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# Producing & Consuming Public Space: A ‘Rhythmanalysis’ of the Urban Park

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Over 2.5 billion visits are made to UK parks each year (Greenspace, 2007). Hence, there is, unsurprisingly, an abundance of literature dedicated to parks, especially within the context of urban regeneration (Inroy 2000). However, little attention has been given to how these forms of social space are produced/consumed (Arsel and Bean 2010; Brace-Govan 2010; Costa and Bamossy 2003; Ozalp and Belk 2009; Sherry 2000), or about the temporality of these consumption experiences (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Calls to develop a more detailed understanding of the nature and meanings of consumption-related practices associated with park users have recently been made (Lee, Shepley, and Huang 2009), which suggests an opportunity to offer a more comprehensive analysis of the temporal consumption experiences encountered by urban park users, and the subsequent contribution to a perceived ‘sense of place’.

For many industrialised cities, the creation of urban parks in the mid nineteenth century was seen to provide “lungs to the inhabitants of densely populated districts” (Latimer 1987, 7) and a place where the general public could take exercise. Thus, giving rise to a strong correlation between the quality of green space/accessibility to public parks and quality of life (Barbosa et al. 2007). Accordingly, changes were also made to the way that urban park spaces are being produced and managed, moving from city councils merely fulfilling the function of park caretaker to a more strategic and actively ‘managed’ role whereby planned marketing activities are created to differentiate experience of the locale and (co-)create consumer value (Warnaby 2009).

Public parks and green spaces are “by their nature multifunctional and analysis falls between different academic areas” (CABE Space 2010, 42). Therefore, drawing from sociology’s view that “space and the duality production/consumption are thus dynamic concepts based on practices” (Styhre and Engberg 2003, 116), de Certeau’s (1984) and Lefebvre’s (1991) notion of space as a “practiced place” is employed here. Moreover, as social practice is composed from daily, monthly and annual rhythms as well as natural rhythms, Lefebvre’s (2004) concept of ‘rhythmanalysis’ helps to capture more fully the embodied everyday experience of those who use or pass through the urban park space. Lefebvre suggests that rhythm exists when there is an interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, and which will incorporate repetition (in time and space), interferences of linear processes (originating from human activity/social practices) and cyclical processes (originating in nature/the cosmos), and a cycle of birth, growth, peak, decline and end. Lefebvre notes the existence of numerous rhythms (i.e. polyrhythmia), which can “unite with one another in a state of health, in normal (which is to say normed!) everydayness” (i.e. eurhythmia), or can be discordant (i.e. arrhythmia), which he perceives as “a pathological state” (2004, 16).

The study focuses on parks in the north west of England, UK. To help capture the diversity and complexity of human and non-human interaction in this socio-cultural context, we employ visual ethnography (Pink 2007) and walking interviews with users (Clark 2009). Compared to interviews alone, the use of photographs and film arguably help to capture more fully, the “lived realities of everyday consumption” (Belk and Kozinets 2005, 128). Rather than merely recording movement or repetition of rhythms, our mode of analysis attends to moods, atmospheres and reciprocal interactions

between humans as well as between non-human pulses of life, in other words, the ways in which rhythms *animate* the urban and facilitate the creation of a ‘sense of place’.

The visual and aural narratives produced as a result of these complimentary methods have helped us to make sense of the temporality of the urban park as a consumption experience. A constant and dominant rhythm identified at all parks is the ebb and flow of user traffic, echoing the linear rhythms of travelling to work or school as well as serving as a constant reminder of the surrounding industrialisation. Unsurprisingly, cyclical rhythms are extremely pronounced in the urban park context, separated by days, nights and seasonal events. Early morning, weekend rhythms are dominated by harmonic non-human interactions between swaying trees and birdsong which later become muffled as the park gates give way to the everyday ‘commercial rhythms’ of the fast food vendors preparing for the day ahead. From mid-morning to early afternoon, the urban park attracts a diverse range of individuals and groups. As the rhythmic pace intensifies, the exchanges between humans appear organized and amicable.

For the most part, the user’s mood is of enjoyment and appreciation - “*Heaton Park would be my favourite...it’s a lovely space. It really used to lift my spirits and clear my head especially going for an early morning walk...it was lovely*”. However, tensions were evident at times (perhaps in a manifestation of arrhythmia), with certain users indicating their annoyance at the intrusions and lack of respect for their space - “*Every time I go to the park jogging I have dogs chase me. A few make contact with my feet and I have no idea if they are going to bite or something*”. Social relations brought about by interactions between non-humans and other non-humans were also spoken of by dog walkers - “*the dogs stop and say hello to each other and you kind of naturally speak to the owner and ask them about their dog...so you build up a rapport based on dog ownership*”. While recognising the role of urban park managers in ‘managing’ the aesthetics of the park space and organising seasonal events such as summer concerts and charity ‘fun-runs’, it is clear that it is the users who are instrumental in co-creating the overall image, ambience and consumption experience of the urban park.

The multiple (poly)rhythms brought about by interactions between place, time and human (and non-human) action, help to illustrate more fully the temporal nature of urban park users’ consumption experiences. The paper concludes by discussing how our study helps distance our analysis from wholly textual accounts of park usage as well as providing management and policy recommendations regarding the essence of urban park space.

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