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## Urban streets between public space and mobility

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### Extended Abstract

Mobility and public space make cities vital (e.g. Agyeman and Zavetovski, 2015; Moriarty and Honnery, 2008). Area and population increases have meant strong pressure on transportation systems and public spaces to provide for urban citizens. It is an increasingly difficult challenge for public spaces to fulfil the various, competing (though sometimes complementary) roles urban citizens require of them: as meeting space (of acquaintances as well as strangers), as public domain, as political space, as liveable space, and as space for commerce (Agyeman and Zavetovski, 2015; Madanipour et al., 2014). At the same time, restrictions of (certain kinds of) mobility due to pollution and congestion problems are ever more necessary (e.g. Tranter, 2010; Moriarty and Honnery, 2008). Mobility patterns and the use of public space are intimately intertwined, as increased mobility and more intense use of public space both feed each other and directly compete for ever scarcer urban space (idem; Tranter, 2010). So, can functions of mobility and public space co-exist and simultaneously increase the liveability of cities? And can public space maintain its diversity of uses and meanings under the ever more intensive use? Can these questions point to challenges, which have become increasingly pressing in today's cities (idem; Dalkmann, 2014; Zottis, 2015; HABITAT III, 2015).

A number of academic and policy debates have begun to address the above mentioned challenges, looking for potential for change and improvement. The first two debates concern physical spaces – including important non-physical aspects – that help define the inclusiveness of cities. Firstly, the debate on the relationship between the concepts of public space and mobility is important for understanding how these concepts compete with- and yet can also complement each other (Agyeman and Zavetovski, 2015; Mehta, 2013). These tensions and complementarities are epitomized in physical reality – for (urban) planners another debate therefore relates to how narrow rules and regulations should be in defining the ‘purpose’ of public space and spaces of mobility, and how this should be

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planned (Gilliam, 1967; Agyeman and Zavetovski, 2015). The following two debates discuss *how* such spaces can be created and how they might contribute to particular goals. The ‘sustainability transitions’ debate asks how normative directions can be sought and what influences can be taken into account in the endeavour. Specifically, it looks at processes of transformative change, especially through experiments and flexible planning (Frantzeaskaki et al., 2015). The governance debate highlights the specifics of how such transitions can be governed, who should be involved in discussions and what power relations need to be considered in the short and longer term to achieve a more environmentally and socially sustainable future. Governance theories suggest that more participatory, open processes are necessary to begin to address the questions and challenges mentioned above (Avelino and Wittmayer, 2015; Miazzo and Kee, 2014).

This presentation discusses the above four debates, looking more closely at how accessibility- and (mostly environmental-) sustainability-enhancing mobility patterns can be enabled in congruence with a diverse and meaningful use of public space. The presentation furthermore looks for ways in which the current dynamics in existing urban spaces capture the main points. The discussion of each debate leads to questions planners may want to address to address the pressing urban issues outlined above. This presentation furthermore provides some preliminary explorations of existing spaces that show some ways these questions are already being explored. While these are unlikely to provide blue-prints, they may provide inspirations for planners, policy-makers, and bottom-up city-makers in different contexts. For example, the Leefstraat in Ghent is studied as an experimental, temporary project, which highlights the problems neighbours living along a street experience. It tries out different ways in which urban planning can respond to address the open questions of what might improve the space: keeping cars out of the street for a few months, freeing parking space for street furniture, designing the space to invite pedestrians and cyclists to move through the street at relatively slow speeds, able to enjoy the space and interact with other users, and at the same time develop alternative mobility options as by means of car-sharing and cargo bikes.

As this example and others show, urban streets embody the relation between mobility and public space and the resulting tensions particularly well. They epitomise the struggle to accommodate functions of (‘efficient’ and ‘fast’) mobility as well as public space functions that include lingering and social interaction (Agyeman and Zavetovski, 2015; Mehta, 2013). As Jane Jacobs reminds us, cities need “a most intricate and close-grained diversity of uses” (Jacobs, 1961:14). She also looks at the crucial functions of sidewalks to provide safety and space for contact (idem: Chapters 1-4). Mehta (2013) shows how streets are the quintessential social public spaces of cities. But while the multiplicity of functions of streets has been researched thoroughly, urban planning still struggles with their incorporation. Nevertheless, pressure from bottom-up initiatives, small-scale entrepreneurs and citizen movements is increasing around the world and begins to force a different approach to urban planning. For these reasons, urban streets and the (need for) changes in their planning, are the central object of study in this presentation.

In sum, the presentation discerns the central questions that emerging theoretical debates raise in order to cope with the contemporary challenges at the intersection of urban mobility and public space. It furthermore looks at four existing spaces that epitomize these questions, and what opportunities and challenges these spaces provide in the search for answers. It concludes that addressing the raised questions in conjunction, and studying experimental and flexible approaches to the planning of urban streets can help identify pathways – though perhaps not ‘answers’ – for a more vital and sustainable development of cities.

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