
The social fabric of everyday life

rietveld@fas.harvard.edu

A pressing problem

Within the field of urban science developments have been identified that strongly impact the functioning of societies: suburbanization and increasing segregation of socio-cultural and ethnic groups. Increased car mobility makes it possible to move from one's home to other parts of the metropolis without meeting people from other socio-cultural groups. Together with a growing share for private parties in the supply of services, these trends put pressure on the public domain, understood as the place where exchanges between people from various socio-cultural backgrounds can and do occur (Hajer & Reijndorp, 2001). It has been convincingly argued that not only public space (non-private space) but also public domain should be a concern for urban planners and (landscape) architects (*ibid.*). Amongst other things, this implies attention to the phenomenology of everyday life, i.e. to public domain *experiences*.

Three important recent reports (WRR, 2005; VROM-raad, 2006; Nio et al., 2008) on the social fabric in Dutch cities have suggested that what is often abstractly called a 'lack of social cohesion' is often primarily a lack of 'public familiarity' (Blokland-Potters, 2005) or, more in particular, a lack of 'trusted familiar strangers' (Jacobs, 1961; Reijndorp, 2004; cf. Milgram, 1972). Without such public familiarity people feel no longer at home and secure in their own street or neighborhood (VROM-raad, 2006, p. 67). This lack of experienced security undermines the urban social fabric.

Towards a solution

How could this complex problem be solved? Interestingly, both the WRR (2005) and the VROM-raad (2006) are optimistic that recognition of the importance of the casual, everyday type of social interactions, could contribute to a solution. Well-designed architectural interventions in public space can accommodate social interactions and contribute to the development of trust and public familiarity in neighborhoods and cities (VROM-raad, 2006). Note that even minimal forms of contact can be effective. For instance, regularly perceiving someone without interacting with her may contribute to experienced public familiarity (Nio et al., 2008). Moreover, the VROM-raad (2006, p. 90) emphasizes the importance of developing places where exchanges between people of various socio-economic groups can occur. Not only public places (a park, square or library) but also private places (a grand café or even a neighborhood shopping street) can contribute to this. Amsterdam's park 'Westerpark' is a good example of the positive contribution landscape architecture can make to public domain.

Contribution of this project

I will collaborate with the (landscape) architects of Rietveld Landscape to create alluring and potentiating possibilities for social interaction in the urban environment. The combination of their architectural expertise and my focus on the embodied and situated individual's responsiveness to relevant affordances makes it possible to translate insights from cognitive science, affective science and the philosophy/phenomenology of unreflective action to strategic architectural interventions. These interventions do not pre-program use, but offer multiple affordances and the related type freedom. We will create places that are simultaneously attractive to multiple groups of users and afford spontaneous exchanges between people from different socio-cultural groups.