

17. Observation Findings

The chance to observe was very useful for obtaining additional information and to identify factors not detected through the interviews. Most of the observations were developed between interview sessions and were tape-recorded. The observations were based on a chart, which had important items as a checklist, which helped to structure the process. This allowed reporting events as they were occurring, allowing detection of people's behavior in more systematic way. Although this was not the main focus of this study, this specific method supported research findings and the research conclusions. A chart was developed in order to organize the observation process, but it only worked as a referential list of things to take into consideration when observations were done. It observed how the plaza is used, and spatial needs in people, because often people's actions can provide more information than their words. It also detected missing links between people and the environment; and unfavorable factors for public life and sociability. Particularly, by recording the activities in the public spaces at different times of the day, many facets of people's behavior can be obtained. Therefore, the combination of both interviews and observations were important for obtaining information from the users and their perceived behavior. It was an important learning process to observe public spaces for this research. Observations also helped determine the most popular spots in the Plaza and determine people's spatial behavior and perceived attitudes in both Plaza de la Madre and Plaza de la República. The following are some general findings obtained through observation in Plaza de la Madre and Plaza de la República.

Frequency of Use

Observation detected peak hours and the frequency of use during the days of the week. Peak hours for both plazas were morning, afternoon and evening hours. People had the available time to use these setting and enjoy the public spaces due to the presence of a much cooler and favorable microclimate. In both plazas, the presence of people began very early in the morning.

During weekends, and specifically at peak hours (the afternoon and night), both plazas experienced slightly higher intensity of use than weekdays. During weekends in Plaza de la República, intensity of use at other hours such as morning and noon was lower than experienced in weekdays, due to the absence of CUNIBE students. In Plaza de la Madre, morning was almost unused by people and noon continued to be empty during weekends. Particularly Plaza de la República becomes a very important family gathering space during weekends because parents bring their children especially to play with the battery operated cars that are available for rent. This amenity is highly attractive for children's recreation and for families.

Plaza de la República is visited from 5:00 to 5:30 a. until 11:30 to 12:00 p.m. When music or cultural spectacles exist, this pattern can extend until later hours. Although the presence of cultural spectacles influence the permanence of people during longer hours of the afternoon and night, this factor alone should not be seen as determinant of the frequency of use experienced and the time spent in this plaza. Therefore, it is possible that a combination of several factors makes this phenomenon possible. The presence of mixed-use activities in the area, which are predominantly commercial and food establishments, the presence of a college institution which draws many students to the plaza, the use of this plaza as a place for developing sports activities by CUNIBE, and the different spectacles developed in the plaza are important events that positively influence the intensity and frequency of use.

Figure 51 **Students at Plaza de la República during mid-morning**



At mid-morning most users are young people carrying books, which were believed to be students from CUNIBE. Most students were seen scattered around the plaza under shaded spaces.

Night and afternoon hours in Plaza de la República were also the most intensely used and visited hours of the day due to favorable climate conditions in the outdoor spaces and due to the vitality of the surrounding sector. At night, most people are seen using the restaurant establishments. CUNIBE is crowded with night shift students and musical events and the TV show develops in the acoustic shell. In Plaza de la República, the noon hour was less active and although people are present the frequency of use is less than other hours. Most people in the plaza are engaged in groups, generally located under a tree and in a scattered way around different areas of the plaza. At peak hours during the afternoon and night hours, most of the informal vendors appeared on the perimeter of the plaza and the plaza surroundings. At peak hours nearby restaurants were used and visited. Many have outdoor seating spaces and are located on a terrace over the street level with interesting views towards the plaza. At this hour the microclimate was cool and fresh, CUNIBE (college) is generally crowded by night shift students and a lot of families and exercising people were present in the plaza. In Plaza de la República, people presence in the morning hours is less socially orientated than afternoon hours. After 4:00 p.m. diversity in the plaza was higher. During the morning hours people start to appear from 4:30 to 5:00 a.m. Use during early morning hours is basically for exercising and jogging. Most users at this time are professional and adult people, older people are seen after sunrise and stay in the plaza until heat starts to warm the plaza

microclimate. During morning hours the Plaza is very cool and breezy and students start to appear in the Plaza from 7:00 to 7:30 in the morning. Most students like to sit in benches under trees, close to the fountain and the diagonal walkway, which leads to the Bus Stop and the College.

Both Plazas also experience differences in seasonal use. It was observed that frequency of use varies with the season. Christmas and summer vacation are very important times of the year, not only attracting people to the public space and increasing its use, but increased use of other public spaces as well. It was observed that pattern of use in both plazas varied from December to the month of January. December was much more active, especially during the afternoon, but not much during morning hours due to Christmas season. Festivity seasons are particular important times of the year in which people have more time available to be outdoors and use public spaces. A discussion about differences in pattern of use due to seasonal conditions and holidays is not considered within the scope of this study.

Activities

Children were often seen on scooters, bikes, on battery-operated cars, which are available for rent in Plaza de la República. Most of them play around the central space of Plaza de la República. This location, first allowed children to be easily viewed by their parents, and it was also the most sheltered area away from skaters and joggers, and also away from street danger. Youngsters were seen on skates, rolling around the plaza in the internal peripheral walkway due to this walkway pavement characteristic, which helped them move smoothly. Skaters are mostly seen during afternoon and evening hours. When Plaza de la República was very crowded during afternoon and evening hours, conflict was found between users: joggers, skaters and children's parents. Plaza de la Republica was not originally designed for high-speed traffic; it was designed as a passive engagement public space. Some users have complained about the speed of skaters and children's cars. Policemen had to take control measures concerning this issue. The person responsible for renting the children's car had to reduce the car's speed because people were complaining about being run over by them. An incident was reported with a pregnant lady, who was run over by a children's car and rushed to the hospital. Skaters complain about other skaters who often speeded and blocked their way. In a certain, way this issue has to do with the individualistic and indifferent attitude Venezuelans sometimes have in relationship to others.

Figure 52 and 53 Teenagers at Plaza de la República skating in the external walkway.



One of the biggest discoveries in Plaza de la República was the use of the setting for imparting sport classes by different college institutions (such as CUNIBE). These were programmed activities, which drew people constantly to Plaza de la República during morning hours.

Figure 54 and 55 College sport activities in the plaza



It was observed that CUNIBE is not the only college that used the plaza for sport activities; another college called IUTIRLA also used the plaza for the same purposes.

In Plaza de la Madre, this mixed-use and diverse surrounding environment was not experienced. It was observed in Plaza de la Madre that people use the plaza during shorter periods of time because at 8:00 a.m. the sun starts to heat the surfaces of the plaza and traffic begins to increase, making this environment more uncomfortable for people to be in. Most people use this plaza during morning hours primarily to exercise. Use and people permanence in Plaza de la Madre increased during afternoon and evening hours when microclimatic conditions were more favorable in this plaza. Therefore, in Plaza de la Madre, the most popular hours were in the afternoon and evening. In the afternoon for example, most Plaza de la Madre users are parents bringing their children to play, people beginning to exercise in the plaza and young people starting to appear and congregate. Similar to Plaza de la República, children generally bike, roller skate and use their scooters. One good thing about the Plaza is that it has more open spaces than Plaza de la República available for children to move around. This public space is sloped, which is preferred by adults and children, because it intensifies people's workout and allows children to slide more easily.

Figure 56 A group meeting at Plaza de la Madre.



This is an example of an optional activity-taking place in Plaza de la Madre. A rescue squad composed by young people trained by a medical doctor meets at the plaza, becoming their alternative gathering space (because their brigade does not have an own setting).

In Plaza de la Madre during the evening most youngsters are seen in the public space interacting socially with their friends. Most of them are found leaning or standing around the fountain which beginning at 6:00 to 6:30 p.m. operates daily till midnight. Also people from the funeral service were seen sitting in the plaza close to the Funeral Chapel. When the Funeral Chapel was crowded, and all possible funeral halls were in use, the plaza became more crowded as well. In Plaza de la Madre, during evening hours, fast food informal vending appeared, and the bakery was constantly visited, sometimes the Funeral Chapel was used but no other surrounding use socially activated the this area. The small nightclub located near the Plaza operated mostly during the weekend, attracting certain users to the surroundings, but is not a very popular establishment, with a poor reputation. Police monitoring was observed once in a while in the Plaza but it was neither permanent nor prolonged. Most policemen moved very briefly around the plaza and the only time they stayed for longer period was while several officers gathered to eat at the bakery. The sense of security users had is also very different from Plaza de la República. The lack of police monitoring in the plaza and the perception of users as an unsafe area may be causing the lack of people presence during more hours of the day.

Sociability

The social environment is quite different between Plaza de la Madre and Plaza de la República. In Plaza de la Madre, for example, users were perceived as socially diverse and children were not observed as the dominant population. Women were generally found in groups at peak hours and mature adults were the predominant population. Young people were especially seen during afternoon and evening hours. Another important issue observed was that more diverse users were found in Plaza de la Madre than Plaza de la República.

Figure 57 and 58 **Children Playing in Plaza de la Madre and Plaza de la República**



Children tend to play during longer hours in Plaza de la República than Plaza de la Madre. This is due to the amount of people present in this plaza, the presence of amenities for children and better security conditions.

In Plaza de la República, people with common interests, like parents bringing their children to the public space, were found chatting about their children or some other commonality. Often, children that play in the plaza make friends with other children. The children's car rental amenity not only allows

children to play and interact among themselves but their parents as well, in spite of being strangers. Amenities such as informal food and snack vending in the plaza and in the surrounding areas of the public space, the special events and TV- talk shows that develop in the acoustic shell creates the opportunity for people to make comments between strangers, talk about their impressions about the topics or the musical spectacle and other situations. This is what Whyte defined as “Triangulation” (1980), the presence of an event or amenity in the public place, which could draw strangers together. Communication, exchange and interaction between strangers can be found in the plaza, but competence and lack of empathy can also be found. Any kind of interaction can be found, positive and negative.

Observing people engaged in groups showed longer permanence in the plaza. Most social activities and dynamism experienced in both public spaces were during afternoon and evening hours, which coincided with the peak hours. More people were observed engaged in groups in Plaza de la República than Plaza de la Madre. Actually the presence of the College Institution (CUNIBE) in the proximity of the plaza allowed students to often use the plaza at different hours for social gathering with their peers. It was observed that most people in Plaza de la Madre and Plaza de la República were engaged in groups of 2 to 3 people. Woman composed most groups in both plazas. Also more romantic couples were observed in Plaza de la República than Plaza de la Madre, often lovers used this plaza for romantic encounters. In interviews some people criticized couples imprudent behavior, especially among the presence of children in the plaza.

Amenities

Sometimes people presence was so high in plaza de la República that seats were not sufficient for all users. Therefore, one of the most important physical needs in Plaza de la República consists of providing more sitting spaces. People are seen leaning on the planters, sitting on the central fountain or in the steps. Lack of sufficient sitting spaces in plaza de la República is a concern. Consequently, people sit around steps or around the fountain in order to rest and chat while children are playing. Resting in the lawn and in planters is not permitted although sometimes people were found leaning on planters or sitting over them. It was observed that people sitting over planters were encouraged by the police to not to do so.

Figure 59 and 60 Amenities available for children in Plaza del a República



Amenities for children in Plaza de la República are available for children especially until late hours during weekends. Children's car rental, the vending of balloons are some conditions that this plaza afford for children.

The TV talk show and the cultural events where local musicians and groups perform in the plaza constantly attracted people to Plaza de la Republica. This is an example of “Triangulation” which William Whyte talks about. Perhaps what Plaza de la Madre may be missing is triangulation; an event or activity that can attract more users to the plaza.

Figure 61 and 62 **Musical events in Plaza de la República**



The presence of musical events highly attracts people to Plaza de la República

In Plaza de la Madre it was observed that people did not stay long periods in the plaza unless they were engaged with others through social interaction. Besides the beauty and physical arrangement of the public space, the setting does not provide enough amenities for people. Perhaps one of the most important affordances of Plaza de la República is the presence of an acoustic shell and the proximity to very busy commercial building and activities in the surroundings make people constantly present in the area. Another important issue not observed in Plaza de la Madre but present in plaza de la República was police and private security guard surveillance.

Spatial Behavior

Coincidentally, both Plaza de la Madre and Plaza de la República users have the tendency to use central spaces for passive activities (children’s recreation and social gathering or spectacle viewing) and the external perimeter for active engagement such as exercising or skating. During night hours when most exercising people leave the plaza, social and recreation activities remain until late hours (11:00 to 12:00 p.m.) This pattern also increases during weekends. This same pattern was also observed in Plaza de la Madre but people spent less time in the plaza than Plaza de la República users. Most people bringing their kids concentrated at the center of both Plazas away from traffic congestion or more active people’s engagements, such as jogging, walking or skating. It was observed that people jogging and walking generally located at the perimeters of the plaza, closer to the traffic jams and pollution. It was confirmed in the interviews, that they were highly uncomfortable. People tend to locate in the center of plazas, close to the fountains, the obelisk or mother’s monument, which also where children gathered. Microclimatic conditions were one of the most important factors that influenced people’s spatial behavior.

It was seen that during noon hours fewer people visited Plaza de la Republica and the people who were in it were all under a tree or shaded area.

In the following page maps of the spatial behavior observed at different hours of the day will be provided for better understanding where people congregate and locate during different hours of the day.

Physical Conditions

Plaza de la Republica is a square, similar to Plaza de la Madre, but with different location and site characteristics, different amenities and subsequently a different livability, social and aesthetic experience. Plaza de la Madre's current renovation and physical arrangement has become aesthetically pleasing and attractive to people which has drawn more users to the plaza. Actually it was observed that mayor's office workers give constant maintenance to both plazas in a daily basis, which is considered a positive management strategy achieved by para-municipal entities. Therefore, constant garden keeping and maintenance has been highly positive and attractive to users.

Observing people's pattern of use while exercising was important for detecting some problems in Plaza de la Madre. It was found that the intensive traffic flux at peak hours in Plaza de la Madre overwhelmed some users. Therefore, instead of using the peripheral sidewalk to exercise they used the internal space.

Figure 71 **Water irrigation system at Plaza de la Madre**



Figure 72 **User exercising in the internal area of Plaza de la Madre**



Users exercised in the internal space of Plaza de la Madre, once the water irrigation system was activated in the morning. The narrow dimension of the walkway was also uncomfortable for people to walk through when the plaza was crowded during the morning. It was also observed that other users exercised in the internal area because of the overwhelming proximity to the vehicular traffic.

The gases emanated by vehicles and the proximity of the sidewalk to the street was observed as an uncomfortable condition. Also the narrow dimension of the sidewalks did not allow all the people to