

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PUBLIC PLACES TO THE PEOPLE OF BOGOTÁ<sup>1</sup>

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Those of us who have been working in the area of environmental psychology for some years will know that place and space have been central concepts in the development of the sub-discipline. One might question whether the theoretical development is as far advanced as one might have hoped or expected, but there has been no shortage of research which has sought to obtain a psychological understanding of these two concepts. Such research has in some cases sought to provide empirical evidence to inform public policy as well as practical planning and design. This case study from Bogotá is one such example.

Pablo Páramo begins by declaring that “the general purpose of this dissertation is to build an understanding of how the people of one city conceive of, and value, the public places of their city.” Pablo Páramo’s work falls into the tradition of closely observed studies of particular places that enable us to better understand their workings. Interestingly, Pablo Páramo’s objectives were not simply to ascertain the public’s assessment of the aesthetic qualities of the environment or even the diversity of its functions for different groups, but rather to inform “urban planners and educators as to how the city environment itself might be better used as an educational resource for its citizens.” This is an interesting and unusual target audience as well as objective, and immediately sets a challenging goal for urban planners. Rather than simply seeing the task of planning as one of development control (as it so often is in cities) or enhancing mobility, or as Pablo Páramo expresses it, “addressing the negative aspects of experiencing cities” it is about seeing the city as “a place of opportunities for learning and development.”

Although public education and involvement has been seen as a vital tool in the sustainable development programme for the public spaces of Bogotá, Pablo Páramo argues that such development “lacked a theoretically based research orientation.....and ..... city planning

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decisions have consistently failed to consider the publics' perceptual, affective, and cognitive responses to the environment" which might, in turn lead to the development of public spaces "... as a learning environment for the people of Bogotá." Drawing on the concepts and methodologies of environmental psychology, Pablo Páramo illustrates extremely well how a sensitive study driven by environmental psychological concepts can make a potentially significant contribution to enhancing the quality of life of city residents. For example, employing techniques that explore the resonant signs and symbols of the psycho-social history of the city with a view to enhancing residents' sense of place and identity takes studies of this kind way beyond the normal focus of residential satisfaction. Furthermore, there is an understanding of the reciprocity between the social and the physical and this is referenced through the concept of affordance. While the physical aspects of the environment, such as surfaces, greenery and seating, are the 'building blocks' of the functional affordances of settings, the presence of other people can also be thought of in terms of 'building blocks', i.e., social knowledge, observed behaviour, expressed attitudes and indigenous culture. All provide affordances, out of which people understand, make sense of and then act in and upon their world.

While it may be expedient to separate the physical from the social aspects of the environment, in reality this makes little sense. As Barthes (1973) wrote in relation to the signifier and signified in signs, while the physical and the social can be distinguished on the plane of analysis, on the plane of experience they are indivisible. Individuals' perceive the environment holistically and do not perceive or utilise social and physical aspects of the environment separately and in isolation from each other. The environment supports development through the fusion of social and physical affordances; to treat them as separate is misleading as well as theoretically and philosophically dubious. Such a dualistic conception of environments ignores the interplay between the physical and social components of the environment that support behaviour and development. Pablo Páramo captures this.

Despite the rich history and importance of public spaces in general and plazas in particular in Latin-American culture, Pablo Páramo demonstrates that, as in the "West", such places have not been immune from the onslaught of the forces and shifts of capital investment. But perhaps unlike many other cities in the world, successive governments in Bogotá have realised the importance of public spaces and have sought not only to protect and enhance them for the "satisfaction of collective urban needs" but increase the amount of public spaces available for the benefit of the citizens of Bogotá. Notwithstanding the contestation between different emphases and approaches from successive mayors, Bogotá now has the

reputation as providing one of the world's leading models for sustainable urban design. This is in no small part to a program entitled *Citizen Culture* based on the recognition of the co-existence of three superimposed regulating systems for people's behaviour: law, morality and culture. With this starting point the city introduced a policy to influence people's behaviour in public spaces and to promote certain basic competences amongst citizens.

The emphasis on culture stands in contrast to the policies adopted in many cities where the control and use of public space is seen to be driven by laws and morality (at least the asserted morality of those in power). Several years ago I undertook a study at the request of a local municipality to examine a public space in a town centre. It was a small area of seating and was typically appropriated and occupied by street drinkers, the homeless, the young unemployed, and the occasional elderly shopper. It was not a particularly attractive area but became 'home' to a loose, fragile community of souls who represent a particularly vulnerable section of society. I likened this space to a room with glass walls – the users spent the day talking and watching the passers-by, while to the passers-by this marginal group were invisible. The local authority were concerned to improve the space, and asked me to undertake a small study to investigate who uses this space and how. We spent a week observing and talking at great length to these people; the importance of this place was unquestionable. We wrote a report for the local municipality and emphasised the role and significance of the space for its users. The local municipality responded by removing the seating in attempt to exclude the users. Of course, they did not solve what they perceived as a problem, but merely displaced it elsewhere. Research can have unintended consequences.

Yes, these are politically and economically motivated decisions. But they are also a result of a narrow functionalist understanding of urban life and spaces. This study demonstrates how well designed, methodologically rich and sensitively analysed studies can provide considerable insight into the everyday life of people in our cities, wherever they are. Moreover, they can inform governments at all levels of the importance as well as the means of planning and designing public spaces which are diverse and socially inclusive and contribute to the creation of learning environments for all citizens.

Barthes, R. (1973) *Mythologies*, St Albans: Granada.