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**GENDER, AGE AND DESIGN IN A NEW PUBLIC SPACE IN A
MEDITERRANEAN TOWN: THE *PARC DELS COLORS* IN
MOLLET DEL VALLES (BARCELONA)**

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to discuss how a new and carefully designed public space can influence the daily life of its users and can become an identifying icon for the town. The research has been carried out in the *Parc dels Colors* (Park of Colours), a park that was inaugurated in 2001 and was designed by a celebrated Spanish architect. The Park is located in a Mediterranean town, Mollet del Vallés that belongs to the metropolitan area of Barcelona. Gender and age have been important categories throughout the research and qualitative methodology (in particular participant observation and in-depth interviews) has been an essential component of this study.

1. Introduction

This article discusses how a new and carefully designed public space can influence the day to day life of the people who use it, and how it can become an identifying icon for the city where it has been built. One of the aims is to analyse it taking into account the categories of gender and age. The research has been carried out in the *Parc dels Colors* (The Park of Colours) in Mollet del Vallès, a town in the metropolitan area of Barcelona. The Park was inaugurated in 2001 and was designed by a celebrated Spanish architect Enric Miralles, and it is an extremely original park in terms of its layout .

We define public space a place of interrelation, social encounter and exchange where groups with different interests converge (Ortiz, Garcia Ramon and Prats, 2004). The use and appropriation of public spaces is an aspect that has to be taken into account when carrying out studies on the daily lives of men and women. Factors such as sex, age and ethnic identity as well as class and income affect the way in which urban life is experienced (McDowell, 1999; Vaiou, 1999). In recent years, the ways in which public space is used have been the subject of study in a number of disciplines (anthropology,

sociology, geography, architecture, etc.) and, therefore, urban public spaces can be defined from different though complementary perspectives. The planning, design and realization (creation and renovation) of urban public spaces have played and continue to play a fundamental role as elements that enhance urban social interaction, contributing to the residents' quality of life and to the fight against social exclusion (Borja and Muixí, 2001). Likewise, urban public spaces contribute to the democratization of the use of space in the city, and thus foster the creation and development of urban identities and the construction of citizenship. Where public spaces are used by a greater diversity of people and for a wide variety of activities, they can contribute to the collective identity of the community (Franck and Paxon, 1989; Valle del, 1997). From a political perspective, the definition would include a vision of public spaces as places where people can participate in public life and where civil rights can be exercised (López de Lucio, 2000).

We are in a Mediterranean context, where cities are dense, predominantly with high buildings and with few gardens and terraces. Streets, squares and parks of many differing sizes are used as places to cross, stroll through, rest and interact. It is true that this model of city has somehow changed in the past few decades: the city has spread outward, the 'traditional' centre has become less important, the outskirts are now a series of single-purpose spaces to which part of the activities and services have shifted, and the inner city has felt the effects of these processes (Nel.lo, 2001). In large cities, outdoor spaces have become harsh places where one merely passes through as quickly as possible, and neighbourhood life has been weakened. This has affected people's daily lives, especially those who for gender and age reasons (women, the elderly, boys and girls) spend more time close to home. Spending time outdoors (playing, talking with neighbours, looking out from the balcony, etc.) is becoming less common than before (Tonucci, 2004). Still, we believe that due to the cultural tradition and the pervasive vital need to use public spaces in the Mediterranean, especially where the city centres are dense and compact, outdoor spaces continue to have an essential place in people's daily lives.

The analysis of gender and age are of key importance to our analysis. A number of researchers looking into urban issues have revealed that cities might be become spaces

for the emancipation of women and deprived social groups (immigrants, the elderly, the poor etc.), because of the opportunities they offer in terms of work, leisure, social help, etc.), and the anonymity they provide (Wekerle, 1982; Greed, 1994; Ortiz, 2004). However, it is also in cities where fear and threats are more present and women, in particular, are affected by such a feelings more than men. This entails restrictions on mobility because urban planning is based on obsolete criteria regarding the role of women in society and the economy (Hernández Pezzi, 1998; Darke,1998; Fenster,2004). Yet in spite of this, it has been shown that urban public spaces such as parks, squares, roads etc., are used more by women than by men (Paravicini, 2002; Garcia-Ramon, Ortiz and Prats, 2002) due to their roles in social life (Yeandle, 1998). The planning of the space and the architectural design may favour social inclusion or exclusion (Pareja and Tapada, 2001) and may help to bring about a more balanced use of these spaces by men, women, regardless of their age , social, or ethnic background.

In addition to this, in the planning of new public spaces architectural design has been conceived by local governments as a tool to promote a given image of the city for “marketing it” in order to put it in the tourist map of the world (Tello, 2002; Holcomb, 1993). Barcelona itself is an example of that with the redesigning of the city in relation to the 1992 Olympic Games and thereafter (Moix, 1994; García-Ramon and Albet 2000).

2. A medium sized metropolitan town

The *Parc dels Colors* is in Mollet del Vallès, a town of 46,897 inhabitants (8,358 in 1960). This sharp increase in population is mainly due to a strong flood of immigrants from the rest of Spain into the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona during the 1960’s. The *Parc dels Colors* serves as a central zone for the town, between the railway tracks and an important motorway, but it is relatively separated from the urban centre, which is further to the south. The urbanisation of the Parc also involved the linking of the three neighbourhoods around it (*Santa Rosa*, *Can Borrell*, and *Plana Lledó*).

The oldest neighbourhood is *Plana Lledó*, which came into existence at the end of the fifties with the arrival of Spanish immigrants from Southern Spain and it was a self-construction zone, then lacking the most basic facilities. For decades, one of the

neighbourhood's collective demands was for an open public space and women played an important role in leading the struggles:

“In the neighbourhood the women faced a daily battle to survive, to educate their sons and daughters, to somehow miraculously reach the end of the month, to support their husbands' strikes, which only compounded the families' economic difficulties. In particular, they demonstrated their ability to offer emotional and psychological support to cheer up the lives of their loved ones. All this took place in adverse material conditions (unhygienic housing with non-existent sewer systems; unsurfaced streets; difficulties in sending their offspring to school and lack of public space for walking or playing, etc.).” (Bosch, 1999:8)

The neighbourhood of *Santa Rosa* was built in 1984. It has a middle-to-low population density and is made up of single family dwellings with gardens, other social facilities such as a school, an old people's home and two large open public spaces. In total the neighbourhood is home to 1,711 people, most of whom are former residents of the centre of Mollet. *Can Borrell* neighbourhood is the most recent one. Building works begun on it in 1987 and it was finally finished at the end of the nineties. It was designed as an urban residential area consisting with both private and public green spaces inside them. With regards to urban development and the social, educational, health and commercial facilities and services it has to offer, the neighbourhood can be classified as a high quality zone.

3. A design space: The *Parc dels Colors*

The *Parc dels Colors*, which covers an area of 20,000m², was commissioned by Mollet Town Council to Enric Miralles with the aim to provide the town with a remarkable and unique space, which would serve both to provide the city with a sense of identity and distinguish it from other medium sized cities of the Metropolitan Area. As the mayor – who is a woman -pointed out to us, the aim was to:

“... create a unique landscape, which could only be Mollet and which could defy the forgettable and mimetic look of so many working neighbourhoods in the

sixties in the greater Barcelona metropolitan area (...) a free public space and a unique and unrepeatable landscape, which would belong to Mollet forever.” (Montserrat Tura, Mayor of the City Council of Mollet del Vallès, 2002)

As we set before, the *Parc* also provides a solution to the demands of the neighbourhood of *Plana Lledó*, and *Plana Lledó* Neighbours’ Association took an active part in its design with specific requests such as petanque courts, children’s playground, benches, etc. The total cost of the construction amounted to 4,799,443 euros, of which the Town Council provided 25% and the European Union 42%. The rest came from various regional and provincial administrations.

The *Parc dels Colors* is a complex space made up of a series of contrasting subspaces: two children’s play areas, a large area with some cement stepped seating, like a grandstand, two green areas at both ends of the park with Mediterranean plants, a number of petanque courts and an area mainly occupied by benches. In the middle, there are several areas of uneven ground and a seemingly random arrangement of fountains, lampposts, etc.

Shapes and materials are not chosen at random but aim to represent the history of Mollet as the coming together of people from different places. This diversity is expressed, for example, in the surfacing of the ground of the park; in the water, which symbolises the rivers, rushing streams and swamps of earlier times; in the pines and aromatic plants that can be found in the undergrowth and around the borders to remind us of the countryside that was a part of the town; in the wall of fossilised trees made from bricks laid as they would have been in the first simple buildings of the town, highlighting *Plana Lledó* neighbourhood’s humble and working class past; in the iron and concrete letters hanging from tripods representing the graffiti spread around the town and honouring Mollet’s young artists. The lighting also appears somewhat random as it aims to reflect the fact that natural light is not regular or constant. Thus some areas are lit and others are dark; the idea was to create hidden corners for those who want to use them.

4. Different uses and activities carried out in the park

Fieldwork has been essential to this study. Thirty-six in-depth interviews of residents and users have been carried out (the same number of women and men, different age groups), and six informative interviews of town planners and social partners. Observations of the park were carried out in different seasons, on different days and at different times from 2001 to 2003. This material has been complemented with photographs and descriptions of the atmosphere during the observations. All the material has been recorded and later transcribed.

The *Parc dels Colors* is used by a significant number of people, a maximum of 851 persons were counted in one of the visits in summer and 665 at one in autumn, which is not surprising in a Mediterranean city where people spend time outdoors in the streets, above all at dusk (when the intense sunlight hours have passed). It is also a reference point for many people because there is no other similar place nearby, especially in *Plana Lledó*, where it is close to one of the biggest schools in Mollet and a club for retired people.

“Well, we come here for a while many evenings for the fresh air. Not in the morning, you won’t find anyone here then. Mind you in the winter there are people here in the mornings playing petanque and things like that. Of course in the winter you can come and sunbathe, but not now, you could get sunstroke... From ten-thirty at night, in summertime, well you can find a lot of people here!”
(Maria Teresa, 50 years old, teacher, *Plana Lledó*)

The average data of all the observations during daylight hours tells us that women are slightly more numerous than men (52.6% of the total of visitors). The most conspicuous groups are women between 28 and 45 years old and children below 15 years old. The less frequent visitors are men and women from 46 to 65 years old, mostly people in working age and without children to care of. During weekdays women are predominant in the park, although in the mornings elderly men above 65 years old are also conspicuous. Children are usually present in the afternoons, especially after school hours.

The predominance of women with their children in the public space during workdays reflects the still low employment percentage of women in Spain (41,9% of working women within the age 15-64) in comparison with the European Union average (54,9%) (Eurostat, 2003). Grandmothers are also quite conspicuous often taking care of their grandchildren which indicates the still significant role of the extended family in Spanish society.

One of the main functions of the *Parc dels Colors* is its role as a playground, both for children and also for mature and elderly men who use the petanque courts. For children below seven the number of boys and girls is almost equal and they perform similar activities. However, the number of boys aged between 7 and 10 years old is significantly higher than that of girls of the same age. The boys' preferred activities are those that require more physical effort and use more space, such as soccer or cycling. They tend to be unaccompanied in the park whilst girls of the same age are usually accompanied by their parents.

Elderly people are to be found mainly at the petanque courts or at areas with benches, sitting and talking. Teenagers, particularly groups of boys, tend to look for the spaces that are most difficult to get to or most isolated, such as the stepped seating, at the top (more visible, but they are alone) or at the bottom (more hidden). There are only very few people who use the park on their own and most of them are between 15 and 30 years old (usually, most of them are men). They tend to sit or stretch out in the aromatic plants area or on the grass, and watch or read. This fact could raise questions of safety and confort which will be discussed below.

Observations made during weekends in summer nights shows us that around midnight the age group between 15 and 30 years old use the Park to meet in small groups (between 2 to 10 persons) before going somewhere else to spend the night. At dawn, it seems that the Park becomes again a meeting point for them. Mature people below 65 (mostly couples) have also been observed strolling in the Park or sitting at the benches after 11 p.m.at night to enjoy the coolness of summer nights but they leave shortly after midnight.

As an important final remark of our observations we can state that they are still heavily determined by gender along traditional lines of behaviour. In effect, according to the literature (Borja et al.2001; Parvicini,2002), success in a public space is achieved if many different people use it in many different ways. In this respect, the *Parc dels Colors* is a park used by different groups carrying out many varied activities. However, as we have mentioned those different activities reflect traditional gender roles. It is true that many fathers accompany their children to the park, either alone or with their partners, but they are still the least represented group on work days. In the same way elderly men are found playing petanque in the park in the morning surely because their wives are out doing the shopping, preparing lunch or other domestic duties. It is at night when the differences between sexes are less significant as a consequence that most of the people are young and without family responsibilities and also in the case of couples because at that time most domestic and caring duties are over. Thus, decisions about who does what in the family unit reveal the asymmetric power relation between the sexes that is reflected in the use of this new public space.

5. Evaluating the *Parc dels Colors*: criticisms and praise

We have found diverging opinions about the design of the Parc but, in general, most users, when interviewed, refer to the design as original, odd, abstract, magnificent, different... These terms are valued either positively or negatively.

“It’s original; it goes beyond what makes a normal park. The Japanese come with their cameras and everything, architects come to study it, I don’t know... It must have its charm, mustn’t it? It’s original, it goes beyond the traditional parks of trees and grass, and that’s it, it’s original.” (Tíscar, 49 years old, teacher, *Santa Rosa*)

Almost all the interviewed people agree that a park was needed but there are many problems with this one: the type of benches, the lack of trees, the lights, the surfacing of the ground of the park, the fountains... In general all the symbolic features are not appreciated or understood. In the first place, the lack of shade and green spaces are severely criticised: there are not enough trees, benches and other seats are

uncomfortable; where there are trees there are no benches and vice versa. As a woman said to us:

“I don’t think of it as a park. For me a park must be green, it must have grass. Here there’s a lot of concrete, it’s mostly concrete and no... even where they have put the fountains and they’ve put benches and everything. Well the benches are useless; you can’t sit there because you get wet. For me... well no, I don’t think of it as a park. It’s a construction or a piece of building work that’s won (architectural) prizes, as many as you like it, but as a park it’s useless.”
(Fernanda, 45 years old, teleworker, *Can Borrell*)

These comments coincide with the results of the literature that points out that women, more than men, associate a park with greenness and in turn greenness with nature (Rose, Kinnaird, Morris and Nash, 1997).

As for the fountains, there are many of them in the park. They are level with the ground and surrounded by a cavity 30 or 40 centimetres deep in order to catch the water. The users of the Parc praise the sensation of freshness they create in summer. However, in windy days the water does not fall within the cavity but spills over ground and makes it slippery. In addition, the cavities or holes present a danger in themselves, as often they are not noticed and people might fall.

“I think it’s dangerous, because there are a lot of water channels and really they look very good, but children can hurt themselves” (Ester, 21 years old, student, *Can Borrell*)

The uneven ground and the random distribution of symbolic objects along the Parc are also viewed with strong criticism:

“... it is dangerous because the ground isn’t flat, you must be careful as there are holes and if you put your foot in one of them you could hurt yourself, it has already happened before. You have to be careful. But, of course, people get

used to it. But to built a Parc with these kind of obstacles, I really don't like it"
(Francesc, 23 years old, student, *Santa Rosa*)

Some architectural features of the Parc can thus be viewed as exclusionary for certain groups of people (children, women, elderly and disabled people...). The stepped seating area is clearly a problem for elderly people:

"... those stairs, only young people can go up there and no one else. They're steps like this, and I have got short legs and can't manage it. And if I don't hold on to something, well, I'm not old but I'm not young either and I can't do it. I only went up there once but there's nothing to hold on to and it makes me scared, it makes me scared" (Hélène, 62 years old, unemployed, *Plana Lledó*).

But the stepped seating as well as the inadequate lighting are seen also as a problem for a young woman who told us:

"The stepped seating is the worst; it's very dangerous for children. I don't know what they're for, there in the middle with nothing else. (...) There's no much light. I feel vulnerable. People sleep on the benches. I mean, that there are things to be scared of and you don't feel comfortable until daybreak... Well I feel the same about people in the street too, when it's very dark" (Ana, 27 years old, nurse, *Plana Lledó*)

Although there are security guards at night, dark areas in the park are a problem for many users who feel unsafe, specially women. Women's fear in public spaces have been widely studied in the existig literature (Valentine, 1989; Pain, 2000) and in the *Parc dels Colors* women tend to be more critical and give more opinions about safety than men do, which suggest taht they are more alert to these issues and have experienced them more intensely. But the subject is less prominent in our interviews that it could be expected because of the permanent pressence of guards in the Park day and night.

Other architectural features are puzzling for many users: the brick walls, the fossilized trees, the hanging letters on cement structures. They are not understood, and perhaps for that reason they create a sense of strangeness.

“It's a design park and it isn't focused on people. It's a design and that's it. It's not for me to question the architect's work, is it? But there are things that I don't like and don't understand. I don't know what they mean. For example, the brick walls and the letters over there. What do they mean? I don't know, I don't like them or understand them.” (Ester, 21 years old, student, *Can Borrell*)

A major criticism is the high cost of the construction work as people think that the same amount of money could have been spent in other public services for the town.

“People do like the park, but everybody complains about the money it has been spent when so many things are still needed, for instance the hospital that still is unfinished...the park is useful and beautiful [but] if it had not been so expensive it would be much better, because that money could have been spent in other things that are needed as, for instance, repairing the streets in places where they are in a bad condition ...” (Toni, 52 years old, unemployed, *Can Borrell*)

Let's now turn to more positive evaluation of the Parc such as perceived by some users and by planners and members of the Town Council. In the first place, it is believed that the Parc dels Colors has put Mollet on the map, at least on the map of international architecture. Second, the Parc links the three aboved mentioned neighbourhoods in a continuous urban development and connecting the north and the south of the city. Last but not least, the construction of the Parc was an answer to the demands of *Plana Lledó* residents who were asking for an open and dignified space.

The *Parc* is an example of an urban project aimed to give the outskirts of the town a monumental character, while connecting them to the center. It might seem that the *Parc dels Colors* is out of place and it should be located in the center or in the outskirts of a more important city. In fact, residents believe this. But Miralles, the architect, was trying to reflect in this formerly marginal area the identity of the town, and in this he has been successful. Everybody agrees that the *Parc dels Colors* has removed the

stigmatized image of a deprived area, and has created a sense of belonging to the neighbourhood and to the town.

“... let’s see, this whole area has been developed and this means that we are within the town. In the past we were the people from the other side of the road. The improvements carried out have made us look more like other districts. (...) And the *Parc dels Colors* has been the final booster to all this so that once and for all we are ‘normal’. (...) Of course, for an area like ours to have such a thing, well, sometimes it seems that people think we are not up to it.” (Berta, 30 years old, student, *Plana Lledó*)

6. Concluding remarks

The *Parc dels Colors* is a complex and singular space that generates conflicting responses from residents. If its singularity appeals, its complexity disturbs. The originality of the design is not understood and it is not always appreciated and valued. However, our study suggest the Park has somehow reconciled the residents to their neighbourhood and to the town, enhancing their sense of identity with the place. But it is clear that the Park does not adapt to the residents, rather the residents have to adapt to the Park they have been bestowed with.

If a public space has to be a place of social interaction where groups with different interests (women and men, children and elderly, etc.) converge, then it is clear that the *Parc dels Colors* is quite succesful. It is widely used at different moments of the day and different seasons of the year by a different kinds of people, and in this sense it performs the main functions traditionally assigned to public spaces in a Mediterranean environment. However, if high quality public spaces are meant to create better conditions favouring a change in established social roles (for example gender roles), then we cannot speak of success of the *Parc*. Rather our observations show the permanence of quite traditional roles and patterns of behaviour as women’ and men’s activities are heavily determined by conventional gender roles.

The project also highlights the mismacht between town planners and neighbourhood residents (especially of *Plana Lledó*) despite the presumed feedback that took place

between them whilst the project was being drawn up. Although some demands from residents were implemented (for example, children's playground and petanque courts), the Park was conceived more as a showcase of the new image that the Town Council wanted for Mollet rather than a public facility to meet the needs of the residents of the neighbouring areas.

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