

# ACTIVITIES IN PUBLIC SPACE IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY: THE CASE OF NARINKKA SQUARE IN HELSINKI, FINLAND



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**SUMMARY.** The scholarly literature is full of discussions about changing public space. It is said that public space is being privatized, securitized, retailized, thematized, gentrified, etc. Although many of the discussions seem to be well-developed and well-grounded, what implications the various changes have on the ways of using public space remain unclear. Assuming that public space continues to be an important locus of public life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century marked by changes, I turned to Narinkka Square, a public square in Helsinki, Finland, and observed the activities that people undertake in this public space. What I have found is that Narinkka Square offers much more than a paved ground to pass by or through. Throughout the day, the square is used for carrying out a wide range of activities, including passive being among other people, sheltering, reading a book, playing sports, and participating in special events. Results presented in the article reveal that regardless of their type, intensity, and duration, all the activities are important, for they contribute to the variety of activities and the overall activity level in Narinkka Square, thereby producing and reproducing this public space, which is also social space. The article suggests that as long as people undertake all kind of activities in this public space, its role in the city shall not change.

**KEYWORDS:** public space, public square, social space, changes in public space, activities in public space.

## INTRODUCTION

Since the Greek Agora, the public square has had a pivotal role in the city. It has served, among other purposes, as a gathering space for citizens to claim and exercise their rights; as a community space for enjoying and strengthening social ties; as a commercial space for satisfying everyday needs or making one's living; and as a theatre (stage, stalls, galleries, and boxes) for looking at, for being seen by, and for being among others. Thus, the public square has for long been the finest embodiment of public space. Even though public space has been changing over time and alongside generations as far as its development and management practices, physical characteristics, social composition of users, or purposes of use are concerned, none of the changes have been regarded so profound as the recent ones.

If one is to turn to the scholarly literature published over the past few decades, one is to find a colorful spectrum of changes associated with public space and public square as its finest form. Some scholars say public space is becoming privatized and/or retailized (e.g., Zukin 1995; Squires 1996; Nissen 2008), some see it as undergoing gentrification (e.g., Goss 1993), while others find it to be increasingly securitized (e.g., Davis 1992; Mitchell 2003), substituted by private space (e.g., Korngold 2017) or redeveloped by thematizing it (e.g., Sorkin 1992; Zukin 1995). Despite the fact that the accounts on changing public space are varied in focus, many end up on a similar note, which is that public space is being so drastically affected that it is losing some of its defining characteristics. What this implies for spatial practices or, to be more specific, how the various changes that public space is said to be undergoing affect how and what for the space is used these days remains underexplored.

To understand the practical implication of the changes that public space has recently been associated with and to explore the activities that people undertake in public space in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I turn to Narinkka Square, a public square in the heart of Helsinki, Finland. I ask two questions: 1) what activities are carried out in Narinkka Square on a daily basis? and 2) what do the activities tell about Narinkka Square as a public space of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's (1991) concept of *social space* and relying on non-participant observation as the principal method of data collection, I assume that public space is to be seen and studied as a complex phenomenon consisting of physical, social and temporal dimensions that are highly interdependent. If public space is reduced to either of its dimensions and if the wider context remains unconsidered, there is a risk of overlooking important details and misinterpreting current and future trends. By studying the phenomenon in its real life context, I intend to demonstrate that despite some obvious differences from the public space of the past and deviations from the established concept of public space, public space in general (and public square as its traditional embodiment), is not going into oblivion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but remains an important locus of public life, a social space.

The paper starts by briefly overviewing Lefebvre's concept of social space and discussing the application of the concept to exploring and understanding public space. The following sections outline the principal changes that public space has recently been associated with and present the implications that the changes are thought to have had on the social dimension of public space. After that I introduce my case, Narinkka Square, touch upon the methods used to collect and analyze the data, and discuss my findings. The article finishes with some concluding remarks.

## PUBLIC SPACE AS SOCIAL SPACE

In his nominal book *The Production of Space*, the philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1991) states that the way of conceiving space as an empty container, an *a priori* or a given, which was wide-spread a few decades ago, assisted in no more than wrongly defining the scope of the concept. It was only after realizing that space is a product of society that the word *space* started to change in its meaning and use (Lefebvre 1991).

Lefebvre (1991) suggests that “(Social) space is a (social) product” (1991: 26) and due to this urban space is to be treated as a container with its contents, namely its specific uses and social relations associated with it. Although the philosopher recognizes that it is possible to consider social space in terms of its form, structure, and function, he doubts that an analysis which excludes the context (ideologies, social relations, and time) is able to offer a complete understanding of social space (Lefebvre 1991: 147, 159-160). Applying these ideas not to the city as a whole but to public space as a special category of urban space it might be argued that public space is distinct from other kinds of space not only in its physical dimension, the processes in which it is produced, or the purposes it is used for, but in all of these taken together. Thus, if one is to understand public space, one is to see it as a social product and consider all of its defining characteristics, including that it is open and easily accessible, developed by a public body or under its initiative, produced for public use, and used as public space.

This, however, might not be sufficient, because social space is more than an object or artefact. Social space, following Lefebvre (1991: 142), assumes an active role in its own production process and is as much a product of society as it is a producer in its own right. Taking a step further, it might be deduced that if space produced by the society is able to act, it must also be able to reproduce itself and be reproduced, making the production process infinite and impossible to ever be complete. If this is the case, and if public space is treated as social space, then it is important to recognize that space is public not only because it is produced for public use, but also because it is constantly used, and reproduced, as public space.

For the purpose of this article it is important to note that Lefebvre’s (1991) concept of social space is not limited to that of public space. In fact, the concept comprises different categories of urban space, including both public and private spaces, which are said to differ from one another as far as their spatial practices are concerned (see Lefebvre 1991: 16, 86). Applying the concept of social space to public space in general and the public square in particular implies not only conceiving public space as a social product, but also as a locus of certain activities on the basis of which it is distinguishable as public space.

## THE SPECTRUM OF CHANGES ASSOCIATED WITH PUBLIC SPACE

To say that public space is changing is to say what many people seem to know, understand and experience. What is less comprehensible to many is what is actually happening, what the causes of those changes are, and, most importantly, where those changes are taking public space to.

Over the recent years, a lot has been written about public space, attributing a wide spectrum of changes to it. Privatization, retailization, securitization, gentrification, and thematization are but a few of the many changes highlighted in the scientific literature on public space. Many scholars concerned with public space (e.g., Zukin 1995; Madanipour 1996; Low and Smith 2006; Nissen 2008) have stressed a tendency towards privatization and spotted the erosion of differences between what is public and what is private in space. According to Ali Madanipour (1996: 144; 2003: 215), the engagement of private companies and the finance industry in the development of urban space and the subsequent commodification of the space have resulted in its privatization. Sharon Zukin (1995: 260-261), in her turn, claims that even when not legally privatized, public space has been merged with retail space, which is not only private, but also different kind of space.

Many also argue that public space is being securitized or even fortified, and that exclusionary public space practices are being introduced into public space (e.g., Davis 1992; Zukin 1995; Mitchell 2003; Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht 2009; Whyte 2009). Following Don Mitchell (2003), public space has been fortified with an aim to increase the feeling of safety and reduce opportunities for certain groups of people and certain activities to be in public. In American cities, the scholar finds it is becoming commonplace to have e.g., security officers patrolling, physical structures resembling bunkers, and video cameras recognizing public space users' faces (Mitchell 2003: 2). Mike Davis' (1992) insights about defensive developments in the urban space of Los Angeles appear to stand in line with such propositions.

In addition to undergoing these changes, public space has been said to be redeveloped by gentrifying it (Goss 1993), turning it into shopping malls (Madanipour 1996; Squires 1996; Lowe 2005; Tyndall 2010), and building new pedestrian streets, plazas, and festival marketplaces (Carr, Francis, Rivlin and Stone 1992). Other changes discussed in public space literature include the replacement of public space by electronic public space (Mitchell 2003) and the development of alternatives to public space, such as a theme park or spaces simulating reality (Sorkin 1992, also Zukin 1995). As regards the implications of the changes, many of them are seen to have offered space that only presents itself as public space, but that does not have the characteristics that distinguish public space as a special category of urban space.

Observing how public squares are being renovated using private money, ever-larger portions of open space in streets, squares and parks converted into outdoor restaurants and display cases of retail stores, and bus and railway stations modernized to extend the retail area, the common concern over changing public space appears to be well-founded. On the other hand, the various changes associated with public space are not always as recent or striking, and their nature and purpose are not necessarily as they appear to be at first. Besides privatization, retailization, and gentrification, it is important to recognize, for instance, that it is not only the private sector, but also the public sector that demonstrates an interest in integrating public and private elements in space (Kärholm 2008: 106), that retailing is an important element of public space (Whyte 1980: 57), and that consumption is what attracts people to the city and keeps it lively (Kunzmann 2014: 401). Finally, if public space is indeed becoming only an imitation of public space, or, to use Lefebvre's (1991) terminology, a representation of space, then it is necessary to clarify how all these changes affect spatial practices and representational space i.e., the other levels of social space, for they are all interrelated.

#### IMPLICATIONS OF CHANGES ON THE ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN IN PUBLIC SPACE

As there is a number of changes associated with the practices of developing and managing public space, there is an even greater number of outcomes that those various changes are said to produce in relation to activities undertaken in public space. To begin with, nearly 60 years ago, Jane Jacobs (1961) argued that public spaces that people were being offered at that time did not respond to their needs, as they were "too large, too frequent, too perfunctory, too ill-located, and hence too dull or too inconvenient to be used" (Jacobs 1961: 110-111). Somewhat later Richard Sennett (1977) also claimed that the organization and design of urban space was to be blamed for the fact that public space was deficient of activities.

More recently, however, the ideas about emptying public space have been replaced by arguments that public space is becoming less accessible to certain groups of people and certain activities (e.g., Davis 1992; Zukin 1995; Mitchell 2003; Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht 2009). The list of undesirable groups and activities includes political protests and demonstrations (Clough and Vanderbeck 2006; Kohn 2013), certain public gatherings (Clough and Vanderbeck 2006), activities undertaken by disadvantaged social groups (Davis 1992; Mitchell 2003), and youth groups' hanging around (Malone 2002), to mention but a few. Regulated or controlled diversity of users and their activities in public space is

seen as problematic for at least two reasons: first, it eliminates possibilities to meet strangers and interact with them (Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht 2009: 272) and second, it creates space that is usable by a limited group of society and only for purposes that are considered to be legitimate (Kohn 2013: 104). According to Mitchel (2003), as space is being privatized and controlled, disadvantaged groups of people and the activities that they seek to carry out are denied the right to be in public. The scholar concludes that “[w]hen all is controlled, there can simply be *no* right to the city” (Mitchell 2003: 229).

Tightened control of public space and exclusion of activities and people from public space are not only attributed to concerns over public security, but they are also associated with retailization of public space and the private sector’s pursue of profit-related ends. As Mitchell (2003: 139-140) explains, controlled diversity allows for greater profitability, but at the expense of unmediated interaction and unrestricted use of public space. Other implications of retailization on the practices of using public space include shopping as a major means of taking part in public life (Zukin 1995), shopping as a form of interaction among people present in public space (Makagon 2003), and using retailized spaces more eagerly than traditional public spaces (Korngold 2017).

At the same time when privatized, retailized, securitized, and otherwise changed public space is said to be less accessible, not so viable and varied, and more restricted and controlled, some scholars (e.g., Madanipour 2003; Listerborn 2005; Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht 2009) argue that public space has never been fully open or accessible to either all social groups or all activities. For instance, Karen Malone (2002: 160) suggests that instead of becoming contested, public space continues to be such. Indeed, negotiating between different interests, preferences and practices has always been necessary for carrying out a wide range of activities in public space public. Moreover, the opportunity to open up such negotiations can be considered as a special characteristic of public space, something that allows the public to test the publicness of public space, thereby creating and recreating it.

Somewhat different, yet related alternative ideas include the claims that public life can flourish even in planned and controlled public space (Pereira 2015: 171), that the nature of ownership and management may have little say on how accessible and inclusive public spaces are (Langstraat and Van Melik 2013: 447), and that newly developed spaces characterized by spatial flexibility and indeterminacy are likely to generate opportunities for unplanned activities (Simões Aelbrecht 2016: 135). As regards the activities of shopping or retailing, they are recognized to be significant for the overall diversity of activities in public space (Whyte 1980; Carr et al. 1992; Gehl 2010, 2011). Indeed, it cannot be denied that the processes of

privatization and retailization stimulate the activities of buying and selling in public space; yet, it must not be forgotten that both activities are inherent to public space. In her study on the sociability in British markets Sophie Watson (2009: 1581) suggests that without the activities of buying and selling, sociability of the markets would not exist. Finally, there are scholars who note that interactions in electronic space do no more than to complement face-to-face interactions in physical public space, which remains significant and valuable (Gehl 2010: 27; Korngold 2017: 478; also Kohn 2013: 107). Even if electronic space is becoming ever more important for a range of public activities, public space is not going into oblivion. Taking everything into consideration, propositions presented above show not only that the implications of changing public space may be interpreted in a different light, but also that further research on the issue, especially as regards the effect of the changes on the actual ways of using public space, is still highly needed.

#### NARINKKA SQUARE AS A CASE

To explore how various changes associated with public space have affected the range of activities carried out in the space, I have turned to Narinkka Square. Located in the heart of the Finnish capital, Helsinki, and occupying 2916 square meters (Helsingin kaupunki 2019), Narinkka Square is best described as a public square or plaza. The square is owned and managed by a public body, the City of Helsinki, and it is open for public use at any time of the day all year round.

The history of Narinkka Square dates back to the second half of the 19th century, when the uses of the Kamppi area that the square is a part of began to change. Instead of the name *Nikolaintori* (Nicolas Square) suggested for a space functioning as a market square, the name *Narinkkatori* (Narinkka Square) deriving from the Russian word *na rinke* (on the market) was adopted (Helsingin kaupunki 1970: 123). While market activities were abandoned in the area in the early 20th century, the name has been used ever since. With the growing demand for and increasing use of motorized transport in the interwar years, the former marketplace became a part of the bus station. Travelling remained the principal activity until the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when the whole was redeveloped, and Narinkka Square was converted into what it is today.

As for now, Narinkka Square is an open public space. On the west, it is flanked by the Kamppi Shopping Center (Figure 1), a multifunctional development that in addition to retail stores and service points houses bus terminals, a metro station, office premises, and residential apartments. The eastern flank of the square borders a pedestrianized street, Salomonkatu, lined by five- to seven-storey buildings



of commercial use mostly. On the east, there still stands *Turun kasarmi* (Turku Barracks) – a two-storey building that was used by the army in the 19th century and that is presently occupied by a few restaurants (Figure 2). Finally, the south of the square is bordered by a recently-built *Kampin kappeli* (Kamppi Chapel) and a multistorey hotel and commercial building. Except for an artwork, six trees, two information screens, a few lampposts, and a handful of litter bins, the square is empty of street furniture, other objects or vegetation.



Figure 1. Narinkka Square looking from the Turku Barracks to Kamppi Shopping Center

Developed relatively recently, but looking like a traditional public square, Narinkka Square offers an interesting example of public space. The context that the square is found in adds further to making it worthwhile studying. As is already known, Narinkka Square is located in the capital of Finland, which is one of the Nordic welfare states that are known for being democratic, liberal, tolerant, open-minded, and community-oriented. Furthermore, in *World Happiness Report 2019* (Helliwell, Layard and Sachs 2019), Finland is ranked first among the happiest countries in the world, happiness being explainable by the country's GDP per capita, social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, generosity, and perceptions of corruption. Such a social and political context is sure to presuppose favorable conditions for public life in Narinkka Square.





Figure 2. Narinkka Square looking from Kamppi Shopping Center to the Turku Barracks

The climatic context may be found to work in the opposite direction. Situated in the north of Europe, Helsinki is destined to have a chilly climate for the greater part of the year. Weather conditions severely limit the time that can be spent outside in open space, such as in public squares. On the other hand, pleasant weather, because of its rareness, can be suspected to be an open invitation to come outside. In addition to the climatic context, one more motive to study activities in a public space in Finland is the scarce availability of studies in English on public squares located in other than the English-speaking world, Southern Europe and other places of warm climate.

#### RESEARCH METHODS, DATA COLLECTION, AND DATA ANALYSIS

Activities undertaken in Narinkka Square were studied following the method of non-participant observation. Considered to be a direct method that allows studying a phenomenon in its context and in real time (Yin 2003: 86; Garwood 2006: 292), the observation was found to be particularly suitable for the purpose of this research. Acting as a complete observe I could see directly what was going on in the

square and avoid having any influence over the activities. Moreover, the method made it possible to study a full range of activities carried out throughout the day and regardless of weather conditions, and eliminated the need to select what to focus on.

Before I started my observations, I randomly selected days on which I would visit the square to gather data. On seven of those days I visited the square five times a day, from early morning until evening. On the other fourteen days I went to the square three times a day: either three times before noon or three times after noon. Thereby, within a period of four weeks I covered each full day of the week (Sunday-Saturday) twice and gathered observational data that informed me about the range of activities undertaken in Narinkka Square at different time of the day and on different days of the week. It must be pointed out that even if weather conditions varied from clear sky and over 20°C degrees to heavy rain and temperatures dropping below 10°C degrees, no other conclusions than about the everyday life of the square during the warm period can be made.

The duration of my visits to Narinkka Square varied from 15 minutes to 1 hour, depending on the range and intensity of activities undertaken at a time. Each time that I went to the square to collect data, I took notes on the context (i.e., the time, weather conditions, special events, etc.), activities being carried out, groups of people engaged in the activities, randomly chosen instances of using the square and my personal experience. As informed consent from every single person using the square was not possible to obtain, I did not collect any personal data that could in one or another way allow identifying the people that I saw. Instead, I relied on my personal insight when deciding what age, gender, and/or social group the people could represent. Within more than 34 hours that I spent observing and noting down what was happening in the square, I managed to collect a rich set of data about the range of activities undertaken in the square, the distribution of activities throughout the day and the week, the range and intensity of activities given different weather and other conditions, and the variety of groups of people engaged in the activities.

The observational data collected in the form of paper-based fieldnotes were analyzed by (1) carefully reading and re-reading their content; (2) marking meaningful items and giving them labels i.e., coding the data; (3) reading through empirically developed codes, identifying recurring themes and relations between them, and developing a coding frame; (4) re-reading the notes and applying the coding frame; and (5) interpreting the data and offering explanations and a balanced argument. The following sections of the article are dedicated to presenting some results of the analysis.

## MAJOR ACTIVITIES IN NARINKKA SQUARE

It happened as early as on the first day of data collection that passing by or through emerged as the principal activity undertaken in Narinkka Square and the activity that overshadowed other uses. As the research process progressed, this initial assumption had to be accepted. Indeed, traversing the square in different directions turned out to be an activity undertaken regardless of time, weather conditions, and special occasions, and the activity that the majority of people present in the square were engaged in. Furthermore, at certain times, such as afternoons on working days or rainy late mornings, people passing by or through significantly outnumbered those involved in the rest of the activities present in Narinkka Square.

Most of the people traversing the square seem to do that out of necessity, and this seems to be their daily habit. They usually move between the north-east or south-east of the square (the direction to/from the railway station and other major city attractions) and the west of the square (where the Kamppi Shopping Center housing a metro station and bus terminals is situated), and their walking speed is either average or somewhat faster than average. On their way, people rarely look around or to each other: in their sight there is either their destination point, the screen of their smart phone or the people they are accompanied by. During the time period when I was regularly visiting Narinkka Square, a range of events were happening, including political and sports events, advertising and publicity campaigns, and small markets. Even though many of the events were occupying the most heavily used spots of the square, few of the passers-by paused to take a look at what was going on, and the greater majority continued walking.

It cannot be denied that the heavy use of Narinkka Square for passing by or through makes the square not only resemble, but also work first and foremost as a street rather than a place to stay. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to terminate the discussion here confirming the assumptions about emptying public space. If one is to dig deeper and try to see through the crowds of passers-by, one is bound to see a colorful picture of activities undertaken in Narinkka Square.

Observations have shown that besides the people who pass by or through Narinkka Square, there are people sitting or standing, there are people drinking coffee, there are people eating, there are people smoking, there are people using their smart phones, there are people taking a walk, and finally, there are people watching other people and people who are there to be seen by others (Figure 3). Although it does not take a public square to have a cup of coffee, to take a walk or to sit, many people choose namely Narinkka Square to carry out those activities. This might be so because it is not the activity itself that fascinates people, but the possibility of passively spending time among other people and choosing freely a form of being

among others. I might be wrong in my guess, but I suppose that a young man walking his dog in the square, a middle-aged woman sitting in the sun with her smart phone, an elderly man drinking his coffee under a tree, and a young man watching people, to mention but a few I spotted, were in the square not for the activities mentioned. They were there to spend their time among other people, and the activities they were carrying out were their chosen form of doing that. For this reason, it feels right to consider those various passive activities as different forms of the activity of passive being among others and, given its colorfulness and pervasiveness, treat it as a major use of Narinkka Square.



Figure 3. Passing by or through and other activities in Narinkka Square (looking from Urho Kekkonen Street to the Turku Barracks)

Occasionally, passive being among other people develops into more active forms of spending one's time in the square. One afternoon, on a day when the busiest part of Narinkka Square was occupied by an event aimed at presenting one of the regions in Finland, I saw a young man, an elderly man, and a group of adolescents taking an active part in the event, while the crowd continued passing by. Special events are but some of the stimuli that people passively spending their time in the square respond to. Other stimuli include unplanned happenings or accidents, unusual objects, extraordinary behavior, and weather conditions. While some users

of the square may remain passive and respond to the stimuli without significantly modifying their patterns of behavior, others may willingly take part in the events or happenings and, as a result, become active users of the public space. For instance, when the greater part the square was used for a car display, forcing passers-by to walk along the perimeter of the square, there were two middle-aged women inspecting the cars, a young man with children playing with soap bubbles coming from behind the cars, and an adolescent boy riding a scooter in between the cars on display. It depends on both people and stimuli what response is evoked, and how the chosen form of passive being among others is modified. What I noticed is that any unusual activity, event or happening is bound to attract the attention of those who have chosen Narinkka Square searching for opportunities to spend their time among other people. This confirms well William H. Whyte's (2009) and Jan Gehl's (2011) insights that people usually do not use public space for a single purpose, and that people and activities attract each other.

The people who choose Narinkka Square to spend their time among other people come either alone or in company. I noticed them sitting, drinking coffee, eating, watching other people, and taking a walk alone, in pairs, in groups of three or four people and in bigger groups, sometimes as big as approximately 30 people. In case the people are in company, their chosen form of spending time is likely to involve socializing. Nevertheless, when the primary purpose of stopping in Narinkka Square is other than verbal communication, some people exchange only a few words and remain nearly silent throughout their stay. This also somewhat explains why instances of unplanned socializing in Narinkka Square are rare and brief. One afternoon I saw an elderly woman who sitting under a tree deep in her thoughts was approached by a young man; another afternoon I spotted a middle-aged man coming to take a seat close to a young man who was spending his lunch time observing people; and another day I saw an elderly man drinking coffee offered for free and engaging in a conversation with a middle-aged woman having her free coffee. Those and a few more were the only instances of unplanned socializing that I managed to notice in the square within the period of four weeks. A relatively slight interest in socializing with strangers may be taken to argue that many people present in Narinkka Square come looking for opportunities to passively be among other people and activities.

Some others come to the square looking for a shelter. Purposeless staying, rambling, and killing time are other activities that a number of people can regularly be seen undertaking in Narinkka Square. Almost every morning and evening that I visited the public space to collect data, I could see disadvantaged groups of people gathering, socializing, sitting, sleeping, or spending their time doing nothing in particular. Although it is true that various activities carried out for the purpose of



sheltering are more likely to be undertaken by disadvantaged adults, there are also adolescents and people not likely to be affiliated with any of the vulnerable groups that may well be seen rambling the square and killing their time. From time to time one can see groups of adolescents or young adults, usually men, staying in the square for no obvious reason, travelers and commuters killing their time left before the trip, and people who fall asleep while sitting on the stairs. For instance, on a late morning of a working day I saw a young homeless man rambling the square; an elderly woman sitting under a tree and spending her time talking to herself; a middle-aged female traveler sitting and killing time left before her trip; and a middle-aged tourist couple having their morning coffee and taking photos. Regardless of who they were, every one of them found Narinkka Square to offer a temporary shelter, a place to stay for a while.

To conclude, passing by or through, various forms of passive being among other people, and various forms of sheltering discussed in this section of the article shall be designated as the major uses of Narinkka Square for at least four reasons. First, those are the activities that people undertake in the square throughout the day and the week. Second, it is more likely than not that at any one time the majority of the people using the public space would be engaged namely in these activities. Third, all the activities are undertaken by people of different age, gender, and social status, and none of the activities seem to be sensitive to those attributes. Fourth and final, these activities allow for flexibility in one's actions; i.e., while engaging in them people can also take part in other activities that the square offers at any given moment. Moreover, they allow for other activities to develop thereby producing and reproducing Narinkka Square as a social space.

#### MINOR ACTIVITIES IN NARINKKA SQUARE

In addition to passing by or through, passive being among other people, and sheltering, Narinkka square is used in many other ways. However, as compared to the major activities, other activities are likely to be carried out at certain hours only; they are more sensitive to people's age, interests, and abilities; they cannot be easily undertaken alongside other activities; and they tend to attract a considerably lower number of people. For these reasons, I shall call them minor activities.

One of the minor activities is meeting other people, acquaintances. Most often this is carried out by groups of adolescents, who come to Narinkka Square in the late afternoon and evening in order to meet their peers. They usually gather, greet each other, and leave in just a few minutes. Other groups of people seem to behave in a comparable way: a middle-aged couple who met another middle-aged couple



one late afternoon, an elderly woman with a dog who met a young woman on a late morning, and many other people whom I saw meeting and greeting each other in the square left the space having exchanged a few words. It cannot be denied that occasionally the people who use Narinkka Square as a meeting place stay longer, but those cases seem to be rare.

Just like meeting other people, saying goodbye and seeing off usually take place afternoons and evenings and last no more than a few minutes (Figure 4). Although both activities are even more occasional than the activity of meeting one's associates, those people who use Narinkka Square to say goodbye to each other or to see someone off usually spend more time in the square than those who come there to meet each other. Add to that, before separating people are more likely to engage in something else going on in the square. It is because they not only add to the variety of activities but also show the potential to develop into other activities that saying goodbye and seeing off are important activities, even if only minor, to account for.



Figure 4. Seeing off, taking a break and other activities in Narinkka Square (looking from the center of Narinkka Square to Salomonkatu Street)

An even rarer activity and one that interests a certain part of the public is playing. In most cases it is children and adolescents who play in the square when they are either waiting for their parents or spending their time together. For instance,

once I saw a boy playing with the information screen while he was waiting for his mother and sister; another time I saw three boys running around and jumping; and one more time I saw a boy playing with the water running down the square after a heavy rain while he and his mother were waiting for the trip. But occasionally adults also play: a few times there were pairs and small groups of young adults riding scooters for fun, and once there was a young couple playing cards.

In the morning and afternoon one can also see working-age people spending their breaks in Narinkka Square. There are office workers, bus drivers, security guards, restaurant employees, shop assistants, construction and maintenance workers, and possibly people doing a variety of other jobs. Some of them come for a cup of coffee, some for a breath of fresh air or a cigarette, while others spend their lunch hour eating and watching other people and activities. What all of the people share is their behavior pattern: they are always passive users of the square, and they are not likely to engage in any other activities done in the square or modify their behavior by responding to external stimuli. Nevertheless, by spending some of their time in Narinkka Square they contribute significantly to its vitality and add to the activities that produce and reproduce this social space.

Minor in terms of the number of people undertaking them, but important as far as the purposes they are undertaken for are concerned, are the various activities that are necessary for people to survive. One of those activities is begging, and it seems to be undertaken nearly every day from late morning to late afternoon. Begging is usually done by approaching people passing by and asking them for money or food or by sitting silently and allowing a notice about the need for money to speak. Although few people respond to such requests for help, the people who beg do not seem to give up. The same holds true for other disadvantaged people who visit Narinkka Square daily looking for empty plastic bottles and cans that could be returned to shops in exchange of money. A few times I also saw them approach people who were about to finish their drink and ask if they could have the empty can. Finally, there are some people who visit the square hoping to earn some money by selling flowers. In contrast to begging or collecting empty bottles, selling flowers is a relatively rare and unsuccessful activity. What is noteworthy is that all the activities undertaken for the purpose of surviving peacefully coexist with a range of other activities and constitute a part of all that create social space in and out of Narinkka Square.

Finally, the activities of making music, reading a book or a newspaper, and soaking up the sun deserve to be mentioned. In Narinkka Square once in a while one can hear some music coming from an instrument being played. Although the making of music is expected to be tipped, the activity can hardly be considered as done for the purpose of collecting money. Instead, it looks more like a form of active being among other people, a form of socializing with others and using music

as the medium. Reading a book or a newspaper and soaking up the sun, on the other hand, are much more likely to be activities in their own right i.e., carried out for the pleasure they provide. Even though they are not common, their occasional appearance allows me to assume that people do consider the square as a place where they can enjoy themselves.

#### SPECIAL EVENTS AND OCCASIONAL ACTIVITIES

Within the four-week period that I spent visiting Narinkka Square, I saw smaller and bigger parts of the square occupied from time to time by music and dance performances, handicraft and design markets, political and sports events, advertising and publicity campaigns, festivals, flash mobs, and various other commercial and non-commercial events (Figure 5). Although the duration of each of the special events was limited, and none of them lasted for more than a few days, on more days than not there was something special going on in the square. As all the events were different in their nature, size, and purpose, opportunities for more intensive and varied uses of Narinkka Square opened up, catalyzing the production and reproduction of this public space.



Figure 5. Preparations for a special event in Narinkka Square (looking from Kamppi Chapel to Salomonkatu Street)

The first of the special events to be accounted for is a market selling local handicraft and design products. The market, which within the period of four weeks was held two times, was a small one: it consisted of up to ten tents, and the variety of goods on sale was limited to women's and children's clothes, bags, jewellery, and tableware. Some people did stop to take a look at the goods on sale, as did two elderly female tourists who inspected every single tent, but mostly people passed the market by. Although it must be recognized that the handicraft and design market did not interest many people, it cannot be denied that the market brought the activities of selling and buying, both of which are inherent in public space, back to Narinkka Square.

Similar insights can be made in relation to political events in Narinkka Square. A few days before the elections to the European Parliament, Narinkka Square was used as an arena for election campaigns organized by the major Finnish political parties. During the few days, the busiest part of the square was lined with office containers, tents, and cars decorated with the parties' logos and the candidates' pictures and enlivened by the candidates themselves standing and waiting for their electors to stop and talk to them. To catch the attention of their prospective voters, the politicians and the people working with them were trying hard: they were delivering leaflets, inviting people to listen to what they had to say, giving away small gifts, and offering free coffee and snacks. Even so, few people rewarded their effort by taking the leaflets or engaging in conversations with the politicians. Small gifts, free coffee, and free snacks attracted more attention, but there never were more than a handful of people gathering around the camps. Still, by bringing political activities to Narinkka Square the event contributed to the range of activities undertaken in the square and afforded opportunities for unplanned socializing: there were conversations between the politicians and their electors, between the people gathering around the tents, and between the politicians themselves. In addition, political and social activities recreated the agora in a public square of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The activity of unplanned socializing with strangers was also encouraged by three sports-related events that enlivened Narinkka Square on some of the days I was there. One of the events was focused on hockey, another one was dedicated to basketball, and the last one was aimed at advertising various sports activities that children can take up in the summertime. For instance, one late afternoon when the hockey event was on its way, I saw groups of young men engaging in a conversation while watching hockey game, and another afternoon I saw two elderly people exchanging a few words while having their free ice-cream and watching others playing sports. In both cases the people were strangers, and they started socializing only because the sports events taking place in Narinkka Square encouraged them to do so. Even if instances of unplanned socializing as the ones just described were

sporadic, the activity is important to take notice of, since it demonstrates well that special events have the power to encourage people to take up activities that they would otherwise be unlikely to undertake in Narinkka Square.

Yet special events do much more than offer something to watch or talk about. As regards the sports events mentioned above, what they did was to bring to Narinkka Square the activity of doing sports. At the time of the sports events, there were adolescent boys, young adults, and middle-aged men playing basketball; there were children attempting to play sports; there were teams of young men playing hockey against each other; there were adolescent boys and middle-aged men trying out some traditional Viking sport; there were adolescents and young adults learning to use the hockey stick and manoeuvre the ball; and then there were people of all age groups watching others playing. Although one early morning, when the square was nearly empty, I did see two young women jogging, and one late morning I spotted two middle-aged men riding their sports-bikes, it feels right to say that for some activities, such as doing sports, it takes a special event to be present in the square.

If it is only the politically conscious people who engage in political activities and the sports-oriented people who undertake the activities of playing and watching sports, live music seems to be the thing that manages to engulf even the passers-by focused on their daily deeds. On one pleasantly warm weekend afternoon, there was a band playing live music in Narinkka Square for almost an hour. Although the music could be heard well enough in every corner of the square, the people listening to the performance were gathering around the band, thereby partly blocking the busiest part of the space. In the crowd there were people of all ages, all social statuses, and all interests. While the people who had chosen Narinkka Square to spend some of their time stayed listening for nearly as long as the performance lasted, those who could not or did not intend to stay in the square stopped for a song or two, or at least tried to enjoy the music while passing-by. With the exception of a handful of people who did not even catch a glimpse at the band playing, the performance attracted the attention of everyone present in the square, putting the activity of listening to live music at the top in terms of people's willingness to undertake it.

Before offering some conclusions, it is important to make three remarks. First, the majority of the activities brought about by special events are not regularly undertaken by the users of Narinkka Square. Consequently, special events and the activities associated with them significantly contribute to the variety of activities and the level of activity in the square and work to its advantage as a public space, which by definition is a place open for all kinds of activities. Second, special events add the element of unexpectedness, which may attract people to come to Narinkka Square and encourage them to not only take part in the events, but also engage in major and minor activities present in the square. Third, and final, regardless of the



fact that special events are occasional, they take place often enough to consider it a tendency rather than an exception for something else that the major or the minor activities to take place in Narinkka Square. It is for this reason that special events can be considered as another major use of the square and as an activity that produces and reproduces this public, and social, space.

## CONCLUSIONS

Although literature on public space is extensive and varied, there is one theme that runs through a great part of it, and this is that public space is undergoing significant changes. Privatization, retailization, securitization, thematization, and other processes that are discussed in relation to public space mostly concern the development and management practices, ownership, and material dimension of public space. However, space is more than a static, material object: it is a product created by the society and a producer that plays an active role in the production process (Lefebvre 1991). Assuming that public space is social space, and that space and spatial practice are related in a dialectical manner (Lefebvre 1991), I set myself a task to find out what activities are carried out in public space these days, and what they can tell about the public space of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

For the purpose I turned to Narinkka Square, a public square located in the center of Helsinki, Finland. Having spent more than 34 hours observing how people use the space I have come to a conclusion that even if public space is said to be changing, people continue to show their interest in using it in a number of ways. Although it is true that passing-by significantly overshadows other activities done in Narinkka Square, it must also be recognized that the spectrum of activities in this public space is colorful. Passive being among others and sheltering, which are carried out as sitting, standing or rambling the square and watching people, being watched by them, drinking coffee, or using one's smart phone, are other major activities undertaken by people of all age and social groups, at any time of the day, and given all weather conditions. In addition, the square is occasionally used as a place to meet people, to say goodbye and to see people off, to spend one's break, to beg, to collect empty bottles, to read a book, and to play. Finally, it appears that more often than not Narinkka Square hosts special events, such as live-music performances, sports events, political events, advertising campaigns, and markets, which enliven the square and open up opportunities for a range of activities, including selling, buying, and listening to live music, that would otherwise be unlikely or hardly possible to be carried out in the square.



The variety of major and minor activities, special events, and various activities that the events bring about indicates that Narinkka Square is open for all kinds of activities, and it is the users of this particular public space who have their final say on what activities the space is used for. Regardless of their attributes, all the activities are important to Narinkka Square as a public space, for each of them enlivens the square and widens its range of use. Activities are also important for the reason that, as Whyte (2009) and Gehl (2011) note, they tend to attract more people and more activities. When different activities meet in Narinkka Square, they intertwine with each other, changing and evolving into new forms of using the space and maintaining people's interest in visiting and using it.

This variety of activities, which comes with the freedom to choose what, when and how to get engaged into, is as much a characteristic of Narinkka Square as public space, as it is a result of the use of the square as public space. This is to say that the activities that Narinkka Square is used for constantly produce and reproduce this social space, each time confirming that developed under a public initiative and for public use the square is public space first and foremost because it is used as public space. In addition, what the use of Narinkka Square tells is that public space remains an important and desirable locus for public activities (e.g., Gehl 2010; Kohn 2013; Korngold 2017) even if it is, or is said to be, changing in many of its dimensions. The role of Narinkka Square as a place for undertaking all kinds of activities shall stay stable as long as this space is used and, thereby, produced and reproduced by people's activities as public space.

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Žieda Tamašauskaitė

#### VEIKLOS MIESTO VIEŠOJOJE ERDVĖJE XXI AMŽIUJE: NARINKKOS AIKŠTĖS ATVEJIS (HELSINKIS, SUOMIJA)

SANTRAUKA. Mokslinėje literatūroje gausu diskusijų apie kaitą, vykstančią miesto viešojoje erdvėje. Mokslininkų teigimu, viešosios erdvės mieste yra privatizuojamos, komercializuojamos, tematizuojamos, džentrifikuojamos, pernelyg saugomos ir pan. Nors dauguma nuomonių atrodo pagrįstos ir pateikiamos suprantamai, visgi nėra aišku, kokią įtaką miestiečių veikloms daro pasikeitimai miesto viešojoje erdvėje. Darant prielaidą, jog net ir XXI amžiuje viešoji erdvė, įprasminama miesto aikštėje, tebėra svarbi viešojo gyvenimo vieta, buvo tiriama, kaip miestiečiai ir miesto svečiai naudoja Narinkkos aikštę, esančią Suomijos sostinės Helsinkio centre. Tyrimas atskleidė, jog nuo ankstyvo ryto iki vėlyvo vakaro Narinkkos aikštė yra daug daugiau nei akmenimis grįstas paviršius, kuriuo patogų keliauti. Tai vieta įvairioms veikloms, įskaitant pasyvų buvimą tarp kitų žmonių, prieglobsčio ieškojimą, knygos skaitymą, dalyvavimą viešuose renginiuose ar sportavimą. Tyrimo rezultatai leidžia daryti išvadą – kad ir kokiomis veiklomis aikštę lankantys žmonės užsiima, visos jos yra vienodai svarbios, nes būtent veiklų įvairovė, gausa ir intensyvumas, kurią lemia erdvės viešumas, įprasmina viešąją miesto erdvę ir kartu ją kuria. Remiantis atliktu empiriniu tyrimu straipsnyje teigiama, kad kol ši miesto viešoji erdvė bus naudojama įvairioms veikloms, tol jos reikšmė mieste bus svarbi, net jei visa kita toje erdvėje nuolat keisis.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: miesto viešoji erdvė, miesto aikštė, socialinė erdvė, miesto viešosios erdvės kaita, veiklos miesto viešojoje erdvėje.