



Promoting interculturalism by planning of urban nature

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ABSTRACT

Immigration in Finland has increased significantly in the last decades. The integration of immigrants and autochthonous Finns poses new challenges to the society. Nevertheless, the resulting cultural diversity creates opportunities for intercultural social development. According to previous studies, urban nature can benefit human well-being and it can also play a role in integration processes. However, the role urban nature can potentially play in integration is largely overlooked, and immigrants are rarely involved in the planning of urban nature. This paper presents the main results of a qualitative study carried out in Helsinki metropolitan area, Finland. The aim was to understand the role of urban nature in integration, and to address how the planning of urban nature can support integration and interculturalism. We found that using urban nature helps immigrants feel comfortable and enjoy their living environment. The interviewed immigrants were interested in getting information on urban planning, especially in their own neighbourhood, and many of them wanted to participate in planning, although they were unsure of their right to do so, and access to planning processes appeared problematic in many ways. To support integration and interculturalism, urban planning should take the opportunity to enhance intercultural understanding. Adhering to culturally sensitive processes, and developing trust with local residents by taking their views seriously, can do this. Nature has the potential to inspire people to connect with one another.

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Introduction

Immigrants and people of different ethno-cultural backgrounds in increasing numbers in our cities have contributed to the diversification of urban culture and of the use of public space (Zukin, 1998, p. 825). In the Helsinki metropolitan area, as in many other metropolitan centres, increasing socio-cultural diversity pronounces the need to create planning practices that meet the requirements of groups with differing needs, interests and everyday practices. In a recent report it has been stated that in Helsinki the needs of different minorities for public services have not been studied properly and the planners of urban nature seems incapable of taking the diversity of these needs into account in public spaces, commercial quarters and streets (Comedia, 2010). In Finland, cultural diversity has increased rapidly as a result of the immigration during the two last decades. The history of Finland as a multicultural society is relatively new compared to countries like UK, Germany, the Netherlands, Canada and US (see Gentin, 2011; Jay et al., 2012).

In Finland, therefore, we are at a position to be able to learn from international multicultural experiences, and accordingly form local policies. Most of the immigrants coming to Finland settle in cities, particularly in the Helsinki metropolitan area. In 2011, a total of 244,827 people living in Finland spoke foreign languages (4.5% of total population), and of these 116,716 lived in the Helsinki metropolitan area. The most commonly spoken foreign languages were Russian, Estonian and Somali (Statistics Finland, 2011). The cultural mix of people living in Finland thus differs from that of many other European countries in which Turkish and Moroccan backgrounds are more typical (Eurostat, 2011).

In shaping the future of culturally diverse cities, the notions of multiculturalism and interculturalism are useful, albeit not straightforward. Multiculturalism as a concept emphasises cultural differences, while interculturalism highlights opportunities arising from interaction between diverse cultural groups (Wood and Landry, 2008). In an intercultural society, affirmative interaction exists between different cultural groups and social actors – old and new immigrants and autochthonous people exchange different perspectives on life, thus shaping society through communication and action (Berry et al., 2002; Martin and Nakayama, 2007; Wood and Landry, 2008). We acknowledge the ambiguity of these concepts and the criticism they have received (see Goonewardena and Kipfer, 2005; Sandercock and Attili, 2009). We do not argue that intercultural dialogue is an easy process; we do argue though that

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such a process should be recognized and facilitated to encourage social change for a sustainable future, in which the society makes the most out of its diversity rather than reproduces fragmentation (see Wood and Landry, 2008, p. 14). We argue that – of different acculturation strategies such as integration, assimilation, separation and marginalization – integration best supports interculturalism. Integration and conditions for interculturalism can be attained by building trust and mutual respect, valuing different identities and genuine co-operation (Wood and Landry, 2008; Brock, 2009). Integration is a *two-way* process in which immigrants and autochthonous people negotiate, adjust and evolve. Integration is important for both immigrants and autochthonous people. In a society with intercultural aspirations the conditions of integration *vis-a-vis* the politics of recognition must be constantly scrutinized and re-negotiated (Sandercock and Attali, 2009, p. 220).

Interculturalism, planning and urban nature

Schultze (1992) analyses the role of public spaces for integration through four dimensions: structural, identificational, social and cognitive (regarding Finland see Hynynen, 2004). *The structural dimension of integration* refers to the access people have to common resources and main institutions of society, e.g. the political system (Schultze, 1992). Public spaces such as urban nature areas constitute a resource that should be accessible to all, including old and new immigrants (Peters et al., 2010). Access to the main institutions includes opportunities to participate in shaping the society and its resources through involvement in planning and decision-making system. Especially in diverse societies participation in planning and decision-making is a sign of the quest for democracy (see Lefebvre, 2003). *The social dimension of integration* refers to the interaction and relationships built in-between individuals and different groups. In accessible public spaces, people can see and meet each other, and it is where the everyday politics of recognition are played out (Wood and Gilbert, 2005). As Wood and Gilbert (2005) and Mitchell (2003) demonstrate, public space is a matter of design and practice and less of ownership. Therefore, the physical attributes of a public space affect the ways people use it and the social interactions that take place in it (Whyte, 1980; Peters et al., 2010). Public spaces play a significant role in building relationships, trust and mutual respect (Wood and Landry, 2008).

The identificational integration refers to the sense of belonging a newcomer feels in her/his living environment. Similarly autochthonous people must be able to develop a sense of belonging to the environment while this is used and changed by people with different ethnocultural background. By using public spaces, we identify and develop affinities to them (Peters et al., 2010). We develop symbolic attachment and emotional ties, which are an expression of our identificational integration with the local environment (Jay and Schraml, 2009). *The cognitive dimension*, finally, refers to the integration through learning life skills (Schultze, 1992) that include, for example, distinguishing public from private spaces in the host society (see Rinkinen, 2004). Similarly autochthonous people learn about cultures and practices that are different from theirs and that shape public life. The four dimensions of integration are overlapping and interrelated. For example it is understandable that social interactions can contribute to the identificational integration by evoking feelings of being-at-home (Peters et al., 2010, p. 94). We argue that urban nature can facilitate all four dimensions of integration, as well as interculturalism (see Rishbeth and Finney, 2006; Bradley, 2009; Jay and Schraml, 2009). We understand interculturalism as a policy strategy that develops structural communication between different people and their cultures and spaces (see Castells, 2010). In an *Intercultural City* people appreciate difference and interaction, and cultures inseminate each other (SSIIM UNESCO Chair, 2012). For making cities intercultural, policy

strategies and their implementation need to pay attention to the two-way processes of integration.

Internationally, the relation between integration and urban nature has attracted a growing interest (see Gentin, 2011; Jay et al., 2012; Kloek et al., in press). Jay and Schraml (2009) studied the perceptions of Turkish, Russian-German and Balkan immigrants concerning urban forests and their integrative potential in Germany. They argue that urban forests can support identification by providing a link between the previous and current home country and a setting for interaction between forest users. Rishbeth and Finney (2006) concluded in their study of refugees and asylum-seekers, that urban nature can be a stimulating and enjoyable contrast to everyday routines, and the positive images and experiences related to the local environment can help refugees and asylum-seekers to come to terms with their new lives. Immigrants interviewed in their study emphasized the role of learning and felt that gaining information about local nature and its meanings in the host country helped them to become familiar with the new living environment and find their own place within it. The role of urban nature has also been explored in a few integration studies in Finland (Tiilikainen, 2003; Rinkinen, 2004). Leppänen (2009) demonstrates that gardening promotes immigrants' creativity, self-confidence and independence. Having an allotment plot gives them an opportunity to grow familiar plants and maintain a connection with their country of origin (see also Ouis and Jensen, 2009, p. 135).

In this paper, we explore the intercultural potentials of urban nature in Helsinki, and how intercultural dialogue should be recognized and facilitated in the pursuit of sustainable urban development. The aim is to understand the role of urban nature in integration and to address how the planning of urban nature could be developed to support integration and interculturalism. After describing methods of data collection of our research in the Helsinki metropolitan area (see Leikkilä et al., 2011), we explore firstly the role of urban nature in the four dimensions of integration, and secondly we discuss the role of cultural diversity and integration in planning aiming to intercultural development. Finally we make recommendations on how planners, decision-makers and researchers could practice inclusion and facilitate interculturalism.

Methods

The data in our research in the Helsinki metropolitan area was obtained in 2010 with a qualitative approach based on thematic interviews, supplemented with written material from the City of Helsinki (City Planning Department, Public Works Department and Social Services Department) and memos from two group sessions. One of the group sessions was a meeting of Somali men in a language and integration course organized by a non-governmental organization and the other a weekly meeting of Somali women, organized by the social department of the City of Vantaa. The written material included memos from public meetings and field trips with immigrants as well as documents on planning communication and survey data. Visiting the two Somali groups enabled informal discussion to take place on how the participants used nature and what they deemed important.

The interviewed people were immigrants ($n = 19$) and individuals working with immigrants in Helsinki ($n = 13$). Persons working with immigrants were officials in urban nature or land use planning, a local official of the social services department, personnel of a play park and an allotment contact person of a local association. These interviewees were found by contacting officials working with culturally diverse districts of Helsinki, and by contact information found on district websites. During the interviews participants had

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