SOCIAL PERCEPTION OF PUBLIC SPACE DEVELOPMENTS - THE CASE OF SAINT STEPHEN SQUARE, SZEGED, HUNGARY

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Abstract

Public space developments have also an increasing role and importance in Hungary, however these projects are not always done along long-term considerations. The goal of the paper is to demonstrate what factors can affect public space developments and how do a square function after a top-down renewal. Based on the results it can be stated that public space developments have a big role within urban developments, but in many cases the main motivation is to use the European Union sources or to strengthen the political position. Therefore, only a few cases are thought out appropriately. Also there is not real dialogue between the different actors of the developments. The case of Saint Stephen square of Szeged bears out the hypothesis that the square has lost its functions, its earlier role has weakened and the newly created, more representative square is not as popular among the square users as it was before.

Keywords: Public space, urban development, stakeholder, interest

1. INTRODUCTION

Public space renewals have got an increasing role within urban developments. This phenomenon can be traced back to several reasons. The importance of public spaces appears acutely in decision makers’ eyes. The functional role of public spaces and the dominance of European Union sources have also become more emphasized in the last few years. Public spaces have key role in the life of the closer neighborhood and in the city as they function as community places, thereby their social role may be notable too. Despite this, during the developments, many times only one (political, financial, or architectural) aspect is dominant. In the course of a public space development such factors might be so determining that affect the outcome of the development to an originally unwanted way. For instance, the tight deadline, limits set by the tender, or actual political circumstance may be these factors.

The paper intends to present the Hungarian public space development routine based on interviews with experts and on the case of Saint Stephen square of Szeged. The main goal of the paper is to outline a general picture about public space developments, and to present the process through the case study of Saint Stephen square based on the interviews and
participant observation. The paper investigates how the different competent experts see the same issues.

Based on the research, several recommendations can be formulated, which can help decision makers to create more usable and greater public spaces.

2. METHODOLOGY

Because of the complexity of the issue in favor of the broader research, I used more different methods. For discovering the importance of the theme and the definition of public spaces I took the Hungarian and the foreign literature as a basis. For exploring the analyzed square I reviewed the related development documents and I did a media analysis in which I overviewed the printed and electronic articles that was in connection with the analyzed square, Saint Stephen square. Besides that, I examined the forum comments related to the articles on the Internet so I could get a general picture of the commenters opinion. Because of the extent and limits of the paper I do not intend to present the results of the media analysis.

In the empirical part of the research, I conducted a field survey several times during which I also did photo documentation. With participant observations and activity mapping, I noted the characteristic ways of the square use. Activity mapping was done on one weekday and on one weekend day divided to several shorter terms. From 6 o’ clock in the morning to 9 o’ clock in the evening on different days I stayed on the square and made notes. I noted the gender and age of the square users’ and the activity they were doing on an activity mapping datasheet (fig. 1.). Every square user got a number that I marked on the map about the square depending in which part of the place it were done. Thus, is outlined which part of the square was more intensively used, which field marks were used and how and what were the typical methods of space use in the different parts of the day. Besides I wrote other notes on the datasheet where it was appropriate, for example if such an activity was done that was not on the datasheet yet. This method can help to explore the problems of a public space or to recognize the specific square use ways (Letenyei, 2006; Madden, 2005).
Besides the mentioned methods, I intended to know the different experts’ view with half-structured in-depth interviews. By the questions, I aimed to ascertain what they think about Hungarian public space developments and in connection with the analyzed Saint Stephen square. The interviewees were landscape architects, representatives of the political life, urban development experts and urban planners. I used the same row of questions so the different opinions and answers are comparable.

3. CONCEPTUALIZATION AND IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC SPACE

3.1. Conceptualization based on the literature

Issues related to public spaces occur in literature in a various approach. The different approaches and concepts are sometimes contradictory but in some cases overlapping and similar. Researchers think about public spaces differently in many ways. There is a debate in connection with public or private places, the degree of control, for example how free is a place, or how democratic. These diverse approaches may arise from the range of the researcher’s ideas, from his personality, experiences, or from the specialty of him, from what perspective is the research done or from the characteristic decision-making traditions. It would be impractical to use one universal “public space” notion or concept, it may be more effective to define public space in the given research depending on the actual theme. Besides, urban places and the use of them change from day to day and this changing role necessitates the continuous revaluate of the role of public spaces (Gehl – Matan, 2009; Low – Smith, 2006). Rybczynski describes this conceptual diversity as being like an onion. ‘It appears simple on the outside, but it’s deceptive, for it has many layers. If it is cut apart, there are just
onion-skins left and the original form has disappeared. If each layer is described separately, we lose sight of the whole’ (cited in Moore 2000, Carmona et al. 2008 p.4).

As the meaning of public space has become more and more complex in the past few years, that also became interesting in the researchers approach how this many kind of perceptions appear in the literature. Lynn A. Staeheli and Don Mitchell (2007) analyzed with content analysis how public space is defined in the geographical literature. They reviewed 218 books, chapters and papers about public spaces then they encoded them based on particular key words (street, open space, park), finally they grouped them. After this, they defined why the author considered important to define public space, then they created categories and summarized the frequencies. In the most commonly occurring notions the physical aspect of public space got emphasis (37%), then „meeting place” (27%), then political stage in 23% of the papers. Several other concepts were formulated: „opposite of private space”, „places of contact with strangers”, „sites of danger, threat, and violence ”„community place”. The variety of public space definitions in the literature was related to the variety of reasons as to why public space is important. The most commonly mentioned importance was “important due to function (e.g. walking, gathering)”, „democracy, politics, and social movements” (30%). Following terms occurred as further reasons: „sites of contest”, sites of „identity formation”, „building community or social cohesion”, „living space (e.g. for homeless people)”.

As an outcome of the research the authors ascertained, that geographers can be grouped into two groups based on how they perceive and analyze public spaces in geographical literatures. One of the approaches emphasizes on the democratic and political nature of public spaces and the other emphasizes on the social role of them.

The research above strengthens the view that public space can be very complex and diverse as a notion and as a spatial entity, its meaning and role is changing continuously and everybody percepts it differently and the different perceptions also change by time. Next to the scientific importance of all this, these issues are relevant because during the developments and formulating urban spaces the perception of square users is a neglected aspect. Although public spaces mediate specific values beside the elemental spatial functions, hereby also have society and community formative role (Staeheli – Mitchell, 2007).

There are several possibilities in public space developments though these are not necessarily exploited. Urban public spaces can have touristic potential as urban life intensifies in successful public spaces. Public spaces affect the local society’s condition, situation and assessment as these are places where people get opportunity to interact, where different people and information concentrate and contact. Public space is the most representative place of identity sense and it has a communication role as it bears messages. Ideal public spaces are multicultural places where everybody can feel like home irrespectively of the religious, politic or ethnic affiliation. These places also reflect the city’s condition and have an effect on that. During the developments it is not rare that a project goads more interest groups’ curiosity (Boros – Garamhgyi, 2009; Udvarhelyi, 2010; Wessely, 2010; Tamás – Kovács-Andor, 2009).
3.2. Importance of public spaces and conceptualization based on the interviews

In the interviews I made during the research I specifically eluded to conceptualization of public space. I asked the interviewees to conceive what public space means to them and how they define it.

Different experts mostly perceive it as a community place that everybody can use freely without restriction. Mostly the local community maintains it, develop it. Their role is the most determining in the use and developments. From function aspect, also the community function emphasizes on many kind of activities like events, meetings, recreation. In many cases they mentioned word “free” so the access aspect was dominant too. They formulated that public spaces are freely accessible without restriction or conditions. In the simplest definitions, every place is public space if it is not in private property and the spaces between buildings that were created by human activity. Only one interviewee drew so simply during the question relating to the definition but he was also talking about classic squares in the later phase of the interview. Even such a place can be perceived as a public space like the garden of the Hungarian National Museum, which is not a public property in its legal status but opened, accessible and people use it as a public space. Besides, it also emerged from the conversations that interviewees do not identify public spaces with squares. When they say public space they think about classic squares or parks that have many functions and not streets or roads.

Before I present the results of the participant observations I think it is important to review the importance of public spaces based on the literature and on the interviews. In this part of the paper I elude to the question why it is essential to handle them capably during smaller scale urban developments. As beside the literature I did an empirical research too related to the importance of the theme, I am going to present the results side by side, confirming or confuting each other.

Besides the conceptual analysis both the foreign and the Hungarian literature includes the importance of public spaces in the everyday life. This importance is present since the human concentrated into settlements. Public spaces have always had a key role in settlements’ history and evolution and always have changed together with the surrounding urban texture. Today, during the process of globalization these places of urban space are still able to interpret the social, economic events as along in history (Feraboli, 2007). The interviewees also confirmed this statement as they think that the condition of a public space reflects well the characteristics of the society and the significance of them partly lies in this role.

Both in the interviews and in the literature the time factor is emphasized. It is acute to rethink the role of public spaces as the cities change continuously and fast. Public space developments have got an increasing role, as beside the basic functional factors like transportation and infrastructure such needs occur like requisiteness of tourism, recreation or community life or even the self-expression purpose of human for which the urban public places ensure great platform. (Varga, 2011). To serve the purposes well, projects have to come true along broad social, natural- and built environmental and economic concepts (Erő – Hatvani, 2010).

Public spaces have always formed important parts of cities in history in the following aspects. The role in the experience of city life, role in the cities’ repute and image has always been essential. It is often a debated issue if public spaces have a role in the neighborhood’s success and operation or not, and if have, than how big it is. A characteristic public space can
easily become the symbol of the city, and it can represent the community spirit and the citizens’ relationship to the given space (Cybriwsky, 1999).

According to one of the interviewees, the role in the cities’ image and in local community life is exceedingly important. This is also true in bigger cities, but pronouncedly in small cities as in many cases only one little square, the main square has to play every role. A properly formulated square is able to function as an engine thus it is flexible and many kinds of activities can be done in it.

According to others, public spaces are important mainly by their public life aspect, as those are the places of city politics, democracy and open assembly. It is such a medium, where individual and group identity can appear and evolve, where diverse local cultural values are expressed and meet through community spirit. As these are shared places by many kinds of users, the type of square use expresses the individual and common values too (Arefi, 2003).

The interviewees also mentioned the public life role, according to one of the interviewed expert, public space is “a benchmark of the democracy and the plural society”. The most often occurring factor in the conversations was the role in community life. In every concerning answer they mentioned this aspect and laid store by the human contact, community building, strengthening and identity strengthening role.

Though as the authors above also emphasize, public spaces are essential by many aspects, the importance of those are uncared in many cases in the urban planning and development processes in Hungary. Many public spaces disappear or become into private space or the access becomes limited. In the past period depreciation can be noticed in the quality and quantity of public spaces despite the fact that successful public spaces harmonically integrate the built and natural environment thereby increase the number of recreational spaces, have a positive effect on tourism, local economy and positively contribute to local life quality. A new kind of approach is needed within planning and developments to create more successful public spaces. During these processes, experts should pursue to creativity and efficiency and carefully pay attention to the role and functions of the public space in the surrounding area to keep the harmony with the local society’s needs and with the neighborhood characteristics (Pasaogullari – Doratli, 2004).

4. INTRODUCTION OF SAINT STEPHEN SQUARE AND ITS DEVELOPMENT

Saint Stephen square of Szeged has been chosen as the sample area of the research. More factors justified the research of this square, but before presenting those it is necessary to introduce the city itself. Szeged is located in South-East Hungary, near the Romanian and Serbian borders (fig. 2). The town has about 170 000 residents and after the change of regimes a lot of new forces started to form the inner spatial processes of the town (Boros et al. 2006).
As it was mentioned before, Saint Stephen square was interesting to be analyzed because of many aspects. Before the development, the square had a strong market and community function but its physical condition has degraded over time. The necessity of the development was justified which was confirmed by the interviews and the media and related forum comments too. Although several problems occurred during the development what was mainly related to the changes of the market. Over viewing the forum comments related to the electronic articles, comments confirmed that a deeper analysis of the processes is needed.

The renewed Saint Stephen square is one of the most imposing squares of the city. It can be found a few minutes’ walk from the Tisza Lajos Boulevard which bounds the downtown (fig. 3). The most conspicuous characteristic of the square is the 90 meters tall water tower which was built in 1904. Besides, the structure of the square is unique too, as its boulevard avenue structure refers to the structure of the city itself. Some booths were settled too for the different commercial units and the residues of the earlier market can also be found (http://szeged.varosom.hu/latnivalok/terek-parkok/Szent-Istvan-ter-1.html) (fig. 4).
The development had begun in 2005 and it was finished in 2007. In the framework of the square reconstruction the water tower was also renewed inside and outside. A new arrangement was developed which represent the already mentioned boulevard and avenue structure of the city and it also refers to the paraphrase of “Szeged the city of the sunshine”. New green areas were established, some trees were planted too, a fountain and a drinking fountain, several benches and dustbins were placed to the square, it was enriched with some artistic creations, too, and the new market place was evolved. The main goals of the development were to increase the public satisfaction, to preserve and present the city’s values and traditions and to increase the number of tourists’ arrivals. The expected effects of the development were the increase of the city’s touristic attractiveness and the improvement of the local businesses’ profitability and help them to create new jobs as well (Boros, 2009; Szeged Megyei Jogú Város Akcióterületi Terve (2007-2009); Szeged Megyei Jogú Város Integrált Városfejlesztési Stratégiája 2008 (updated: 2009).
Beside the water tower the most important characteristic of the square was the flea market before the development, which occupied nearly the half of the square’s area. In the framework of the renewal the market function was not intended to cease, the aim was to keep it in a more cultured form, but its size was decreased significantly. I was looking for answers to the question that how is the new square used, how is it working, what is the life of it like and how successfully could the decision makers reach the formulated goals.

4.1. The square based on the participant observation and the interviews

The outcome of in-depth interviews and the participant observation in connection with Saint Stephen square made out similar result.

Based on the notes I made during the observations, I could clearly separate the dynamics of the square by different periods of the day. The square is the busiest at weekdays in the early morning hours. In these hours the customer turnover is the highest at the small shops thus opening hours last from early morning till early afternoon. Many people cross the square but in this period dynamic activities are more typical, like walking with dog, but not many people stay at the square. Observations were done during the summer time, so it was very hot. Thus, in the morning hours when temperature is not so warm, static activities become more often and the composition of square users changes too. In this period the square gets emptier and mainly old people and young mothers visit there, they walk around, sit and chat. Around noon the shadows absolutely disappear thus nobody stays at the square, some people go through it but heat makes it impossible to do anything in there for longer time. This phenomenon lasts until late afternoon when the shade of the water tower makes some benches usable (fig. 5).

Besides the tower some trees are in the square too, but these were planted during the development thus these are not big enough to give shadow and are not near to the benches either. In the afternoon more people go through the square again and also more people stay and spend some time there. Some of them sit down for couple of minutes then leave the square. The number of meetings increases too and this phenomenon lasts till the late night hours. The most attractive part of the square is the fountain, benches next to it and shaded benches are the most often used. From early evening until the end of the observation the square functions as a meeting place for the younger people, some of them chat there for a while but most of them just meet there and then go somewhere else.

Figure 5. Characteristics of the square use – Shaded places
It revealed from the activity mapping that the use of the square is one sided in two meanings of the term. The South-Eastern side of the square which is closer to the downtown is more used and the other side where the booths and the market are is not so popular. Here I consider it important to mention that during the observations I noticed that homeless people abstain at the square all day and they use exactly the other half of the square (right side on the figure). They are sitting around on the tables of the market, lie on the benches, chatting all day and leave some litter behind. This phenomenon partly explains the characteristics of the square use and the other users’ acts. Besides, from the many kinds of activities that could be done in such a square, only sitting, meeting and chatting occur and only for a short time. Based on the notes on the map, some places show off that are more attractive than the others, these are signed by grey shapes on the figure (fig. 6). These places which are used for relax, is the area around the fountain and some benches. Several people look at the information at the entrance of the tower and because of the morning turnover the surrounding area of the shops is such a busy place too.

Figure 6. The most often used places in the square based on the activity mapping

On weekends the square use characteristics change in some ways. There are more visitors and more families that go to the square, while on weekdays mostly single people visit it. As the tower can be visited, on weekends there are more square users because of this, and some tourists can be observed too. During the observations the market did not work.

The interviews about Saint Stephen square, confirm the characteristics and problems above. The opinions of the interviewees who know the development, the square and the processes are similar. They don’t consider it as a successful square, and this has several reasons. The main character and functions of the place has always been the market. Thanks to it, the square was full of life and functioned as an important meeting place. During the development mainly the aesthetic elements were renewed and though the market also got a new place and form, its functions have changed. During the development works of the Saint Stephen square the merchants were settled in the big market of Mars square (which is the biggest market of Szeged) and they got used to that, thus when the new square was ready, it
didn’t worth to go back because of the high rental fees. There were many endeavors for revitalizing the market, like run it as a bio market, and it got a roof in case of bad weather.

Despite all this, the turnover did not change much. In the beginning of the year the rental fees were decreased to half and this had some positive effects but in the remaining period of the year the market doesn’t work. As the merchants said it, before the development every kind of commercial form operated better because more people, so more costumers visited the square. The interviewees see other problems related to the use of the square. It is unusable at the summer time as it churns out the heat and there aren’t any shaded areas where visitors could have a rest.

Besides the fact it hasn’t got any function or role, none of the age groups find their place. Maybe it is the most appropriate for the old people as the square is calm, quiet and empty.

As a positive effect of the development, the interviewees emphasized that the surrounding properties’ value might have increased and the living environment has become nicer. The traffic order has also changed, thus the noise pollution has decreased on the square but the car traffic has shifted to the surrounding streets, where the number of cars increased significantly, so the residents started to collect signatures against it.

Overall it is considered as such a square that doesn’t have real functions. The planning and preparing work was not appropriate, thus the new square cannot work well. Citations from the interviews below express the many kinds of opinions well:

"It became empty, earlier it was a lively square, now I don’t see it in this way."
"It has absolutely lost its market character…"
"It has only a few roles, it is something sterile."
"This is an unsuccessful public space."
"It is dysfunctional."
"It is not user-friendly, not citizen-friendly."
"Before there was a life there, now there isn’t life there."
"The market was its most important function."
"It is impossible to stay there because it’s so hot."
"It’s not working."
"The needs should be measured to make it filled up with life"

5. CONCLUSIONS

Public space developments are more and more common within urban renewal in Hungary too. One of the reasons, is that many kinds of European Union sources are accessible for such processes. Besides, several squares, public spaces are in bad condition and this also makes the renewals necessary. Thus public spaces get a higher priority in decision maker’s practice too, still during some developments, the earlier functions and roles of the square don’t get enough emphasis. Renewal of Saint Stephen square of Szeged is an example to the top-down method in urban developments. In this case the square worked well earlier though its physical condition was not good. Now it is aesthetically developed but the aspect related to use and functions did not get enough attention. Partly that is why the square is empty now, can’t refill with life and people-square users can’t occupy it again.
Results of the research can promote empirical and theoretical analyses in connection with public spaces. Furthermore, it can be useful in applied urban development too, as with using the elaborated methods it might be easier to plan, prepare and effectuate public space developments. Outcome of the analysis can also promote to get the two sides, the decision makers and the bottom up actors closer to each other. The subject includes more research potentials too. For example with analyzing more sample areas the results can be softened and by involving physical geographical methods it could be interesting to study the micro climate of public spaces.

Public spaces can make people gather and make the surrounding of the place more successful. This is why it would be essential to analyze Saint Stephen square’s status well and do some further arrangements.

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