aged 15-16. The answers were categorized by the author.



As a research method, memory work assumes that we are actively creating ourselves as we seek meaning within a circumscribed social space. The underlying theory is that subjectively significant events, which are remembered, and the way they are constructed, play an important part in the construction of self in relation to space.²³ As girls were asked to mention places, instead of the researcher choosing places to study, assumptions about where girls hang out were set aside. Furthermore, the geographical area was not restricted by the researcher, which means that the focus was not on specific neighborhoods or the city center.

The question on significant places did not have ready response options, but it was accompanied by the following examples: streets, parks, buildings, sport arenas, parking lots, playgrounds, cafés, forests, bridges, squares, bus stops, and specific places along the Aurajoki riverside. As the table 1 illustrates, the answers did not follow only the given examples, but varied, some of them being very specific (naming e.g. cafés, streets, shopping malls, or schools). In addition, several girls mentioned several places in a same category (for example fast food restaurants and cafés). The riverside was mentioned by half of the girls, and therefore the most reoccurring in the answers. Many of the girls mentioned specific neighborhoods, of which several of the girls mentioned more than one. The youth centers were mentioned only four times. Either because they were not important for the girls, as they did not make it to the five most significant places, or the girls forgot them. However, many mentioned their own or a friend's home, even if that neither was given as an example. Mapping all answers showed that the places were distributed all over that city.²⁴ Furthermore, the significant places were not always close to a residential area.

Writing memories is an approach to explore socio-spatial elements and the social (re)construction of space. Somewhat surprisingly, all collected memories could be interpreted as neutral, if not positive. None of the 97 girls chose to write about a bad memory or a memory of being scared, such as being alone in the night time, or about walking in a secluded area like a nature trail. Surprising finding was instead the number of girls who wrote fond memories connected to liminal places, such as streets, alleys, pedestrian crossings and parking lots.

This research briefing focuses on those examples. The originally Finnish citations have been translated into English by the author (for the originals, please see the Finnish version of the publication).

Hiding or invisible in a public space

“Close to the Kupittaa park, close to Neo [a private hospital] and some kind of school, there is a bit isolated place, where few people walk by, and it is a bit private. We were there skateboarding and listening to music with friends and the atmosphere was relaxed and nice [...].”

In the memory the public space is perceived as hidden and private. It could even be considered as a public space taken into possession by the girl and her friends. Connecting the citation to earlier research on girl's need for a space of their own^{21, 25, 26}, I interpret that the absence of other people's gazes affects the described atmosphere. The gaze can also express how others would perceive the space or the atmosphere, as it would probably be different. Many other memories involve similar examples emphasizing the blurriness between public and private. For example, another girl writes, also in connection to the same park:

“I have all my best memories from the Kupittaa Park (close to Hese) and close to Itäharjun Prisma [a large grocery store], because I spent a lot of time there with friends during the summer. We met a lot of interesting people, plus it is a calm place with good vibes. You can act all crazy without being disturbed and make memories. [...].”

Except for similarities in describing a public space as private, the two examples both refer to the same relaxed atmosphere. If it is the lack of other people's gazes that reconstruct the space as private in the first memory, this does not apply entirely to the second memory. However, as the girl mentions “acting all crazy”, that is also enabled by the gazes of others not interfering the construction of girlhood in this memory. Ignoring gazes can be a way of making them absent. Good vibes may refer to the general atmosphere, but it can also refer to approving gazes, which indicate that the constructed and practiced girlhood becomes “neutral” and therefore invisible

in this particular place. The same practices might not, however, be approved, if they were acted in a different place. This highlights how the performativity of gender is greatly connected to space. When a public space is (re)constructed as private by the two girls, girlhood is constructed in connection to these specific spaces. In addition, the relaxed atmosphere makes the spaces feel friendly and safe.

Constructing space through practices of movement

The bodily practices of people moving, walking, passing can be argued in themselves to create a sense of liminality, as people are not somewhere to hang out, but because they are going from one place to another. This is particularly illustrated in the following memory:

“The market square is somehow a great place, since there are old and new buildings, a lot of people walking and a continuous flow of traffic. And wherever you continue from the square, the magnificent buildings will continue. But at the same time the square is somehow bare and scary, especially in the evening, but that also give the place a nicely exciting feeling.”

Partly the square is described through what is close to it, highlighting the space between buildings. Yet partly, the space is also constructed through movement, which indicates that the girl perceives the space as constructed by the people passing. In another example from the collected memories, a similar liminal space, characterized by in-betweenness and movement, is mentioned:

“The pedestrian crossing is an important place for me. When I have been visiting my best friend at her home, she walks me to this specific pedestrian crossing. During winter, we push each other into the snow while walking. Once I had to walk home without a shoe, because it was full of snow. Sometimes we have intensive discussions when we walk towards the crossing and simply stay at the crossing talking, since neither of us would like to leave alone to our own directions. Before we both go home, we hug.”

In this example the crossing has become an important place for goodbyes, in addition to its mundane function

for passing from one side of the street to the other. It is characterized by non-movement; standing still. This practice of non-movement makes this particular crossing more important than others. The practice of standing still at a crossing can be understood in relation to how girls take spaces and make them their own. Even if the planners can define its official and dominant meaning, the users can always use the space also in alternative ways. Following this viewpoint, another example is connected to a parking lot:

“I have gained great memories also from Siwa at Lauste, yet also some more sad memories. When I lived at Lauste, I went to sit on the roof of Siwa to sit and think about sad things. When I had better days, I went there to talk to my friends. We also skated there, since there is a parking lot, which very few people use, so we could spend time there undisturbed. We brought our own food, but also sometimes went to Siwa to buy some candies or soft drinks. The place above the Siwa is great for looking down and ‘spy’ other people. [...]”

The parking lot can be analyzed as liminal, as it is inhabited by girls, who have neither cars, nor the driver’s license, and who don’t necessarily have any intention to visit the grocery store. The parking lot was not planned to be possessed by teenaged girls. In a sense, this practice could be understood as spatial tactics. Connecting these spatial tactics to the construction of girlhood, I want to stress that the tactics individuals use are profoundly social. Hence, space is constructed in the memories by strangers’ continuous flow of movement and friendships.

Conclusion

Urban space is not solely a physical structure, neither is it only public or private space, but created and recreated by how different people use the space. In this research briefing the focus has been on girls, aged 15-16 and their relationship to spaces, more specifically on liminal spaces in Turku. I have concentrated on the construction of girlhood and space in relation to visibility and invisibility as well as bodily practices, such as movement and standing still. I have shown how the bodily practices and the gazes or lack of them by others are part of constructing spaces that are perceived as safe and private

by girls, even if these spaces are public. Both gazes and lack of gazes, as well as movement and non-movement are related to bodies. The space is perceived in a specific way because of the perception of the body or others bodies, but the bodily practices can also support using space in ways that are contrary to the planners' expectations.

The results of this study challenge to re-examine youth's relation to urban space in Turku. As such, the liminal is reclaimed as a space of possibility in which girlhood and girl's practices can be seen in a state of rigidity and fluidity, constantly changing, rather than finished.

The study also emphasizes the requirement to consider a gender perspective when designing urban space. City planning with gender focus could entail questioning what kinds of gender-neutral or girl specific spaces exist, and how they are used. The result of city planning with a youth perspective is often skate parks, areas for climbing and graffiti walls – designed for and used primarily by boys. At the same time as several girls in my study mentioned skateboarding as a hobby, but none of them mentioned planned skate parks among the most important places for them. Instead they mentioned liminal spaces, as I have shown with examples, in connection to the hobby. This can be understood and explained

through visibility and invisibility. While skate parks and halls involve being gazed by other skateboarders, liminal spaces such as parking lots and alleys are characterized by the absence of other people's gazes, which affects the perceived atmosphere.

Public spaces are spaces for representation. That is, by claiming space in public, social groups become public. This does not, however, entail that public spaces planned specifically for youth are always what the youth desire, as this briefing shows. There is also a need for public spaces that can be considered private, and therefore safe. In addition, spaces that have the potential to be used in an un-planned way are welcomed by teen-aged girls. Therefore, I argue, that it is crucial to remember that there are factors in relation to urban space that are outside of the horizon of city planning and architecture. These factors are how physical structures and urban spaces are used by different inhabitant groups of a city. One policy advice, in connection to this research briefing, would be to take the possibility for versatility in ways of using the spaces into consideration when planning public spaces. Another suggestion would be to enquire enough many different users about their relation to public spaces, and not, for example, simply assume what most youth in Turku would prefer.

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