

The public space as a vector of social cohesion

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Abstract Public spaces and their potential to foster social cohesion have become a key topic in contemporary urban planning, especially in contexts affected by social and ethnic segregation. In this regard, co-participation between urban planners and local communities emerges as a highly effective tool in addressing these issues by enhancing the quality and inclusiveness of the urban environment. This paper explores how public spaces can be designed to support community engagement and shared activities, with the ultimate goal of strengthening social cohesion.

The paper focuses on the specific case of Miercurea-Ciuc, a city in Harghita County, Romania, characterized by ethnic segregation, with a Székely (Hungarian-speaking) majority of over 70% and a Romanian minority. Additionally, the city's cold, foggy climate contributes to reduced outdoor activity and limited social interaction, further challenging community cohesion. The research is structured around two main components: (1) an assessment of the current state of public spaces in relation to observable levels of social interaction, and (2) the development of design proposals that incorporate participatory tools to actively involve community members in the shaping and activation of public space.

The main objective is to understand and illustrate how spatial strategies can be used to promote interaction, a sense of belonging, and inclusive community identity. The methodology combines multi-criteria analysis of existing urban environment with the development of a intervention model, ranging from a system of city-wide public spaces to the micro-scale of individual public spaces. The proposed approach is built on three core stages: Gather – Connect – Build.

Gather: Create inclusive spaces that attract and bring together people from all social and ethnic backgrounds.

Connect: Encourage interaction among users once they are present in the space, through shared activities.

Build: The creation of spaces that support a sense of belonging and communication among local residents, aiming to foster a shared local identity.

The outcome consists of an urban design solution that responds to the needs of residents by creating a coherent system of public spaces, diversified in terms of the activities they support. This demonstrates how the public space can become an effective instrument in the process of strengthening social cohesion.