

Urban Environments and Youth: Culture and Spaces

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Abstract—*The urban culture of India is undergoing rapid transition with fast urbanization of major cities as young people move from smaller to bigger towns seeking better education and job prospects. This urban culture inherently encompasses a lifestyle of new technologies, media and information flow, coexistence of multiple identities, physical and social freedom, aspirations, opportunity etc. In a country where more than 70% of the total population is below 40 years and more than half a billion below 25 years of age, it does become imperative to understand how this segment of population inhabits space (sourced from Census of India data, 2001). Being a crucial stage of life where transactions intensify from community to city level and horizons grow towards identity, intimacy and role confusion, youth are characterized by a symbolic culture of image projection, McDonaldization and consumption with strong affinities towards technology, media, night life, sexuality, violence, leisure and political movement while the physical environment acts as a canvas for their development. As architects and designers we do keep in mind requirements, design needs and context while designing architectural and urban spaces but it is equally important to look at the behavioral aspect of the space. An insight into the how the physicality of a space affects the behavior of its users, and simultaneously how the user needs and culture affects their use of space can be a valuable tool towards designing meaningful, benefiting and wholesome spaces.*

Franklin Roosevelt [1]

What people do, the choices they make and their actions define the places they are in. It is commonly understood that the success of a place depends on the satisfaction of people who are using it and the diverse options it offers to its users. People tend to respond differently to different spatial settings and even though the responses can be comparable, conscious incorporation of evidence based human behavior into design is an imperative way to improve experiences in public space [2]. Human behavior varies in different spatial situations as per their physical characteristics, social culture and perceptual settings. While human behavior, as an integral part of the many social processes that undergo in this spatial situation is an outcome of the space itself, the space also acts as a medium for the behavior to become apparent. The physical world is a proven receiver and simultaneously a responder to this impetus between people and place, and that will get affected if the space responds to or supports human behavior. So this is a collaborative or a reciprocal relationship between people and the environment in which both influence and simultaneously get influenced by each other.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is an enquiry into the importance of user need based design of urban spaces, looking at youth or young adults in the city at an important stage of life and with a distinct socio-cultural need from the urban environments that they inhabit. This paper is an attempt to establish the importance of behavioral design based on user perception by looking at youth as an important stage in life cycle, exploring youth culture and examining use of city spaces by youth. The information found during research was either extremely specific to a certain case or conversely, extremely general about young adulthood, and while this research gives an insight into young adulthood and their needs from the inhabited physical environment, the information is by no means complete and the research, only a starting point.

'We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future.'

While different users of the public space inhabit the space as per their own needs, behavioral patterns and characteristics, they are affected tremendously by the quality of the environment they are in. Studying behavioral patterns from a user standpoint provides the architect and designer a wealth of information that can be used to manipulate the probabilities of certain behavior occurring even though we cannot determine for sure if they will occur [2].

‘...All the worlds a stage,
and all the men and women merely player,
they have their exits and their entrances,
and one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages.’

Shakespeare [3]

Environmental perception varies greatly with the stage of life cycle as it does with background, gender, ethnicity, attitude, memories and past experiences, differences in sight or hearing, education and the time of the day. Theorist Amos Rapaport writes that the important link between function and symbol in the physical environment is nonverbal communication [4]. He noted that 'since environment apparently provides cues for behavior, but does it verbally, it follows that they must represent a form of nonverbal behavior' environment are more than just inhibiting, facilitating or catalytic, they not only remind but also predict and describe. The environment thus communicates through a set of cues the most appropriate choices to be made: the cues are meant to elicit appropriate emotions, interpretations, behaviors and transactions by settings up appropriate situations and contexts. Nonverbal messages thus make people understand the true messages and the verbal ones hence make them spend more time as are more believable than verbal.

From a theoretical standpoint we can explore how design can be approached through an understanding of user perception and behavior to create better spaces inhabited by these users. This can further be tested and restructured by looking at city spaces and observing and mapping how the users are using these spaces. Everyone recognizes the fact that a person's life traverses several stages from infancy to old age, as presented in the seven 'stages' of man by Shakespeare [3] that are: infant, schoolboy, lover, soldier, justice, elderly person and finally the senile one, but what is seldom understood is the idea that each stage is a discrete reality with its own special compensations and difficulties and that each stage has certain characteristic experiences that go with it. When one thinks of the word 'youth' or 'young adulthood', different images come to our mind and each of us might have a relative and distinct understanding of the word. It could even be a feeling! Young adulthood is in fact one of the most ambiguous and sometimes intangible stages of life [10] but for the purpose of this research, we consider university students between 18 to 25 years of age as our target group for studying youth [5].

Let us look at what some prominent theorists have written about this stage of life cycle and its correlation to design. Christopher Alexander [6] emphasizes that the persons at each stage of life have something irreplaceable to give and take from the community and it is just these transactions which help a person to solve the problems that beset each stage and an understanding of the patterns of this transaction helps provide for the social and physical institutions at each stage. Hence it is as important to understand requirements and design for each individual stage as is to design for the crossing and transition from one stage to another. Lewis Mumford [7] stresses on the significance of provision of an environment suited to every stage of life and growth from infancy to senescence and how a consciousness of the phases of life may

alter the planners attitude towards design. As per Mumford, after the first two phases of infancy and the school child, starts the adolescent stage which is marked by an unbound level of increased interaction with peers and interest in sport and adventure activities that defy the neighborhood focus unlike the previous stages. The late adolescent phase is underlined by the elevating sexual energies which usually do not find direct outlets in the city leading to courtship and romance being too brief or furtive.

The most inspiring work along these lines has come from Erik Erikson [8]. According to Erikson each person goes through eight major life cycle stages which are closely tied to specific needs. The adolescent stage experiences a conflict between identity and role confusion as experienced by the youth in terms of relationships with peers and the search of a model for adult life, the search for continuity in one's own character against confusion, doubt and a moratorium. The young adult stage is a conflict between intimacy and isolation experienced by partners in friendship, sex or work involving the struggle to commit oneself concretely in relations with others, to lose and find oneself in another, against isolation and avoidance of others.

Therefore, this is an important stage of the life cycle in which the horizon broadens from the community or neighborhood level to the city level and is marked by an increased interaction with the physical environment of the city. While this interaction is at many levels and is multidimensional, yet unique and individualistic, research has proven that collective behavior occurs as a result of certain universal traits. This collective behavior comes together to constitute a unique typology of culture, which young adults in the urban areas have evolved for themselves, consciously or not, and this can be termed as the youth culture. This youth culture may vary as per local context, use, region, specific age, etc. but can still occur universally. For the purpose of this research we shall look at the space related cultural aspects only.

So what is the unique culture that young adults in urban areas have evolved for themselves? One of the most visible aspects of urban youth culture is their sense of freedom which they strive for: freedom from traditions, freedom from adult control, freedom of thought, expression and communication and freedom from constrained environments. Whether the youth belongs to the urban areas or not, projection of image is a very important part of youth culture and this happens through branding, hanging out in 'cool' places etc. let us now look at some of the most prominent components of youth culture namely, media, politics, technology, confusion and socialization.

Globalization has brought with it *McDonaldization* [9] and Coca Colonization of cultures which refers to the standardization and Americanization of global cultures competing with local cultures. Youth remain the principal

targets of all global brands and companies. This vulnerable group idolizes media, looks for their role models in the film world and lives in the virtual world. Young adults are influenced largely by media like cinema, television and radio and they get majorly influenced by the show of life and its virtues in media. They are exposed to the world through media elements and are also the majority of target audience of media in the form of advertisements etc. Hence we see that the media and youth relation is transactional. Young adults, perhaps more impressionable than they would like to admit, use the media as a major source of identity formation. The media also represent a common ground that young adults share. From the media they acquire a set of guidelines to follow, both moral and stylistic. An inherent part of the youth culture is the consumption oriented disparity between the consumer and the non-consumer. This can be an important cue for us while designing spaces or environments for them that need to be inclusive, allow self-expression and are free from disparity. We can bring them at the confluence of media and reality, where they believe and are influenced by it only to an extent that is rational, where they look at it within the backdrop of the real world. Such that the guidelines that they acquire and set into their gullible minds from the media world whether advertisements, films or radio, are also informed by the realities of the physical world.

Another determining characteristic of young adulthood is whether or not a person is eligible to vote [10]. Decisions about the representation of one's country, state or county are important and need to be made by a capable person. Ornstein talks about the identity of young adults not being complete without political knowledge and ideas and political campaigns targeting young adults because once they form ideas they seldom reverse them. Hence politics and political involvement are important interests of young adults and so is self-expression and affiliation. They often resort to protest marches, strikes and demonstrations and are definitely the voice of the country seeking environments that support free democratic visibility, communication and change. Let us consider an example to understand this relationship of youth and politics interposed with media. The colonial serenity of the India gate lawns at New Delhi with its sprawling greens and the indo-saracenic backdrop of majestic government buildings occasionally transforms into a warlike hostile pandemonium with hordes of protestors and police paraphernalia surmounting, whenever there is a demonstration or a protest march there. This started happening only after a blockbuster Bollywood movie, *Rang de Basanti* a 2006 patriotic and social change themed youth film by Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra, featured the India gate as a protest space for holding a candlelight rally and henceforth that is what it became [14]. It gave youth a visible but neutral ground synonymous with protest on which they could freely gather, express, demonstrate and be heard; where strangers with a common purpose could get together (spreading messages to join the voice again through media) to fight for theirs or their

country's future. The interplay of media, politics (political space) and youth can be understood here to a large extent.

Herb Childress [11] talks about another aspect that affects teenagers (and young adults) and that is using virtual spaces more than adults as they are able to remain free from adult control to create and maintain social lives from decentralized locations. Youth of today are deeply attached to their technology to the extent that virtual worlds are now more or as important as real world, and have even replaced the latter to a large extent. Hence while providing better communication; technology has actually reduced one on one interaction with the real world, which is doing great social damage to this generation. Real world interaction is perhaps only possible if they step away from their virtual worlds into a world that is inviting, fun, interactive, gives freedom and a chance to project an image of themselves that is based on truth and acceptance. Spaces which allow casual socializing and choice participation and which are as much fun as a chat room. Where projection of image is through participation in the environment itself and no false pretense is required for self-expression.

The city is a magnet for youth in search of better education, employment, exposure and subsequently for better lifestyles. Young adults from smaller towns are in awe of cities and consider them to be the epitome of knowledge, fame and love. Some of these young aspirants adapt and succeed while some do not. They are not only the majority occupiers of public spaces of the city but are also users of public transport and hence the public realm of the city. The cities through which they wander to study, work, play, interact or hangout becomes the vessel in which they grow. An important characteristic of youth is that they are at the threshold of their lives and are grappling with decisions and choices that others may not see as important. To them life is new and exciting, but frightening and unsure at the same time. They are caught between their generational cohort and their historical connection to families who are trying to protect and comfort them [10].

At this vulnerable stage when the young adult is undergoing many conflicts and confusions, they look at the outside world for answers to their own conflicts. When they get influenced by their environs so much, it is imperative to design it as a positive canvas for development in which he satisfies all his needs towards self-actualization. Needless to say, this positive canvas must act as a supporter for their cultural interests to take place freely to elude any confusion and conflicts.

Another significant part of youth culture is the extent and manner in which they inhabit spaces in the city. A survey through some of the most popular public youth dominated spaces in the capital city of New Delhi, India reveals that gathering spaces, whether formal or informal in nature, are very important for their way of life. These spaces provide a social environment that satisfies their needs of interaction and

contact with peers. Young adults are casual inhabitants of natural environments like parks, playgrounds, open spaces etc. and these spaces are preferred over closed artificial environments irrespective of the time of the year, though the degree of use might vary with seasons. A study done through behavior mapping, interviews and observation of these spaces suggests that the activities carried out by them in an urban environment are primarily recreational, health and work or education related and the distribution and accessibility of these around the city and their ambient conditions determines the success of those spaces[5]. Youth are attracted to multifunctional spaces that provide choices of activities like hanging out and socialization, intimacy and romance, political or professional activities, cultural activities, consumer oriented activities like shopping, eating, movies etc., health related or educational activities. Socialization for instance includes commuting, chatting, casual strolling, walking, sitting on building edges benches or steps, waiting, eating, biking, studying, watching others and getting watched, forming groups, lingering on etc. Some of these social zones are formal environments like parks, malls, movie complexes and a lot are informal environments (or at least not designed for this purpose) like transit nodes like metro stations, streets, steps, corners and edges, eating joints, sit outs etc. Hanging out is also an activity synonymous with youth. Youth culture is about the spirit to have fun owing to the availability of time for enjoyment. They usually use the public spaces in the city to carry out this activity of leisure, although a variation of use happens due to economic differences. Young adults who are from lower income groups usually like to go to places which are affordable and free from any usage charges. This is the reason why the India Gate lawns or the Connaught Place central park is occupied by a lot of such youth [5]. On the other hand young adults from relatively affluent families go to places which are in accordance with their status and where they can find more of their type of 'crowd'.

Patterns of usage are also found to differ in static and dynamic spaces or public and private spaces. Static spaces are spaces where there is no movement and flow and are meant to be centers of activity, while dynamic spaces are just the opposite and offer choice, movement and change. So while open and natural environments provides them with better opportunity to intensify their physical competence in today's spell of sedentary lifestyles, and are affordable, unbinding & liberating outlets, multifunctional spaces are important social zones for young adults.

In conclusion, we have learnt about the importance of multifunctional and open spaces that satisfy socialization needs of youth and we have also looked at some significant components of youth culture that impact their responses to the physical environment. These can become important cues for design.

At a broad level, the distribution of these spaces in the city, quality of the activities these spaces afford, good access and linkage with the rest of the city and with other youth activity zones are important considerations required for health and development of the youth through design. Safety needs need to be encountered to prevent anti-social behavior against young adults who are majority public transport users or pedestrians. Oscar Newman's [12] theory of defensible spaces through natural surveillance and Jane Jacobs's [13] concept of eyes on the street are research theories useful to design such spaces. Issues of confusion, isolation and role play can be resolved to some extent by enhancing social affiliation possibilities through social organization and participation design. This space when enriched and supported with media and technology applications, can be made further responsive to the youth culture, as discussed earlier. The quality of this space should allow for vibrancy by virtue of human scale, distribution of activities within that space, safety, sense of belongingness, liveliness and inclusive nature. These spaces should allow for creation of opportunistic spaces within themselves, for display of skills, image projection, competence that enable learning at formal and informal levels. Design of spaces for planned and spontaneous youth related activities in the public realm which not only encourages individual or group participation but also becomes a symbol of belonging to the youth culture, thereby supporting the individual identity of adapting to the youth culture. As designers we need to provide the youth with an environment that is rich in communication & opportunities for learning and enables aesthetic appreciation, allows adequate socialization, incorporates technology and media outcomes and allow for self-expression and projection. If we build or appropriate our city spaces taking cognizance of these aspects of youth behavior and culture, then perhaps we can ensure a more meaningful social realm in our cities that supports good health, development and actualization of these young adults to maturity.

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