Urban Sociology
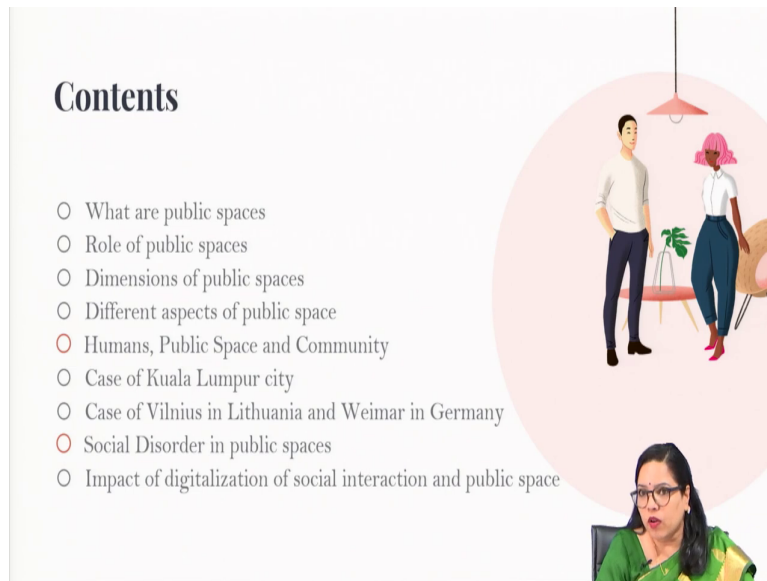**Professor Archana Patnaik**
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Module 3 – Smart cities and Urban life
Lecture 12
Social Interaction in Public Spaces

Hello everyone, today we will discuss the importance of Social Interaction in Public Spaces.

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In this module, we will discuss what are public spaces, the role of public spaces, the dimension of public spaces, and the different aspects of public spaces. Then we will also discuss humans, public spaces, and the community or the interaction between them. We will also reflect on cases from Kuala Lumpur city and Vilnius in Lithuania and Weimar Germany. Then we will also discuss the social disorders that happen in urban spaces and the impact of digitalization on social interaction and public spaces.

According to Madanipour a space that is not controlled by private individuals or organizations and hence is open to the general public can be called as a public space. Carr and others define public spaces as publicly accessible places where people go for group or individual activities. Mehta also defines public spaces as space that is open to the general public, which generates public use and active or passive social behaviour, and where people are subject to the general regulations that govern the use of the space.

For example, the streets, the plazas, the squares, the parks, and other urban public spaces. Similarly, urban sociologist Oldenburg has defined a third place which is visited by people

regularly, shared with friends, neighbours, co-workers, and even strangers, and is a place other than home or workspace.

For example, in the case of the small local business or the informal community gathering places, these refer to places that are accessed by people for the personal interest, but at the same time, these places also act as the contested territory between various groups, between private and the public and between the regulating authorities and the citizenry.

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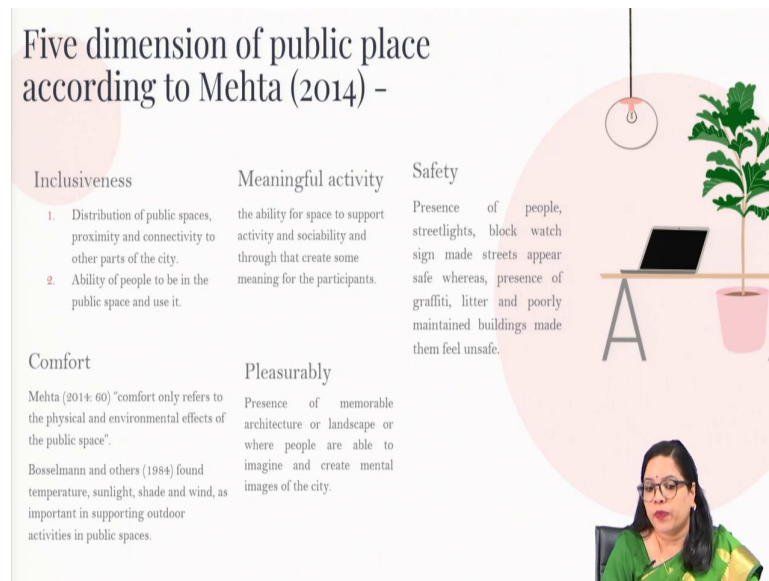Considering the usage of places as Beck suggests the places have social, economic, and environmental values. Thomas reflected on the four social roles of the public spaces as an arena for public life or a meeting place for different social groups, and a space for the display of symbols and images in society. And lastly, a part of the communication system between the urban activities.

Five dimension of public place according to Mehta (2014) –

Inclusiveness
1. Distribution of public spaces, proximity and connectivity to other parts of the city.
2. Ability of people to be in the public space and use it.

Meaningful activity
the ability for space to support activity and sociability and through that create some meaning for the participants.

Safety
Presence of people, streetlights, block watch sign made streets appear safe whereas, presence of graffiti, litter and poorly maintained buildings made them feel unsafe.

Comfort
Mehta (2014: 60) "comfort only refers to the physical and environmental effects of the public space".
Bosselmann and others (1984) found temperature, sunlight, shade and wind, as important in supporting outdoor activities in public spaces.

Pleasurably
Presence of memorable architecture or landscape or where people are able to imagine and create mental images of the city.

The five dimensions of public place according to Mehta are inclusivity or inclusiveness, pleasureability, safety, comfort, and meaningful activity, let us discuss them one by one. Inclusiveness if we have to define it is a place, a place is inclusive or not is determined by the degree of access one has to it.

According to Mehta when access to public spaces is concerned then it has two aspects. The first deals with the distribution of public spaces, proximity, and connectivity to other parts of the city. And the second aspect is the ability of the people to be in the public space and use it. Hence, one person's proximity to the place and the ability to use it determines the inclusiveness of the place.
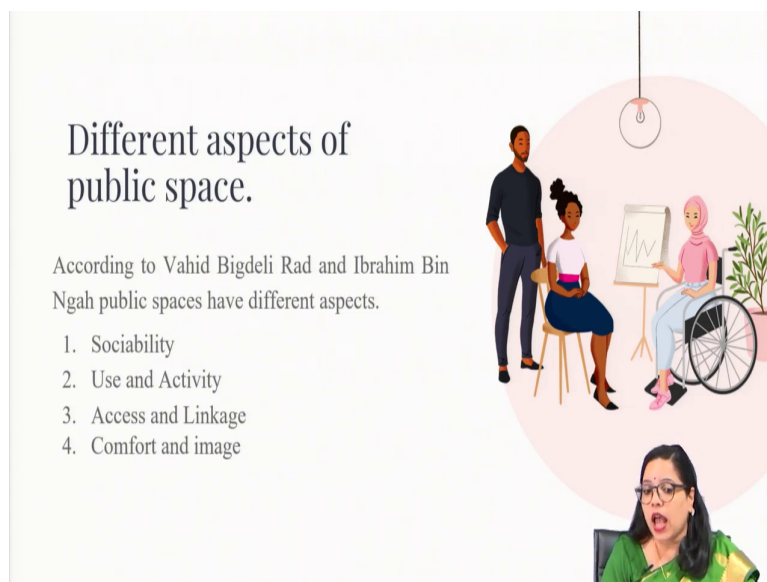
The second dimension is the meaningful activity, by which Mehta contextualizes the meaningfulness in the context of the ability for space, support, activity, and sociability, and through that creates some meaning for the participants. He referred to usefulness as a criterion for the place to be meaningful, like the place that is used for shopping or eating or entertainment, or special needs, to gather or to display or to express or to discuss debate, demand, and protest.

The third dimension is a which is safety is the primary concern when public places are concerned. The presence of stores and other non-residential properties, according to Perkins, and others, make people consider spaces safe. Scholars have also highlighted how the presence of people, street lights, and block watch signs made streets appear safe, whereas the presence of graffiti, litter, and poorly maintained buildings made them feel unsafe.

Comfort as the fourth dimension depends on various factors. According to Mehta comfort only refers to the physical and the environmental effects of the public space. For example, Bosselmann and others found temperature, sunlight, shade, and wind as important in supporting outdoor activities in public spaces. Further, protection from sun, rain, and wind plays an important role in the utilization of outdoor spaces.

The fifth dimension being the pleasurably refers to the presence of memorable architecture, or landscape or where people can imagine and create mental images of the city. Given the different dimensions of the public space, Mehta developed the public space index to measure the quality of traditional public spaces such as the streets, the plaza, the squares, and small urban parks. Now, having discussed the public space, and its dimension, let us discuss the different aspects of public space.

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According to Vahid Bigdeli Rad and Ibrahim Bin Ngah public spaces have different aspects, the first being sociability.

According to them. sociability is the most important aspect of public spaces as they create the opportunity for the people to interact with each other using these spaces, and through that, they develop a bond. For example, imagine all the time you and your friends used a park or a mall or a museum to meet and spend time with each other.

The second aspect of public space according to them is the use and the activity. The use of the space and the activity it promotes draw individuals from different parts to utilize the space during different times and seasons. The more the use of public spaces for the individual, the more they attract the people for its use.

For example, imagine how certain spaces in your city are used during the festivals in a specific season for celebrating it, and through that drawing people from various places to visit them and use them. Also think about the Melas, circuses, or other activities that use certain designated public spaces, and through that have created the use of the public space.

The third aspect of the public space is the access and the linkage of them. For them, the public space should be well connected and easily accessible to the public for better usage. Like having proper transportation facilities, and parking space facilities for specially challenged people to access the space. These all play an important role in the usage of space.

While the concept of linkage is associated with circulation and the special connection, access is linked to the visibility of the space and how one can reach it. Accordingly, Tibbalds term this as physical and visual access which can affect the positive function and the safety of the space. For example, imagine all the time when you were not able to use certain spaces like the parks or gardens for relaxation, as they do not have proper parking space, and how that created a problem for you in using that space.

The last aspect, according to them is comfort and image. The public space that provides comfort and has some aesthetic or visual attractiveness attracts people in using the space. In this case, the durability or the maintenance and the protection of the space and the visual attractiveness impact the mental comfort of the people within the respective public spaces. Such durability and the physical attractiveness of a space help people in getting a space to relax and derive satisfaction from the use of that space.

A space that can attract social participation is considered to provide the population with the following needs. For example, the mental and physiological comfort that provides an individual with durability, then relaxation, active occupation, passive occupation, discovery

and mystery, visual beauty and aesthetic features social desirability caused by interaction, and security.

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Communities that are formed within the public space are bonded through social interaction, people absorption, social security, and encouragement. This influences to increase in the different group's tolerance within a space, which leads to more interaction, creating active spaces.

Further, the community is affected by certain forces and factors, such as the geographical features of the public space or sights like the climate, the physical characteristics, and the activities in the public spaces, the economic aspects, the social aspects, the social-cultural features of the society, and the political aspect.

For example, we all feel attracted to spaces where we can relax or whose physical features attract us to spend time there. Having discussed the different aspects of public space, let us discuss some cases to understand the importance of public space for the people.

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According to Ujang and others, public spaces are regarded as social spaces and have a vital role in enriching the urban experience. Ujang and others in their study examined the association between place attachment and social interaction within public spaces in the city centre of Kuala Lumpur. According to them, human place interaction influences the human perception of a place and that forms the place identity.

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For example, as we discussed earlier, scholars like Mehta studied the quality of the main streets as third places and found that users who frequent the streets value the outdoor seating spaces provided by the businesses for relaxation and people watching. According to Ujang and others, Asian spaces and urbanism have multi-layered activities and images.

Thus, the role of public space in developing social attachment can be difficult to determine the multicultural context of Asian cities and their complex social realities. Since they studied Kuala Lumpur city, which is a multicultural melting pot, populated by Malay, Chinese and Indian ethnicities. The Kuala Lumpur urban design guidelines of 2015 aim to transform the city and make Kuala Lumpur city centre a more liveable, efficient, and enjoyable city.
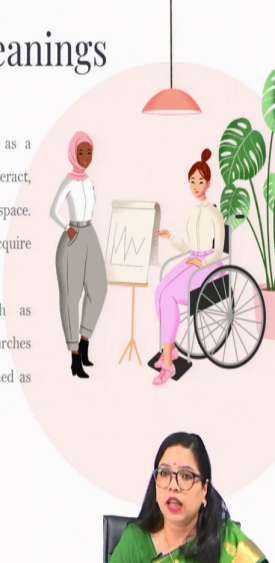
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The study was conducted in historical shopping and tourism destinations like Jalan Masjid India, the Dataran Merdeka, and the Medan Pasar. The participants of the study included different sections of people using the public space for different purposes, like the shop owners, the workers, the shopkeepers, some personnel, office people, shoppers, local visitors, and students.

They found that people from different groups attach different meanings to the space. Like shoppers, the traditional shopping streets of JMI are regarded as the chosen place to visit and shop. Whereas for vendors, the street artist it is, it serves as a means of livelihood. They also found that streets were used by various ethnic groups for weekly night markets and festivals, which are associated with Malay Indians, Indian Muslims, and Chinese ethnic groups.

The purpose of visiting a place is determined by the time spent in that space. Lack of street activities was also considered a factor affecting people's engagement with the space. They found that many migrant nationalities spend time with friends in public spaces in the city, mainly on weekends and public holidays. They also gathered during a certain time of the year to celebrate the festivities.

They found that many of the spaces were not designed for multi activities and thus fail to cater to the needs of the social and cultural interaction that could happen among the people, they found that streets were not regarded as a social space for people to interact, but rather as a functional space, as they were used to acquire goods and necessities.

They found that religious institutions such as mosques, temples, and churches within the city also function as community gathering places. These findings reflect the fact that the design of a space affects the function it provides to the users. Now, let us discuss another case where places are of historical significance.

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Case of Vilnius in Lithuania and Weimar in Germany

O Gintaras Stauskis and Frank Eckardt (2011) analyzed socioeconomic and psychological effects of architectural arrangement of traditional public spaces of two cities:

Vilnius in Lithuania and Weimar in Germany.

O Lukiškių Square in central Vilnius - it served as an ideological memorial place of the occupying Soviet regime.

O After independence in 1990, Lithuanian national and municipal authorities attempted to erase the negative ideological imprints associated with the place and link it to the modern use by residents of Vilnius.

Gintaras, Stauskis, and Frank Eckhardt analysed socio-economic and psychological factors or effects of the architectural arrangements of traditional public spaces in two cities, the one is Vilnius in Lithuania and Weimar in Germany. The Lukiškiu Square in central Vilnius is a place where from time-to-time court sentences and even the public execution took place. Later for half of the century, it served as an ideological Memorial place for occupying the Soviet regime.

After independence in 1990, Lithuanian nationals and municipal authorities attempted to erase these negative ideological imprints associated with the place and link it to modern use by the residents of Vilnius.

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Case of Vilnius in Lithuania and Weimar in Germany

✓ Theaterplatz in central Weimar, Germany is associated with two poets Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller. The city's legacy is linked to the work and life of these two writers.

✓ Thus, Weimar and the city became the place for intellectual pilgrims.

✓ Also associated with the concentration camp on the hills of Weimar in Buchenwald.

Similarly, the Theaterplatz in central Weimar Germany is associated with two poets. One is Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and the Friedrich Schiller. The city's legacy is linked to the work of the life of these two writers. Thus, Weimar and the city became a place for intellectual pilgrimage. However, it was also associated with the concentration camp on the Hill of Weimar in Buchenwald.

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Stauskis and Eckardt thought that for the sociological mission, public space is an arena where different social groups carry out a range of very specific social activities that are noticeable to the sharp-eyed viewer. For them, the social liveliness or the death of public space could be measured by evaluating the presence and the intensity of the social interactions and the generation of its result in the form of certain publicly accepted behaviour models.

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The behaviour models according to them vary from country to country and from place to place. For example, consuming non-vegetarian food is allowed in some places like some restaurants. However, consuming the non-vegetarian food is not allowed in sacred places. According to them while redesigning the city, the architects should consider these behavioural models without which the public might fail to interact with the city constructively.

According to them to facilitate social interaction in public spaces, certain specifics of design should be kept in mind by the planners. For them, a variety and combination of heart like the building and their structure and the soft like the elements of landscape relief painting pavements. Measures in combination with universal design elements like the microclimate light, colour, material, texture, etc, allow for the proper arrangement or rearrangement of various aspects or spaces to facilitate the mode or, to facilitate the most involving social activities.

By analyzing the urban squares within us, Weimar, Stauskis, and Eckardt found that socio-political systems shape the structural, and aesthetic transformation of places. The good and equal access of citizens of different ages and physical abilities, to public spaces, is vital for improving the social interaction within these public spaces.

Now, that we are aware of the public spaces and their interaction with the individual and society, let us examine the social disorder and the public space. Sampson and Raudenbush analysed the sources and consequences of public disorder. This was done with the help of videotaping and systemic rating of more than 23,000 Street segments in Chicago, to determine the scale of social and physical disorder in 196 neighbourhoods, census data, police records, and an independent survey of more than 3500 residents were used to test a theory of collective efficacy and structural constraints.

When we consider the concept of disorder within a particular space. Being the neighbourhood, for example, has a more specific bearing on the study of crime. According to

many scholars, associations have been made between the disorder and both the fear of crime and the crime rates. In this case, a minor disorder is a direct cause of serious crime.

Organizations of broken window thesis, which was given by Wilson and Kelling argued that public instabilities even if relatively minor, as in the case of the broken windows, drinking in the street and graffiti attract predatory crime, because the potential offender assumes from them that residents are indifferent to what goes on in the neighbourhood.

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Let us now discuss some concepts to understand the social disorder in public spaces. The first concept is collective efficacy. It comprises the social cohesion among the residents combined with the shared expectations of the social control of public space. Collective efficacy explains lower rates of crime and observed disorder after controlling neighbourhoods' structural characteristics. Collective efficacy is also linked to a lower rate of violent crime after accounting for disorder and the reciprocal events of violence.

The next concept is ecological comorbidity. Ecological comorbidity is the association between public disorder and predatory crime, especially violence. The broken window literature sees these disorders as a fundamental cause of crime. If this given idea is true, then the hypothesized association of structural characteristics and collective efficacy with crime and violence ought to be largely mediated by the social disorder.

Now, that we are aware of social disorder and public space. Let us examine how digitalization is affecting the usage of the public. Susan Drucker and Gary Gumpert documented the use of urban spaces in a media-saturated world. Scholars have highlighted

how the use of mobile phones has altered the use of public spaces. As scholars like Aurigi and De Cindio have reflected on how urban space is both augmented and digital.

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With the cities gaining the characteristics of information cities, the digital city, the smart city, and the global city, which we discussed in the earlier modules, the penetration of technology into the life of the public is irresistible. Similarly, Aurigi and De Cindio explain that new technologies allow people to meet new and different others beyond the confines of space and one's own culture, creating in this way, an entirely new world of potential friendships.

However, these provide people with an alternative to the physical world and the possibility of not engaging in the public space in the way we discussed earlier. Various scholars have even suggested how virtual worlds can provide for a mixed reality space or a hybrid reality where people interact on street and at the same time in the virtual world.

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According to Aurigi and De Cindio this type of distributed presence has implications for socializing with other people in the city and online spaces. Thus, we find that their interaction in public spaces is important. However, with the introduction of the new technologies, the benefits that these spaces provide, become questionable.

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Thank you for listening and have a great day ahead.