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The materiality of everyday practices in urban greenspace

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Abstract

This paper investigates how urban greenspace is integrated in everyday practices of urban populations. What are the social functions that green areas serve, and how do people interact with the materiality of urban greenspace – its biophysical structures and its nature and landscape. The paper reports from a recent empirical study in the city of Copenhagen, Denmark, and it seeks to unfold and qualify concepts of lifestyle and practice, i.e. concepts by which sociological studies can capture and understand patterns of actions in people's daily lives and life courses. Particularly it seeks to include an understanding of the role of materiality in the analyses of social practices. Inspired by actor-network theory the paper proposes to analyse the role of urban greenspace in everyday practices as actant functions performed by the greenspace and its elements. A number of studies show that urban green areas are beneficial for human health. These studies do, however, not go into a broader understanding of the social significance of urban greenspace and its significance in people's lives. The social functions of urban green areas are not limited to whatever good effects they have on public health. The question is also which roles green areas play in people's lives and in the community. The study presented in this paper shows that urban green areas are included in everyday life as spaces for free time and for household flexibility. They serve a number of different social functions by providing spaces for solitude, for being together with close friends and relatives and for the experience of civic diversity. And the possibility of having experiences of nature and landscape become an integral part of urban life.

Key words

Lifestyle, practice, urban greenspace, materiality, actant function

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Introduction

Just as infrastructures for accommodation, traffic, energy, sewage, waste disposal etc. all are important features of urban life – and of the environmental impacts of urban life – so is urban greenspace a vital organ in urban metabolism, an important factor in urban sustainability and a central element in the lives of urban populations. The question in a sustainability perspective is how urban greenspace contributes to improved environmental conditions within the urban sphere and how urban greenspace may be a factor in protection of biodiversity at a regional and national level, but also how greenspace may contribute to social sustainability in terms of better living conditions for urban populations. The question in a sociological perspective is not just how urban green areas may improve living conditions, but how it is used by the residents in urban areas and how it becomes part of their lives. The purpose of this article is to investigate how urban greenspace is integrated in everyday practices of urban populations – and how green areas thereby offer important ecosystem services to cities and their inhabitants. The article reports from a recent empirical study in the city of Copenhagen, Denmark and seeks to unfold and qualify concepts of lifestyle and practice, i.e. concepts by which sociological studies can capture and understand patterns of actions in people's daily lives and life courses.

Environmental concern and sustainable development are pertinent issues in urban development. To some extent, integration of environmental concerns in urban infrastructure suggests that cities remain – or are developed to be – compact, i.e. with high population density and high building density. This can limit the use of energy and the need for motorised transport, which in turn can limit local pollution and emission of greenhouse gasses and make a transition to renewable energy sources less demanding (Høyer & Holden, 2003). However, an element of green areas and therefore a less compact urban space is also necessary, both for the ecosystem system services and for the liveability that green areas provide.

Urban greenspace offers a number of different ecosystem services, i.e. services that originate in nature, landscape and ecosystems (within and outside the city limits) and from which human society benefits. The Millenium Ecosystem Assessment (2005) distinguishes between different types of ecosystem services: provisioning services such

as food, water, wood and fibres; regulating services such as flood regulation and water purification; and cultural services such as recreational space and aesthetic pleasures. These are to different extent relevant in an urban context.

Thus, some studies have shown that parks and other green areas in a city can provide regulating services not just through air and water purification but also by taking the edge off extreme heat, regulating floods from heavy rainfall, and in other ways protecting against extreme weather (Pauleit, 2005; Pauleit & Duhme, 2000).

Provisioning services cannot be said to be a core service of urban ecosystems, but urban landscapes do in many cities include allotment gardens, water for fishing, vegetation with edible berries and fruits and even urban agriculture (see for instance Perez-Vasquez et al., 2005; Viljoen et al., 2005).

Whether health effects of urban green areas should be defined as provisioning, regulating or cultural services may be a moot question, but a number of studies do show that urban green areas are beneficial for human health and wellbeing. That includes both physical and mental health. Green areas provide areas for exercise and fresh air, but also spaces of calm and quiet as well as sensory pleasures and experiences of nature, which all can contribute to stress relief and physical and mental wellbeing (Nielsen & Hansen, 2007; Stigsdotter et al. 2010; van den Berg et al., 2007).

These studies do, however, not go into a broader understanding of the social significance of urban greenspace and its significance in people's lives. The social functions of urban green areas – or with a different phrasing: the cultural ecosystem services they provide – are not limited to whatever good effects they have on public health and wellbeing. The question is also which roles green areas play in people's lives and in the community. Several studies have explored social and cultural differentiation in the uses of and access to public green areas, leisure facilities and urban nature (e.g. Jetzkowitz et al. 2007; Kinzig et al. 2005; Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995; Reusswig, 2003). But while such studies do analyse an important feature of the sociality of green areas – the social stratifications that are maintained in the uses and the bio-physical structures of such areas – the understandings they develop tend to say more about social segmentation and differences between particular classes, ethnicities and lifestyle groups and less about everyday life in and with urban greenspace.

Other studies have explored the meanings, perceptions, uses and values of greenspace. Thus, in a study from the 1980s in the borough of Greenwich, London Burgess et al. (1988) found that “parks and open spaces are replete with personal and social meanings. They provide a context for social interaction, they serve as tangible reminders of childhood and memories of community life, they offer ‘gateways’ of opportunities for people to escape for a while from the stresses of urban life” (p. 459-460). Swanwick et al. (2003) concluded in an overview of urban park studies that the open, non-discriminatory access to urban parks was an important reason for their special role facilitating public health, social inclusion, child development and community spirit. In a study of the emotions involved in people’s use of an urban park in Amsterdam Chiesura (2004) found that a feeling of freedom is one of the most widespread sentiments experienced by park users. And in a study of users, uses and perceptions of local woodlands in Scotland Thompson et al. (2005) found that respondents would feel at home and at peace when visiting woodlands and would feel a relief from not just stress but also the pressures of material consumption, although most of these sentiments depended on age and social background and was contrasted by some women’s feeling of vulnerability and insecurity.

The ambition of this article is to follow up on and add to the insights from such studies of perceptions and uses of urban green areas. In particular, the article focuses on the issues of how green areas are integrated in *everyday practices* and life courses of urban dwellers and how people interact with the *materiality* of urban greenspace. This ambition comprises both conceptual/theoretical and empirical analysis. The theoretical reflections will follow in the next two sections, in which concepts of lifestyle and practice will be examined and qualified from the perspective of environmental sociology and with particular focus on the role of materiality. This is followed by a presentation of some key findings from an empirical study of everyday life in urban greenspace in Copenhagen, Denmark.

Lifestyle

Concepts of lifestyle and practice are central in sociological inquiry and the social sciences in general, because it is with such concepts that patterns of actions in people’s daily lives and life courses can be analysed and interpreted. Environmental sociology

and studies of urban sustainability also need such concepts, because lifestyle is an integral part of the socio-technical systems through which emissions of pollutants like greenhouse gasses, sodium, particles, and toxic waste are generated; because it is in the general course of life and in everyday practices that people consume resources, generate waste, and interact with the environment – including both nature and technological infrastructures – and because promotion of sustainable development will, one way or the other, always affect lifestyles.

Both concepts are about patterns of actions – about routines and habits, about doings and sayings performed in the course of people's daily lives – but there are considerable differences in how such patterns of actions are grasped. Different aspects are emphasized in various traditions for using these concepts, and these different traditions are of varying relevance to environmental sociology and to this particular study of how urban populations interact with the infrastructures of urban greenspace. This will be discussed in the following.

In the tradition of Anthony Giddens the concept of lifestyle is perceived in terms of personal identity: “A lifestyle can be defined as a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfil utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity” (Giddens, 1991: 81). The Dutch environmental sociologists Spaargaren and van Vliet follow this tradition and take it a step further by emphasizing the *expressive* element of lifestyle: “With each lifestyle there is a corresponding life story, in the sense that by creating this specific unity of practices the actor *expresses* who he or she is or wants to be” (Spaargaren and van Vliet, 2000: 55, emphasis added).

Similar conceptions of lifestyle are widespread, not the least in studies of consumption and of subculture, where conspicuous uses of for instance clothes, electronic equipment, cars, music or entertainment are interpreted as expressions or signals of personal and cultural identity. It is, however, also an inadequate conception, especially in the context of environmental sociology, but also for sociological investigation of everyday practices in general. Firstly, lifestyle cannot be perceived solely as something that is expressed, exhibited and communicated. It must also be perceived as something that is practiced, performed and inhabited. Not that the two are mutually exclusive, but by focusing on lifestyle as identity *signal* sociological inquiry

blinds itself to important aspects of lifestyles. Secondly, what is at work in the patterns of actions that constitute lifestyles is not just the creation and maintenance of self-identity but also the technological, cognitive and cultural contexts for everyday practices.

An example may clarify this point: In the study presented in this article, several of the respondents told how they frequently choose a path through urban parks when travelling on bicycle or foot between home, work, child care institutions and other destinations on their daily routes. They do so because they want to avoid the noise and dangers of street traffic; and because the tour through a green area offers sensory pleasures and sentiments of relief, relaxation and freedom. Going through urban green areas on a regular basis as part of daily travels is certainly a distinct pattern of actions, but it does not make much sense to understand such as practice in terms of identity *expression*. The logic is not one of exhibiting a certain self or a certain personal style or establishing status and distinction, but rather one of seeking bodily protection against noise, pollution and physical danger, experiencing mental and bodily relief, and enjoying sensory pleasures.

It makes more sense to understand this practice in terms of inhabiting and performing – rather than just signalling – self-identity. As Giddens puts it: “Lifestyles are routinised practices; [...], but the routines followed are reflexively open to change in the light of the mobile nature of self-identity. Each of the small decisions a person makes every day [...] are decisions not only about how to act but who to be” (Giddens, 1991: 81). In that sense, a person establishes a bit of his/her self-identity by being such a person that enjoys the sensory pleasures of urban parks and enjoys the break they offer. However, travelling through urban parks as part of the daily routes is a practice that is shaped by so many different factors that the focus on self-identity is inadequate. Such a practice is also shaped by infrastructural and bio-physical conditions like location of heavy traffic and location of parks; it is shaped by customs and norms for park usage, like the sometimes troubled interaction between dog owners, bicyclists and parents with children at playgrounds; and it is shaped by the destinations people have for their daily travels, like work and child care institutions – which in turn are products of societal developments such as changing labour market and family structures. We do not understand much of this practice if we only view it as an exercise of self-identity.

Moreover, rather than perceiving the dynamics of everyday practices as a realisation of self-identity, they may instead be perceived as a *relief* from identity – from constant maintenance of an identity project. In a study of practices of green consumption among young people Bente Halkier discusses how the young consumers alternate between reflection and routine (Halkier 2001) – both central components in Giddens's concept of lifestyle. Many of the respondents in Halkier's study seek to evade complex reflections of consumption habits and of how these habits may or may not correspond with their attitude towards environmental problems. They try instead to rely on practices that appear to be normal and feasible.

Based on this study, it could be argued that processes of routinisation function as a relief from reflections of one's actions and how they correspond with one's identity. It could also be argued that what informs lifestyle reflections, when they do take place, is a concern with social norms and customs as much as it is a concern with self-identity. It is not only subjectivity but *sociality* that is realised in people's enactments of various lifestyles. And even if focus is on identity, construction the more pertinent question remains: what are the building blocks – the discursive, material, cognitive building blocks – in this identity formation? In other words and to reverse Giddens: Lifestyle is not just about who you are and want to be; it is about what you do and how people's actions are shaped by various forces.

Practice and materiality

This leads to the concept of practice as it is developed in contemporary practice theories and their application in environmental sociology (Schatzki, 2001; Reckwitz 2002a, 2002b; Hand et al., 2005; Warde, 2005; Gram-Hansen, 2009; Shove & Pantzar 2005). A practice can, like lifestyle, be defined as a certain pattern of actions. It is a set of doings and sayings, which are guided by established understandings of what to say and do, procedures for how to say and do it, and objectives indicating why to say or do it (Warde, 2005: 133-134). While there is some similarity in the basic definition, practice theories offer a different approach than Giddens does in his Lifestyle concept. Firstly, practice theories avoid the abovementioned focus on identity as well as other individualist accounts of human action and social order (such as rational choice theory) without resorting to social determinism. Practices are not owned but performed by

individuals and they are both individual and social; they are concrete, bodily actions performed by individuals and at the same time enactments of social structures and dynamics.

Secondly, practice theory allows for a broad and nuanced understanding of the different forces that shape and are enacted in concrete practices. Different applications of practice theory emphasize different aspects, but as Gram-Hanssen (2009) argues in an overview of contemporary practice theories, there are some similarities in how they identify distinct forces that are involved in shaping human action. These include

- the bio-physical and technological environment in which practices take place and the tools and artefacts that are used
- socially distributed discourses, collective sentiments, norms and worldviews
- socially distributed regulations, standards, laws and formalised procedures
- experience based, sensuous and bodily knowledge and practical know how

For example, and as mentioned above, the practice of choosing green paths on the way to work is formed by infrastructural and bio-physical conditions like location of roads and parks; by customs and norms for park usage, by park regulations and their enforcement, by bodily and sensuous knowledge of routes to travel, and by the destinations people have for their daily travels.

The focus on material structures is particularly pertinent in studies of urban greenspace – and in environmental and urban sociology in general. People interact with materiality in the shape of nature and landscaped infrastructures; their daily lives involve and take place in parks, allotment gardens, cemeteries, at lakes and beaches and in other green and blue areas, and the bio-physical characteristics of these places, their location and size, the features of their landscapes and facilities and their flora and fauna all influence the ways in which practices are performed and lives are lived.

The role of materiality in human agency is, however, also a debated issue in practice theory. The question is whether artefacts and technologies should be perceived as merely a mediator and a result of practices that essentially are social and bodily, or whether artefacts and technologies should be perceived as an active part of practices. Theodor Schatzki acknowledges that things are an important element in human activity, but stresses the bodily basis of all practices (Schatzki, 2001). Social practices are

collective and routinized movements of human bodies. The important aspect of human use of artefacts and technologies is the practical knowledge and know how that is at work in this relation. Andreas Reckwitz wants to take this acknowledgement a step further in order to grasp fully the role of material objects in social practices. To him practices involve human bodies and minds as well as material objects. Just as a practice – a certain set of doings and sayings – is impossible to maintain if it isn't performed by human bodies/minds so would it be impossible to maintain certain social practices if particular artefacts did not exist ((Reckwitz, 2002b: 212-213). To develop fully this point he draws on actor-network theory (ANT) and most notably the work of Bruno Latour.

It is a key point in ANT that social agency is not only related to human actors but also to “non-human” objects, i.e. technologies, infrastructures and artefacts. Most human activity involves material objects one way or the other, but these objects are not just insignificant, replaceable and dead objects; they enable, constrain and shape the practices in which they are involved. Social order is a product of socially stable artefacts and infrastructures as much as artefacts are products of human activity. And social relations involve and are inscribed into material objects. In other words, the role as actor is not reserved to human beings; material objects are also actors. In Bruno Latour's formulation an actor, human or non-human, is anything that modifies a state of affairs by making a difference (Latour, 2005: 70-72). Non-human actors are intertwined with human actors in social activity (Latour, 1991).

For example, cars and motorways are involved in and shape various social processes. They enable long distance work and kinship relations, shape everyday family dynamics of shopping and leisure, and condition public interaction in urban spaces. Similarly, Shove et al. (2007) have analysed how power tools extend the range of what individuals can and will do in terms of repair and construction in their own homes. Competence, at least in do-it-yourself activities, “can be usefully understood as a relational attribute that emerges from and through performative relations between human and non-human actors” (Shove et al. 2007: 143).

Such an understanding of the significance of materiality may also be relevant for studies of urban natures. An insight that is acknowledged by Hinchcliffe et al. (2005) and Hinchcliffe & Whatmore (2006) who emphasize that the materiality that is involved

in (human) agency also involves living things. Based on studies from Birmingham they argue that nature is not outside human affairs but very much present in them, also in urban areas. For instance, Birmingham's telecom tower is home to nesting Peregrine falcons who in the immediate man-made surroundings find plenty of pigeons to feed on. A nearby derelict building and adjacent piece of land used for parking is a breeding ground for Britain's rarest bird, the black redstart. Otters swim around in the canals slightly farther away, and on derelict brownfield areas of abandoned industrial and railway infrastructures water voles find a habitat, while (human) neighbours engage in land art by bending willows into particular shapes. Cities are sites of "ecological co-fabrication in which the life patterns and rhythms of people and other city dwellers" are intertwined (Hinchcliffe & Whatmore, 2006: 134).

Similarly, Power (2005) suggests that suburban gardens should not solely be perceived in terms of pure domestication where humans enforce particular shapes onto nature. Rather, gardens are hybrid places where humans and non-humans both collaborate and compete (as when weeds continue to spread in spite of all efforts to eliminate them) thereby co-creating the garden landscape. In a study of how members of new religious movements engage with the landscape in sacred spaces Ivakhiv (2003) also argues that nature should be perceived as more than social constructs, as more than passive objects onto which social meanings and functions are projected. Landscapes and organisms are active elements in orchestrating religious attachments.

In making this point he refers to both ANT and affordance theory (originally Gibson 1977). Affordances are qualities of objects with which humans are involved, for instance trees, lawns and paths in a park. Such objects afford certain possibilities to human actors; for instance lawns afford spaces to use for play or sports, sunbathing or picnics. Affordances are both objective and subjective; they stem from the reciprocity between the environment and the organism (Macnaghten & Urry, 2000: 169). On the one hand, affordances of an object are determined by the actions and perceptions of the human actor who engage with the object and ascribe certain functions and meanings to the environment. On the other hand, affordances also constrain behaviour along certain possibilities inherent in the objects. For instance, open flat lawns cannot afford shelter or hiding.

Consequently, practice and lifestyle analysis in general needs to acknowledge the active and constituent role of material objects, and the analysis of everyday practices in urban greenspace needs to consider the artefacts, organisms and landscapes with which people engage, but while doing so the analysis also needs to consider the practical knowledge, bodily movements and societal discourses that are enacted when people use urban greenspace.

In order to consider the multiple aspects of everyday practices (in urban or elsewhere) the analytical concept of *actants* is particularly useful. This analytical category— adopted by ANT-studies from structural linguistics – centres the attention on the *social functions* that are at work in practices involving both material objects and human bodies, discourses and know how. An *actant* is defined as a *function* in the agency that is performed in networks of objects and people; a function that may be performed by several different actors (Latour, 2005 inspired by Greimas, 1983). Thus, trees in a park can be said to perform the actant function of giving bodily relief and sensory pleasures and also the function of providing cover for making out or smoking hash. At the same time these functions of enacting bodily relief or making out or smoking hash is performed by the human actors who engage in these activities, which further involve practical knowledge about suitable places for doing these things, cultural ideals about the pleasures of the outdoors, collective sentiments and norms regarding romance and drug use, judicial regulation of drug use etc. It is exactly the (actant) functions of urban greenspace in everyday practices that will be explored empirically in the following sections reporting from a study in Copenhagen, Denmark.

The study

A cross disciplinary project about quality of life and quality of nature in urban greenspace (LiNaBy) was carried out in the city of Copenhagen, Denmark in 2009-2010 focusing on four separate districts representing different socio-demographic characteristics, park infrastructures, housing types and population density.

Copenhagen is the capital of Denmark. The entire capital region has a population of 1.2 million people while the municipality of Copenhagen had 528,000 inhabitants in primo 2010 (rising to 549,000 in 2012). The municipality covers an area of 91.3 km² of which 26.16 km² are green areas. The population density were thus in 2010 almost 5800

inhabitants per km². Green areas cover 29 % of the land. In 2005, when there were 502,000 inhabitants, dwellings in apartment buildings (including student halls of residence) constituted 90 % of the municipality's entire mass of dwellings while detached and terraced houses with gardens constituted 8.6 %. Since then almost all increase in accommodation has been in apartment buildings. (Data from The City of Copenhagen 2005 and Fakta om Kommunen).

Figure 1: Map of Copenhagen (Source Kort © & Matrikelstyrelsen)

Figure 1 shows a map of the city. The approximate location of the four neighbourhoods is marked with letters A-D and the green areas that were subjected to analysis of nature quality – as well as to ethnographic observations – are marked with red. Vanløse (A) has a population density matching the average of the whole municipality but has a significantly higher proportion, 20 %, of houses with gardens. Ydre Nørrebro (B) has the highest population density in the city with 19,700 inhabitants per km² in 2005. It also has the highest number of single room apartments, no accommodation with gardens and a significantly smaller proportion of its area, only 4 %, used for greenspace. Christianshavn is part of the old town and 99 % of the dwellings are in apartment buildings, but population density is comparatively low, 3,000 inhabitants/km², due to the presence of green areas and former industrial and

military installations that only partly have been transformed into accommodation. The district of Vestamager (D) contains a number of rather disparate neighbourhoods including a somewhat troubled housing project from the 1960s, blocks of apartment buildings from the first half of the 20th century, patches of detached houses, the largest green area in the municipality, and a new locality called Ørestaden which has been under development over the past 10-15 years. Population density in Vestamager is still low, due to the large green area, but it is not meaningful to mention a specific number, because the district has undergone so many changes and its boundaries have been redrawn since 2005.

The topic of the project's sociological study was urban nature in everyday life. This study consisted of 28 semi-structured interviews with about 50 people in four separate districts. Interviewees were selected to include a broad spectrum of differences regarding age, gender, ethnicity, education, income and type of accommodation – not to facilitate comparison, but to ensure that findings did not reflect only a minority.

Interviewees were found in several different ways. (a) Through organisations, groups and clubs in the investigated neighbourhoods, for instance a social club for retired men and an umbrella association for leisure activities in Vanløse; (b) by approaching people, individuals as well as groups, in the investigated green areas and conduct the interview right away or make an appointment for a later interview; (c) by looking up phone numbers at relevant streets and call people; (d) through a community action office who mediated contact to a group of immigrant women and another group of young people living in a housing project; (e) by putting up advertisements in local culture and community centres; (f) through contact to a kindergarten; and (g) through social networks. This way it was ensured that we got in touch with many different people and with frequent as well as infrequent park users.

The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were supported by observations in green areas of the investigated neighbourhoods. All interviews were transcribed in full length. The interviews followed an interview guide organised around three broad themes: (A) everyday life, (B) social functions, (C) perception of landscape qualities. Within these themes, a number of sub-themes, issues, concerns, stories and sensitivities turned up in the interviews. The entire interview material was colour-coded by hand in several rounds, first according to the broad pre-defined themes and then

according to the sub-themes that appeared. Further coding and analysis proceeded with sensitivity to the composite character of everyday practices and to the materiality – the plants, trees, animals and landscape features – that kept turning up in people's answers, reflections and stories. Ultimately the analysis was focused on identifying actant functions in people's engagement with urban greenspace.

It may be perceived as a problem to analyse people's engagement with materiality through verbal accounts and to focus on non-human actors who cannot speak for themselves. However, observations do not solve that problem. It may be possible to observe that people look at a tree or sit beneath and thereby connect to it, but we need discursive (written, verbal) accounts to further understand the qualities of this connection, for instance that it is integrated in personal history, provides a cosy atmosphere, may be perceived as potentially dangerous in heavy weather, and so on. The identification of actant functions is based on people's accounts, so like other studies that use interviews to investigate human-nature interaction (e.g. Power, 2005; Macnaghten & Urry, 2000; Ivakhiv 2003) this study ultimately understands non-human actors from a human perspective. That is in fact the aim of the study: to investigate how urban greenspace is integrated in everyday practices of urban populations – and to be particularly attentive to the role of materiality in people's everyday practices.

The analyses and the recurrent patterns they revealed will be presented and discussed in the following.

Giving social spaces

There are a number of ways in which vegetation, wildlife and features of the landscape like hills, banks and stones all play an important role in creating and sustaining social spaces and adding specific qualities to the social dynamics of such spaces.

Thus, for many of the respondents urban green areas provide a space and an occasion for spending time and having close conversation with partners, friends and relatives. To some extent, it is just the getting away and getting out of the house that constitutes a mutual space of being together, but certain features of the green space contribute actively to the feel and the atmosphere of the interaction; they facilitate conversation and intimacy. One respondent, Thomas, explains that when walking with his partner in a wood the quiet of the wood combined with the sounds of rustling leaves,

birds that are moving about and the muffled hum of traffic in the background together create a particular kind of closeness between them.

“It’s those quiet moments when you walk together and then you can suddenly sort of retreat into yourself and enjoy the quiet.”

The wood affords a characteristic dynamic in the interaction between him and his partner, a type of interaction where they both can be oriented towards each other and lost in their own thoughts, and where they can have silences and gaps in their conversation without feeling awkward about it. If the wood were to be analysed as an actant in this interaction one could say that it performs the function of shaping conversational dynamics and giving intimacy.

Similarly, bushes and trees as well as small banks and hills establish demarcated and shielded spaces. Such spaces, created through a specific design of a green area, provide shelter from cold and strong winds and from the sun on warm days, but they also create conditions for comfort and what Danes call “hygge” (maintaining an atmosphere that is nice, cosy and comfy). For instance, a park called *Nørrebrøparken*, situated in the densely populated neighbourhood of Nørrebro, contains a one meter high, winding, grass covered bank that is used for sitting on and leaning against and for making your own open air personal space using the bank as a wall, particularly in the corners where the bank changes direction (see figure 2). As Louise explains: “It’s just cosier when you can lean against something – contrary to *Fælledparken* [another park in Copenhagen] that is just big and open and windswept.”

Interestingly such banks are also beneficial for biodiversity. Compared to a flat and open lawn they provide better living conditions for a number of meadow plants and insects. It should be added that the bank only has been part of the park for four years and was included in the park design after a renovation process that included both landscape architects and local residents. In that sense the bank contains and carries the sociality that was developed through a process of public participation, planning and design. And from that outset it performs the actant function of providing and creating “hygge”, comfort, and spaces for being together.

Figure 2: The bonny bonny banks of Nørrebroparken (Source: Photograph by author)

It is a common practice in everyday life to interact with friends and relatives, to spend time together while relaxing and talking, and to establish and maintain a nice and cosy atmosphere. A practice theoretical approach allows for a broader and deeper understanding of such a practice and how it involves a number of different variables. It involves the physical spaces which enable the interaction and afford a particular quality – in urban greenspace the quality of being private while still in a public place and of enjoying the outdoors with its smells, sounds and sensations as a background for or even as a participant in the interaction. The practice also involves practical knowledge of how and where to establish or to situate oneself in a cosy atmosphere. And it involves a common discourse of the value of cosiness, a discourse that has been materialised in the construction of banks in a park, from where it is integrated in concrete activities.

Providing possibilities, flexibility and breathing space

There are a number of ways in which urban green areas provide opportunities and possibilities that otherwise could not be exercised. For instance, some of the

respondents relate how they use nearby green areas for birthday parties and other celebrations, because there is not room enough in their own home, because typical recreational games like “rundbold” (app. like softball) and croquet can be played in the open field, and because the green space allows for a more informal interaction. Not least children’s birthday parties are placed in parks thereby avoiding that the home is completely trashed.

Birgit: “When we celebrate birthdays we also go down to the meadow. When there are so many boys... well, they just have to get out and blow off some steam”

Some of the respondents who otherwise are confined to small apartments with no balconies or other access to open air can find a place to get outdoors; something that often is practiced in relation to preparation and consumption of meals. Thus, for many of the respondents the green and blue areas offer opportunities for using their body and energy in ways that cannot be exercised at work or at home. On the one hand, they offer a space for breaks and pauses when you may otherwise be in motion, either on your way from one place to another or during the workday. Several of the respondents in the interview study related how they would pop over to the nearest park during lunch break, or they would on their way home stop and take a break and enjoy the sensuous pleasures of views, smells and silence. On the other hand, green areas provide spaces for motion, exercise and physical activities like going for a walk, running, kayaking... or sledding during winter.

Furthermore, parks can provide cover for doing things that you would not do in places where you can be easily observed. Some of the young people from the housing project in Vestamager told that they would not smoke hash in the small park enclosed in their building complex – viewed by children, family and neighbours. They would go to a nearby nature area with more hedges and trees to provide cover, or they would go to a park further away from their neighbourhood. For a young woman that was also an option if she just wanted to be unobserved by neighbours and family – for instance regarding the friends she wanted to meet with.

In these and other ways urban greenspace becomes a resource in everyday life; a resource that is constituted through the materiality of the green areas’ presence, their contrast to the surrounding urban spaces, their size, the features of their landscape (such

as hills for sledding and water for kayaking, cover for illicit activities), their facilities (such as paths for running and fields for playing football) and even their distance from prying neighbours. There are three notable dimensions of this resource. Firstly, urban green spaces provide – or afford – physical possibilities for engaging in a great variety of activities that otherwise would not and could not be performed. They constitute these activities in people's lives.

Secondly, urban green spaces can be said to enable *flexibility* in everyday life. They do so because of the opportunities they provide – for moving your dining room outdoors or throwing large parties etc. – but in addition they do so by enabling informal and unscheduled activities just by being there as an opportunity, an opportunity that is free of charge. The football fields of the city's many parks are to some extent used for organized sports, and the lawns and paths are used for planned and organized activities by running clubs, tai chi clubs, yoga clubs, cheerleader clubs and more, but that aside it is a recurrent and even dominant pattern in the responses of the interviewees that the green areas give space to the unplanned, spontaneous and unscheduled activities and to informal encounters. Walks, outdoor meals, sunbathing, exercise and other green area activities are performed when there is time opportunity and inclination and can be left unperformed when chores and schedules leave no extra time. As Hafida explains:

“When I have time I usually take my nephew and niece out for a trip to the park, and it is very spontaneous. It is really good, because there are some parks that you can visit, and it would really be a shame if they closed them. Then you couldn't be spontaneous, and there wouldn't be that flexibility in the daily life anymore.”

A group of dog owners explained that they meet at the same time and more or less the same spot in a particular park every day, but they are not members of a formalised association, the group of participants is ever changing around a core of participants always welcoming new dog owners in the group if they happen to pass by or get word of the getting together. The meetings are in every way informal. Similarly, there is a group of parents whose children attend a forest kindergarten and are transported by bus from central Copenhagen to the forest area outside town. Sometimes when the children return from kindergarten a group of the parents linger on, start talking, maybe buy

pizzas and extend their socializing to the adjacent park. The park enables this informal hanging out.

Thirdly, urban green spaces give breathing space. Through their physical presence and by virtue of the sensory experiences they provide they allow people to seek relief from stress, from noise, from busy schedules and long lists of chores and obligations. A young mother, Camilla, explains it like this:

“It gives a sense of freedom [visiting a park]. It gives peace and quiet, it doesn’t remind you of all the chores you have to do – it’s a kind of breathing space.

And Sisse, the mother of three sons, explains that on rare occasions on her way home from work or shopping for groceries she might sit down on a bench overlooking the lake close to her home.

“What I like is just sitting there staring. And it has to be a place where there is some nature to look at. Otherwise it wouldn’t make any sense. If you want calm, you know, in your head, there has to be [some nature to look at].”

In other words, urban green spaces serve – due to their biophysical qualities and their mere presence – the actant function of providing possibilities, enabling flexibility and giving breathing space and sensuous relief. All significant elements in the course of everyday life. Walks, outdoor meals, sunbathing, exercise and other green area activities are all practices in their own right, and as such they all serve their own purpose, but they can also serve as a *linking* factor in the flow of everyday life. Not because use of greenspace should be perceived as an arbitrary filling of time gaps, but because use of greenspace is flexible and can be shortened or extended, because it can be unscheduled, and because it provides relief and energy.

Connecting to trees and birds

There are a number of ways in which experiences of trees and birds (and other vegetation and wildlife) are integrated in people’s life histories and social relations.

Close to the centre of Copenhagen there is, for instance, a large nature area called *Vestamager* or *Kalvebod Fælled*. The area covers app. 20 km² and consists mainly of reclaimed seabed plus landfill. For more than 40 years, it was used by the military and is now a public nature area with open meadows, grazing deer and cattle, small birch woods, and a bird sanctuary. This area is visited by so many birds that the phenomenon of large flocks of migrating starling looking for shelter at sunset can be observed every season. The phenomenon is in Danish called “black sun” because the flocks become big enough to cover the setting sun. It was commented and praised by respondents in the interview study, and particularly one couple (Dorthe & Torben) explained how the phenomenon is a topic of conversation among visiting relatives.

“You know, we can sit at the steps and watch black sun over Vestamager and at the same time hear the town hall bells. It’s like, when my family come to visit us we all go and watch black sun. Everybody becomes kind of high from experiencing that phenomenon” (Dorthe).

In that way flocks of birds in the sky are connected to a household’s socializing with its relatives. Their gatherings are not prompted by the birds – in the relevant season the occasion is a birthday – but the bird flocks are nonetheless integrated in family interactions as an agent that activates expectations, memories and conversations and thereby also as a recurrent feature in the family’s yearly cycle of birthday celebrations and other festivities. It could be added that while the flocking starlings are not a product of human design their habitat in Vestamager and therefore their presence in the sky over Copenhagen certainly is. As a result of an unemployment project in the 1940’s a large marine area was reclaimed. As a result of military use, it was not covered with houses and industry, and as a result of conservation and planning, it remains a nature resort thereby providing a habitat for flocking birds which in turn enter into family relations, leisure activities and celebratory events of neighbouring households. Running through this complex of interactions is a discourse about the value of open land and the value of wildlife experiences. This discourse has been materialised in the conservation of a man-made nature area that was constructed for other purposes, and it is enacted in the integration of wildlife appreciation in practices for family festivities.

Also, trees can play a notable role in many people's lives. For instance, Hans tells about the many places in town he just has to check out whenever he knows that particular trees are blooming or bearing fruit. In that way, these trees shape his routes through town and mark the changing seasons. Another example is Lise who tells about a huge scarlet oak situated in *Kongens Have*, one of most popular parks in central Copenhagen. She thinks it is a marvellous sight, she has a picture of the blooming oak on her mobile phone and when she first met her partner, she took him to see it. The actant function performed by the oak in this interaction is almost classic, namely that of a helper in an emerging relationship – which in the further development of the relationship is transformed into the function of providing a common frame of reference and a common history in the couple's mutual life. A third example is Sisse who lives in the residential neighbourhood of Vanløse where she also grew up. There is a meadow called *Damhusengen* close to her home. It is lined with old trees and in her childhood, she had a favourite climbing tree while her sister and cousin each had their tree next to hers. She still frequently pads her tree when she passes it and points it out to her children. Or so she did until recently, but now many of the trees lining the meadow have been felled.

Prompted by an incident in May 2009 where a man was killed when a tree fell on his car the municipality intensified its maintenance of the city's old trees and launched a campaign to fell and trim more of them hoping to avoid similar incidents in the future. In fact, a different respondent from the neighbourhood of Vanløse told that he almost got hit by a falling branch once he was out jogging on an evening with gale force winds blowing. Interestingly, this experience with dangerous trees did not translate into an adjustment of practical knowledge to the effect that one should not go running in stormy weather. Rather, the experience led to the understanding that old trees – in urban greenspace, not in “real nature” – should be felled.

So urban trees seem to perform many different actant functions in many different practices. They can serve as physical points of reference in the formation and maintenance of identity, also across generations or in romantic relationships, and they do so when they are involved in practices for playing (with or without the participation of adults), going for walks, going from a to b etc. We notice that identity construction in this case is an important aspect of practices, but we still need to understand such

identity constructions in their broader context, i.e. the social discourses of nature appreciation, the material qualities of trees and the sensuous experiences that are at work in these practices. In addition, urban trees can also serve as obstacles for practices, as enemies that obstruct the performance of jogging and other outdoor activities. This function is, however, not necessarily intertwined with a discourse of nature as dangerous, but rather to a discourse of proper nature management.

Conclusion

Two sets of conclusions can be derived from the discussions and analyses above. Firstly, the practice theoretical approach applied in this study and the corresponding analysis of actant functions provided a deeper and broader understanding of people's engagement with urban green areas. It is well documented that access to green areas is beneficial for public health, and several studies have explored how urban greenspace inspire a sense of freedom and peace, are replete with personal and social meaning, and support community life different. Similar findings were surfaced and were confirmed in the present study, but the point of this article is not just to identify different perceptions, meanings and uses of urban nature, nor is it to explore the social distinctions that are enacted and inscribed in urban greenspace. Its contribution is to emphasize the many ways in which visits to, activities in and experiences of urban greenspace are *integrated in the everyday lives* and life courses of urban populations. Green areas with their flora and fauna, their scenery and landscapes provide social spaces for closeness with friends and family and facilitate informal networks. They provide *resources* for household, leisure and festivities and spaces for relief, spontaneity and *flexibility*. They enter into and define conversations and histories. They define communities through the public spaces they provide in which inhabitants of local neighbourhoods get so see each other – and sometimes to be in conflict about proper use of the local park. And all of this they do by virtue of their physical presence and their material qualities.

Secondly, there is a theoretical or conceptual lesson to be learned. When investigating lifestyles, practices and patterns of actions sociology needs to acknowledge materiality as a crucial factor, it needs to include and balance the different factors that are involved in shaping practices, and it needs to move beyond the focus on self-identity that has been applied in some lifestyle studies. Even when construction and

maintenance of self-identity is a central logic in specific practices – as we saw in the connections people develop to urban trees – these practices are poorly understood unless we include the material, discursive and bodily aspects.

To understand practices in urban greenspace we needed to include the discourses that are enacted in these practices, i.e. discourses regarding the value of nature and open landscapes and also the discourses of comfort and cosiness. We also needed to include bodily sensations like feelings of relief (or of fear and annoyance) and experiences of physical activity; sensations that shouldn't be perceived in terms of identity formation, inasmuch as the logic of achieving these sensations cannot be reduced to a logic of constructing self-identity. Furthermore, we needed to include the role of materiality as an active element in social dynamics. The materiality of urban greenspace is a product of planning, design and human intervention. Social functions and meanings are built into these designs – such as the function of providing comfort and cosiness and the function of protecting and experiencing wildlife – but the flora, fauna and terrain of urban green spaces also take on their own lives, as with the migrating starlings that enter into areas of reclaimed seabed, and through various uses new qualities are added to the designed landscape, such as the capacity of woods to condition conversations and of trees to shape routes for personal transport through town. It is with these built in and added qualities and with the integrated lives of ecosystems that the materiality of greenspace is intertwined with and contributes actively to social dynamics.

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