

The contribution of good public spaces to social integration in urban neighbourhoods

Summary

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Topic

Despite increasing mobility and individualization, the immediate residential environment and neighbourhood are still highly important for the social life in urban areas, especially for young families, their children and older people. However, the usability of the residential area is often restricted by street traffic. Since the beginning of 2002, the construction of strolling zones (new type of home zones/wonerfs) in Switzerland has opened up opportunities to design increasingly more public spaces with mixed-use functions, allowing the co-existence of traffic and people, and thus, fostering the potential for social integration.

The project determined the effects of traffic and different types of streets on neighbourhood relationships, the use of public space and the subjective feeling of being socially integrated. Structural, discursive and subjective aspects were analysed. Because of the difficulty in determining social integration from an objective viewpoint, the term integration potential is used, meaning conditions that promote social integration.

Methods

Three different types of streets are included in this study, which was carried out in socially-mixed residential areas in the city of Basel: 1) one street with a speed limit of 50 km/h and a relatively high density of traffic, 2) one street in a speed-30 km/h-zone and 3) three strolling zones (maximum speed 20 km/h, right of way for pedestrians, and children's play allowed). Within these three strolling zones, one had only recently been adapted to the new regulations, and two, known as residential streets, have existed for over 25 years, thus allowing long-term effects to be considered. Regarding the type of buildings, the population composition, and rents, all the streets are comparable. This investigation is based on a written survey of residents living on the different streets, and on observations of the activities in the public space, which were documented by photographs.

Main results

The more traffic-calmed and attractive streets are (i.e. the less motorized-traffic, the lower the speed limit, and the lower the parking density), the higher the potential for social integration becomes. Strolling zones have higher integrative potential than speed-30-zones and the latter higher than speed-50-streets. This can be shown, for example, by the frequency of neighbourhood contacts. Residents who live on traffic-calmed streets have considerably more contacts and more intense social relationships with their neighbours - including those neighbours who live on the opposite side of the street - than residents on the other surveyed streets. The separating effect of the street is especially reduced for children. Despite the fact that interactions are more regular and more intense, the residents of strolling zones do not feel the negative aspect of social control.

The participants living in the traffic-calmed streets also feel safer, and they use public space more often. While only 24% of residents living in speed-50-streets claimed to linger occasionally in the street, 37% in speed-30-streets reported doing so, and 51% in strolling zones. Families generally use the public space in their residential environment more often than persons from other household types. Moreover, children who are allowed to be outdoors on their own stay considerably longer outside than other children, their playing area encompasses the whole street space, and their physical activities are more vigorous.

Residents living in a street defined as a strolling zone feel more at home in their environment and reside there longer than people in other areas. On the other hand, a significantly higher percentage of residents living in speed-30 or speed-50 streets declare that their street is no different from a normal street, that they are living there only temporarily, or even that they would like to move. Moreover, about 30% of those living on the speed-50-street define themselves as "not very well" socially integrated or "not at all" integrated. The same statements were made by only 13% of residents of strolling zones and 14% of those living in speed-30-zones. The residents who feel the most socially integrated are those on the two 25-year-old residential streets. It is interesting to know that socio-demographic characteristics have in most cases a lower influence on the potential for social integration than does the type of streets people live on. Only in isolated cases can a significant and independent influence on the potential for social integration be attributed to age, gender, nationality or social status. A distinction might be noted between families and persons from other household types, especially regarding the frequency of neighbourhood contacts and the use of public space.

Recommendations

As shown by the examples of strolling zones in residential areas, easily accessible public spaces and traffic-calmed streets offer a high potential for social integration. Their creation should therefore be fostered. Special attention should be given to the design to include play areas for children and areas for adults to meet and socialize. Requiring minimum financial investment, strolling zones not only promote the potential for social integration; they also improve the quality of life for all residents.

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A more detailed summary in English will be available in September 2007 on the websites www.kindundumwelt.ch and www.urban-mobility.ch.

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