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Urban Public Spaces and Vitality: A Socio-Spatial Analysis in the Streets of Cypriot Towns

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the issue of vitality in urban public spaces, streets in particular, as a major indicator of their success. The study first provides a theoretical framework for understanding the social value and role of urban public spaces on quality of urban life; second, it discusses the essential components of vitality in streets. Finally, investigating vitality and its determinants in two major streets in Famagusta and Kyrenia, North Cyprus, the paper highlights the issues of proper connections and proximity to important magnets, and physical and social attributes in the street area.

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Keywords: Urban public spaces; vitality; major streets; North Cyprus.

1. 1. Introduction

Public spaces have been a central concern of urban planners for centuries since the management of Greek agora and Roman forum, but have been neglected for a long time due to the effects of urban planning. More recently, public space has become a focus for sociologists, geographers and political scientists, along with urban designers whose mission appeared to be leading toward the healed public realm in cities. In the modernist planning, the focus has been on the requirements of cars rather than the

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needs and expectations of pedestrians, and therefore, cities have lost many qualities that they used to have in the older precedents. This has negatively affected the quality of daily life in cities (Oktay, 1990). Vitality, the concept that distinguishes successful urban areas from the others, is lacking in many contexts.

Vitality in urban public space refers to a safer, more desirable, and more attractive space which has the capacity for offering more choices for social activities as well as being a place for cultural exchanges. This kind of space is the successful result of the process of place making for people.

In line with these, this study aims to understand the meaning and use of urban public spaces and to analyse their social values and their influence on the quality of urban life. It investigates the degree of vitality in two major streets in Famagusta and Kyrenia, two cities in North Cyprus. Although these two towns are not involved in the complicated urban issues as in big cities, they provide unique contexts for socio-cultural analysis. Observations of social life in these streets reveal a vibrant character. The study explores the similarities and differences between these two streets in order to provide a better understanding of the reasons behind this vitality. It further investigates issues such as user types, activities, and time of use within the physical context.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Understanding Urban Public spaces and their social value

Francis Tibbalds (1992: 1) describes the public realm as, “all parts of the urban fabric to which the public have physical and visual access”. Public space is the space we share with strangers, people who are not our relatives, friends, or work associates (Walzer, 1986: 470). Almost all definitions and views about public space include the primary indicators of accessibility and activity. We can single out the various definitions to an inclusive one: urban public space is a space within the city area which is accessible to all people and is the ground for their activity. According to Madanipour’s (1996) terms “they are controlled by a public agency, and are provided and managed in the public interest”. Urban public spaces could be analysed in two major forms: (a) streets; (b) squares.



Fig. 1 (a): daily activities in a street in Amsterdam; (b) periodic festivities and events in a plaza in Amsterdam

People’s public life occurs in urban public spaces in a complex set of forms and functions; accordingly, these spaces must be capable to contain diverse behaviour, uses and activities such as shopping, walking, conversation, using the facilities to entertain, relax or even passing the time as daily activities, and also periodic festivities and events (Fig. 1a & 1b). As Montgomery (1998) emphasizes, “it is the public realm and associated semi-public spaces which provide the terrain for social interaction and a significant part of a city’s transaction base, i.e. the market square, the street vendor, the shop frontage and the sidewalk café”.

In modernist urban planning, more attention is paid to requirements of cars rather than pedestrians' needs. For the purpose of increasing the traffic efficiency, different types of arrangements are implemented by engineers in the urban environment. However, pedestrian circulation is more important to provide vitality in urban areas rather than vehicular circulation. On this regard, Trancik (1986) defines a new term: 'lost space' in contrast with defined/enclosed space or positive space by considering the current problems with the definition and use of urban spaces in the modern city. He highlights the problems with the modernist approach which did not concern the flow of pedestrian activity in the city and describes the image of these spaces as undesirable urban areas that are in need of redesign-anti spaces, making no positive contribution to the surroundings or users. These kinds of spaces definitely reduce the vitality in urban public spaces. Besides, the work of Oktay (2002), Siksna (1995, 1998), Jacobs (1994), Jo (1998), and Montgomery (1998) emphasize on the importance of the pedestrian circulation in urban vitality and criticize the attention to vehicular traffic (Bozkurt, 2004).

The declining approach during the modern period has affected many urban areas and transformed them into inhuman spaces which reduce the quality of life of the residents. Cyprus as a small country is not an exception. Many newly introduced streets in its urban areas are being utilized as movement channels for cars rather than a capable space for social life. Moreover, the physical forms have low concerns of social needs. However, some streets are still working as vibrant and dynamic spaces in both the historic areas and the new ones. This paper explores the socio-spatial relations of two vibrant streets in two important towns of North Cyprus. The reasons for selecting these streets are mainly to understand how the physical form with the functions attached, influences the pattern of use and to find out the basis of vitality in these two streets. We then closely investigate these two cases by exploring their similarities and differences in terms of their vitalities.

In managing public spaces, Caroline et al (2007) argues that "people are drawn to, and tend to stay longer in, public spaces that offer interest and stimulation and/or a degree of comfort. Survey and observation data show that people appreciate and look for special events and activities in public spaces, both locally and in the town centre. Unique and special events including spontaneous 'street entertainment' also grab the attention and help to define places as interesting one. People are more likely to linger if there is somewhere comfortable to sit, especially if there is also some protection from the weather".

In designing public spaces, even where they are physically accessible, other issues and aspects of public spaces can act as a barrier to their use by some people. They could be the difficulty to get in, the scarcity of (open) public toilets, facilities for children and older people and parking for cars (Caroline H. et al, 2007). "In a well-designed and well-managed public space, the armour of daily life can be partially removed, allowing us to see others as whole people. Seeing people different from oneself responding to the same setting in similar ways creates a temporary bond." (Carr et al., 1993, p.344). Eventually, successful urban spaces are the ones that are well-designed and well-managed which brings successful urban life for the people by enhancing their quality of life in the public domain.

2.2. *Vitality in streets*

Lynch (1981, pp.118-19) identifies vitality as one of the performance dimension of urban design and describes it as the degree to which the form of places supports the functions, biological requirements and capabilities of human beings.

Vitality deals to the degree with which an urban space is socially successful. In Montgomery's definition (1998), it refers to the number of people in and around the street (pedestrian flows) across different times of the day and night, the uptake of facilities, the number of cultural events and celebrations over the year, the presence of an active street life, and generally the extent to which a place feels alive or lively. Vitality in the urban realm is an important quality because it reduces crime, makes commercial interests more viable, increases passive enjoyment of streetscape – people watching, encourages social

interaction and provides opportunities for cultural exchange. Consequently, vitality in urban space is regarded as an important measure of its health. Barry Sherman (1988) considers vitality as an indicator of successful urban places in his check list. The findings of contemporary research indicate that vitality is a product of both the visual quality of the environment and the variety of the supported activities.

It should be noted that a more appropriate design of a public space satisfies more needs of the people. Meeting people's needs and adapting to their activities is then a key objective of a good public space. Maslow pyramid of needs which is widely accepted now talks about the levels of needs starting from physical needs as the lowest level reaching more complex needs such as social need which includes safety, belonging needs and etc. In line with these, the following could be accepted as the most important social elements of the public realm: (i) accessibility, (ii) equity, and (iii) safety.

In the most basic level, accessibility is the most essential one. Accessibility has two types: (a) Visual accessibility which allows people to see it and be informed what is happening there and (b) Physical accessibility which allows people to enter that space and use its functions. An urban public space should invite people to come inside and use its facilities. This factor leads us to another significant social need which is equity. Equitable environments are those which can be shared equally by all sections of society. They provide all the qualities that the full range of users require (Carmona et al. 2003). They meet the needs of different groups without diminishing the welfare of others. The environments which are not equitable or are exclusive, display qualities which make them less available to certain sections of society, i.e. women, ethnic minorities, elders, disabled, poor people, and children.

Urban design is concerned with the creation of equitable urban public spaces, just as much as with the creation of physical form. These spaces are essentially democratic, because they give all users a stake in their use. They might also be characterized as those which increase choice; therefore, they are more responsive. Concerning equity in the design of the public realm guarantees a more socially balanced, democratic environment which is available to all. Equity brings a safe, vital public realm in which different constituents from across the social structure can interact without conflict.

In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, safety and security, come next after basic physiological needs. Generally these could be considered as: (i) Safety from physical harm (from natural elements/disasters, disease etc., human elements and artificial elements such as cars and etc.); and (ii) Psychological security (having control over the environment, maintaining privacy and avoiding being socially or physically lost). (Cozens, 2011& Carmona et al. 2003)

3. Methodology

This paper draws on the findings of a case study which involves deskwork, fieldwork, and interviews methods of studying with qualitative approach in data collection. The data collection method of the research is a mixed method consisting document survey, on-site observations, in-depth interviews with people and questionnaires.

The measures of analysis include social attributes i.e. user types, social groups, variety of activities, active times, interactions and safety, and physical attributes i.e. physical forms, amenity of the street space, and variety of the functions within the street are also studied.

3.1. Case 1: Salamis Street

Salamis Street is the commercial strip of the city of Famagusta, the second largest city in North Cyprus with a harbour, a historic core and a big university (population: 54,000. Rounded to the nearest 1000 - Census 1997). The city has prospered significantly in line with the progressive growth of the Eastern Mediterranean University (EMU), the magnet in the end of Salamis Street. Extending about two kilometres, connecting the EMU campus (which accommodates 12.000 students) to the main node of the city (Anit Roundabout), and accommodating diverse uses, the street plays an important role in the lives of the city residents, in particular the university students (Fig. 2). In this study, owing to the huge length of

the street, the northern part of the street extending from Toros Roundabout to EMU campus was selected. This would also lead us to a more coherent result as the southern part has different characteristics and meaning.

Salamis Street can be considered the most vital public space in the town due to the presence of people over different times of the day and year. However, despite the variety of functions along the street, there are serious limitations on the general quality of the environment. As highlighted by Oktay (2005), “in all areas, the incompatible land use created by the random sprawl of commercial, recreational, industrial, and service functions in the main streets and residential districts pervades in a disruptive fashion. Furthermore, the commercial and recreational units (shops, restaurants, and so forth) which are located along the major street foster traffic congestion and increase the need for parking facilities and infrastructure. In addition to these inappropriate types of development, the urban fabric in these areas faces a serious problem created by the unused building plots”. This problematic situation could be explained by the fact that the street has originally not been planned and designed as an urban public space; it was a major road outside the city, connecting the small town of Famagusta (before its sprawl) to Karpaz region in older times.



Fig. 2. Salamis Street

3.1.1. *Types of the users, activities and usage of the street*

Connection of the university to the street makes a walking path for students for reaching their homes, using its dining venues, shopping or even just walking and spending time, individually or in a group from morning to midnight. Other people use it too, as some live nearby and some others have work places along it.

The mixed-use apartment buildings along the street contain a variety of functions, namely; restaurants and cafes, boutiques, markets, pharmacies, electronic shops, and betting clubs in their ground floors. However, there numerous examples of incompatible uses in the street, i.e. car wash centre and gas stations which are not compatible with the rest of the functions. The restaurants and cafes are the students’ most preferred recreational facilities in the town. Some functions such as betting clubs attract the local people mainly. However, it appears that they cannot add vitality of the street as they are introverted and lacking a visual relationship with the street space. Further, it is impossible to spend time and have a rest in the street unless sitting at cafes and eateries and buying staffs (Fig. 3a).

The street life in Salamis mainly owes to the presence of students and youth who provide successful social and economic transactions. The majority of shopkeepers as a part of interviewees who are the permanent users of the street agree that the street life depends actively on the presence of students. They pointed to the university activities and emphasized on school seasons as the period for substantial lively atmosphere there. It is to be noted that little differences in their comments is mainly based on their own financial transactions, but the common idea was on the overall usage of the street.

Tourists do not constitute a large number of users. This is due to the lack of amenity or loss of historic place in the Street. Tourists are more likely to be seen at places with more attractions. Obviously, the walled city of Famagusta, the historic core of the city, is more attractive for tourists. Remarkably, the majority are youth. The elderly people and children are not present in the street environment as there are no special facilities for them. Almost mixed types of genders walk and use the street.

The majority (86%) of the street users involved in street daily, whether in weekdays or weekends. In-depth analysis shows that they use the street both for their primary needs such as a path for going to school, taking daily needs from markets and up to more complex needs such as pacing, meeting friends or going to a café in group. The activities in the street depend on the time. In mornings and afternoons, there is a feeling of work atmosphere and the street serves as the school path, and the commercial functions serve the customers. Work places such as banks, offices and agents perform their activities and transactions. However, social interactions are still observable (Fig. 3b). Economic transactions in shops and commercial places are considerable which make the commercial value of the street higher than other nearby streets. This issue also affects the people engagement in the street. In the evenings, the street has a new face getting more vibrant and attractive. Cafes and restaurants are more crowded and the whole street serves as a place for leisure (Fig. 3c). However, as shopkeepers mentioned, depending on the season, this alters from the early evening to late evening. The different functions along the street play different roles in inviting people as they make active and semi active edges, for an instant a cafe that extended its chairs and tables out attracts people for eating and talking and makes a more active, people friendly edge. In this survey, the majority of the interviewees (69%) use the street mainly for its cafes and restaurants, and one-third (31%) uses its shops.



Fig. 3. (a) General view of Salmis street; (b) Students' walk to the university in Salmis Street during day time; (c) Vibrant environment of Salmis Street at night.

3.1.2. General Evaluations on Salmis Street

The street network in Famagusta is not following any master plan, and Salmis Road is not a planned and designed public space like the rest of the city. As the street (randomly) developed in the last 15 years the buildings belong to that period and all of them are reinforced concrete. As the height of the buildings differs from two stories to eleven stories, the unity is lacking in the street environment.

Safety is a positive attribute of the city and its spaces. Almost no one claims differently or recalls any crime, and the higher ranking of safety during the day and at night is one of the important findings of Famagusta Area Study, a survey study measuring the quality of life in the city (Oktay & Rustemli, 2011). The majority of people (69%) who participate in the survey believed that the street is safe during the day, and 75.9% agreed that the street is safe at night time.

The amenity as another important basis of vital spaces does not properly exist in this street space. Due to any physical problems the general quality of the street space is not high, nor sufficient. The major problems in the street space were listed and ranked based on the observations and the participants' opinions in Table 1. It is found that 96.6% of the survey participants suffer from inefficiency of sidewalks and 72.4 % of them believe that not having a bike path is also one of the most important inefficiencies.

Table 1. Physical problems of Salmis Street on people opinion.

The problems	Level of the problem	Percentage of people suffering from this problem
Inefficient sidewalks	High	96.6
Lack of bicycle path	High	72.4
Lack of public transportation facilities	Medium-high	62.1
Poor quality of architecture and lack of magnet building	Medium	51.7
Lack of street lighting	Medium	51.7
High speed traffic	Medium	48.3
Pollution and dirt	Medium	41.4
Lack of spaces for gathering outdoors	Medium	41.4

3.2. Case 2: Ziya Rızkı Street (Kyrenia)

Ziya Rızkı Street is the major commercial strip of the city of Kyrenia, the third largest city in North Cyprus with an antique harbour and a small university, and the centre of the country's tourist industry and commerce (population: 38,000. rounded to the nearest 1000. Census 1997). The street is situated to the back of the city's antique harbour and serves one-way traffic. It connects to an important node called "Ramadan Cemil Square" where the Municipality of Kyrenia is located (Fig. 4). This area can be considered the centre of the city and accommodates numerous cafes, eateries, hotels and casinos which help create vitality during the day and at night. In this study, the northern part of the street extending from Ramadan Cemil Roundabout to Tourism Park was selected, as it reflects a more intensive public use and meaning comparing to the southern part.

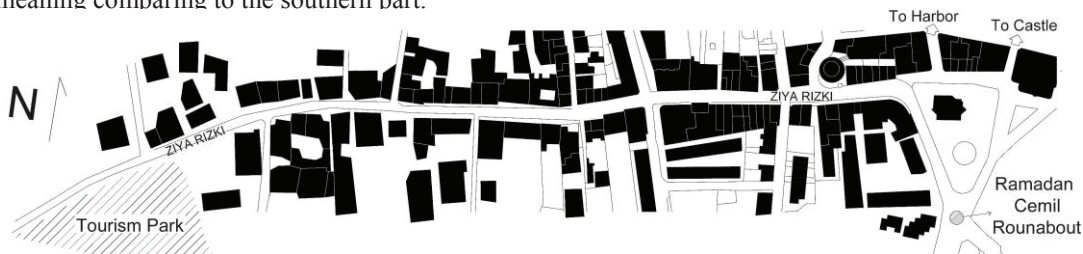


Fig. 4. Ziya Rızkı Street, Kyrenia.

3.2.1. Type of the users, activities and usage of the street

Owing to its proximity to the harbour and the traditional core, Ziya Rızkı Street makes an excellent shopping and opportunity to the visitors during their visit to the harbour and historical places of interest. Observations reveal that people of different age, gender and nationality use this street. In-depth interviews with shopkeepers demonstrate that two major users of this street are tourists and students, while other citizens are rarely seen. Depending on the season, different users are seen in this street. During the summer season, it is filled with more tourists and few students, while in the other times of the year, students make the majority. However, this area is reputable with its tourist oriented image. According to shopkeepers' views, the citizens mainly use the upper parts of the street for their needs due to the availability of car parking there. Compared to the other users they are not seen frequently since they prefer to spend their free time in other areas. The presence of students of the Girne American University is not significant either due to the far distance from the campus or lacking activities which may attract them.

The tourists visit the street during their stay and the students visit it to have fun and spend some leisure time during school seasons. The Street offers limited facilities for the daily needs of local citizens. The climate is an important factor in the vitality of the street: the brighter the weather is, the more crowded the street is. In the late mornings and early evenings, the street experiences a more vibrant face (Fig. 5a). Families, friend groups and individuals are frequently present in the street spaces. However, observations on social groups on the street show that the family groups are the dominant social groups there (Fig. 5b).

The street space is not a place for stopping and sitting for a while - except at the beginning of the street by the Municipality Building where one can sit on benches - but has a lively atmosphere that consists of several types of people window shopping and moving with exploring eyes. As mentioned earlier, there are mostly retail shops along the street except at the beginning. This arrangement makes this street a more shopping type, which is alive while the shops are open, and it gets quiet after the closing time. The majority (58.6%) of the interviewees shop in this street and less than half (37.9 %) of them enjoy the cafes and restaurants, while only a minor population (3.4%) use the casinos and betting clubs in the street.



Figure. 5. (a): Vibrant milieu of Ziya Rızkı Street during day time; (b) Family groups as the major social group at Ziya Rızkı street; (c) Silent atmosphere of Ziya Rızkı Street at night.

3.2.2. General Evaluations on Ziya Rızkı Street

The street has a special location being almost at the centre of the city with good connections to the other parts of the city, the harbour and the historic quarter. The area is safe like the other quarters of the town. Since it serves mainly as the shopping area, after early evening it becomes intensively quiet. Quiet condition makes a little sense of unsafe place as mentioned by the survey participants (Fig. 5c). In approximately half of the questionnaires (41.1 %), unsafe environment was marked at the night time, but no crime or suspected issue is reported based on observations and arguments of shopkeepers and permanent users.

The street is enclosed between two historic building edges which are mainly one or two stories. It has a human scale environment, however, due to its short width, its capacity is limited to one-way traffic. Although the sidewalks are well-organized in some parts, they are not satisfying the pedestrians' needs and are considered the most problematic issue in the street space. The major problems in the street spaces were classified according to the observations and the users' opinions are listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Physical problems of Salmis Street in people's opinion.

The problems	Level of the problem	Percentage of people suffering from this problem
Inefficient sidewalks	High	72.4
Lack of street lightening	Medium	51.7
Pollution and dirt	Medium	48.3
Lack of public transportation facilities	Medium	44.8
Lack of sense of safety at night time	Medium	41.4

3.2.3. *Comparison between the two cases*

There is no hesitation in indicating “vitality” as the common attribute of the two streets. However, the question is whether they are similarly vital in terms of feeling and essence. Comparison of these two public spaces better explains how they work. We have intentionally selected these two towns since they are basically similar in terms of size, population, climatic and cultural basis. A complex set of elements works in these streets to produce their social spaces. In addition to the physical form and environment, social matters such as user's issues and the way they prefer to engage in the spaces are of the factors that lead to particular types of interactions and activities within them, which eventuates their current social conditions. The systematic comparison was carried out while concentrating on the following items: user types, social groups, activities and interactions, and the time of activities on the street.

The most important difference is that vitality in Ziya Rızk1 Street is brought by visitors and tourists, while in Salamis street, university students' presence is the main reason. It is realized that the user groups in Ziya Rızk1 are various and include families and friend groups. Although the families are the dominant user groups in Ziya Rızk1 Street, they are not noticeable in Salamis Street.

In Salamis Street, the communal way of use and daily engagement of the users make the social atmosphere friendlier. Their attention to socializing is more evident rather than concentrating on exploring the environment. Vice versa, the users in Ziya Rızk1 Street do not engage in the street space daily, since they are mostly just visitors. A sense of exploring is evident in their way of acting. Interaction is completely different from that of Salamis Street's.

The shops are the magnets in Ziya Rızk1 Street that encourage people to walk along the street while window shopping. As such, walking, shopping or window shopping are the main activities in the street. The image of activities in Salamis is mixed with an image of people who are sitting at cafes and eateries. Using the eateries and cafes is more obvious than shopping contrary to Ziya Rızk1 Street.

The time and duration of the people's presence and activities are different between the two streets. Salamis is alive from early morning according to the starting time of university classes and offices until after midnight while the cafes and bars are still open. The most vital time is in evenings and at nights. In Ziya Rızk1, the street is alive only from late morning up to evening until the shops close. The most vibrant times in Ziya Rızk1 are late mornings and evenings, not nights. Table 3 summarized these similarities and differences between the two streets.

Table 3. Determinants of vitality in the two streets.

The items of comparison	Salamis St.	Ziya Rızk1 St.
Dominant user type	Students	Tourists
Dominant social group	Friend groups	Family groups

Dominant activities	Using the restaurants, cafes & bars	Shopping or window shopping
Time of activities in the street	From early morning to late night	From late morning to evening
The most vital time of the street during a day	From early evening to late times at night	Late mornings & evenings

5. Conclusion

The social value of urban public spaces makes them significant within the cities, since they are involved with people needs, from the very basic to the complex. As such, public spaces affect people's quality of life. They have to afford people various activities; otherwise, parts of the society will be pushed out of the public realm which results in serious limitations for the daily lives of people.

Attention to social value has been increased in the recent urban design theories owing to the negative effects of the visual-artistic trends in the urban design and due to focus on the requirements of cars rather than pedestrian needs. In this context, reviewing various approaches and aspects in urban public space was found important to reveal the interrelationship between the physical environment and the social environment. The key issues concerning vitality in a place are the presence of people at different times and the compatibility of diverse activities. Vitality relates to various dimensions of a public space including both physical and social aspects. Streets, which are reduced to "traffic channels" in modernist city planning, have the potential to be transformed into vibrant and vital public spaces by hosting various activities and events.

The analysis of the Salamis Street in Famagusta and the Ziya Rızkî Street in Kyrenia, the most vital streets in these towns, shows how they work socially. In Salamis and Ziya Rızkî, the presence of people is evident at different times. However, the determinants of vitality in two streets are different. Salamis is vital owing to the presence of the students of the university (Eastern Mediterranean University campus in walking distance), while in Ziya Rızkî, visitors and tourists are the main users that make the area vibrant. It can be concluded that not all vital spaces have same reasons or work in a similar way. Hence, a place could be considered vital with different basis which eventuate to different feelings in the space. Whether two spaces have similar or different basis and reasons for vitality, it is obvious that vital spaces are healthier and safer where people could interact more and tend to stay longer since they enjoy their time in public. This presence also attracts other people's attention, and it makes a cycle. If a place is attractive, the people would come and if people are present, the place would become even more attractive. However, it should be ensured that the presence of people is not possible through the commercialized functions only, but supported by pleasant pedestrian corners/facilities enabling them to sit and spend the time without necessarily eating or drinking.

The findings of this paper are a new beginning for further researches. For instant, by exploring the reasons for absence of tourists in Salamis Street or absence of citizens in Ziya Rızkî Street, it would help having a more equitable public space environment for all sections of their society. Moreover, the research presented in this paper would shed light on evaluation of urban public spaces considering both the physical and social environments. It is capable of providing feedbacks on the current condition of these spaces as a result of place making process, i.e., the most recent trend in urban design.

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