

## **Just hanging around: everyday uses of informal space among suburban youth in Pori, Finland**

*Author:* Katri Tella (University of Turku) email: katri.tella@utu.fi

### **Abstract**

Young people experience and use the environment from their own subcultural viewpoint, which differs from that of adults.

Young people, who spend time and gather as a group in public spaces, are sometimes seen as a negative element affecting the environment. For instance in Pori, local newspapers have written that elder people are afraid of young people when they group in front of shopping centers and other public spaces. The main problem is based on the fact that local youth is experiencing and using the environment from its own sub cultural point of view which differs from that of adults.

How does the Finnish suburban youth make alternative and informal uses of everyday space in their home neighborhood? The case is local but the uses of environment are very universal. Young people are choosing the best places for hiding from control and at the same time experience the environments whole: seeking shelter from cold weather or finding the sunniest place of the area, and giving meanings to those places by marking and renaming them. And these actions often contradict the original purposes of the places.

Research material has been collected by interviewing young people during the special field workshops.

The research is part of the research project Suburban Pori/University of Turku, Finland.

*Key words:* *neighborhood, youth, place experience, spatial practices.*



# **JUST HANGING AROUND**

**Everyday uses of informal space among suburban youth in Pori, Finland**

**Katri Tella**

**Researcher in project Suburban landscape Pori**

**University of Turku,**

**[katri.tella@utu.fi](mailto:katri.tella@utu.fi)**

## Introduction

*“ They can be there if they were not breaking anything, or yelling to grannies, or spitting. ”*

Public space is open to anyone or is it? Behaving properly seems to be one thing needed when using space, because neighborhoods are controlled by conventions<sup>1</sup>. But who has the right to make rules about correct behavior or uses of spaces in our neighborhoods when the space itself offers us a number of ways to be in neighborhood? The main focus of the study is to observe young people's self designed uses of public spaces in ordinary neighborhoods.

The main question of this study is: **how does the Finnish suburban youth make alternative and informal uses of everyday space in their home neighborhood? What their own spatial practices are saying about their needs and objects of appreciation in their home environment?**

This study is part of the research project Suburban Pori/University of Turku/ARA, Finland. The research area is Pihlava - a Finnish suburb with approximately 4000 residents. The project was started in 2009 and continues until the end of 2011. In this paper I will show a few examples of places young people find important from their neighborhoods. I will also analyze the elements or other key factors that make those places so important for the young users.

## Concepts and methods

My point of view in this study relates to landscape studies. The study connects to the discussion of marginal space uses, which has been studied in Finland for example by Nina Sääskilahti, Turo-Kimmo Lehtonen & Pasi Mäenpää, who has done some research on youth

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<sup>1</sup> Mayol 1994, 23.

in public places, including shopping centers. Timo Kopomaa has also examined public places by combining social research with spatial and architectural research.<sup>2</sup>

The main concepts of this study are space and place, which play an important role in landscape experience.<sup>3</sup> Space is more wider and abstract concept than place.<sup>4</sup> Space is something that exists as a set of relations between things or places.<sup>5</sup> It is constructed by - and is constructing - spatial relations.<sup>6</sup> Tuan and Tilley have argued that when a space is movement, a place is pause.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, that places are far more than locations because they have meanings for individuals.<sup>8</sup> So the place can be seen as a site, object, and even the way of seeing.<sup>9</sup> In this study, the spatial practices also contain the concept of the place. Spatial practices are a part of dialectical interaction between the space and the habitant; places are performed through people and that is why the meanings of places are never complete, but take new shape and meanings on daily basis.<sup>10</sup>

This paper is based on the case study of space, place and spatial practices of local youth in Pihlava, Pori, Finland. Research material has been collected by interviewing young people during special field workshops, during which young people documented their home environment. The local youth use their environment in ways that seem to fit the stereotypical way because many of them hung around.

Because this is a case study of young people using a space it was important to find suitable methods to reach the target group. I decided to use special field workshops to reach this special age group. The field workshops I used were based on special combination of working methods that I had thought, to be useful for this purpose.

Field workshops were organized with 11-19 year old people who were spending time in the local youth center. All of the participants that were given an opportunity to make document mainly through photographs the environments they felt was their own or were important to them for other reasons.

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<sup>2</sup> Lehtonen & Mäenpää 1997. Sääskilahti 1999; Kopomaa 1997; Kopomaa 2003, 165.

<sup>3</sup> Tilley 1994;

<sup>4</sup> Tilley 1994, 15.

<sup>5</sup> Tilley 1994, 17.

<sup>6</sup> Tilley 1994, 17.

<sup>7</sup> Tuan 1977, 6; Tilley 1994, 14.

<sup>8</sup> Tilley 1994, 15.

<sup>9</sup> Cresswell, 2004, 15.

<sup>10</sup> Lefebvre 1971, 38; Cresswell 2004, 34, 37; See Tilley 1994, 14-15; de Certeau & Giard 1994, 142-143.

Participants were instructed to take pictures from places they tend to spend time in and show around places to the researcher. So, eventually, the final form of the field workshops were combined of walking with the researcher who conducted interviews while walking with young people who were took photographs of the places they felt closest to in their home environment.

Second phase was to analyze the material gathered during the field workshops. There were hundreds of pictures which were analyzed by content. Then several classifications based on contents of the pictures were made. This classification gave the structure for the study.

## **A multitude ways of seeing neighborhood**

I became interested in this subject a couple of years ago when I was on a walk with my small child and we saw a group of young people from our neighborhood spending time on bus stop. They were *just hanging around* without a need to go anywhere.

Back then, I had just been going through very busy and stressful period in life, and I have to admit that I was kind of jealous that they had so much time to spend on and also felt irritated by the fact that they were just spending time on the bus stop without any intention to step on when the bus arrived. I just could not understand what was going on with those kids' -or in some cases almost young adults' minds.

The incident made me realize that the fact that I could not understand their motives showed that young people have their own point of view that differs from my adult view. At the same time I also realized that I needed to study this subject to learn more about young people's place experiences.

Irritation directed against young people hanging around in public places seems to be a quite widespread phenomenon. Representing young people as a negative element in environment seems to be a very common subject in public discussion in local newspapers' readers sections, social media, etc. There has been a significant amount of writing in the Finnish newspapers that young people are causing fear for older people by grouping in front of shopping centers or other public spaces. Gatherings are represented as a problem. When youths and young adults way of being in public places unfit the normative ways of acting an

in environment (made by adults), discrimination becomes the natural way of getting rid of the problem.

One topic which aroused heated public discussion last year also in Finland, was the Kids be Gone, is a firm that has been marketing Mosquito – Kid Deterrent device, a product for shop owners and others “*ultrasonic teenage deterrent is the solution to the eternal problem of unwanted gatherings of youths and teenagers in shopping malls and around shops*”.<sup>11</sup>

That is a fine example which entails the main problem of the whole discussion – young people seem to be unwanted in public places. In some cases, public discussion has made stereotypical assumptions about how young people act in public spaces, and what would be contrary to normative and appropriate behavior for those kinds in spaces. By definition, the stereotype of young people in a public space is someone who acts against the norms like. A 60-year-old woman described young people and argued that they were allowed to be there unless they are “*breaking anything, or yelling to grannies, or spitting*”. In this case outsiders are constructed by defining how to behave in certain places and telling who actually do not fit in that scale.<sup>12</sup>

And when someone is not acting properly it is fine to deport him from public places. At the same time, when those polemical writings which were published in the readers sections, are producing a stereotype, they are also making representations of space, normative uses of space.

The main problem which directs processes such as discrimination is based on the fact that local youth is experiencing and using the environment from subcultural point of view which differs from adult view. Young people are making their own spatial practices based on their different ways of valuing those environments.

It has been said that place is place when there is someone who is sensing it. To become a place is needs someone who is in discussions with the experience of the place; there have been concepts like sense of place, habitus<sup>13</sup>, etc. Tim Cresswell have written that place is not simply something to be observed, research or written about– it is part of the way we see

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.kidsbegone.com/>

<sup>12</sup> See Cresswell 2004, 39.

<sup>13</sup> Shields 1991, 37.

research and write.<sup>14</sup> The sentence contains the idea of this study as well – the places will lead us on the way young people see their neighborhood environments.

In environmental studies there has also been an increasing interests in the need of fuller understanding how urban children and young people are sensing places. Researching this topic is important for educational purposes.<sup>15</sup> But, it is important in cultural sense as well.

The city is obstructed by codes that dweller has to assimilate in order to live there. On the other hand, dwellers are also creating places by using environment in certain ways.<sup>16</sup> It has been argued that living is *narratinvizing* – the stories that lay on the streets must be woken up by someone.<sup>17</sup>

## Meaning of places in the neighborhood context

First of all, it is important to understand some of the facts about the context neighborhood where the study has been located. It has been written that neighborhood is the privatization of a public space.<sup>18</sup> Suburban areas can be seen as neighborhoods, because dwellers have their homes there. Because they are home environments, stages of everyday life, the space uses can turn to routine.<sup>19</sup>

What makes suburban areas like, the research area of this study, so special, is that suburban areas contain social spaces, so called instant neighborhoods where dwellers know that can be and recognize at the same time, there are more anonymous spaces like public spaces.<sup>20</sup>

Pierre Mayol has described how knowing how to behave properly is how dweller becomes a partner in a social contract of being in public spaces<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Cresswell 2004, 15.

<sup>15</sup> Miyoun & Calabrese Barton 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Mayol 1994, 10.

<sup>17</sup> de Certau & Giard 1994, 142.

<sup>18</sup> Mayol 1994, 11.

<sup>19</sup> Cresswell 2004, 33-34.

<sup>20</sup> Mayol 1994, 9, 13.

<sup>21</sup> Mayol 1994, 8.

The basis of this study is the assumption that young people are an active group when it comes to using spaces, and they are also making improvements in the environment to cater for their own needs. It seems that, instead of participating in discussion of normative uses of space in the readers sections or other forums where people can publish their opinions,<sup>22</sup> young people have taken a role in discussion by participating in action rather than by words. That is why it is important to study the spatial practices of local youth.

Henry Lefebvre has written about constructed spatial codes which are defining the system of a place.<sup>23</sup> The code is telling how to perform place – but sometimes codes are recoded also. Young people are decoding<sup>24</sup> environments by using those ways that differ from the adult perception of appropriate uses. Next, I will give few examples of places they felt were important in their everyday space uses, outside the school day or other formal uses of spaces, places that they felt their own.

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<sup>22</sup> Tella 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Lefebvre 1971, 16.

<sup>24</sup> Shields 1991, 28.





### **Place 1. The Smoking area**

- **It's important to be seen, or sometimes not to be seen**

As the result of these field workshops it was possible to find places from the research area that had special meanings for young people using the space. One example of these was The Smoking Area.

One of the places young people find important in their home environment was the smoking area. Tupakkapaikka, as they called it, was informally sited on an empty unbuilt site on their neighborhood.

Only a path and few traces on the ground marked that someone had been there. Although it seemed an empty and marginal space, for local youth it seemed to mark something else – to them it represented as a very meaningful place.

One of the reasons they had chosen the spot was that they had been deported from other places, so they had taken their spot on this piece of land that nobody seemed to care about.

For underage people smoking is an illegal or prohibited action, so they have to find a place where they can do it without getting caught. And because they needed a place for illegal action, they had to find a place where they could be out from their parent's sights as well. In my research area, in terms of smoking young people chose a marginal places that seemed to be no one's property.

On the other hand, the place had a social meaning for local youth. It contains social expectations.<sup>25</sup> The significance of the smoking area was constructed by the fact that it was a place for a gathering. So the place was hidden enough from their parents' eyes but so widely known among young people that they knew they would meet each other there. It was a well known spot where young people could meet each other.

Erving Goffman uses the term gathering to refer two or more individuals. For Goffman gathering is a social situation where those who are present are one.<sup>26</sup> And when gathering, communication has an important role. All verbal and non-verbal ways of communication, culturally approved manners and other codes which differ in youth and adult culture causes outsideness and misunderstandings between those different age groups<sup>27</sup>.

Eventually, smoking cigarettes in the smoking area seemed to be, as Erving Goffman has written in his *Interaction Ritual*, a side action.<sup>28</sup> Also non-smokers were gathering there as well – it was the social atmosphere what made the place special and meaningful.

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<sup>25</sup> Cresswell 2004, 35.

<sup>26</sup> Goffman 1967, 144; See Kopomaa 1997; Kopomaa 2003.

<sup>27</sup> See Goffman 1967, 143.

<sup>28</sup> Goffman 1967.



## **Place 2. In front of the health care center**

Other important place for local youth was found in front of the healthcare center. Young people gathering there was at the top of the topics of all complaints, so I knew it was somehow a hotspot or problematic area even before we had our workshops with young dwellers.

For me, the place seemed not to have been offering anything special. It was just a yard of the healthcare center, with quite common buildings. Young people were using the yard mainly after the closing time.

Because them being there caused much resistance from older people, the young people had been exported more than once from the yard. Older residents were complaining that they were, for instance, spitting all over the yard and causing other problems so they wanted to prohibit the usage of space. The youth had been driven away from there by guards and police officers.

Such conflicts with authority may be a way of getting some excitement. The young people told me many stories about provocative acts or conflicts they have had in certain places – like being exported from a certain place by guards or police officers.

So why the young people insisted on getting there?

In discussions about place with its young users there seemed to be lots of arguments for spending time there. The one fact that young people told me was that it was the sunniest and the warmest place in whole area. And when there was a rainy day there was an overhanging roof structure over entrance or doors which provided shelter from the rain.

So my conclusion is that although it may seem that they are just searching conflicts against other age groups by using spaces against normative ways, young people are also searching the elements that support their ways of being in the environment. Those elements are tools with which to construct the environment for their “hanging around” purposes.

## **Conclusions:**

### **Incorrect ways of using space - or something else?**

The case is local, but the uses of environment are very universal.

As you can find above they had their reasons of being there and making alternative uses of the space. There can be different kind of spaces and places inside this one area. Instead of being just habited, private spaces, there are public spaces as well in their neighborhoods. There is not one without the other. Sometimes they are one on the other and that dichotomy is also what makes it so difficult to use the neighborhood environment in a way that suits everyone.

And what makes it more complicated is that it seems that young people are decoding the environment and finding suitable places for their actions. And their spatial practices are based on their ways to value those environments. And the evaluation process is connected with what they need from the environment. Hanging around is being outdoors and also participating in the environment.

When seeking suitable places for hanging around, they are valuating environment, choosing the best places for hiding from control, and, at the same time, experiencing the environment in its entirety: seeking shelter from cold weather or finding the sunniest place of the area, and also making signals to those places by marking and renaming them. And the actions are

performed in those places in spite of what purpose the places and its structures were originally planned to serve.

Seeking shelter from weather conditions, meeting people, being there were justified for several facts that do not seem to be obvious to groups that do not share the environmental view with young people. They are outsiders from the youth culture.

It is important to focus also on what those motives are and reasons that have affected what places young people have chosen to spend time in and what kinds of meanings they have created in those places.

The young people are decoding places of their neighborhood by using and performing places everyday and they are marking the places by renaming them. Gathering in places and using places in their own way might be their way of taking a part in public discussion. Instead of writing letters to readers sections or choosing other traditional ways to participating in public discussion, they are participating with action taking their places in environment.

*Author FM Katri Tella is a doctoral student in University of Turku (Landscape Studies), Finland. Tella is working as researcher in project Suburban Pori, and she works also as a spare-time art educator and has also organized performances and art workshops from babies to adult audience in Pori Art Museum, Pori Centre for Children's Culture and teaches in School of Visual Arts Pori.*

## **Photographs:**

1-2 Katri Tella 2009, 2010

3-4 Mansikka-Lähteenmäki- Hernesniemi 2009-2010

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