Gender Differences in the Urban Environment

Ref 122

The flâneur and flâneuse of the 21st Century

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Abstract

The aim of this short paper is to show how the spatial features of urban environments affect women and men's behaviour pattern.

To research gender differences in perception of the historical city, a type that explores the city, the flâneur is used. Flânerie means: watching people and being watched, but just that definition wouldn't be adequate and would do the flâneur injustice. This character is a paradox itself, he likes to be secluded from the mass, then he would like to be part of the mass, he wants quietness and then liveliness.

The flâneur has a female version, the flâneuse. Among the critics, the existence of the flâneuse is debatable. Writers like Janet Wolf and Virginia Pollock claim that she can't exist, because she can't show the same behavior as the flâneur, wandering aimlessly around town. As stated by Deborah Parsons and Anne Friedberg, the flâneuse does exist, but in a different form then the flâneur. The flâneuse was simply not noticed by male history writers. In this short paper the existence of the fâneuse nowadays in the Dutch environment is discussed.

To analyze gender differences, the space syntax method has been used to identify and to describe a city's spatial properties influencing the way people move through public spaces. As results from research with the help of Space syntax has shown, most people move through the most integrates urban spaces. Gate counting and static snapshots were used to observe how men and women use public spaces in the centres of Breda, Dordrecht, Maastricht and Vlissingen. It was registered how and where men and women behaved in urban spaces in different time periods of the day. All stations in these cities were eccentric from the historical centre. The route from historical centre to station is the most known and used route through town for pedestrians. The outcomes of the observations and spatial analysis were compared with one another.

As the results from this inquiry shows, correlations between the spatial configurative structures and how men and women use urban space were found on the one hand. In spatially integrated street, an equal number of women and men were found. The more segregated the streets tend to be the more they were dominated by men. On the other hand, as soon as the shops were closed, men dominated the streets. Women are using the street as corridors and not as a destination itself. When women are using the squares in the evening or at night, they are usually accompanied by others. The use of space syntax showed that liveliness could be predicted by the structure of the city. Not only does the crowd provide the flâneuse a valid excuse to wander around the streets, a sense of security, but it's also a component of flânerie: to see and to be seen. Namely, for the flâneuse liveliness is one of the conditions to stroll around.

Proceedings of the 7th International Space Syntax Symposium
Edited by Daniel Koch, Lars Marcus and Jesper Steen, Stockholm: KTH, 2009.

122:1

Hence, knowledge provided from research seems to be essential for designing urban environment attractive for women as well for men.

1. Introduction

In the field of architecture the percentage of architect and urban designer women is much lower than men. As one might expect, often the architect projects himself in the design he is making based on own preferences from own experience. Since a large amount of architects and urban designers are men, the results are based on men's perceptions. How are then these design solutions suitable for the other half of the population? Do gender differences play a part in the perception of the city? If it does, could spatial interventions decrease these differences? Finally, how do women in comparison with men use public spaces?

In order to understand gender differences in the perception of the historical city, one approach is to start with a reveal of a type that explores the city, the flâneur. It is one approach to understand the social differences between men and women. Flânerie means: watching people and being watched, but just that definition wouldn't be adequate and would do the flâneur injustice. This character is a paradox itself, he likes to be secluded from the mass, then he would like to be part of the mass, he wants quietness and then liveliness. The contradictory of the interpretations of his experiences in the city, make him an interesting character. The distant aesthetic gaze, almost bored, make the flâneur a special character in the city.

Interesting enough, the flâneur has a female version, the flâneuse. Among the critics, the existence of the flâneuse is debatable. Writers like Janet Wolf and Virginia Pollock claim that she cannot exist, because she cannot show the same behaviour as the flâneur, wandering aimlessly around town. As discussed in Deborah Parsons and Anne Friedberg writings, they claim she exists, but in a different form then the flâneur. Male history writers did simply not notice the flâneuse. The aim of this research is to reveal the behaviour of women in public space in Dutch built environments.

2. History of the Flâneur and the Flâneuse concepts

The term flâneur originated from the 18th century. It was described by Charles Baudelaire as 'gentleman stroller of city streets' (van Godsendthoven, 2005). The flâneur has a key role in understanding, participating and depicting the city. The flâneur participates in city life, but remains in theory an objective spectator.

The concept of the flâneur was founded beginning 18th century by the philosophers Rousseau and Goethe. Baudelaire was the most influential author on the concept flânerie, but he never defined the flâneur literally. 'The flâneur was an idle stroller with an inquisitive mind and an aesthetic eye, a mixture of the watchful detective, the aesthetic dandy and the gaping consumer, the badaud. A solitary character, he avoided serious political, familial or sexual relationships, and was only keen on the aesthetics of city life. He read the city as a book, finding beauty in the obsolete objects of other people, but in a distanced, superior way' (van Godsendthoven, 2005).

The flâneur is a product of modern life and the industrial revolution, parallel to the references of the tourist in contemporary times. ¬The arrival of department stores and the 'Haussmannization' of Paris' streets in the second half of the nineteenth century swept away large parts of the historical city and also the domain of the flâneur. The archetype of the flâneur disappeared with its surroundings, in favour of the women- oriented department stores. 'The department store may have been, as Benjamin put it, the flâneur's last coup, but it was the flâneuse's first' (Friedberg, 1993).

The flâneuse is not a female flâneur, but she is a version of the flâneur. She does not experience the city in the same way as he does. It is hard to define the archetype of the flâneuse, because the flâneur himself consists of paradoxes and many subcategories. Key concepts for flâneur and flâneuse are the amount of spare time, the aesthetic detachment towards objects, crowd and sceneries they see and their ambiguity about it.

Proceedings of the 7th International Space Syntax Symposium
Edited by Daniel Koch, Lars Marcus and Jesper Steen, Stockholm: KTH, 2009.

122:2

The department stores were a starting point for the existence of the flâneuse, but this also marked her as a consumer, a 'badaud'. The difference between badauds and flâneuses are the distance they create between themselves and the activities in the city. A characteristic of flânerie is an aesthetic distance between the subject and the object of attention. The badaud-flâneuse lacks this distance. The city is not being experienced, but is reduced to a place to consume.

As implied, the badaud-flâneuse did not have the full ability to flânerie. However, she has many qualities, which are at least some first initiatives to stroll around. Her domain moved from the interior of her home to the interior of the department store and sometimes even to the streets (Parsons, 2000). Shopping, art and day trips contribute to develop a certain view in that period of society, which was at the end of 19th century. Friedberg was very well aware that this new freedom was not the same as the freedom of the flâneur (Friedberg, 1993).

The flâneuse concept developed throughout the years expanded somehow further than being a badaud. She was discovering domains like art forms, like for example the cinema and the theatre at the beginning of the 20th century. But she was still objectified by men and patriarchic institutes. However, women became independent, without taking over the absent look and gaze of the flâneur. They changed their lives into art forms and had an opinion about the society they lived in. To gain respect as artists, the image of women as muses had to disappear. She had to claim an active role and to develop her own personality.

Through the literature, the life of the flâneuse and the female characters in the city, like passersby, artists, dandies and badauds are often interlaced with each other, and difficulties they experienced are alike. The flâneuse often shifted between these roles, but distinguished herself by her independency and distanced. She became a symbol for post-modern urban life: a wanderer in many shapes. In figure 1 an overview of the history of flaneur and flaneuse is shown.

3. Flaneurie in the 21th century

Describing the developments of the meaning of the flâneur and flâneuse concepts through the history makes clear that the pure flâneuse or the flâneur does not exist. These characters were used to give social descriptions about street life images to a certain period in the city in order making it easier to analyse certain facets of the city. In the analysis of gender differences from a perception perspective, these metaphors help to understand the history and meaning of it. It is clear that flâneur and flâneuse are not each other's equivalents. The largest difference between them is the usage of public space, which has influence in their various perception of the city.

The writers such as Wolf, Pollock and Scalway made critics of the flâneuse concepts. Wolf's opinion is that the role of the flâneuse is impossible and remains impossible, despite the expansion of public activities of women like shopping and visiting cultural events. An important point they make about the non-existence of the flâneuse is the strong presence of separated spheres in 19th century. Women from middleclass were dedicated to the interior, the private domains. Women wandering the public spheres were branded as prostitutes. At present, seen in light with the emancipation processes taking place the last two decades, has brought the flâneuse to a more equal position with the flâneur in the invisible right to be in public urban space. However, aspects like safety and when and where women are spending time in urban space still have effect on how women use public spaces and affect the public spheres.

As an effect of our modern lifestyles, most people have very tight time schedules. Since women in Europe are working instead staying home, the flânerie concept is changing. A short stroll through town or practicing flânerie as lifestyle is the modern flâneuse. The daily life of these types could define how much spare time they have and in what category they belong as a flâneuse.

One of the flâneuse's features is freedom. It is about to see and to be seen, having the same freedom and right to participate in urban street life as the flâneur, to stroll around being a part of the city life and feeling comfortable being present on urban streets. What kinds of spatial conditions must then the built environment offer in order to support the flâneuse?

Proceedings of the 7th International Space Syntax Symposium
Edited by Daniel Koch, Lars Marcus and Jesper Steen, Stockholm: KTH, 2009.

122:3
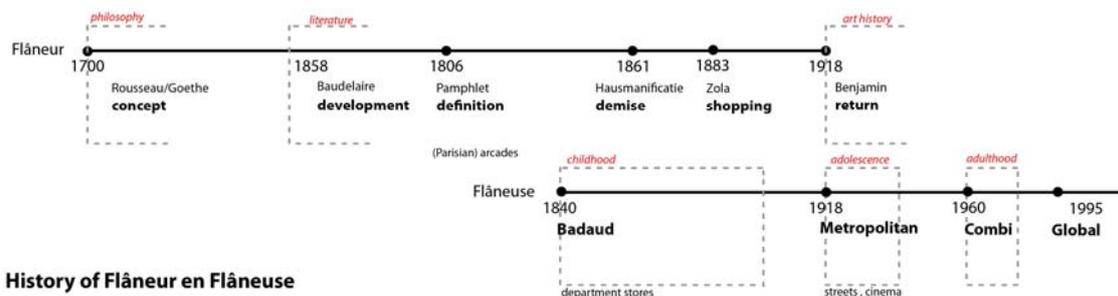
Figure 1
The development of the concept of the flâneur and the flâneuse.

4. Space Syntax and static snapshots analyses

In order to identify the gender differences in urban space, the routes from the railways stations towards the city centre in four different Dutch towns were investigated. They were chosen because of the eccentric location of the station from the centre and the quality the route has to flânerie. In Breda the route crosses a small city park, in Dordrecht the route proceeds along the inner harbour, Maastricht has the Sint Servaas bridge across the Maas, and Vlissingen has the green Boulevard. Not only is the scenery important for the flâneuse, but also the amount of crowd and the degree of liveliness in urban space.
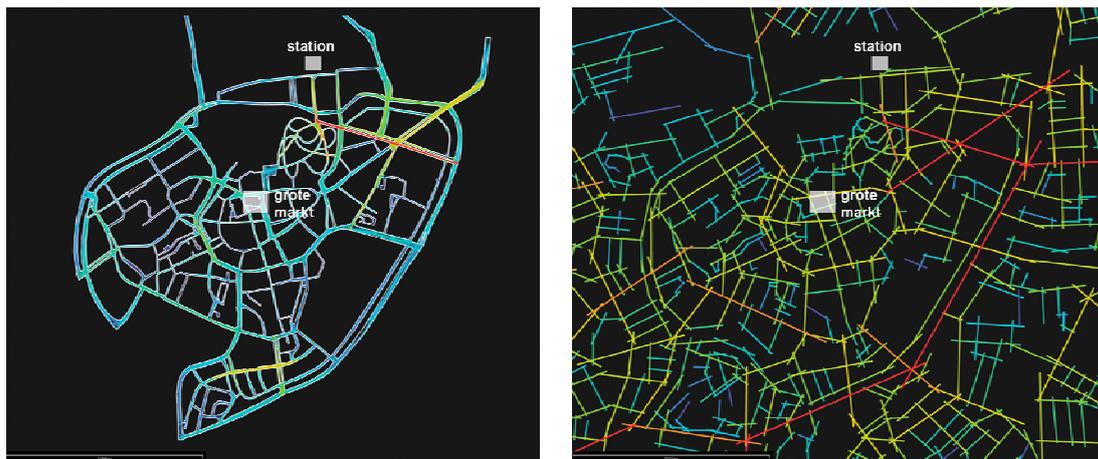
Figure 2:
The spatial analyses of Breda (above) and Doordrecht (below).

Proceedings of the 7th International Space Syntax Symposium
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122:4
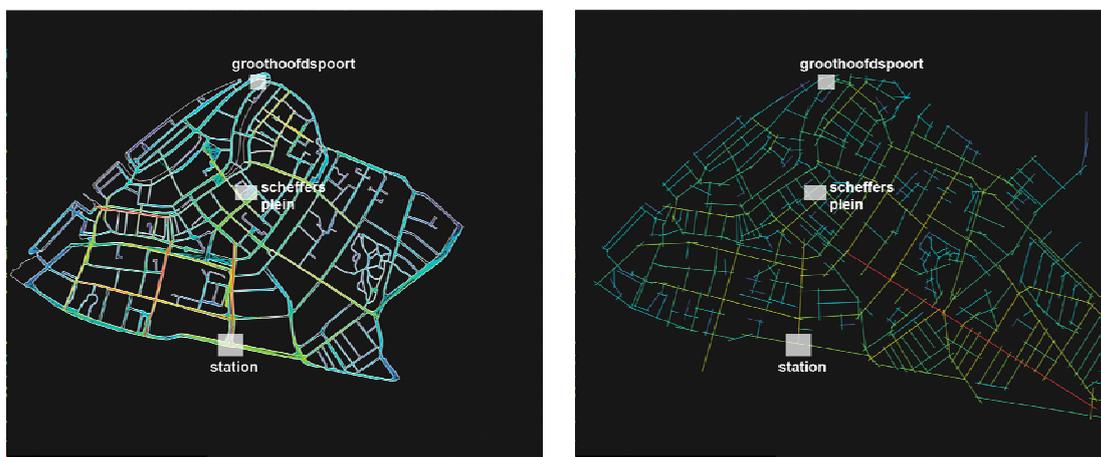
The Visibility Graph Analysis from the Depthmap software provides a good predictive model for movement. However, it incorporates only information on the configuration of space, and has no input on the location of attractors or generators of movement. Likewise it is not representing the variations types of individuals, their intentions for being in public space, nor their origins and destinations.

As the spatial analyses shows, Dordrecht and Vlissingen proved to have low degree of integration and street liveliness on the main route from the railway station to the marked square, while the opposite was shown in Breda and Maastricht. Maastricht actually scored best in the Depthmap analysis. This can be explained by the way in how strategically the location is of the main route in relationship to the local neighbourhood and city centre. The route is used not only to get to the station but also to move from west to east of the city.

The gate count method is based on observations in the towns on weekdays and in weekends. Flows of movement were observed and counted in the four towns on a weekday and in the weekends when shops are closed from 8 pm until 8 am.

First a number of points for registrations were chosen for each town. These points are located at street junctions. The categories used for the observation of human behaviour in public spaces are men strolling, women strolling, men walking, women walking, men standing, women standing. At each gate people's behaviour was registered every time they were crossing for a five minutes time period. Afterwards times are multiplied up to arrive a rate per hour. The results from the registrations were correlated with the results from the spatial analyses. In all cases correlations were found between the results from the spatial analyses and the registrations of human behaviour. The higher integration, the higher amount of people frequent streets. There were no significant gender differences during daytime. After shops' closing hours, men dominated the street. The results of these registrations are shown in figure 4.

Figure 3
The spatial analyses of Vlissingen (above) and Maastricht (below).

Proceedings of the 7th International Space Syntax Symposium
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122:5

Dordrecht and Vlissingen had low scores on the degree of liveliness in their streets, while opposite results are found in Breda and Maastricht. Moreover, as the spatial analysis and the results from the registrations of human behaviour showed, people tend to stay longer in crowded integrated streets then in empty segregated side or back streets.

The results from these analyses can be useful to create a better environment for the flâneuse. It can be done in urban design through incorporating attractors along the main routes and integrate the route in the structure of public spaces to stimulate liveliness. Spatially, streets with high integration tend to be favourable by women, but only when shops and cafes are open.

Breda Gender in %	Morning	Noon	Peak	Evening	
Men	61,5%	52,9%	60,4%	61,9%	
Women	38,5%	47,1%	39,6%	38,1%	
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	
Activity in %					Total
Men					
Walking	34,5%	24,3%	34,0%	7,3%	100%
Strolling	15,5%	51,6%	22,3%	10,6%	100%
Loitering	12,9%	58,6%	19,4%	9,1%	100%
Women					
Walking	20,5%	45,5%	25,0%	9,1%	100%
Strolling	15,5%	54,4%	22,0%	8,0%	100%
Loitering	16,7%	60,3%	17,5%	5,6%	100%

Dordrecht Gender in %	Morning	Noon	Peak	Evening	
Men	61,8%	47,0%	46,3%	54,7%	
Women	38,2%	53,0%	53,7%	45,3%	
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	
Activity in %					Total
Men					
Walking	22%	42%	26%	10%	100%
Strolling	12,2%	51,9%	24,2%	11,7%	100%
Loitering	18,8%	46,9%	21,6%	12,7%	100%
Women					
Walking	6,4%	56,1%	28,5%	9,0%	100%
Strolling	13,2%	51,5%	24,6%	10,8%	100%
Loitering	11,1%	51,9%	30,4%	6,7%	100%

Maastricht Gender in %	Morning	Noon	Peak	Evening	
Men	44,8%	46,0%	49,1%	51,9%	
Women	55,2%	54,0%	50,9%	48,1%	
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	
Activity in %					Total
Men					
Walking	21%	43%	26%	11%	100%
Strolling	13,2%	51,0%	22,4%	13,4%	100%
Loitering	11,6%	46,2%	24,9%	17,3%	100%
Women					
Walking	18,1%	46,6%	24,9%	10,4%	100%
Strolling	17,0%	52,4%	19,0%	11,7%	100%
Loitering	11,8%	51,2%	28,3%	8,7%	100%

Vlissingen Gender in %	Morning	Noon	Peak	Evening	
Men	53,3%	52,9%	58,1%	73,3%	
Women	46,7%	47,1%	41,9%	26,7%	
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	
Activity in %					Total
Men					
Walking	19%	50%	22%	9%	100%
Strolling	15,2%	53,8%	22,1%	9,0%	100%
Loitering	26,1%	42,0%	20,3%	11,6%	100%
Women					
Walking	19,1%	60,7%	16,9%	3,4%	100%
Strolling	19,9%	53,0%	21,9%	5,3%	100%
Loitering	26,3%	55,3%	15,8%	2,6%	100%

Figure 4
Statistical data from all the 4 towns

5. Conclusions

There are many continuations of old characteristics of flânerie, but there are also new developments in the nuances it. The flâneur can wander through the city 24 hours, seven days a week without any problem. Still it is different for the flâneuse, especially when she has no valid excuse to be out there. Often it is bounded to shopping activities.

Likewise, the quality of the environment is an important factor for generating an equal distribution of women and men in streets. Hence, architects and urban designer have to be aware of the users' perceptions of their design products. They are namely shaping the spatial framework for the opportunities for the flâneuse. The use of space syntax showed that liveliness could be predicted through analyses of the towns' spatial structure. Not only does the crowd provide the flâneuse a valid excuse to wander around the streets, a sense of security, but it's also a component of flânerie: to see and to be seen.

In the observations in the four towns, no gender differences can be found, until shops are closed. Suddenly the flâneuses are abandoning streets. Women are using the street as corridors and not as a destination itself. When women are using the square in the evening or at night, other women or men usually accompany them. The flâneuse is limited in her freedom, because she feels unsafe after shops' closing time.

The differences between the towns are not only influenced by spatial structure but also influenced by the number of inhabitants and attractors in the centre. Dordrecht and Vlissingen main route are

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122:6

spatially poorly integrated with the rest of the infrastructure comparing to Breda and Maastricht. They also have a lower numbers of cafés, restaurants and clubs than Breda and Maastricht, in which attract visitors to the town centre at night.

To diminish gender differences, street safety has to be taken into account in the urban design. This could be improved by integrating the main route in the infrastructural network of the city and by adding attractors, such as shops and cafes along the route. Then it is possible to generate an urban ballet throughout the day with a large variation of actors entering the urban scene.

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Proceedings of the 7th International Space Syntax Symposium
Edited by Daniel Koch, Lars Marcus and Jesper Steen, Stockholm: KTH, 2009.

122:7