

The construction of the concept of neighbourhood children from the big city

Nikolaos K. Mitoulas

(Phd, National Technical University of Athens, Laboratory of Urban Design, nmitoulasgr@yahoo.gr)

1 ABSTRACT

The child with the psychosomatic separate scale in compared to that of a productive adult human, it perceives the wall space in the neighborhood and the city based on different psychological and logical connections. The research is focusing its attention on how children structure the concept of neighborhood living within the extended urban environment of modern Athens. Which are the factors of the space that contribute to obtain the sense of neighborhood and create a sense of intimacy in the banal urban landscape are investigated. In research have participated 209 pupils, boys and girls aged between 10-12 years old that attending in primary schools in 10 municipalities of the Greek capital. A method of multiple questionnaire responses is used.

2 INTRODUCTION

The concepts that are related to situations in space arise within sociospatial ecosystem and they are in direct correspondence and contact with the existent material elements of space. The concept of neighborhood is of primary significance for the residents of a large city as it comprises the primary unit of structured space which gives the sense that it is actually a neighborhood. Such a small scale environment of urban space is the most ideal for the life of children in a large city. But the modern city changes dramatically fast, changing simultaneously the image and the nature of neighborhood. The present essay makes an effort to detect the limits and the size of neighbourhood in an intensely urbanised environment as conceived by children in the city of Athens.

In every language and culture the concept of neighborhood is described with many and different definitions and ideas. Every social group focuses on different reference marks while on a scientific level the theories of space perception interfere.

Tuan¹ names as neighbourhood the place where the individual has the sense that he is at home while Holahan and Wandersman² define it as the intermediary level between home and city, within the limits of which the residents have the awareness that they belong to the same community. The word neighbourhood refers directly to the word adjacency explaining the basic criterion of classification of place in this category. Most definitions of neighbourhood are based on the concept of proximity stressing that neighbourhood is the people who live next door³. The quantitative and social data of the area play an important role in the discrimination of neighbourhood from the other forms of man-made space. George Hillery⁴ gave 90 definitions in his attempt to found the spatial expression of community and social interaction. The common point of reference of all these definitions is a) the region, b) the common bonds and c) the social contact. Neighborhood and community are general terms that describe the built space and the special connections of the persons within it. Neighborhood is defined concerning space with the determination of limits within the social interaction of the members and the common bonds take place. Hancey and Knowles⁵ confirmed that the residents of urban regions tend to define smaller regions as their neighbourhood, while as one moves away from the urban core to the suburbs and the regional communities, the area becomes bigger in size. Also women, the long-lasting residents of place, the parents of young children, tend to define neighbourhood as a small area.

Ruth Glass⁶ attempting to overcome the problem, suggests two alternative definitions necessary for the completion of the idea of neighborhood. In the first one she refers to “the distinct territorial social group, distinct by virtue of the specific physical characteristics of its differentiation. The second definition is given as “territorial group” the members of which are met in common ground that belongs to them, expressing within it the basic social activities and they organise spontaneous social contacts. Neighborhood is a place with a name known to its inhabitants, it is smaller in size than a community, having common facilities such as a general stores or a school, and is marked by social relations that include the exchange of assistance and friendly visiting. Furthermore the differentiation is comprised by the life standard that the inhabitants follow which depends on their culture and the socioeconomic class they belong to. The physiognomy of the neighborhood’s structured space has to do with the natural features of space such as orientation, its place in

the earthy terrain of the area, the existence of liquid element (sea, river, lake), green etc. The social features are given with clues that are referred to the socioeconomic, cultural, ethnic, instructional composition of the population.

Skaevelant and Garling⁷ examined the relation among the natural features of neighborhood and the impact they have in the procedure of acquisition of the sensation of neighborhood by the habitants. The analysis of the questionnaire showed that there are seven dimensions of the natural space that characterize neighborhood:

- the private space
- the visual appearance
- the arrangement of the environment's elements
- the inhabited area's density
- the commodiousness
- the streets' level and the access
- the sizes of private open air

The "New Urbanism" movement in the planning of neighborhoods urges that the meaning of neighborhood is structured at the habitants of an area with the pedestrian access to stores and schools, with the existence of roofed passageways and with houses built near the street⁸. Nasar and Julian⁹ also found that the existence of greenery increases the sensation to the habitants that they belong to that place. Kuo, Sallivan, Coley and Brunson¹⁰, showed with their researches the conduciveness of the greenery of a neighborhood to the tightening of social bonds.

Hunter A.¹¹ examined the changes that have been conducted as a result of the increment of the city's scale in ecology, the symbolic function and the social structure of the local urban communities of Chicago. He mentions that the definition of community depends on the habitants' ability to scatter and share a set of symbols. Consequently, the mechanisms of the symbolic apprehension of neighborhood are shifted continuously as people react to the social and ecologic changes that happen with the increase of the scale of the structured space. Hunter came to the conclusion that although we have lost our unique natural urban community of the past with its powerful local culture that contains the common name, rich in intimations and a distinct set of natural limits, we are now in a dynamic system of symbolic communities that semantically organises the complexity and the rapid change of the social and territorial environment of the city's habitant.

According to the National Committee about the neighbourhood of the U.S.A.¹², neighbourhood is ultimately what its habitants think it is.

2.1 Child and neighbourhood

The child with its special psychosomatic scale as regards the one of an adult productive person, conceptualizes the built area of neighborhood and city based on different psychological and logical associativities. After the end of the babyhood period where the child during the early years of its life lives in its homestead, comes out to the world just like every mammal, out of the nest, right ahead, where usually the street passes. Then it stands in the area of neighborhood, of the special shelter-place, residence and sentimental fullness next to his/her intimates. The small step out, the lack of experience in the space and the different perception of time contribute in the percipient ultra-enlargement of the elements and the situations that take place. Traditional neighborhood was spread out on a small surface centuries ago within a relevantly small city, consisting of a community of neighbours that were few in number. The giant growth of the cities and the change that was conducted with the application of the technological achievements, the apartment buildings and the cars, changed the neighborhood. In many cases we have giant neighbourhoods or atypical neighbourhoods in which the habitants don't have any association among them. Fellin P. and Litwak E.¹³ opine that the increased mobility in the neighborhood acts disorganizationally and destroys the neighborhood's consistency. The rate that the persons are embodied in the environment of neighborhood depends on personal and communal features that possibly reduce because of their mobility when these features vanish with the urbanization then the previous consistency with space resolves and the limits become ambiguous for the subjects. The research focalizes on the way in which children comprehend the

meaning of neighborhood in this big scaled urban environment with technology demanding knowledge and abilities that stiffen the children's movement. The purpose of this research is to determine:

- What is neighborhood according to the perception of children living in a big city
- Which elements of the structured space contribute in the formation of the concept of neighborhood from children
- To point out the elements which create a feeling of intimacy and identity to children in the ordinary and faceless urban environment.

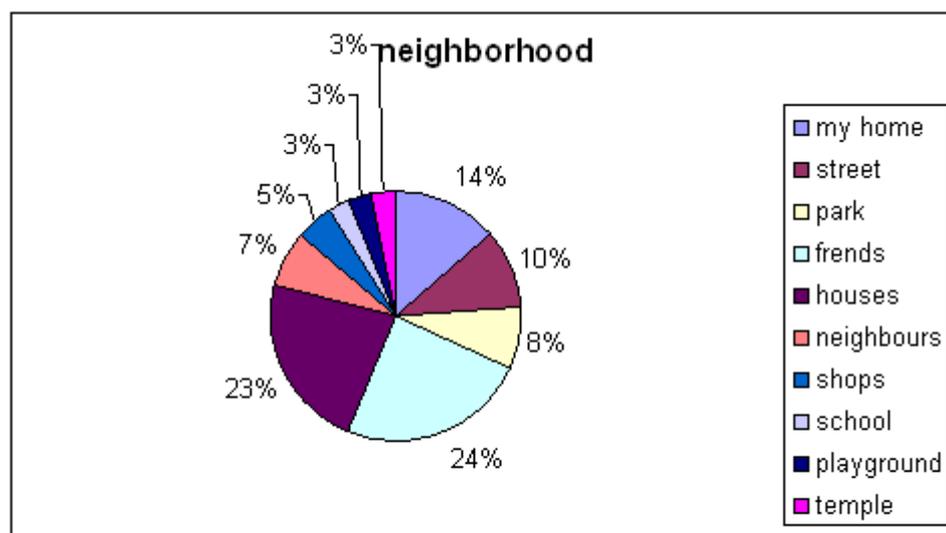
3 METHOD

209 students took part in the research, boys and girls, 10-12 years old that study at 10 elementary schools in townships of the Greek capital. The selection of the students' age was done with the criterion being the ability that children have to answer multiple choice questions that indicate the possession of sophisticated thinking. The schools were chosen with the criterion of the rate of urbanization of the regions they were located at. The schools' neighborhoods are the typical neighborhood of a Greek city with the disappearance of the natural element, the serious problems of access and transport and the absence of public open air that could be used for play and pastime by the underage students.

The research was carried out with the help of a multiple choice questionnaire. The question "when you say my neighborhood, what image comes to your mind" is an open question that aims at imprinting the concept of neighborhood according to the childish perception.

4 DISCUSSION

Out of the 209 students, 175 answered the question mentioning over and above of an element that in their opinion composes the image of neighborhood while 24 didn't answer. 10 elements that structure the meaning of neighborhood and are material or immaterial were recorded. The material ones like buildings and plazas take up with their mass a particular place in the space while the immaterial ones are social functions and situations like game, friends and the neighbours' warm presence. The total number of options is 294.



| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|-------------|-----|---------|---------|-------|----------------|
| frequencies | 294 | 8 | 69 | 45,50 | 23,02 |

69 out of 175 children, with a percentage near to 24% stated that their friends are what makes a part of the city be recognized as their neighborhood. The houses adjacent to theirs with 68 options and 23%, the homestead with 14% as well as the street in front of the house with 29 options and a percentage up to 10% are the basic elements that structure the feel of neighborhood and as an extension the feeling of intimacy. Plaza follows with 23 and 8%, next-door's familiar people, which is the neighbours, with 21 and 7%, stores with 16 and 5%, school with 10, temple with 9 and field with 8. The students relate the "friends" option with pastime, an activity of vital importance for the child since by playing he/she expresses himself/herself

socially and transforms the viable reality that surpasses the abilities of his/her psychosomatic composition. The results evince the importance of the existence of coetaneous in the area so as to be obtained the feeling of “belonging” this area and to obtain the characterization neighborhood. Besides the social facts, the child perceives the elements that compose the area and recognizes them with the criterion of proximity towards his/her homestead. It’s the buildings he/she has approached, has visited many times and can describe in many ways. The homestead is the reference and relation point with every other element that has been chosen. It’s the center where the child places himself/herself and observes the world; it’s the shelter and the first cozy environment after mother’s uterus. He/she understands that there’s no neighborhood without houses and that his/her neighborhood is where he/she lives. The street that passes in front of his/her house and in front of the other houses that lie seriatim next to his/hers, takes the fourth place regarding the importance of the neighborhood’s intellectual structure. The street connects the familiar with the unfamiliar that lies outside the neighborhood; it’s the communication point between inside and outside. However, it’s not the place where playing in the modern city appears with greater frequency because of the traffic and the occupancy of the sideways and the sidewalks by cars. Children stay on the road only for little time and most of the times they usually use it to cross it. What is remarkable is the fact that school is component element of neighborhood for 10 children with a percentage up to 3%. Although the schoolyard is the dearest playground, it has a small presence in the imaginable map of neighborhood.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The concept of neighborhood is composed as an image in the children’s mental composition on conditions that are referred to physical and social elements. Children conceptualize the environment’s datum in proportion to the level of their psychosomatic development and their needs that result from the discreteness of childhood. They give priority seriatim to contemporary friends, to neighboring houses where possibly these friends live, the homestead and the street that passes in front of them are neighborhood. The image is completed by the plaza, the neighbors and the stores.

The street that passes in front of the house is the most important of the structured elements that structure the meaning of neighborhood. The present conditions that dominate on the cities’ streets enforce the assumption of initiatives for the protection of the children’s social ecosystem. The prevention of neighborhood’s fission from the vehicles’ traffic that deters the presence of children becomes imperative. The importance that the child gives to the people who live in the neighborhood shows that it is the irreplaceable territorial-social frame for its scale because there, is where he/she is socialized and forms his/her personality.

6 REFERENCES

- Tuan Y., “Topophilia: A study of environmental perception, attitude, and values”, ed: Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall 1974
- Holahan C. J., & Wandersman A., “The community psychology perspective in environmental psychology”, In Stokols D. & Altman I., ed: Handbook of environmental psychology, ed: John Wiley and Sons, V.1, New York, 1987
- Heller K., Price H., Reinharz S., Riger S., Wandersman A., “Psychology and community change” 2nd ed., Homewood, IL: The Dorsey Press 1984
- Hillery G., “Definition of community: areas of agreement”, *Rural Sociology*, 20, 1955, p.p. 111-123
- Haney, W. G., & Knowles E. C., “Perception of neighborhoods by city and suburban Residents”, *Human Ecology* 6, 2, 1978, 201-214
- Mann Peter, “An Approach to Urban Sociology”, ed: Routledge & Kegan Paul New York: The Humanities Press, London 1970, p. 151
- Skaenland O., & Garling T., “Effects of interactional space on neighbouring”, *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 17, 3, 1997, p.p. 181-198
- Plas J., & Lewis S., “Environmental Factors and Sense of Community in a Planned Town”, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 24, 1, 1996, p.p. 109-143