

**“Young people and self-organizing
activities in urban space: A
Denmark cross case analysis”**

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Introduction



Photo: Marcus
Marcussen

The paradox of public space and youth activities

- some theoretical assumptions

- Hard architecture (Sommer 1974).
- Increased pedagogization of public space (Lieberg 1994).
- The fall of the public man (Sennett 1977).
- Young people have been deprived of a spatial place in society due to adult dominance (Qvortrup 1994).
- Researchers tend to study the spaces they want children or youth to engage in, instead of looking at the places they construct and redefine themselves (Zieher 2001).
- Public space is the one space that youth can define and construct autonomously (Skelton and Valentine 1997).

The methodological concern

“The general problem is that people who are mobile, and therefore not immediately present in the research site while the ethnographer is paying his or her fleeting visit, have often been ignored, even though they are in fact often of great importance to the more settled people.” (Olwig & Hastrup 1997:5).

Research often takes an institutional focus in trying to understand young people’s leisure time in public space. Which consequences does this have for the conclusions we draw about youth?

Research questions

- How do young people construct and redefine place through self-organization in urban space?
- How can these social and cultural processes be problematized and characterized as a certain youth defines space?
- How are aesthetical learning processes constructed between the people involved, the specific place and their actions?

Theoretical field:

- Anthropological youth studies (Bucholtz 2002, Amit and Wulff 1995).
- Social constructionism (Berger and Luckmann 1966), the childhood paradigm of 1970 (James and Prout 1997, Qvortrup 1994).
- Human geography (Skelton and Valentine 1998, Carr and Lynch 1968, Stevens 2007, Lefebvre 1991).
- Phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty 1994), phenomenological approach to understand place (Edward Casey 1996).

Fieldwork

Multi-sited fieldwork	(Marcus 1996, Clifford 1997, Gupta and Ferguson 1997, Hannerz 2003).
Primary field premise:	Fieldwork took place away from institutional settings and pre-organized activities.
Interview:	36 young people (age 14-23, 26 boys, 10 girls), 5 “old youth” (age 27-38), 7 pedagogical stakeholders.
3 central urban settings:	A neighborhood, a youth environment and spontaneous events.
Methods:	Observation and participant observation (Spradley 1979, Hammersley and Atkinson 1983). Interview (walking conversation, photo-elicitation, place based interview) (Anderson and Jones 2009). Visual methods (Pink 2007, Rose 2001, Prosser 2007). Mappings and drawings. Video documentation of self-organized events. Ethical situational reflectivity(Hammersley & Atkinson 1983)

Towards an understanding of young people's self-organized activities

“...rather than discarding the notion of culture, it should be reinvented, as it were, through an exploration of the “place” of culture in both the experimental and discursive spaces that people inhabit or invent.” (Olwig and Hastrup 1997:3).

Data:

- Specific actions and use of places.
- Narratives about possibilities in everyday practice.

Place as an “event”. Places not only *are*, they *happen*. Edward Casey. (1995:27).

Understanding space from the perspective of play - redefinition and construction of place

Tight space (Sommer 1974).



"Loose" youth defined space.



- Loose space (Franck and Stevens 2007).
- Tight space (Sommer 1974).
- Spontaneity in play (Flemming Mouritsen 1996).
- Body and space (Merleau-Ponty 1994).

Youth club vs. abandoned hall in urban area



"Go to something" or "do it yourself"

"When you look at the young people who shuffle in the youth club, then we're really not that different. But you can say that they choose to "go to something", their parents give money to them so they can participate, while the rest of us learn it ourselves and it's fucking funny. The others are very focused on training and getting up in the main street to perform their dance. It seems that it just doesn't give the same, as if you make a meetup yourself." (Kasper, age 14).

An aesthetic view

“For a site to become loose, people themselves must recognize the possibilities inherent in it and make use of those possibilities for their own ends, facing the potential risk of doing so.” (Franck and Stevens 2007:2).

“It would not be the most efficient and safe environment. Nor would it offer maximum stability and security. It would certainly not be extremely comfortable, nor even very beautiful unless we look for beauty in the process of interaction rather than in static form.” (Lynch and Carr 1968:1282).

“Affordance”, James J. Gibson (1977, 1979).

Purposes of activities – formed in process.

Hanging out
under a bridge
led to making a
concert.



Photo: Marcus
Marcussen

Characteristics of self-organization in urban space

Reconceptualize leisure (Chris Rojek 1995).

Postmodernism: “Real experience”, escape, release.

“Youth self-organized space” has an importance in itself.

The self-organizing activities of young people in my fieldwork and in the perspective of play build upon:

- A youth defined space.
- Opportunities to “vote with your feet”.
- The right to define place and time.
- Spontaneity and uncertainty.
- Tolerance.
- Ownership: the process of the activity is important.
- Diversity of age.
- Exploring own and other ways of make meanings, roles, positions, boundaries.



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