De warme stad: betrokkenheid bij het publieke domein

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Abstract

In this study I focus on urban social life in general and in particular on social life in the public realm. This realm consists of those public spaces, such as parks, streets and cafes, where most people present are strangers, people who do not share biographical information. This realm is typical for urban societies and the users of this public space are commonly thought to interact with each other in an anonymous and superficial way, as is presented in the urban sociological literature.

However, my qualitative research explores this public realm and identifies a new concept, which I have coined the ‘warm city’. This concept refers to interactions in the public realm, which are not only anonymous and fleeting, but also have personal and intimate dimensions. In this sense, such interactions are felt to be positive and ‘warm’.

Concepts such as urban anonymity and non-involvement play an important role in the literature on conduct in the public realm. Goffman’s ‘civil inattention’ (1963: 84) is a well-known example of this ‘cold’ perspective. Goffman’s concept describes the principle that guides behaviour among people who do not know each other. For example, when passing in the street, people look at each other for a short period, without any form of recognition. Next, they divert their gaze so as not to embarrass the other person. Lofland’s A World of Strangers (1985) is another example of the sociological tradition which emphasises the coldness of interactions in the public realm.

There are few, if any, examples of sociological research which examine alternative, more intimate forms of interaction in the public realm. This blind spot originates in an academic worldview that presents public and private realms as opposite domains. The public realm stands for reason, secondary relations, anonymity and control, while the private realm stands for emotions, primary relations, intimacy and expression. This polarisation, however, is value-infused and overlooks the re-
ality of new urbanity in which fun and amusement dominate the public world. Such behaviour is strongly influenced by new urbanites: young people with a high education and relatively a lot of spare time. The concepts used by sociologists no longer seem to be suitable to describe this new character of the public realm. The aim of this study, therefore, is to explore 'the warm city'; that is, to examine the ways in which people are positively involved with others in the public realm.

Three questions guide the exploration of this new field: 1) what is the spatial context of urban warmth?, 2) which forms of interactional involvement exist?, and 3) what is the duration of the warm city? These questions are described briefly below.

1 The concept of the warm city refers to a spatial context of involvement. Is it possible to locate urban warmth in certain spaces or places and, if so, which circumstances influence this?

2 We know that many interactions in the public realm are anonymous, fleeting and impersonal, but are there also interactions in which one experiences involvement or intimacy? What forms do these interactions have? How do they start and develop?

3 Finally the dimension of time is also important in urban interactions. Does the warm city only consist of a series of non-integrated experiences of urban warmth which all have a fleeting character? Or are there also longer periods in which one experiences the warm city?

I have chosen Amsterdam as a research site because it is a prime example of a city in which new urbanity is manifested. More than half the population consists of singles and couples without children, which has its effect on the presence and use of the public realm. Furthermore, having lived in Amsterdam for many years, my own first-hand experience helps to contextualise the experience of my informants.

The core of this study consists of interviews. In total I have interviewed 45 persons. Most of the participants belonged to the age-category of 25-35 and have lived between 5-10 years in Amsterdam. In general the informants lived in the neighbourhoods and quarters next to the centre of Amsterdam. Their professions varied: accountant, theatre technician, student, secretary and so on. Most of them lived alone and enjoyed a way of living that allowed them to spend a great deal of time in public areas. Women and men were equally represented. The interviews were open in character, so respondents could freely discuss their experiences of the public realm,
such as sitting in the Vondelpark, going to a cafe, shopping downtown and going to a market. I was interested in what they did in those situations, what forms of interactions they encountered, and what kind of feelings and thoughts they had during those public interactions. The method I used is the 'constant comparative method' (Glaser & Strauss 1967:101). With this approach the study takes place in interaction with the researched reality. The researcher reflects constantly on the gathered data and reacts to the developments in the study by formulating new questions and focus points.

My findings indicated that urbanites make the public realm meaningful by wilfully and playfully interacting with others in this realm. My results show that during these interactions people try to gather information in order to define the identity of others, to probe situations and to present themselves. This process of reflection, conceptualisation, and interaction diminishes the distance between strangers and creates the experience of urban warmth.

When persons wish to experience urban warmth in the public realm, they have to redefine the rule of 'civil inattention' in order to create another way of interaction in which it is possible to experience the warm city. I have coined this kind of interaction 'civil attention'. Those who stick to this 'rule' respect the privacy of others, while at the same time interacting with others. When observing they do not stare, during eye contact there is no prolonged gaze, and while having a conversation they avoid uncomfortable subjects.

I consider these interactions as small and temporary institutions, which have certain forms and meanings (as in the case of institutions of 'family' and 'work'). These are the building blocks which people use to transform the public realm into a place in which they experience urban warmth. To examine the start and development of 'warm interactions', I use an almost microscopical perspective. I focus on the subtle ways in which persons create step-by-step involvement with others.

The three main questions structure the chapters of the dissertation. In chapter 2, I focus on the spatial context of the warm city. In the chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6, I focus on types of interactions. In chapter 7, I focus on the dimension of time.

In chapter 2, 'The pliable landscape of the cold/warm city', I show that the warm city is not related to the whole city. A lively environment, caused by the integration of
functions and a ‘small-scale’ urban structure, is the breeding ground of the warm city. The presence of many people does not immediately lead to involvement with others. Depending on the situation one is in and the interpretation one makes of others, crowded places are experienced as either attractive, of no interest, or repulsive. The way in which one categorises other people – as belonging to a category near or distant from them – is also decisive for experiencing urban warmth.

In addition, the character of urban warmth varies from place to place. For example, there are places in which the dominant interaction form is people watching, locations where people go to for a chat, and places where one goes to to seduce people. This geographical knowledge is stored in a mental map of Amsterdam, the map of the warm city. An informant’s mental map is not static, but develops over years. It is the result of urban socialisation, which takes places through one’s own experiences, through images projected by the media, and from urban guides – people who have lived in the city for a longer time and who are willing to share their knowledge on the public realm with those less experienced.

After addressing the spatial context I focus on ‘warm’ interactions. The order of these chapters is based on the types of interaction I discuss. In chapter 3 and 4, interactions are described which fit the traditional ‘cold’ perspective of the public realm. In chapter 3, ‘The public realm as a place for watching people’, I focus on the meaning people attach to looking at others. I show that watching people is more than observing others from a distance. There is side-involvement, such as that which occurs when people pass each other in the street, and main-involvement, during which one observes the other intensively. Involvement has an emotional and a reflective side. During the former, one experiences the other emotionally, during the latter one reflects on the behaviour of the other and looks for an explanation of his or her conduct. Watching people stimulates self-reflection, during which one compares oneself with others. The attention for others also results in a watching-game, during which time people guess about the identity of the other.

In chapter 4, ‘The public realm as a place for fleeting interactions’, I analyse the warmth of interactions which last only a few seconds. I have distinguished three forms of fleeting interactions. 1) Short verbal contact that breaches the rule of silence and impersonality among strangers. Short verbal interactions have several connotations. They can be playful and impulsive, and can also be used for placing a compliment or for sharing an experience. 2) Tactile contact varies from laying a
hand on someone's shoulder while passing in a busy cafe, to physical interplay on the dancefloor. In the first example touching has a secret character, during the second there is negotiation about the character of the interaction. 3) Eye contact that bridges the distance between strangers. This contact can be used for communicating recognition, kindness and attraction.

In chapter 5, 'The public realm as a meeting place for strangers', I show that interactions between strangers do not only have a fleeting character. Encounters can also be built up step-by-step. In such situations, the interactors gather information to define the identity of the other and then decide how to approach him or her. They look for a common ground to start and continue the conversation. Once social or cultural familiarity is discovered, people feel recognition, and a temporary friendship develops. During intimate and erotic encounters the distance between strangers almost disappears. This takes place through a) the direct approach, which consists of an explicit comment inviting the other into an erotic transaction, or b) the phased approach, which consists of a series of moves during which people test how far they can go. The encounters become more personal when it 'clicks', which means that people feel an instant mutual recognition, generating trust and understanding.

The exploration of the warm city is not limited to interactions among strangers. In chapter 6, 'The public realm as a meeting place for friends and acquaintances', I focus on the way in which people who do share biographical information interact with each other in the public realm and what this means for their involvement with this realm. Being with friends does not necessarily prevent involvement with the public realm. In the company of friends and acquaintances, persons achieve urban warmth in two ways. First, they combine being together with paying attention to strangers. This is done by observations, fleeting contacts and encounters. Secondly, persons develop and affirm relationships with known others during accidental meetings and planned encounters. In the public realm, one encounters friends one has lost sight of, familiar strangers (persons one only meets in the public realm), and of course present day friends and acquaintances.

After exploring the spatial context and interactions related to the warm city, I address the dimension of time. In chapter 7, 'The public realm as a space for extended experiences', I show that the warm city does not only exist as a series of isolated interactions, but also in periods of longer duration, which I have called 'lovely day-
experiences', using a concept from my informants. I have distinguished three types of lovely day-experiences. 1) The solitary experience, during which time the participants stay by themselves and enjoy the public realm through observations and fleeting contacts. 2) The adventurous day, which takes place en groupe and is characterised by a chain of events and encounters with friends, acquaintances and strangers. 3) The euphoric experience, which is characterised by a hedonistic submergence in an intense experience of the public realm (particularly night life).

In chapter 8, 'The region of the warm city', I summarise my findings and place them in an historical and societal context. Although my research has focused on the micro-level of interactions, in this last chapter I refer and relate to some historical and social-economic dimensions of the warm city. I show that aspects such as culture, generation, class, gender and income influence the resources for experiencing the city as warm. I also show that although the warm city is specifically related to 'new urbanity', there are traces of urban warmth in other periods of urbanity (for example, with the flaneur in Paris in the second half of the 19th century).

Finally, my study suggests that we can develop skills to create the experience of the warm city by gaining insight into how urbanites manage their experience of the public realm. This knowledge can be acquired by using an approach which explores how people give meaning to and derive meaning from the social and spatial environment of the public realm. With this study I have given the first impetus to research the public realm in this way. Further exploration of the warm city concept is required among other urbanites, in other cities, and during other historical times.