Soothing Urbanism: Restoring Mental Health of Diverse Individuals Through Public Space Design
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SOCIETAL RELEVANCE

There have never been more people living in cities then today, and according to the expectations of the United Nations, more than two thirds of the world's population will live in cities by 2050. (Zumelzu & Herrman-Lunecke, 2021) This unprecedented urbanization trend raises concerns about the impact of urban environments on mental well-being of residents. Especially since research suggests a negative impact on mental well-being due to the spatial implications of urbanization and a higher risk of mental health issues, like depression, anxiety, stress and loneliness, for city dwellers in general. (UD/MH, n.d.; Zumelzu & Herrman-Lunecke, 202; Hajrasoulih et al, 2018)

While empirical evidence suggests that environmental factors can influence mental health positively or negatively (Hajrashoelih et al, 2018), the specific relationship between urban design and mental well-being remains an evolving field (Zumelzu & Herrman-Lunecke, 2021). Bridging this gap is crucial for creating restorative and inclusive urban environments that support mental health, drawing insights from disciplines like environmental psychology (UD/MH, 2022; Hajrashoulih et al, 2018). Within my thesis I try to address this knowledge gap by examining the interplay between environmental psychological research and urban design. Trying to create a better understanding of the positive and negative impacts the urban fabric can have on mental well-being. Because urban design that promotes good mental health depends on the population being able to benefit, this thesis also addresses the global issue of segregation an gentrification and its impact on restorative settings within the urban environment. (Roe & McCay, 2021)

Making sure the built environment is designed in a way that it is inclusive and that it has restorative qualities is, in my point of view, most relevant for a well-functioning city. As a cities functionality is for a large extend dependent on the well-being of its citizens. This is where the larger societal relevance of my project lays aligning with the objectives of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 3 and 11.

While it's evident that the prevention and treatment of mental well-being are integral to SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being, it's worth highlighting its importance within SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities as well. Mental health significantly influences the development of resilient settlements, as they rely heavily on the overall well-being of society. In the context of SDG 11, promoting mental well-being contributes to the creation of sustainable and inclusive urban environments. (Votruba et al., 2016; Global Goals, n.d.) To realize the aspirations of this development goal, urban areas must, among others, prioritize promoting good mental health and provide support for those who have mental health problems (UD/MH, n.d.). In order to prioritize mental health in urban environments, qualities must be available to all to foster inclusiveness. (Roe & McCay, 2021)

Ethical Considerations
In addressing the ethical implications of urban design, my project aims to confront the challenges of gentrification by prioritizing inclusive design. By using methods that focus on the needs and experiences of the existing community, as they are the experts (Roe & McCay, 2021). With this project i strive to activate marginalized group by including them in my research process. I aim to amplify their voices through an in-depth analysis regarding their needs, positive experiences and negative experiences in relation to the design of the urban environment. Additionally, I try to achieve a larger understanding of societal and cultural differences within the experience of the urban fabric.

In processing the knowledge I acquired through collaboration with these groups, I try to explore the conflicts between use and experience of public space between the different groups. With this I aim to shed more light on the existing disparities and enhance the positive experiences of these groups. I realize there is a risk that improving urban quality may inadvertently lead to an increased popularity of the area in its way again risking gentrification. This represents one of the ethical concern in my project. To start tackling this I try to emphasize the importance of small scale solutions and prioritizing the design of spaces suitable for the needs of marginalized groups. With my project I only scratch the surface of this dilemma, the topic will remain intricate and you could probably devote a complete thesis to this.

REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How did your research influence your design/recommendations and how did the design/recommendations influence your research?

I have based my analysis entirely on the theoretical framework that I established beforehand. The six spatial themes that emerged from the combination of the restorative and inclusive design methods have been the guidelines for every conversation I had and every analysis map. This is then also one of the limitations of my research. I relied on the existing theory and did not seek out any new topics that might influence the restorative qualities of the urban fabric. However, the research into the lived experiences of the target groups I have researched, provided me with a fairly open perspective because i did not ask them any specific questions. Aiming not to influence their answers. Though, later I did categorize their stories into the existing themes. It is possible that if I had conducted this research first and then looked at the theoretical background, different themes might have emerged. This could thus be an option for further research, by looking into the experiences of residents without this spatial framework.

2. How do you assess the value of your way of working (your approach, your used methods, used methodology)? Reflect on the process.

With my thesis I have looked closely into the spatial elements that will benefit mental well-being within the urban environment, and the accessibility of these settings to its diverse inhabitants. I started with reading the theory on urban design and mental health. Soon, I realized that it was very important to find out what the differences in perception would be in the experience of the urban environment of certain groups. As this is personal and the needs and values of groups probably differ. This is why is started doing qualitative research on the positive and negative experiences of targeted groups by organizing workshops. A limitation in this is that the selected groups, are just that, a selection of groups. Even though I made this selection with careful consideration more research could be done into the experiences of other groups. Nonetheless, I do think there is a great value in this method of researching, as it provided me with insights a mere academic research or just reading the theory would not have.

Another limitation is present within the documentation of the conversations I had with the residents and their stories. For starters, I was not allowed to record the conversations due to an importance for privacy, so my memory of the conversations and the notes I made are the base line for the information I summarized afterwards. While I sincerely tried to extract the exact essence from the stories without any bias, I naturally still looked at these conversation through my own lens. Secondly, I asked the participants to evaluate places based on a selection of photos of the physical context I provided. Even though I made a quite broad selection, this selection was still mainly based on places I thought would be relevant to review. As a result it is possible that some places might not have come to light. I have tried to minimalize this by asking them to also talk about the neighbourhood, tell me about places or experiences they have had, and by the exercise of mental mapping I executed with most of them. The theory about mental mapping tells us, that people usually draw the places that are the most important to them in regard to positive or negative memories. This makes me think that if I missed something really essential it would have come across in this part of the analysis.

3. What were the advantages and/or limitations of your methodology? You can also discuss problems that occurred during the process, e.g., with data collection. State how you fixed them!

During the process of my thesis, I sometimes struggled to maintain focus solely on the project's main topic, and avoid delving too deeply into connected topics. The first framework of the project was quite broad, including two design methods, which sometimes allowed for deviation from the main concern. However, I am glad that I stuck to my decision to stay with the two methods, as some did say I should have picked one in the beginning of this project. I am glad, because I truly see inclusive design as a fundamental requirement for the restorative city. This is something the literature also strongly supports. Ultimately, the inclusion of the inclusive design method, mainly influenced my approach. This allowed me to focus on the restorative design method with the building of my theoretical framework and to keep the social data analysis to the minimal.

Another thing that I found challenging was the documentation and visualisation of all of the conversations i have had with all of the residents and organisations without losing their depth and value. I find that this is what happens quite easily when you try to map them. I made several attempts; for example, I started by organizing everything per theme, but I quickly realized that this would make conflicts appear in the maps and that I would

have to map these experiences separately. Additionally, I noticed that when I wanted to present the results on the neighbourhood scale that details would become obscured. But these were the things within the results that were so important in the differentiating between something that is experienced as positive or where it turns to become an negative experience. Besides the fact that these details are what I found the most interesting and enjoyable about the results of this project.

Ultimately, I solved these struggles with the visualisation by mapping the experiences of each group, sorted into positive and negative experiences. Then bringing the experiences of the different groups together by mapping the similarities and the conflicts. The conflicts i mapped on a relatively small scale and the similarities on a somewhat larger scale.

The approach I've taken with this project and the focus on the analysis, means that due to the time constraints of the graduation project, I won't be able delve into designing with complete precision. At the end of this project I will only propose suggestions, as precisely as possible, for adapting the public spaces in 'Bos en Lommer'. With this I will attempt to articulate the task at hand and the necessary changes within the neighbourhood in order to achieve a more restorative and inclusive environment. This also means that a limitation of this project could be that if this proposal is not precise/clear enough, the suggestion may give too much freedom for the actual design and the intended goals may not be achieved. This is the risk of formulating my final outcome in this manner. In the coming weeks, after my P4 presentation, I will try to shape these suggestions as precisely as possible to reduce this risk.

4. Is your research transferable to other situations and if so, how can it be used by others?

The research I did for my case study is specific for Bos & Lommer and the insights I gained from all the workshops might be specific to the groups I have had the opportunity to question over the course of this project. But apart from this, the method I used is applicable to other situations. The new combination of the two methods (inclusive and restorative design) I made, and the conceptual/methodological framework I derived from this could be applied to other situations. Where per situation one topic, or another could be more important. Where in the case of Bos & Lommer the issue of segregation was really important, another case study could have a different emphasis. When you would apply this method on another case study you would have to start, like the theory and thus my method suggest, with the analysis of the community context. After which you will need to start looking at your case study with the environmental themes in mind. By doing so, you could find the "case specific focus" for your chosen context. This means the steps would have to be slightly adjusted to the situation, but the themes and the methodological structure would be similar.

Secondly, the way I compared the academic research with the participatory research on site would be significant in order to apply this method on another situation. With this participatory method, I think you could find the pivotal elements, for any situation, and be able to find a starting point for change towards a more restorative and inclusive environment.

What is true, however, is that with this method, the design is never truly finished. The research and its outcomes are based on the current residents and thus has its limitations. If the research is conducted as it is currently developed, this would mean that when the community context changes, you will need to analyse the impact this has and look into the needs and values of the new resident/visitor groups. This results in a design that is never finished. Further research could focus on the variability of resident compositions and how as a researcher/ designer, you can be better prepared for these changes. Perhaps by exploring the needs of potential resident groups.

Another thing this study does not consider is changes to the environment due to, for example, changes in climate and the effects this could have on the possibility to have restorative experiences within the urban environment. When temperatures rise due to climate change, the design would possible benefit more from for example spatial elements like shade providing trees or water elements. These types of changes could also influence the importance of elements from the six environmental themes which should be considers when conditions change. The relationship between themes like climate change and sustainability and mental well-being could thus be another topic for further research.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. What insights did you have?

The academic analysis we often conduct as urban designers, are usually based on our own perspectives and on the outcomes from existing data and analysis. Often, certain groups and experiences are not included in these types of studies, because they simply do not respond to questionnaires or because they are in other ways less visible. Additionally, we always bring our own perspective to the table, even when we try hard to set it aside. Despite being very conscious of my own perspective throughout this entire process, is still made assumption during this process. The addition of the participatory fieldwork, had been extremely valuable in reminding me of personal differences, differences in needs and values. Which I think is especially relevant in our experience of factors within the urban environment.

Another insight I gained during this process is in regard to the visibility of certain groups, or rather, their invisibility. It can be quite challenging to locate these groups and talk to them about these kinds of issues. This takes time and, in reality, money. This is of less significance during a graduation project, but it can become more challenging within practice.

In relation to the analysis of the lived experience of my target groups, I have also learned it is essential to approach them with a certain flexibility. Being open-minded and realizing beforehand what kind of group you're dealing with is crucial. For instance, children often speak their minds more freely, which can lead to very honest responses. Though, with them it is also important to ask further. What is the real situation? Are there other factors influencing their answers? Sometimes, they may not have thought deeply yet about it themselves, meaning you will need to assist them in forming an answer without putting words in their mouths.

Another example involves groups of women with vulnerable backgrounds. These participants were in general very cautious, and it took quite some time for them to trust me. As a result, I choose to come back to these groups a second and a third time to build on this trust. With the Arabic-speaking women, it was also crucial to have an interpreter they knew, which made them feel safer and more competent to participate. Another advantage was that choose to hold the meetings within their own environment with already established groups instead of at a separate location with people they might not know yet. In conducting these fieldwork days I relied mostly on intuition and I definitely gained valuable insights from the experience.

Additionally, one example of a personal insight I have gained during this process is that it is okay not to fully know where a project is heading at the beginning. At the start, I really had no idea whether I would be creating a design or not, and if I did, whether it would involve making patterns or taking a different approach. What I did know is that I didn't want to delve into the very precise details of the design, and that I wanted to start with a broader analysis and a socially connected topic. This ultimately led to an extensive analysis based on many different conversations with very diverse people, and I am very glad I was able to take my time doing so.

2. What did you learn from the process, what can you do now that you couldn't a year ago?

I have learned a lot about the applying theoretical frameworks in analysis and design. I do not think I have ever used as many principles from theory, as I did during my thesis. Often in previous projects, these concepts were more improvised or based on something you had read somewhere once. This made this process incredible valuable in relation to its theoretical framework. I had also never worked with a conceptual framework before. This greatly helped me to stay on track during the process, as I tend to be easily distracted by other connecting themes I find interesting.

Content-related I have learned a great deal about the relationship between mental well-being and urban design, which I believe I have defined quite well within my report. Additionally, concerning the topics of inclusive design and gentrification, I have learned that addressing these can be very challenging. Yet, I find that it starts with an interested attitude toward the involved groups and increasing you knowledge on the topic as a designer. In the end, there is still so much more to learn and to consider when it comes to urban design. Connecting to something many teachers will ever tell you, urban environments are complex systems where everything relates to almost everything.

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