

Building a Haven in the Public Sphere of Molenbeek (Brussels)

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These days one of Brussels' 19 municipalities, Molenbeek (Belgium), struggles with 'civil impeachment'. The Brussels terrorist attacks of March 2016 only deepened the sentiments that arose after the Paris attacks of November 2015. In one paper I dig under this surface of suspicion and analyse the process of youth involvement in the redevelopment of one of Molenbeeks' ethnic super diverse public places: the small St. Rémi park. I discuss the participative design process and its results and effects on local youths' use of this place. In another paper I expatiate on effects of the changed socio-spatial setting on youths' behaviour. Here I also describe my tailor made ethnographic methodology for this place based on a creative expression intervention to uncover place-related identity aspects in youths and their social interactions, especially those that are based on social cues.

The case study as such is part of the DieGem research project on 'Solidarity in ethnic diversity'. It is financed by IWT/ SBO Flanders. *Yota!*, an organization furthering youth participation in the design of public place, is a stakeholder to the research project and was applicant for a research study. *Yota!* is a shareholding structure of *JES*, a Brussels based, yet Flemish experimentation oriented and government supported 'city lab' for urban youth. Currently *JES* is the 'watch tower' of social interactions in the park. In the RC21 presentation I will give a brief outline of the process, the results and effects of the participation process on youths and I will discuss my ethnographic methodology for analysing youth interactions.

In the first part of the presentation (and the 1st paper) I dwell on the context of this case study: a small park (St. Rémi) situated in Molenbeek seen before (2010) during (2013-2015) and after redevelopment involving an 'adult initiated, but shared decision making process with youths'. The main actors in this participation process are the organisation *Yota!*, as a catalyst for change, involving the members of the local youth gang in a participatory redevelopment setup for the park (re-opened in the summer of 2015). The municipality itself was also prominently involved, as was the Brussels based architecture office K2A and were local users.

Yota! aimed at socially and physically transforming the small St. Rémi park by granting children and youths full participation in the decisions making process of the arrangement of space. This, they believed, would open up possibilities for creating safe relations amongst youths and between youths and neighbourhood. Prior to the participation project *Yota!* applied a site targeted approach to find, maintain

and deepen personal contacts with neighbourhood youths during several years. A reading of the situation of the park and its surroundings before redevelopment makes clear this dilapidated environment hardly provided inviting and usable space for the youthful user of this neighbourhood. The state of the environment gave youths the feeling of being 'not worth the effort' and attracted in particular antagonistic interactions. Huge steel fencing around the park with two big entrance gates encouraged youths to bring out typical territory claiming group behaviour especially seen in youths in socio-economic precarious situations (Hopkins, 2010). Small children were downright frightened of passing by the park. The dirt left behind by dogs and by drug use, made the whole space unsafe and not usable for other users, especially smaller children.

I go on with answering the following questions: How and by whom is the same, yet materially and organisationally changed place, used in 2016? How come youths are often seen to excel in non-participation, yet were found engaging in this case? What elements made way for a different use of and a changed interpersonal behaviour in this place? Findings are based on reactive observation in the park, interviews with the main actors and readings of related documents. I then argue a combination of the satisfaction of a need for (identity) recognition (Taylor, 1994) together with a redistribution of assets (Fraser, 1998) contributes in stimulating youths to display cooperative behaviour while using the park.

In part two of the presentation (and a part of paper 2) I describe the ethnographic methodology based on a creative expression intervention in the public sphere of the sports hall looking out on the St. Rémi park. In a workshop setting for 10 youths, covering 4 to 5 participation moments, every member is allowed to paint an image depicting identity features, personally perceived as important (new shoes, particular shirts, hairdo...), on a wall covering mural depicting the distinctive park spots. Their painting is aided by selfies, laptop and beamer. Theoretical underpinning of this methodology is based on the literature of the body as a key location in understanding the complexities of young people, place and identity. The methodology allows for observing and interacting with 'young peoples' bodies', seen as locations where they express their identities through clothing choice, ways of expression (social cues), gestures and behaviour, etc. (Butler, 1999; Kenworthy-Teather's, 1999; Hopkins, 2010; Pickett, 2004)

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