

Activity Interfaces: Breaking Down the Barriers at Public Activity Places

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Aim

The Swedish sport and physical activity landscape, like in many other countries, is in change: how, where, when and if we exercise and are physically active is changing. We can see a growing trend away from traditional club sport, towards activities provided for within the commercial sector, in a non-club organisational setting or carried out as self-organised activities (for a discussion on institutional changes see Borgers et al, 2018). The growing preference for self-organised activities, alongside the decline of traditional sport as well as an alarming inactivity rate, has driven an incentive among cities (municipalities) to provide more public activity places, such as outdoor gyms skate parks and small-scale ball pitches (Book, 2017). However, building an infrastructure doesn't assure physical activity among the wider population (see for instance Koohsari et al, 2015). For instance, girls and women are heavily under-represented at the public activity places. There is a need for other support as well, often to be found outside the traditional way of organising and providing for sport.

With basis in the project *Equalizer – a tool for equal and inclusive activity places*, this presentation aims at discussing possible spatial, organisational and activity interfaces to activate public urban places.

Research Design

The *Equalizer – a tool for equal and inclusive activity places* focuses on the potential in transforming existing activity places through fairly inexpensive and workable measures in order to attract more users, irrespective of gender. The project connects theory and practice and uses the city as a living lab. The project is performed as a collaboration between researchers; architects; the Leisure Department in Malmö; and users. An important part of the project is the involvement of potential users, mainly girls/women. Together with groups of girls/women (age 17-25 and 40-53), we have carried out participatory actions (so called “disturbances”) at activity places. These have been evaluated and processed in workshops to identify barriers, which in turn have resulted in ideas about supportive measures for making the activity places and physical activities involved more inclusive.

Results and Discussion

The presentation will focus on the identification of barriers and discuss supportive measures. We have formulated the identified barriers as question, developed by the participating girls/women. The first cluster of questions concerns spatial support: How do I find and approach the place? How could I step inside step-wise and naturally? Based on these we have identified supporting physical structures: guiding spatial structures, visibility, low physical barriers, spatial connections between inside and outside, etc.

The second cluster of questions concerns organisational support: How could I gain access to the place? How could I find support in taking place? How do I know how to use the place? How could I find other girls who are interested in using the place? Based on these we have identified supporting organisational structures: presence of adults, organisations in different forms or networks giving a helping hand, PE teachers showing the places during school time, occasional events, communication platforms etc.

The third cluster of questions concerns the activities taking place at the place: Do I need to perform to use the place? Do I need to play football to use the place? How could I use the place for different activities? Based on these we are identifying supporting structures in order to open up for a more flexible and varied use of the places: combinations of activities, social activities, unexpected and temporal equipment, illustrative signs, etc.

In order to structure the measures, it can be useful to refer to ecological or socio-ecological models (see for instance Sallis et al. 2006), but more importantly to move outside the traditional structures/conceptualisations and boundaries connected to these. Most of the supporting structures discussed in order to break down the barriers and make public activity places more inclusive could be regarded as some kind of interfaces between activities, organisational types and spaces. This means that we can't develop inclusive public activity spaces without linking different municipal departments, school and leisure settings, physical and social activities, simplicity and creativity, etc. We need to think outside the traditional way of organising sport, but not ignoring organisational issues despite the open character of public places. It is about developing a hybrid and interfacial way of working, and to disturb existing norms.

References

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