

School of Civil Engineering Research project web page

PhD topic: Urban Escape Places
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About the project

The general aim of this research project is to investigate what happens at the intersection of People, Places, Infrastructures and Environment by taking a closer look at the life that exists in between buildings, what Fran Tonkiss names ‘the social life of urban form’. Cities are in fact “a form of ‘socio-nature’, a complex ecology of human, built, and natural forms” (2013: 115).

The densification of cities, along with the ever-increasing pressure of the ‘standardized business time’, strongly impacts people’s way and quality of life. One of the most common ways to fight this pressure is to turn to escape places and the Cultural Ecosystem Services they provide: vision of natural and cultivated landscapes, inspiration, recreational assets and quite commonly opportunities of social encounters.

Still, concomitant to this craving for escape places and ecosystem services is an apparent suffocation of public spaces. The increasing pressure – and often divergent objectives - of privatization, the implementation of risk-based policies and the general principles of consumer-based urban economies only scarcely fit with the notion of public spaces, and hardly accommodate with the freedom of their users or at least with their alternative or even subversive occupation and practice (Evans and Jones 2008, Ferrel 2012).

This research project aims at exploring this tension and its impacts on the processes of urban transformation and renewal. Three cities have been chosen as case studies, each facing their own structural, political and social challenges: Birmingham, Amsterdam and Belfast.

Experiments/research method

The research method is mainly based on an ethno-geographic approach of the field, combining field notes, pictures, interviews and questionnaires, alongside with GIS-based desktop research.

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