

Spatial appropriations – the case of the lake of Zurich

Landolt Sara* & Odermatt André**

* Human Geography, Department of Geography, University of Zurich, Switzerland

** Economic Geography, Department of Geography, University of Zurich, Switzerland

The public parks at the lakeside of Zurich are among the most frequented public areas in the city of Zurich. They are highly appreciated by the residents (Stadt Zürich/Stadtenwicklung 2005: 8). Due to the frequent use of these lakeside areas, their intensive maintenance by public authorities is a precondition for providing high-quality space for detention.

The Department of Geography of the University of Zurich conducted a study on the use of the public parks at the lakeside. The study was executed in connection with the creation of a new concept for these public parks by the public maintenance service "Grün Stadt Zürich". The project aims at analysing spatial appropriation and utilization patterns at the lakeside, and their meaning to and their perception by the residents as well. Furthermore, in order to identify potential conflicts of use and new fields of intervention the study aims at identifying changes that have occurred in the utilization patterns by comparing its results with a similar social study that has been conducted in 1995.

Based on a theoretical understanding of space as a social construction, the analysis focuses on the aspects of comfort, belonging and commitment, which can be read as increased intensity of spatial appropriation (Fenster 2004; Kaspar & Bühler 2006). In order to understand the process of interpretation and the attribution of meaning to the objects we distinguish between producers and users. Thereby, the producers are consisted of the authority, planners, maintenance service, police, etc. Users can be divided, for example, into categories of different needs and requirements. In relation to the objects the intended purposes of the producers can be differentiated from the needs of the users. To make sure that an object will be recognized and used for the purpose of the producers, they attribute it with codes. In doing so, it is important that the producers and the users speak the same language. If this is not the case, conflicts between producers and users as well as between users with different needs could arise (Hamm 1982: 157-161).

In order to give consideration to the diversity of the public parks at the lakeside and to be able to give spatially differentiated statements we divided the area into eight sections. In the empirical work we used a triangulation of methods. Systematic observations constituted the basis for a survey that was conducted with the users (n=651). The study was supplemented by semi-structured interviews with experts and users. Empirical data was collected during summer 2005 and winter 2005/2006.

Compared with 1995 the distribution of age, the gender ratio, the frequency of visits as well as the place of residence of the visitors have barely changed. The gender ratio is equal in summer as well as in winter. Most of the interviewees live in Zurich (64% in summer time; 75% in winter time). The data collected in winter show that the visitors can be divided into summer-visitors and year-round visitors. 98% of the visitors in winter answered to frequently visit the lakeside in summer as well. This

demonstrates that the considerably more numerous summer-visitors do not crowd out the winter-visitors. Certain categories of the year-round visitors, for example the elderly people, seem to be disappeared in the bulk during summer time but represent a considerable proportion of the visitors during winter time.

The huge contentedness and the often-heard statement of “feeling comfortable” can be interpreted as a positive spatial appropriation. The visitors appreciate and like the parks at the lakeside, they feel safe, have enough space for their activities and are highly pleased with the quality and maintenance of this area. Statements like “*my* place in this park ...” are signs of a high identification and a higher level of spatial appropriation. The high identification with the parks also clearly appears when the interviewees talk about annoyances. The statement that littering the promenade is “...as somebody would waste *my* backyard” is an indicator for the strong identification with the area. A high identification is important that visitors take care of the area. Furthermore, it is the basis for personal commitment.

An example of a process of spatial appropriation that causes conflicts is barbecuing. With regard to barbecuing it is obvious that not all actors speak the same language. If there were equipped places for barbecues it would be possible to say that the producers coded the lakeside as barbecue area. But with one exception there are no such places along the lakeside. However, visitors barbecue at many places in the area. This shows that due to societal changes (eating in public spaces) predefined places (in this case the lawn) are used not only for the intended purpose. Therefore, barbecues cause conflicts between producers and people that barbecue as well as between the latter and other users. Barbecuing is now defined as a field of intervention by the authorities and the maintenance services.

The reciprocal influence of social structures and actions in the public parks at the lakeside appears as clear as the fact that the production of an artifact always includes an aspect of construction of society. Therefore, the production of public spaces becomes an object of power.

REFERENCES

- Fenster, T. (2004): The global and the holy city. Narratives on knowledge, planning and diversity. Harlow. New York.
- Hamm, B. (1982): Einführung in die Siedlungssoziologie. H.C. Beck. München.
- Kaspar, H. & Bühler, L. (2006): Räume und Orte als soziale Konstrukte. RaumPlanung 125: 91-95.
- Stadt Zürich & Stadtentwicklung Zürich (Ed.) (2005): Bevölkerungsbefragung 2005.