

Youth in Urban Space: Building Young People's Identity

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Youth workers in Vienna observed a change in the use of public space by young people before the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though the demographics confirmed that numbers in these age groups were stable and even on a slight increase, exposure to boys and young men in the street and outreach work declined, while simultaneously contact with girls and women in public places had increased. There was also an impression that the big cliques that had dominated certain places or regions were getting smaller. Expert exchange at international level confirmed that these observations had been a phenomenon in many areas in several European cities.

In order to further study these trends and get new insight and findings, organisations from Vienna, Milano, Stuttgart, and Helsinki joined forces in an Erasmus+ “Youth” founded strategic partnership on youth in urban public space. The partnership included six organisations from four countries: Verein Wiener Jugendzentren (Austria), Stuttgarter Jugendhaus gGmbH (Germany), Helsinki Youth Department (Finland), Milano Youth Department (Italy), the NGO Tempo per L’infanzia from Milano, and as scientific support and coordination - the University for Continuing Education Krems (Austria).

Despite the difficulties and complications due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the project was finally able to start in February 2021. Several dozen youth workers working in the four cities collected research over a period of two years. They gathered data about the usability of public space by young people, marked change trends over time, and looked at how the approach and offerings of open youth work could be better adapted given the new data. The researchers used both quantitative and qualitative

methods. They questioned more than 2.000 young people and more than 400 youth workers. 24 one-week observation visits gave intense insights. They conducted focus group interviews both with young people and youth workers, among others. The researchers analysed data both on regional and international levels.

We sat down with Werner Prinzjakowitsch, the Educational Director of the Association of Viennese Youth Centres, to get a better understanding of the significance and impact of the project. We discussed some of the project's findings, important recommendations, and ways to move forward, thanks to the knowledge and insights revealed throughout its implementation.

What is the significance of the Youth in Urban Space project?

WP: There is significance on several levels. Firstly, the public urban space is one of the most important and used spaces for adolescents. A huge part of their life is shaped by it. And for most of them, it's where they are not confronted by an adult in a hierarchical relationship (like at home, school, etc.) and where they can make choices on their own.

Secondly, I don't know of any other international project that involved so many youth workers (400+) and youngsters (2.200+) on a certain topic over such a long period of time (2 years).

Thirdly, it's quite unique in its combination of research and practice. It involved 40 practitioners in research activity under supervision of researchers, as well as combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies in various ways.

Finally, it had outcomes both for the European and – to a larger extent – local levels. By comparing and sharing internationally, the local youth work communities created memorable experiences, got feedback, and could reflect and make their specific local conclusions.

What are some of the most interesting findings of the Youth in Urban Space project?

WP: As I mentioned earlier, we need to distinguish between the European and local-level findings. Generally, the importance of public space for young people could be proved. But also the tremendous role that local surroundings, the local district, or neighbourhoods play in the lives of young people.

Findings also indicated that the way young people use public space changed. Social media and access to public transport played a significant role in that change.

Even though it's not a new finding, this study confirmed the different ways girls and boys use public space. For all genders, there are significant changes. Groups of youngsters get smaller and youngsters tend to be part of several different groups of friends. Moreover, in cities with migrant populations, people are more often coming together: diversity in a positive way is increasing.

Most importantly, contrary to popular opinion, young people from every gender still prefer to meet in person. Even though social media is essential, they prefer to use it as a tool and not spend their life there.

Why is it important and necessary to apply a gender-specific approach when you talk about open youth work? In what way will the findings of the project contribute to ‘transforming’ unequal gender relations?

WP: We have to consider the different ways people use, or would like to use, public space. In addition, we need to recognize that public spaces are still mainly build for men and their needs. Girls and young women clearly stated the above throughout our project implementation.

An important outcome was that structural changes like public parks planned by and with women do occur, but do not result in long term changes in public spaces. It's rather a change in (predominantly male) behaviours and an increase in awareness and acceptance that is necessary. It needs training and campaigning. Rebuilding public spaces is important, but just on its own it does not have any impact.

In what way are public spaces essential for young people's identity building?

WP: Mainly, they're a meeting point and place for activities with peers. Often because of financial reasons, young people simply can't afford to be members of fancy clubs or organisations that ask for fees.

Furthermore, the local environment is an important factor in identity building for most young people. It's smaller and comprehensible. It offers symbols and sometimes local places are those symbols. For example, Viennese youngsters often use "three letter codes" for identifying with a district or local surrounding (OTK for Ottakring, a district, SWK for Schöpfung, a specific suburban municipal housing estate).

Therefore, it's important to acknowledge that what plays an essential role is how attractive those public spaces are for young people.

According to the project's findings, what do youth workers need in order to make their work even more impactful?

WP: As formulated in the recommendations of the Youth in Urban Spaces project, in order to make the youth workers' work more impactful, we need resources secured over a long term, proper education and training, and ongoing reflection and evaluation. All of which are also a matter of resources. Something else that is important is the recognition by others acting in the public space, networking at eye level.

How would you want the project's findings to impact local municipal and European strategies and approaches to open youth work?

WP: Firstly, I would appreciate recognition at a political stakeholder's level, specifically at the point where financing is located, and this is predominantly on the regional and local level when it comes to youth work.

And secondly, on the European, EU funding, level, both in politics and administration, I would recommend that responsible persons have a sharper look at their funding, and make sure it goes to organisations that are really rooted in the local work and not only "international multipliers", which is what I often experience to be the case. The Youth in Urban Spaces project proved that such a desired

outcome and an impact only happens with and through locally rooted partners.

[You can read more about the Youth in Urban Spaces project here.](#)

Youth in Urban Space on YouTube

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