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The use and design of rural public spaces in Slovakia: a participant observation approach

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a participant observation approach**

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Abstract

Observation and participant observation methods have been used to analyse the quality of public spaces in cities since of the mid-twentieth century. The number of users and their behaviour informs the quality assessment that is used as a basis for planning and design processes. As far as is known there are no specific observation methodologies for assessing the use of rural public areas – public spaces in villages. This paper explores the use of a participant observation methodology designed for rural areas and provides information of the form of public spaces, their users and how they are used. Three case study villages have been were analysed. Results show the potential of the methodology as an important source of information for those who design public spaces not just with vegetation but with hard landscape features (such as outdoor furniture, paths, and playgrounds).

Key words: participant observation, rural public spaces, rural public space design, human behaviour

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Introduction

Public spaces and human behaviour

Consideration of public spaces should include two elements: their physical setting and the behaviour of those using them. These elements are mutually adapted and they are in part self-regulating (Lynch, 1962). Human behaviour is supported by the physical environment. It lies along the boundaries of architecture, engineering, planning and landscape architecture (Lynch, 1984).

If our purpose is to design places that support people's needs and activities, our analyses should be aimed at analysing human behaviour. As Spradley (1972) suggested, in contrast to animal behaviour, human behaviour has meaning to the actor, and that meaning can be discovered. Lynch (1984) suggested that the site planning process should begin with an understanding of the persons for whom the site is being planned and a definition of what their role will be in creating or deciding the features of the plan.

Observation – the perspective of planners and designers

Observation helps to provide the image of the site (Lynch, 1984) and helps to guide the design. The designer must observe in detail how the area is actually used by its human inhabitants, watching vehicle movements and the walk to work, and spotting the places where locals hang out are more informative than pages of statistics.

By observing what people do, rather than just listening to what they say, Whyte (1980) and Gehl (1996, 2000) were able to put an end to some of the deep-seated and destructive myths about what people want from their cities and public spaces. The observation approach has been widely used amongst planners and designers such as Jane Jacobs (1962), Kevin Lynch (1962, 1984), Clare Cooper Marcus (1998), Randolph Hester (1990), Mark Francis (1984) and it has become a significant basis for urban design. Recommendations to analyse human behaviour (movement of pedestrians, the overall atmosphere of the centres where people meet and the place where most activity takes place) are mentioned in the methodology for assessing public spaces discussed by Carr (1992).

Thwaites and Simkins (2007) described a perception of outdoor environment that depends on both who you are and the nature of the relationship with the setting under investigation. Figure 1 shows that the optimum situation is one in which place perceptions relating to both aspects can be obtained. The resolution of the pictures, representing different methods, illustrate the experience of place from the users' perspective. It shows that the best way to

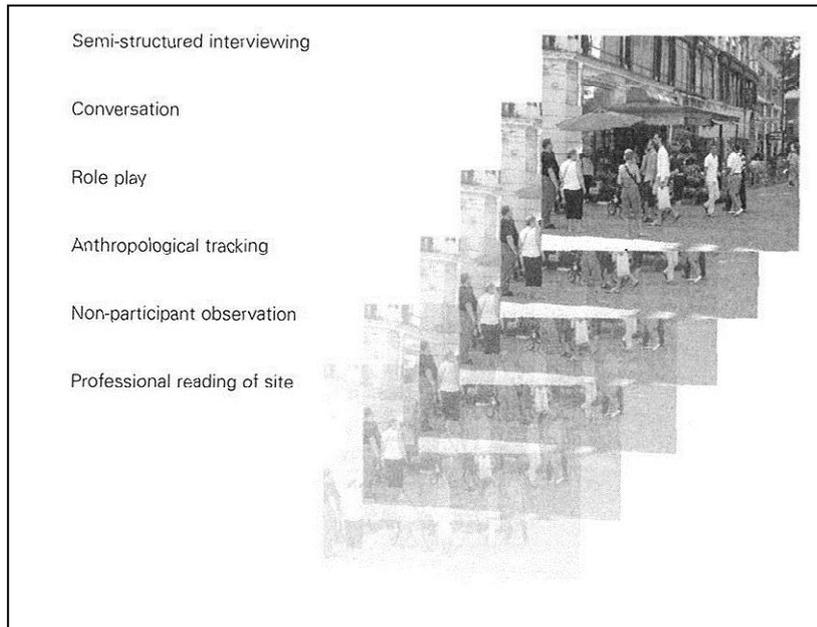


Figure 1: Optimal situation of place perception (Thwaites and Simkins, 2007).

gather the necessary information from internal users is by means of semi-structured interviews.

Thwaites and Simkins (2007) also present a new term relating to public space observation – ‘Anthropological tracking’, similar to the term ‘environmental tracking’ as used by Lynch (1962). It is an approach involving watching for traces of people, rather than people themselves (Thwaites and Simkins, 2007). The method requires site designers to learn to read the signs just as the hunter reads the spoor of forest animals (Lynch, 1962). Accumulations of discarded gum, cigarette-stubs, etc. are evidence of temporary occupation; suggesting that, while the physicality of the location may be unremarkable, locally it may be an important vantage point to pause and wait for friends, to watch, to smoke, chew and drink (Thwaites and Simkins, 2007). As Lynch (1962) suggests, this information may be fragmentary and hard to read unless one is familiar with the culture (which might vary according to location, and expressive more of behaviour than of inner feeling.

Observation – the perspectives of sociology and anthropology

From the anthropological and sociological perspectives, observation is “the recording of facts, perceptible to the senses and on the basis of a set plan through which the researcher maintains a receptive position in confrontation with the research objects” (Scheuch, 1958). People’s social activities are studied where they actually take place (Friedrichs and Lüdke, 1975).

Observation is categorised by Friedrichs and Lüdke (1975) as participant and non-participant. Participant observation is a method in which a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people (Dewalt and Dewalt, 2002). It is an empirical method of social research that includes qualitative research and ethnographic approaches (Spradley, 1980) and registers perceptible actions in ‘natural’ situations (Friedrichs and Lüdke, 1975).

Participant observation is widely accepted as the central and defining method of research in cultural anthropology, but in the twentieth century it has become a common feature of qualitative research in a number of disciplines (Dewalt and Dewalt, 2002). Through participant observation, it is possible to describe what goes on, who or what is involved, when and where things happen, how they occur, and why – at least from the standpoint of participants – things happen as they do in particular situations (Jorgensen, 1989); we can observe the activities, people and physical aspects of the situation (Spradley, 1980). Researchers can also uncover factors important for a thorough understanding of the research problem that was unknown when the study was designed (Mack *et al.*, 2005).

Effective participation typically requires blending in, interacting with people, and identifying individuals who may be good sources of information (Mack *et al.*, 2005). These people could be interviewed as part of the process – if the observation is not covert! An interview is a recorded conversation, usually with prepared questions, with individuals or groups. It is more flexible and interactive than a questionnaire (Jorgensen, 1989). Jorgensen (1989) categorises interviews as informal – ordinary free-flowing conversation – and formal – specific questions asked in exactly the same way and time. Wates (1999) explores the differences between group interviews, key informant interviews and semi-structured interviews – the latter, relevant to this research, being conversational open discussions with local inhabitants to understand their needs, problems and aspirations.

Observation methodologies in landscape planning practice

One of the tools for evaluating open space structures according to their usability in people's daily life is Gender Mainstreaming (Damjanovic and Reinwald, 2008). The landscape planning indicators which were developed to ensure gender equality and sustainability are used for qualitative and quantitative measurements. They may be subdivided into socio-economic indicators and spatio-economic indicators. The socio-economic indicators reflect age and group specific conditions of life and the related requirements regarding spatial structures (Damjanovic and Reinwald, 2008).

Another direct observation methodology is *Spaziergang* (walking with observation) (Koll, 2009). This methodology was used to analyse the user groups and their activities of selected public spaces in Parndorf, a village in Austria. The information was used by landscape architects as a source for the renewal process of public spaces.

Participant observation methodology for rural public spaces

Planners, designers, sociologists and anthropologists appear to agree that every social situation could be observed and consists of three main elements: place (physical environment), actors and activities (human behaviour). Therefore the role of participant observation can be applied to public spaces to analyse the physical setting (Spradley, 1980), the public space (Lynch, 1962).

Public life observations of rural public spaces seek to evaluate the quality and use of public spaces and serve as a basis for future design and renewal processes in rural public spaces. The purpose of the observations is to determine how and by whom selected public spaces are used. To complete the participant observation process and to uncover the reasons why people use the public space, semi-structured interviews are conducted by the author. Information obtained from semi-structured interviews provides more impressions about public spaces and helps to enter the people's daily routine. This paper presents results from semi-structured interviews conducted in one of the case study villages in Slovakia – Dobrá Voda.

The recommended time for observations is every hour between 8:00 to 20:00 for 15 minutes during both weekdays and weekends; but, as Mack *et al.* (2005) suggested, specific observation times based on particular activity might be needed. There might be specific times of day when an activity usually occurs. Activities, gender, age and observation notes were recorded on observation forms.

After the observation, activities were divided into three groups identified by their characters as listed by Gehl (2004). There are necessary activities which occur regardless of the quality of the physical surroundings; optional activities which people are tempted to do when climatic conditions, surroundings and the place are generally inviting; and social activities that are characterised by active or passive contact with other people.

Observation notes have to be completed immediately after the observation. They comprise a description of setting, people, behaviour, public space, everything that happened, the place where most social activities happened, and the observer's reflective comments on the observation. Notes can be supplemented by photography, which is especially useful for making records of *nonverbal* human scenes and interactions (Jorgensen, 1989).

Observation positions are chosen to provide the best possible overview of pedestrian traffic. The observer should not stand out or affect the natural flow of activity. It is recommended that the observer should behave in a way similar to the people around them, and mask the observation forms (with newspapers, for example) or watch the activities from car or from restaurant (pub) terrace or coffee shop. Observation may be done individually, in pairs, and in teams – whichever arrangement is most appropriate for covering the locations and topics at issue.

If during the observation days any activity was recorded in the public space being observed, anthropological/environmental tracking (Simkins and Thwaites, 2007; Lynch, 1984) is used. Photographs and significant elements document anthropological tracking. The evident the presence of people on public space could be mapped.

Three case study villages: Dobrá Voda, Domadice and Veľké Zálužie

For the participant observation three different villages in different parts of West Slovakia were selected (Figure 2). In each village, central public spaces were selected and characterized by Šilhánková's (1996) typology as square, street, vegetation area or other area (such as a parking lot).

The population and the distance from the nearest city were important selection factors (Table 1). The largest population is in Veľké Zálužie due to its closeness to the town Nitra and the smallest population is in Domadice village. All three villages are situated in hollows and are characterized as compact rural settlements. Streams are located in all villages and flow through their centres.



Figure 2: Location of selected villages (Dobrá Voda, Veľké Zálužie and Domadice) in the western part of Slovakia (Lipovská, 2010).

Name of the village	Number of inhabitants	Distance from the nearest city [km]	Location of the village	Type of the village	Watercourse in the village	Ground plan – genetic type of village
Dobrá Voda	853	29/ end village	hollow	compact	Blava	village along the road
Domadice	241	17/ passing village	hollow	compact	Kopáč	village along the road
Veľké Zálužie	4 052	13/ passing village	hollow	compact	Long Canal	village along the road

Table 1: Comparison of the case study villages Dobrá Voda, Domadice and Veľké Zálužie (Lipovská, 2009).

Dobrá Voda

The village of Dobrá Voda is located in the Trnava district, 29 km from the town of Trnava. It is in the northern part of the Small Carpathians, on the south-eastern fringes, surrounded by woods, through which flows the Blava stream. In some parts of the central public spaces, the stream creates small channels along the road. Dobrá Voda is the highest village in the Trnava region. It has 853 inhabitants with a population density of 26 inhabitants per km². Nine central public spaces were selected and based on the boundaries of the cadastral map were divided as follows (see Figure 3):

1. *Church square*: The area of the square in front of the church of St. Mary the Virgin is formed by the surrounding houses, which include the Parish house with a room commemorating the famous Slovak poet writer John Hollý, room and the pub-restaurant. The square is the central point of the village. It is a starting point for hiking trails and there is also a bus stop. Here all major community events take place such as the celebration of May 1st, a local fair, or the welcoming of St. Nicholas with the Christmas tree. The square has no specific surface layout for walking and car transportation. In the middle of the square is green area with two war memorials.

2. *New square near the church with the playground and the fountain*: This is a square with a fountain, children's playground and benches, rebuilt in 2008. It is located east of the entrance to the main square. This area had previously been used as a small park that had been created on the area of the old water tank. The area now provides space for all age groups. There is a pergola with benches, playground and water feature in the form of



Figure 3: Selected public spaces in Dobrá Voda. First column: public spaces 1-5; second column: public spaces 6-9 (Lipovská, 2009).

fountain. A low fence with two entrances encloses the whole area.

3. Main Street towards the square: The selected part of Main Street begins at a local shop and ends at the square in front of the church (1, Church square). It is one of the principal and the most frequented streets in the village. Houses bound both sides, with unfenced front gardens. On the west side (looking towards the square) is a footpath for pedestrians and the Blava stream, which is separated from the main road by the grassy area with trees. The alley of trees ends at the main square. On the east side (looking towards the square) houses are separated from the road by a strip of grass.

4. Vegetation around the memorial: A green area is located around the monument of liberators. The vegetation located on the area is predominantly coniferous. The area serves as a shortcut to the square from the side streets.

5. Vegetation around the village theatre: The area around the village theatre is defined by two local communications and public space no. 6 (Street behind the village theatre) and

public space no. 3 (Main Street towards to square). The area is mainly covered by grass.

6. *Street behind the village theatre*: this is a narrow side street formed by surrounding houses separated from them by narrow fenced front gardens. The street begins at the local store and ends on public space no. 4 (Vegetation around the memorial).

7. *Street in front of the municipality house*: The selected part of the main street is formed by houses. The two-way road is separated from houses by the green strip. Behind the green strip is a footpath and unfenced front gardens. On the south east side houses are separated from the road by narrow strip of greenery. Close to the street are located main facilities such as shops and fire station.

8. *Other area in front of the municipality*: A paved area is a bus stop, parking lot and information point. There is telephone and information panel, behind which is a small green area with coniferous trees.

9. *Vegetation around memorial*: An area situated on the right side of the municipality house is formed by grass surface with coniferous trees and perennials. It includes a statue of St. Vendelín, which is enclosed by low fence.

Public life observation in DobráVoda

Public spaces in DobráVoda were observed during a weekday and at a weekend. Weekend observation took place during a good, sunny (30°C) summer Sunday (18th July 2010), from 08:00 to 20:00; and weekday public life observation took place during Tuesday (10th August), also a good, sunny (32°C), summer day, from 08:00 to 20:00.

During the two observation days 604 people visited the square, which represents the largest number of visitors from all observed public spaces in the village (33.8% of the total number of observed people in all public places in the village of DobráVoda during two days of observation). The total number of population visited the square during the week and the weekend did not change significantly.

Main Street was visited by 439 people during the two days of observation: representing the second-largest number of visitors observed in all public spaces in the village. The total population visited the street during the week and weekend changed significantly. The weekend visit rate grew by 41.1%, which represents 75 people.

The square with playground and fountain was used by 352 people, representing the third-largest number of visitors observed in all public spaces in the village (19.5% of the total number of people observed in public places in the village of DobráVoda during the two days of observation).

Most people who visited public spaces were in the age group 31-64 (39.6%). Most recorded activity in a public place was passing through the area – a necessary activity (58.6% from all activities) and most recorded social activity was talking (36.2%) – nearly every third person in a public space was talking.

1. Church square

Weekend participant observation showed that the public space was mostly used from 19:00 to 19:15 (23.0%) and least used from 11:00 to 11:15 (2.2%) and from 15:00 to 15:15 (2.2%). Most people visited the public space were placed in the age group 31-64 (35.3%) and the

largest representation of all the activities was passing through the area – a necessary activity (46.3%).

Weekday observation showed that the public space was mostly used from 17:00 to 17:15 (15.0%) and least from 8:00 to 08:15 (3.5%). Most people visited the public space were placed in age group 31-64 (41.3%) and the most frequently observed activity was a necessary activity – passing through the area (46.3%).

2. New square near the church with the playground and the fountain

During the weekend we observed the largest share of visitors (16.2%) from 14:00 to 14:15, in the age group 31-64 (35.3%). The largest representation had a necessary activity – passing through the area (50.8%). A social activity, which was recorded, was talking (30.8%).

Weekday observation showed that the largest share of visitors was located on the square from 11:00 to 11:15 (20.5%). Most people visited the public space were placed in the age group 31-64 (43.2%). During the weekday the largest representation had a necessary activity – passing activity (47.3%) and a social activity – talking (29.9%).

3. Main Street towards the square

During the weekend, most visitors were in the public space from 18:00 to 18:15 (16.0%) and the public space was least used from 11:00 to 11:15 (2.7%). Most people who visited this public space at the weekend were placed in the age group 31-64 (35.4%). The weekend observation showed the largest representation of a necessary activity – passing through the area (48.2%) and a social activity – talking (31.5%).

Weekday observation showed that the public space was mostly used from 11:00 to 11:15 (16.5%) and the public space was least used from 16:00 to 16:15 and from 12:00 to 12:15 (4.4%). Most people visited the public space were in the age group 31-64 (45.6%) with a necessary activity – passing the area (57.1%). A social activity, talking, was recorded at 30.2%.

4. Vegetation around the memorial

Weekend observation showed that the area was mostly visited from 19:00 to 19:15 (25.5%) and least used from 17:00 to 17:15 and from 18:00 to 18:15, when nobody visited this public space. The largest share of users was placed in the age group 31-64 (35.0%). Most observed activity, was necessary – passing through the area (70.0%) and social, talking (34.7%).

During the weekday the largest share of users was recorded from 14:00 to 14:15 and from 19:00 to 19:15 (17.9%). The age groups most visiting public places were between 31-64 years (35.7%) and activity, which was observed, was a necessary activity – passing through the area (67.9%).

5. Vegetation around the village theatre

This area was visited by only two people (0.1%). This public space was analysed by an anthropological tracking method, which confirmed the presence of people on this public

space. Based on the observed traces of human behaviour we can say that this area is used for passing by and for children's ball games. The evidence was the worn path between the new and old village theatre building and two areas of trampled grass, probably the places for football goals.

6. Street behind the village theatre

During the weekend 17 people passed the area and their distribution during the day was more or less regular. For each observation time only one to two persons passed, so there was no distinct representation in an observation time for a public space. Most people using this public space were placed in the age group 15-30 (37.5%) and the sole observed activity was a necessary activity – passing through the area (100.0%).

During the weekday 16 people passed the area. Most were placed in the age group 31-64 (29.4%) and sole recorded activity was a necessary activity – passing through the area (100.0%), as at the weekend.

7. Street in front the municipality house

During the weekend, the largest share of visitors were in the public space from 14:00 to 14:15 (15.8%) and the public space was least used from 16:00 to 16:15 (1.8%). People were mostly in the age group 15-30 (42.1%) and the most commonly-recorded activity was a necessary activity – passing through the area (57.3%).

During the week this public space was used mostly from 10:00 to 10:15 and from 19:00 to 19:15 (11.1%) by the people in the age group 31-64 (51.9%). The most commonly- recorded activity was a necessary activity – passing through the area (48.1%).

8. Other area in front of the municipality

Here, the weekend observation showed that the distribution of people using this public place was more or less regular. Each observation recorded from 2 to 5 persons, so there was no observed noticeable representation in any particular observation time. Most people visiting this public space were in the age group 31-64 (35.7%) and the most frequently recorded activity was a necessary activity – passing through the area (50.0%).

Weekday observation showed a similar pattern. The people observed were in the age group 31-64 (54.5%) and the most frequently recorded activity was a necessary activity – passing through the area (42.4%).

9. Vegetation around memorial

This area visited by only two people (0.1%) during the two days of observation. This public space was analysed by an anthropological tracking method, which confirmed the presence of people on this public space. Based on the observed traces of human behaviour we can only say that people maintained flowerbeds. Other activities were not successfully recorded.

Semi-structured interviews in DobráVoda

To complete the data from participant observations and to uncover the reasons why public spaces are used or not, semi-structured interviews were conducted in Dobrá Vodavillage. The aim was not to reach as many respondents as possible, but instead to obtain reliable data. Respondents were of all age groups, but mostly in the age group 7-14, who visit the public spaces least, based on the observations (ranking second lowest in the overall assessment for all public places). Young people in this age group spend most time in the village, where they visit the local primary school. The names of all interviewees have been changed for anonymity, and translations into English are by the author.

Age category 7-14

Eight people in the 7-14 age group were interviewed on the square itself (4 respondents) and in local restaurant/pub (4 respondents), which is located on the square. Of these, 3 women and 5 men agreed that they use this observed public spaces as transition area (passing through them or alongside them). Other responses for the specific locations studied are as follows.

1. *The square near the church*, for them, a meeting place where they meet with their friends and where their parents park their car if they go to the pub. They use it mainly in the evenings.

2. *The new Square with a playground* is attractive for this age group, especially in the evening, says Marian (14): "In the evening there are no children, we can sit here and talk because at this time it is quiet place". During the day this area is visited especially by girls who like playing on the swing and talking, but it is not a regular activity, rather the spontaneous use of public space.

3. *Main Street* is, for all respondents, just the crossing point.

4. *Vegetation around the monument*: this area is uninteresting for this age group. Michael (9) says "I use it as a shortcut from school, when I go home, but only when it is dry. After rain there is a lot of mud". His sister, Elena (12) adds, "in the past we could sit behind the pub, but now we cannot because there are no benches and there is nothing to do".

5. *A green area around village theatre* is used for evening activities, but not visited regularly. Younger children go there play football and, older children to drink alcohol. Marian (14) says: "We often meet there and drink behind the building. Then we go to the disco. Sometimes we go to the pub instead. The younger drinkers go there more often, especially those who cannot have a beer in the pub".

6. *the street behind the village theatre* is seen only as a place for passing by.

7. *The second part of the Main Street at the municipal house* is a street of similar importance to the street behind village theatre and Main Street. David (14) says, "I usually only pass that street when I go home, from shop to shop, or to the municipal house. Once we lay there on the side of the road and we were observing the stars. One part of this street was not so illuminated, so it was easy to see some". Elena (12) recalls: "When my brother was younger, we went there to look at the swan, which lives in the pond".

8. *The area in front of the municipal house* is also rarely used by young people. A few of them mentioned that when they hadn't had a mobile phone, they used to go there to the

phone box. "There is no reason to go there", says Joseph (14), "old grandmothers go there to take care of the flowers".

When asked which public space is the most popular for them, all respondents agreed that it is the football pitch, which is open 24 hours a day. Anna (12) says: "We go there because there is always somebody to meet. The boys play football, we can talk there and watch them". All of the respondents appreciated the isolation of this area, existing benches and evening intimacy. During the day the area is visited by footballers, parents with children, but the evening belongs to young people. David (14) says: "It would be strange if someone older got there. What would they be doing there?"

Older age groups

Seven volunteers were selected for interview. Three were interviewed in public places and four in the local pub. During the interviews no difference in the use of public spaces was found for these age groups, therefore the information from the interviews is dealt with in a single section.

1. *the square near the church* is one of the most important public spaces for this age group. It is a meeting place for them, where conversations and important events take place. Responding to the question of how the square is used, Joseph (33) said: "I use this way to get to the pub, to church, and to see my friends. I always go by car because it's comfortable". To the question of whether this is his favourite place, he answered "I haven't a particular favourite place in the village, but rather somewhere in the woods. But if there was no square, I would miss it". Mr Milan (74) remembers the square as the site of the local market. "Now the square is used only for walking. When I am tired I sit on the low wall at the church to take a rest and I always meet someone to talk with. It was nice shady place, but 3 months ago they cut down the chestnut trees". Mr Marian (50) also uses this place, and after outdoor work he likes sitting on bench at the memorial.

2. *The new square with a playground* is perceived as a place that increases the attractiveness of the village. Ms Jarmila (30) said: "We go to the playground with my daughter, I usually sit and talk with someone". Joseph (33) is annoyed because young people who use this new square damaged the fountain with cigarette butts. "The fountain worked until the young started throwing butts into it".

3. *Main Street* is, according to the people interviewed, an unmaintained area. It is the place for passing by and meeting. Vilma (43) said: "I don't like trees on the street. I also remember when they planted new ones someone broke them".

4. *Vegetation around the memorial* is an area that was problematic to identify for a few of the respondents. This area is used but not perceived. People use it as a shortcut to the square.

Similarly, 5. *the green areas around the village theatre* is not used by the respondents.

6. *The street behind the village theatre* is visited by only one of the respondents, Karol (87). "I go that way because one of my friends lives there", he says.

7. *Part of the main street in front of the municipal house* has a meaning for people similar to that of the Main Street. Maria (20) says: "We meet and say goodbye with my friend at the pond".

8. *The area in front of the municipal house* has the statue of St. Vendelín and well-maintained vegetation, and is the outdoor market place. "When there is a market the half of the village meets there. Otherwise there is no life, only cars park there", says Karol (87).

To the question of which village public space is the most popular for them, nearly all answered their own garden. Joseph (33) mentioned that his favourite place is somewhere in the woods and Jarmila (30) mentioned her mother-in-law's garden.

Domadice

Domadice is a small village located southeast of the town of Levice. Traces of village settlements date back 2700 years to the Old Bronze Age. The first written record of the village is from 1138, when the village was called Villa Dalmadi. Its current population is 237. Five central public spaces were selected for study (see Figure 4).

1. *Vegetation area between the municipality office and the cultural house* is an unmaintained area with coniferous and evergreen plants, and serves as a shortcut to the street (public space 2).

2- *Street towards the cultural house and the municipality office* begins at the main road and ends in front of the municipality office. It is bounded by the housing area with the old fire station on one side and by the public space 1 on the other.

3. *Bus stop area* is the grassland with planted shrubs and trees where all major community events take place. On the paved part of the area are the bus stop, an information panel, lighting, benches and concrete flowerpots.

4. *Vegetation close to church* is a grassed area with shrubs and trees. It was a water tank for local agriculture, industry and the fire station. After the water tank was buried the area became a place in the centre of the village with any function or facilities. The area is bounded on two sides by the Kopáč stream.

5. *Vegetation around the church* is situated on a small hill bounded by a low fence. This area has two entrances. The main one is from the main street and the second is from the street behind the church. The area is planted with trees and perennials.

Public life observation in Domadice

Public spaces in Domadice were observed during a weekday and at a weekend. Weekend observation took place during a good, sunny (33°C) summer Sunday (25th July 2010), from 08:00 to 20:00; and weekday public life observation took place during Tuesday (17th August), also a good, sunny (28°C), summer day, from 08:00 to 20:00.

During the two days, 282 activities were recorded, most taking place on the street towards the cultural house and the municipality office (n= 187). Most activities observed were necessary activities, with the largest representation being the activity of passing through the area.



Figure 4: Selected public spaces in Domadice. First column: public spaces 1, 3, 5; second column: public spaces 2, 4 (Lipovská, 2009)

1. Vegetation area between the municipality office and the cultural house

This area was visited by 11, 11% of all observed people during the weekend. The largest share of users was placed in the age group 31-64 (67% - from all of the people observed that day). Other age groups visiting public space included 15-30 (10%), and 65 and over (23%). Based on the pedestrian counting information I observed $n = 20$ people and the public space was mostly used from 15:00 to 15:15 ($n = 5$) and from 14:00 to 14:15 ($n = 4$). During the rest of the observation time the public space was used by approximately 2 persons each hour. Activities taking place in a public place were necessary (44%), optional (17%) and social (39%). The most commonly-observed activity was a necessary activity – passing through the public space.

On the weekday only 3 people (4% of all observed people that day) visited the area. The largest share of users was placed in the age group 31-64 (67% observed that day in the area), similar to weekend use. Other age groups using a public place were 65 and over (30%) and 0-6 (3%). Activities taking place in this public space were assessed as a necessary activity (78%) - passing through the public space and a social activity (22%) - talking. During the observation less people were observed in this public space than at a weekend ($n = 6$). Based on pedestrian counting information the observed public space was mostly used from 11:00 to 11:15, when two people walked through the area.

2. The street towards the cultural house and the municipality office

This is the most used and popular public space in village, used during the weekend by $n = 61$ people (60% of all observed people). The largest share of users was placed in the age group 31-64 (60%). Other age groups visiting public space were 15-30 (14%), 65 and over (20%), 0-6 (5%), and 7-14 (1%). 105 people were observed in the public space and based on pedestrian counting information the public space was mostly used from 15:00 to 15:15 ($n = 25$) and least used from 09:00 to 09:15 ($n = 2$). Observed activities in a public place was a

necessary activity (44%) – passing through the public space, an optional activity – standing (17%) and a social activity (39%) – talking.

The largest share of weekday users was placed in the age groups 31-64 (62%) and the public space was most visited from 14:00 to 14:15. Most observed activity was a necessary activity (55%) – passing through the public space. During the one weekday observation, fewer people were observed in this public space than at the weekend (n = 52, 57%).

3. Bus stop surrounding

This space was visited by 25, 25% of all observed people and the largest share of users was placed in the age groups 31-64 years (54%). Observed activities were: necessary (8%), optional (70%) and social (22%). During the one-day observation n= 43 people were observed in the public space. Based on pedestrian counting information the observed public space was mostly used from 08:00 to 18:15 (n = 15) and from 15:00 to 15:15 (n = 10).

During the one-day weekend observation we observed more people than during the week (n = 35), that was 39% of all observed people; and based on pedestrian counting information the observed public space was mostly used from 09:00 to 09:15 when it was visited by 34% (n = 6). People visited the public space were placed in the age group 31-64 (67%). The most frequently-observed activity was an optional activity (60%) - standing and sitting.

4. Vegetation close to the church

This space was visited by only two children (2%) in the age group 7-14 during two days of observation. They were playing football during the weekend observation. Anthropological tracking on this space confirmed the presence of people. Based on the observed traces of human behaviour we can say that people in this area perform activity of maintenance (of the flowerbeds) and passing along the fence on North side of the area.

5. Vegetation around the church

This was visited by three ladies (2%) in the age group 31-64 during two days of observation. They were planting flowers and chatting for more than 3 hours. On this public was realized an anthropological tracking, which confirmed the presence of people. Based on the observed traces of human behaviour we can say that people pass this area, mostly after the church mass.

Veľké Zálužie

Veľké Zálužie village is located in the district of Nitra, 11 km from the town of Nitra. The main road passes through the village and connects two towns Nitra and Sered. The village population is 4052 inhabitants. Three central public spaces were selected for study (see Figure 5):

1. Rínok Street

The selected part of the street begins at a crossroads in the front of the main entrance to the psychiatric hospital and ends at the main street crossroads. A row of trees is planted along the road. Houses with unfenced gardens line both sides of the street. Some front gardens are paved and used as parking spaces.



Figure 5: Selected public spaces in Veľké Zálužie village, first column (public spaces 2, 3), second column (public space 1) (Lipovská, 2009).

2. Main Street

The selected part of the street begins at the crossroads with Rínok Street (opposite the Post Office) and ends behind the grocery shop (near the bus station). It is one of the principal and most-frequented streets in the village. The main road cuts the street and the village in half and is a significant barrier for pedestrians and cyclists. The observed area has pavement on only one side, where a new bus stop is located. Close to the street are main facilities such as shops, restaurants/pubs.

3. The area in front of the grocery shop

This area is located in the centre of the village, close to the main road, which borders it to the south. Along the main road is a strip of grass, planted mainly with coniferous trees. The area is used as an unstructured parking area.

Public life observation in Veľké Zálužie

Public spaces in Veľké Zálužie were observed during a weekday and at a weekend. Weekend observation took place during a good, sunny (32°C) summer Saturday, from 08:00 to 20:00; and weekday public life observation took place during the following Monday, also a good, sunny (29°C), summer day, from 08:00 to 20:00.

During the two days, 2254 activities were recorded, most taking place on Main Street (865 activities). I observed a difference between the number of visitors at weekday and weekend. During the weekend 1268 people (60% of all people observed both days) visited the public space, mainly between 14.00 and 18.00.

Villagers use the central public spaces daily. People pass them on their way home from work, to a restaurant or pub, shops, etc. This is confirmed by the results of the observation, when there was an increased concentration of citizens in the afternoon (after 14.00).

Most observed activities were necessary activities, with the largest representation being the activity of passing through the area. Public spaces, where necessary activities mostly take place, are seen by Gehl (2000) as lower-quality places, but are essential for optional and social activities. Their presence shows the quality of place because they occur only if the quality public space is offered to the user.

1. Rinok Street

During the weekend Rinok Street was visited by 33% of all observed people (from all observed public spaces). The largest share of users was placed in the age group 31-64 (47%). Other age groups visiting public space: 15-30 (31%), 65 and over (8%), 0-6 (8%), and 7-14 (6%). During the one-day observation 424 people were observed in the public space. Based on pedestrian counting information the observed public space was mostly used from 14:00 to 14:15 (n = 62) and from 15:00 to 15:15 (n = 57). Least was used from 09:00 to 09:15 (n = 22). The activities observed were necessary activities (71%) – passing through the public space, optional activities – standing (8%) and social activities (21%) – talking.

On the weekday 34% of all observed people visited Rinok Street. The largest share of users was placed in the age group 31-64 (46%), similar to the weekend use. Other age groups using a public place: 15-30 (27%), 7-14 (10%), 65 and over (9%), and 0-6 (8%). Activities taking place in this public space were assessed as necessary activities (75%) – passing through the public space. During the weekday more optional activities such as standing took place here (20%). The other activity observed was talking (a social activity – 5%). Fewer people were observed in this public space during week than at the weekend (n = 295). Based on pedestrian counting information the observed public space was mostly used from 14:00 to 14:15 when it was visited by 21% (n = 62) and least used from 12:00 to 12:15 when it was visited by 5% (n = 15) of all observed people that day.

2. Main Street

Main Street was visited by 497 people, 40% of all observed people (from all observed public spaces) during the weekend, making this the most visited within the selected public spaces. The largest share of users was placed in the age group 31-64 (47%). Other age groups using public place: 15-30 (31%), 65 and over (8%), 0-6 (8%), and 7-14 (6%). Activities taking place were classified as necessary activities (71%) – passing through the public space, optional activities (8%) – standing and social activities (21%) – talking. Based on pedestrian counting information most people visited the public space from 16:00 to 16:15 (n = 74) and least used was from 12:00 to 12:15 (n=31) when it was visited by 5% of all observed people that day.

During the weekday Main Street was visited by 41% of all observed people. The largest share of users is placed in the age group 15-30 (36%). Other age groups using the space were 31-64 (38%), 65 and over (13%), 7-14 (8%) and 0-6 (5%). Activities taking place in this public space were assessed as necessary activities (76%) – passing through the public space. Other activities that took place were optional (6%) and social activities (18%). During the one-day observation 344 people were observed in this public space. Based on pedestrian counting information the space was most visited from 16:15 to 16:30 when it was visited by 22% (n = 75) least used from 12:30 to 12:45 when it was visited by 9% (n = 30) of all observed people that day.

3. The area in front of the grocery shop

The area was visited by 27% of all observed people (from all observed public spaces). The largest share of users was placed in the age group 31-64 years (43%). Other age groups using public place were: 15-30 (26%), 7-14 (19%), 65 and over (9%), and 0-6 (3%). The activities taking place were necessary (82%), optional (6%) and social (12%). The most commonly-observed activity characterised as a necessary activity was shopping. The most observed was an optional activity (standing) and a social activity (talking). Based on pedestrian counting information the public space was mostly used from 12:00 to 12:15 (n = 45) and from 19.00 to 19.15 (n = 42).

During the weekday the area was visited by 25% of all observed people. The largest share of users was placed in the age group 31-64 (45%). Other age groups using the space were 15-30 (35%), 7-14 (10%), 65 and over (14%), and 0-6 (3%). The most commonly-observed activity was shopping - a necessary activity (81% from all three activity categories). Other activities that took place here were a social activity, talking (12%), and an optional activity, sitting (7%). During the one-day observation 221 people were seen in this public space. Based on pedestrian counting information the observed public space was mostly used from 12:45 to 13:00 when it was visited by 20% (n = 41) and least used from 14:45 to 15:00 when it was visited by 9% (n=18).

Participant observation in the case study villages

Few villages have data available about the users and activities taking place in public spaces. The existence of a document that analyzes the community from this perspective could help in processes of renovation or planning in rural public spaces. The data obtained from the participant observation method can help to analyse the quality and use of public spaces. This could form a document available to the citizens, politicians, planners and others responsible for the condition and renovation of public spaces. The present analysis assesses the current status of selected public spaces, quality, accessibility and use.

During two days of observation it was seen that many activities occur in public spaces and most take place on streets, which are used by people daily. People pass them on their way to home from work, to a restaurant or pub, shops, etc. This is confirmed by the results of the observation, when there was an increased concentration of citizens in the morning (8:00 to 11:00) and mid-afternoon (after 14.00 to 16:00). During the observation few young people were seen, yet based on demographic data they are present in all of the villages observed. The reason could be that the public spaces are not attractive for them and they don't like to spend their time on open public spaces, according to the interviews. Lack of space for this age group means that young people use the facilities for small children or they find other, hidden, public spaces.

Most of the activities observed were categorised as necessary activities, with the largest representation being the activity of passing through the area. Social activities, specifically speaking, had the second-largest representation. Based on these data it can be concluded that the level of social life in selected rural public spaces is good and public spaces have the potential to be used and visited by people for purpose of social activities (Table 2).

Public spaces, where necessary activities mostly take place, are seen as lower-quality places. Higher-quality public spaces tend to be characterized by the presence of optional and social activities (Gehl, 2002).

Pedestrian meeting-points are located off the pavements, but on the paths of pedestrian movement. These meeting places could be characterized as spontaneous. Observations have confirmed their concentration around main facilities such as shops or restaurants.

Participant observation confirmed that the physical environment inevitably plays a role in public life. The observations of public spaces in the case study villages show that the most frequently-used public spaces are central to the village structure, and where the local amenity and service buildings are located. They are therefore important for the whole village. Their opening hours or, in the case of churches, times of services, can raise the numbers of visitors. In some cases the number more than doubled.

ACTIVITIES		
NECESSARY	OPTIONAL	SOCIAL
	Drinking	
Passing with buggy	Sitting on the stairs	Roller skating
Outside work	Phoning	Playing on the street
Going from/to church	Walking with the dog	Cycling
Going from/to shop	Sitting	Observing the surroundings
Passing on bicycle	Walking	Sitting on the terrace of the pub
Passing the area	Standing	Talking

Table 2: Observed activities in the case study villages. The bottom line indicates the most frequently-recorded activities (Lipovská, 2010).

Vegetation in the villages is in the form of private, semi-public and public green spaces. The public greenery includes mainly evergreen coniferous trees that were planted in the 1950s and 1960s which, despite good maintenance, have a static form and appearance. This, and the absence of sitting spaces, could explain why these public spaces are little used.

Seats are an important element in public places and their lack could change public spaces into transition zones with only a few places where people stop and talk. Well-designed and located seats create resting places, with people staying longer in public places and the quality of public life rising. Seats have also economic benefits for surrounding buildings. Sitting on the café and restaurant terraces has the same effect for improving the quality of public life as public seating. Although people are sitting in private places, its activities extend to public places. Private seating is beginning to be used in the earlier months and more than public.

Discussion

Participant observation in each village took only two days and I have tried to demonstrate that even in such a short time we can obtain information that will enrich our analysis in the renewal process of public spaces in rural settlements. The method can be used in small villages as well as in towns and cities, with people or without them, using the semi-structured interviews where people are present and anthropological tracking where they are absent. In larger and more frequently-visited public spaces it could be problematic for one person to record data, and in such cases teamwork is necessary.

Recording the number of observed people is only indicative of the intensity of use because one person visiting a public place may be recorded several times. This fact does not affect

the number of registered activities. Their numbers reflect all activities in a public place (one person may perform more than one activity, thus their number is different from the number of people visiting area).

As Wates (1999) argues, observation can be understood as the direct integration of people into the planning process. When part of the observation is the direct contact with citizens in the form of interviews, the people have the opportunity to be informed and involved. In an interview, people are mostly aware of the purpose and use of the interview. This situation could be good start to inform people about the project and about the renewal plans. Analysis on the use of public space and subsequent informal interviews with local citizens contribute to the planning that takes into account people as the main users of public spaces. They give us an overall picture of the use of public spaces. This information is necessary to restore public spaces, because, as Lynch (1962) states, planning or renovation of public spaces should start the analyses, which help us understand the people who will use space.

Conclusion

This work explores the relationship between people and space, arguing that people should be given higher priority when making good outdoor public places. We design public spaces not just with vegetation but with hard landscape features (such as outdoor furniture, paths, and playgrounds). We necessarily affect not just the aesthetic and ecological situation but the social quality of public space. The participant observation method discussed here is a way to analyze public spaces in villages and to understand how and why they are used, ultimately in order to improve their social, economic and physical aspects.

In view of the landscape planning praxis the information obtained from the participant observation method is useful as a dialogue between community and designer. Their possible uses for designers could include:

- **The use of public spaces** (*How is public space used and by whom?*) –we know the number of people, we know their age, their activities).
- **For location of roads and paved areas and character of their surface** (*Are the paths and routes suitable for everybody? DO we have enough pavements?*) – we observed how and where people move, the age of the people using the public spaces, and some of their characteristics (for example whether disabled).
- **The number, shape and location of rest areas and their equipment** (*Are there enough resting seating and observing opportunities? Is there shelter to protect from sunlight?*) –we do know what kind of activities are taking place in public spaces and if they need special equipment or places; we know who visits the public spaces. Shelters, benches and rest areas are important for the quality of public life.
- **Location of green areas** – we know where people move and what places are most visited. This information is helpful for the design of green areas to encourage more use by local people.
- **The design of active sites and their target groups** such as children's playgrounds, playgrounds for teenagers, or sport areas for seniors (*Are there enough opportunities for creative and exploratory activities?*).
- **Selection and location of plants and the overall visual modification site of public space** (*Is there shade to protect people from bright sunlight?*) –distribution of plants and vegetation could help to develop some activities and resting areas, especially those with natural character. Under the shade of the trees you can find a place for some activities, especially in hot summer days.
- **Monitoring quality of public space** – based on activities and the number of people who visit the public space we can evaluate the public space as having higher or

lower importance for inhabitants. Most important public spaces, that create a place for social and optional activities, will be assessed as public spaces with social importance and their future renovation will have to take account of the current activities.

- **We can create an Activity Map:** Showing where people do things, which places they visit. This is useful for planning future facilities.
- **Quality comparison** – information obtained from observation could be compared from place to place and time to time.
- **To indicate the principles of future improvement** – it can assist in the clearer definition of the design brief and point the way to design solutions.
- **Base for SWOT analyses** –the results from observations could be used as source for SWOT analyses, and can also form the basis for project goals and objectives.

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