

The previous discussion shows that climatical conditions were determinant in drawing people at certain hours of the day to both plazas and specifically during comfortable climatic conditions. The frequency of use also depended in people's available schedule for visiting the plaza and developing routine activities such as exercising.

16.2 Uses and Activities

Uses and activities studied in this chapter are related to the different functions that occur inside the plazas and in the surrounding context. This topic was studied with the objective of understanding what activities and uses that most attract people to Plaza de la Madre and Plaza de la República. Uses and activities were also studied through observation, which will be presented in the " Observation Findings" section of this chapter.

In response to question # 4, which was the only question regarding this topic, the main uses and activities experienced in Plaza de la República were of a social nature: socializing (24%), and relaxing and enjoying the public space (24%). Other uses were of a recreational and sport nature (rated at 23 %), in which children's play and adults' sport activities are included. In Plaza de la Madre, the main activities were people exercising (35%), relaxing and enjoyment (26%), and social interaction (18%).

An important result was the presence of a broader range of activities (both basic and optional as Ghel has categorized) in Plaza de la Republica due to the presence of a large number of amenities and the plaza's location with respect to surrounding land-uses. Surrounding uses that include commercial activities and food vending attract people to the site. The factors, that according to this study, explain the presence of a broader amount of activities in plaza de la República may be caused by the following conditions:

- Presence of a College called CUNIBE, which attracts a high number of young individuals to the plaza in order to socialize and rest between university-scheduled classes. (Colegio Universitario Rafael Beloso Chacín)
- Mixed-use activities in the area surrounding the plaza, which attracts people from different areas of the city. Such mixed-uses include: office activities, shopping, restaurants and cafes.
- Presence of scheduled (programmed) activities in the Plaza de la República, such as a daily TV show during night hours, and arranged sport classes in mid-morning hours during weekdays from different college institutions of Maracaibo.
- The centralized – sheltered area, with big fountain, which favors relaxation. The plaza's physical dimension, and parallel walkway system with different types of pavement material allow different speed traffic and uses by people.

- Presence of tall, relatively adult trees which provide enough shade during most hours of the day and therefore propitiate favorable microclimatic conditions and human thermal comfort.

When it was asked what people generally do in the public spaces, the range of activities was broader in Plaza de la Republica than plaza de la Madre. In Plaza de la República, the main activities were for social purposes, recreational and exercising activities were secondary. The previous are typical activities in public spaces, but two very different uses appear when an acoustic shell exists in the plaza and when a College Institution is located in the immediate adjacent block. As stated above, a daily television show and music events are available to people, which also attracts other people to the plaza. Consequently, people visit the plaza to watch special events (8% of the population interviewed) and of the student population interviewed (9%) chatted and studied for an exam with classmates or worked on course assignments before or after class.

It is very important to mention that students were the main users of Plaza de la Republica during noon hours, specifically for those purposes. As an additional question, not included in the interview of other users, students were asked if they had any gathering area in their college institution. Students stated that they had two spaces: one indoor and another outdoor in the main entrance. An additional question asked to students was why they were not there. Some mentioned the heat and uncomfortable conditions in both college spaces and, specifically, a lack of trees in their outdoor gathering area. Trees and shaded areas are highly attractive at noon hours not only for the students but also for anybody that inevitably has to be outdoors. According to CUNIBE students, being at the plaza de la Republica is not only a retreat from school, but also an oasis that protects them from inclement climate conditions. When they were asked how comfortable they felt at this time of day in the Plaza, their answers were favorable; they felt physically comfortable and their comfort rates were high. This issue will be discussed further in the microclimatic comfort section of this analysis. Other students, after eating in the College luncheon or eating in adjacent fast food restaurants, go to the Plaza in order to rest and socialize.

In contrast to Plaza de la Republica, individuals in Plaza de la Madre had a different hierarchy of uses and activities in the public space. Plaza de la Madre is used more as a sport facility than as a social gathering place. It is also used as a place for passive engagement, which involves relaxing, or looking at others rather than interacting. This plaza also does not have amenities for children such as Plaza de la República, which keeps the plazas from being attractive to these very important young users. Plaza de la República is a more active engagement place, where social interaction and bonding between people exists. It was also know that user of both plazas also liked to watch other people and their children if they were playing.

A factor, which discourages people visiting Plaza de la Madre, is the nature of the surrounding uses, which draws less people to the sector and reduces the presence of natural surveillance in the

Plaza. If surrounding land uses were different and the type of commercial activities more socially orientated, the plaza would be more visited. One important surrounding activity, which sometimes attracts people to the plaza, is the Memorial Chapel SERCOMPRECA. People who attend the Memorial Chapel frequently use the public space to sit and talk with others when the establishment is crowded with people. People who visit Plaza de la Madre may find a retreat from the emotional tension of the funeral ceremony. Perhaps the plaza could be used at times as an extension of the Chapel and as an alternative environment to socialize and relax. Other than the memorial chapel, other surrounding uses such as the bakery shop draw people constantly in and out of the sector, but this establishment is not a social condenser, because the place has no seats or tables where the people can eat.

Other uses are hardware store, a chicken vending establishment, commercial bank, a restaurant, a nightclub, and at night, only one informal food vendor appears to sell hamburgers and hotdogs. So, activities in the surroundings are not very attractive for people. In addition the nightclub, located in one of the surrounding blocks, has a bad reputation. Perhaps the nightclub (especially during weekends), the bakery that is open until 10:00 pm everyday, the memorial chapel and the fast food vendor could attract users to the plaza during night hours, but these activities do not represent significant people condensers and other establishments in the city could afford better service.

In relationship to the activities developed in both plazas, interviews showed that in Plaza de la República, users develop more diverse activities than Plaza de la Madre. One factor that increased the presence of people and activities in Plaza de la República were the presence of supporting commercial activities in the sector that was constantly drawing people to the area and the plaza. Plaza de la Madre did not have these conditions. The activities in this plaza were limited to exercising, engaging passively with the environment (watching others), for example, perhaps because of the lack of many physical amenities in the plaza and the nature of the surroundings uses.

16.3 Accessibility

Accessibility is the way users arrive at Plaza de la Madre and Plaza de la República and the distances necessary for access to it. This information is necessary to know how easily people are able to access both plazas, to explore if this influences people's intensity of use and visits to both plazas, and to determine if problems in accessibility reduce the frequency of visit to both plazas.

Most users of Plaza de la Madre are the surrounding neighbors of the plaza. Therefore, most users live very close (70% of the participants) or relatively close (23%). Average distances from their homes to the plaza were one to ten blocks. In contrast, most Plaza de la República users live very far from the plaza (60%) and a minority of the people lived close or relatively close to it. Living far away from

this public space meant that most people needed to access the plaza through vehicular transportation. Plaza de la Madre users live in the surrounding neighborhood and therefore most people arrive by foot (77%). In Plaza de la República most users access the plaza through public transportation, which implies that public transportation service is effective. Actually, the plaza has a bus stop where most students from CUNIBE College arrive. Particularly for Plaza de la Madre users, living close to the plaza increases the opportunities for people to visit the plaza in a more constant and regular way; this is another reason why individuals use the plaza almost on a daily basis.

According to the classification of plazas from PDUL regarding accessibility conditions, Plaza de la República is a general ambit plaza and plaza de la Madre an intermediate plaza. Plaza de la Madre is an intermediate category plaza, which is more neighborhood-orientated. Therefore, most users will be surrounding neighbors that live in close residential areas. Plaza de la República is a general category plaza, which has a broader influence over larger city populations and therefore is widely accessed by people from different parts of the city. Therefore, a person traveling long distances to access Plaza de la República may reflect high preferences towards this plaza, which infers that the plaza has successful conditions, which makes it a people condenser. Also, the presence of accessible conditions invites many more people to the place. Plaza de la Madre, although being highly accessible through public transportation, does not attract users from other sectors due to the nature of the surrounding activities. The security conditions of the neighborhood (close to barrios), the lack of diverse activities and uses in the plaza reduces the chances of drawing many people in. Therefore, the plaza is physically accessible, but it does not have attractive conditions for people.

One of the most important amenities that influence the accessibility to the public spaces, and in this case affected accessibility, in Plaza de la Madre and Plaza de la República, was the lack of parking space. The lack of parking space in both public spaces encouraged people to park their private vehicles along the perimeter of the plazas. This generated traffic congestion, especially in Plaza de la República and the surroundings (being a highly visited space), by reducing the available street space for the traffic flow. This fact also created vehicular congestion due to the fact that parallel parking demands more maneuverability in order to place the vehicles appropriately. The presence of traffic congestion during peak hours and the lack of parking space near the plaza is an unfavorable issue for both plazas.

The way people accessed both plazas was somewhat different and depended on the users characteristics and the availability to use public or private transportation. In Plaza de la República most students accessed the plaza by public transportation and most families by their own vehicles. Most participants accessed both plazas by foot when visiting the plaza for exercising. Therefore, the way people accessed both plazas and the distances taken to visit these spaces reflected that Plaza de la República is used by a wider range of people coming from different areas of the city. In Plaza de la Madre, most participants using the plaza lived in the neighborhood.

16.4 Sociability and perception of other users

Sociability, as studied in this research, deals with the perception of the user towards other users of the plaza. This research asked if people interacted with others in the public space and sought to know if any other user of the plaza made people feel threatened or uncomfortable. It explored how social interaction took place in the plaza and how comfortable people felt with the other users in the plaza.

The interviewed participants were asked if they knew others in the public plaza, and if they were able to describe them. The most diverse descriptions were given in Plaza de la República. Thus, more diversity of users was found in Plaza de la República than Plaza de la Madre. It is also important to note that Plaza de la Madre is an intermediate plaza; a major influence in the surrounding neighborhood, and therefore, it is more popular among the nearby residents. In Plaza de la Madre, most interviewed participants mentioned that users of the plaza were diverse in age and social status. Also users were people that cared about their health and walked and jogged. A minority of interviewed participants (14%) perceived others, as good and therefore non-threatening, 11% believed that other users were socially active people, the rest felt that users were mostly neighbors and people seen regularly, especially while exercising on a daily basis. In Plaza de la República, the description of others mainly focused on young people and CUNIBE students; people were seen as nice and therefore, non-threatening. A lot of the users that were interviewed mentioned that others were people exercising and skating, as well as family groups using the public space. A very low percentage of participants saw policemen and maintenance workmen as other users in the plaza, especially in the morning hours.

In Plaza de la República, the presence of many and diverse users at peak hours was a favorable factor, which was a sign of natural surveillance and security. On the other hand, in Plaza de la Madre, diversity was not necessarily perceived as a favorable condition for increasing security because diversity also meant the presence of “malandros” as other users of the plaza (who lived in the adjacent barrios). Therefore, the image of others and the image of the plaza as a gathering space were more favorable in plaza de la República than Plaza de la Madre.

It was also noted that people socialize more in plaza de la República than plaza de la Madre. Perhaps the setting supports more interaction among people due to the presence of “triangulation” amenities such as the acoustic shell, which favored the presence of different spectacles in this plaza, due to the presence of attractive commerce in the surroundings and more intensity of use of this plaza. In Plaza de la República, participants also mentioned that interaction among strangers also occurred. In this case the family orientated environment in the afternoon and night hours favored interaction among parents while their children played with each other.