Social Interaction in Built Environment: The Urban Context

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Abstract - In this paper, spaces that act as the pulsating nerves for the people to interact in agglomeration are discussed. Various factors are considered that influence interaction of the people. Built environment is very important aspect in defining living conditions. Human behaviour, experiences and social interactions in public spaces are related to the processes of the mind that are influenced by the different features and aspects of spaces in a built environment. These features may be physical, social, cultural or sensory. In a built environment there are various elements which can make any space active or engage people for social interaction. The quality of urban space itself plays important role in involving people for social interaction. Various parameters in relation to the social, cultural, environmental and economic factors make one place better than other qualitatively.

I. SOCIAL INTERACTION

Interaction can be defined as: 'Reciprocal action or influence'. An occasion when two or more people or things communicate with or react to each other can be stated as interaction. Social interaction is the interaction amongst people/ human beings. Human beings are social creatures; they cannot live without having interaction. Therefore to act, proceed and perform as one, we need interaction with: other individuals, the setting and the surroundings [1]. Thus, spaces that give us such opportunities are a need of time in cities. It is comprehensive idea for improving a neighborhood, city or region. It strengthens the connection between people and the places they share. It is how we collectively shape our public domain to maximize values amongst users.

Dowson & Getty explains social interaction as: "Social interaction is a process whereby men inter- penetrate the mind of each other". A social interaction is an exchange between two or more individuals and is a building block of society. Social interaction requires a mutual orientation [2].

There are four forms of social interactions[3]: (i) between individual and individual, for example when two individuals are talking formally in office or informally in park, squares or in any malls (ii) between individual and groups, for example teacher teaching in front of the students or any employee giving presentations in front of his officials (iii) between groups and groups, like in any family meetings or during war two groups fight (iv) between individual and culture, this defines the way of interaction of an individual. There are three factors that define the context of social interaction: (i) the physical setting or the place, which means the space or the place where the person is present in a given time (ii) the social environment, which means the public or the people surrounding that person during that time, and (iii) the activity surrounding the interaction [3].

II. BUILT ENVIRONMENT

The term built environment, refers to the man-made surroundings which provide the setting for human activity. It has been defined as "the human-made space in which people live, work, and recreate on a daily basis. It is an interrelationship of human activity over time and the man made environment which includes all those features that are place or designed in the surrounding with some concept of human ideology or with any architectural concepts[4].

Built environment plays very important role in social interaction. Psychologist Kurt Lewin (in 1951) explained that behaviours (which directly relates to the interaction) are not only a function of personal factors,

but also of the environment in which it take place [5]. Concluding from an overview of environmental psychology's states (Gifford, 2007) that interaction is a result of three factors which are: the setting or the place, the person and the social-cultural factor [6]. Setting or the place could be designed in such a way to make people interact in the best possible way and this setting or the place is only termed as Built-environment.

Apparently all spaces are interactive spaces where people interact. But according to James sheffered from streetscapes Inc. the interactive spaces should be comfortable, safe and relaxing for the people and therefore built environment should have these qualities to attract people there to interact and also to make people stay there for longer span of time.

In an another theory, Psychologist Kurt Lewin (1951) argued that behaviours (which is directly related to interaction) are not only a function of personal factors , but also of the environment in which they take place[5].

III. URBAN OPEN SPACE

Open space is land and/or water area with its surface open to the sky in which urban open space includes all types of spaces between buildings in towns or cities like: squares, neighbourhood parks, streets etc. urban open spaces are designed for public health, people welfare, activities recreation, social gathering and community events etc [7].

Social gathering and interaction is one of most important functions of the urban open space. Urban open space shall be designed to make public use it for social involvement. Any space becomes place only when people make use of it and it involves people.

Environmental, social, cultural, and economic factors are the parameters which define the quality of any urban space to make it suitable for social interaction in the best possible way[8]. The need of built environment for all urban spaces is different and place specific.

It is the quality of interactive space present in urban space that makes public gather in that place in comparison to any other place. There are many parameters which define the quality of interactive spaces present in any space. These parameters actually build or improve the qualitative measure of the place where people find it comfortable to interact, gather or be a part of any community event or involvement.

The parameter for a good urban public space are[9]:

1.   **Distinctiveness:** The built form, features, colours and materials should be such that, it gives the space its own identity within the surrounding environment. It should also reflect the local character of the area in context to culture, economic and social background because the relation of urban space with its city and its people is integral. So it is important to correlate that space with the people. Reflection of local character is required in the space also, as people tend to collect and be in that place for longer time span where they feel connected.

2.   **Safety:** Safety is one of the important concerns of people to spent time in a place. The state of feeling safe is feeling free from fear or anxiety. People use urban spaces without any fear of tripping or falling, or being attacked is said to a safer public space than any space which are not providing such facilities. People tend to go to a safer place then any such place where they are not feeling safe from any such conditions mentioned.

3.   **Comfort:** comfort may be defined as a state of physical ease and well-being. Human comfort are again divided into three aspects:

Environmental factors: Environment factors include those physical and natural elements that contribute to human comfort which includes sun, wind etc. the concept of sun and wind relates to climate and time factor. For example during summer or in a very sunny day people want to be in a place which provides them shading from sun but the same person would like to sit outside in sun when there is winter. This also differs from place to place, as people in colder region want to sit outside in sun whereas people from hot area want shade

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during daytime. The temporal use of space also defines the need of exposure as during daytime people would like shading but in evening they may prefer open spaces.

Physical factor: Physical comfort includes the number of sittings installed according to the population density of that place and also the quality of sitting in terms of how much comfortable the sitting is.

Social & psychological factor: Social comfort means comfort in society or in a group which may include individual privacy though remaining in public and psychological comfort relates to mental safety or comfort which comes with increased security and safety measures placed in that place.

4. **Accessibility:** Accessibility can be defined as the quality of being able to be reached or entered. It means having good connections from spaces to other parts of the city. Accessible through private as well as public transport should be there for persons coming from different parts of the city. Accessibility plays very important part for social gathering since the ability to access that place is very important. Accessibility has again three divisions:

Mobility: it means the ability to move or be moved freely and easily.

Proximity: it means nearness in the space.

Connectivity: it means the state of being connected or interconnected.

5. **Enjoyable:** Enjoyable word could be described as to take delight or pleasure in (an activity or occasion). Enjoyable could be related to recreation which represents variety of pleasant events, such as concerts, exhibitions, festivals, games, sports and other social events to which public are connected with and which fits into a larger context. These act as magnets to attract people. These activities allow for active involvement of people which gives life to that space and makes it a place which feel more lively in comparison to places where community or public in not involved.

6. **Active & passive engagement**: The mode of engagement can be described as –

Active engagement: It means more contact with other people in urban spaces. Design of the urban space can create opportunities for interaction. The arrangement of physical elements such as benches, fountains or any other such dominating element can encourage the social interaction. People rely on any object or element which station them, the social life of small urban space case study showed that people try to look out for elements that could station them to which people take support. These could be any object or element; even a free standing two-wheeler could be an object for engaging people where people gather and gossip around that. It could be any level difference where people sit and interact or around any flag pole or near any edge of the place.

Passive engagement: "Means people stay calm and watch". Passive engagement are provided in urban spaces by any physical elements like fountains, statues, art, and so forth which creates curiosity in people's mind and it tends to attract people to gather near themselves. A term known as triangulation is used for gathering people around themselves. Triangulation is the process by which some external stimulus provides a linkage between people and prompts strangers to talk to each other. The stimulus can be an object or sight. For ex: a street band, street artist or a street sculpture upon which people comment and remark and discuss with each other. It has a very strong social effect. It develops curiosity and increases social interaction among visitors.

All these parameters are to be considered to create a good urban public interactive space. Making a place socialable is a need in cities and town, and considering all the factors in a good mixture will be helpful in creating good interactive space. Any of the parameters cannot be left since all these considers equal amount in providing quality to the public place. All these factors are important for making space that are more user-friendly for social interaction [10][3].

III. CONCLUSION

Social interaction is also a result of built-environment with social-cultural factor and personal psychology. With proper architectural measures we can enhance any built-environment to enhance interaction amongst the users in any space. Studying how a person interacts in any space a public space can be designed to be more interactive. If built-environment is designed in a proper way it can initiate and also makes possible for users to interact. To design such spaces all the parameters should be considered. The design solution will be different

for different places and the same module cannot be repeated to any other place unless designed considering factors according to that area. Proper combination or mixture of all the parameters gives the best result in creating a good and happening interactive space in an open urban space.

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