COMMUNITIES CANNOT BE BUILT

DOI: https://doi.org/10.18485/arh_pt.2025.10.ch20

_ Pieter de Haan

Knowledge Centre Shared Space,
Leeuwarden, Netherlands,
pieter@kenniscentrumsharedspace.nl

ABSTRACT

Places are human places. It means that another way of use of public space makes sense. It does not necessarily mean that another way of distribution of space in the public realm must lead to a continuation of the nowadays separation of different categories of road users. In my opinion the road should become a street with a shared use. A road where people can communicate and meet each other. Conditional for making human places is to have a traffic technical higher network to enhance mobility needs. Dense, mixed-use, walk-able urban spaces are recognized the world over as the most creative and dynamic environments. The mall-like recreations of these spaces are already perceived as being passé and gaudy and a poor substitute for the real thing. From Curitiba to Copenhagen to Istanbul, the notion of liveable streets – an old Indian concept that once characterized cities as different as Benares and Tanjavur – is now the new mantra of smart urban design. (Rajan 05/24/2010)

In The Netherlands we discovered also that when design of the public space was started with the need of people, most not motorised, we can expand our urban public realm beyond older pedestrian spaces into spaces that were previously segregated and devoted to motorised traffic. (Paul Barter Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, Singapore 2010).

The road should become a street with a shared use. A road where people can communicate and meet each other.

We now can present results of working over 20 years with a concept called Shared Space in terms of behaviour, accessibility, safety and implementation in bigger cities and rural areas. Shared Space also implies an innovative approach to the process of planning, designing and decision-making. New structures for municipal organization and public involvement are the result

KEYWORDS _ *Public space design, process, involvement*

INTRODUCTION

"Communities cannot be built."

Communities are built on the relationships, shared experiences, and mutual support among people. The physical structures, like buildings and infrastructure, are just the backdrop. It's the people who bring life, culture, and a sense of belonging to a community, most times with a sort of own identity. Villages, older settlements grow slow and the inhabitants are of different generations. Young and old are living mixed in a community. Time and years give the possibility to get to know each other.

COMMUNITIES GROW SLOW AND ALMOST ALWAYS IN A HARMONIC, AND ORGANIC WAY.

Communities are built on the relationships, shared experiences, and mutual support among people. The physical structures, like buildings and infrastructure, are just the backdrop. It's the people who bring life, culture, and a sense of belonging to a community, most times with a sort of own identity. Villages, older settlements grow slow and the inhabitants are of different generations. Young and old are living mixed in a community. Time and years give the possibility to get to know each other.

In the seventies in the Netherlands the concept of "woonerf" came up. (literally translated in English as "residential plot")The idea was that streets that are built to live in, should be and kept liveable. In 1976 this idea was accepted as a juridical entity. Around 20 % of all houses are in neighbourhoods that can be called "woonerf" (Sterke woonerfwijken: Voorkomen is beter dan herstructureren, 2011) . It looked a bit like an endeavour to make a village. Or like an old African saying: "It takes a village to raise a child".

Still these ideas are introduced. See figure below from a woonerf in Rijswijk the Netherlands. See the sticker on the special woonerf sign, saying that 15km/h is the maximum speed.



Figure 1: Woonerf in Rijswijk 2016 (Mens en Straat)



Figure 2: Wellington NZ

The word "woonerf" is one of the few Dutch words that became a familiar word in English. In most European cities it is a common way to make living places also safe and liveable places. Even in Australia and New Zealand we find places for people instead only for cars and transport.

The next phase was to make a step from only neighbourhoods to cities and villages, where more functions formed the texture of a whole living area, where mobility, shopping, schooling and leisure were mixed. This idea came up in the nineties in the Netherlands. No longer the usual traffic regulating instruments, like signs lines and lights. It was the late Hans Monderman (1945-2008) who was seeking ways to make public space back again from a traffic space to a human space (Haan et al., 2022). His idea was based on communication between people in the public space. This phenomenon, nonverbal communication, brought Hans Monderman, to the idea that people communicate in every day life to move through public space. It's one of the most important ways how people relate to each other.

Is Shared Space an idea?

Slowly the ideas of Hans Monderman got attention from planners and traffic engineers. First in The Netherlands but already in Europe and on other continents. As a concept, without a scientific base, governments and an Interreg project made it possible to realize experiments and research. But it's not just a concept, although emerged in the world of traffic engineering, it's much more than that. It's about people, about equality of people, road users, about living and can have more implications for how people interact and are responsible for there places. Or as Charles Montgomery (2013) says: "So, if we really care about freedom for everyone, we need to design for everyone – not just the brave."

It also about trust and respect instead of rules and regulation. So stemming from ideas about engineering it's also about philosophy, and psychology about human social attitudes, inclined to be good, inclined at forehand to trust others. See for instance the worldwide assent with the ideas of Rutger Bregman in his book *De Meeste Mensen Deugen* (2019) *(*Translated: *Most People are Good*).

In the idea behind Shared Space it's not distrust, but trust as the ruling mechanism for public space.

An illustration can make clear how the world of social life, where people have contact and interact with others, differs from the world of traffic and regulated public space. Two observations:

When I'm in the supermarket, I walk with my cart and do my shopping. Moving through the most narrow "streets" is a bit like in real traffic, I stay to the right, ask if I can pass or wait for someone till I can reach for a product. These are no traffic rules, these are human rules. As long as I make contact, I'm friendly and I even don't show that I'm in a hurry. Outside the shop, we put our goods in the car. We start driving and start to be drivers, road users, no longer interacting with others, individuals only reacting on road signs, traffic lights etc. The communication is directed one way to me, part of the traffic system, no longer a human world.

When I was in Shanghai some years ago, I observed in the city centre how people in a shopping area crossed a street. Traffic lights and policemen were ignored. In the chaos there was a steady flow of pedestrians motor bikes and cars. All on almost the same speed. See YouTube for my footage (2025).



Figure 3: A car with blinded windows is like a cocoon.

This illustration shows that behaviour is strongly influenced by the situation. The blinded car windows prevent two way interaction and stimulate the dominant communication with the system ,the traffic system and not the social system. It's like living in the world of traffic instead of living in a human world.

We see this also in the built environment where buildings are no longer showing their inside, they are directed to the interior and not to the street, to the road users. Plinths are important for an attractive urban environment. As cited in *The City at eye level* (Karssenberg, 2016): Urbanites experience cities in what we call the "public realm". A building may be ugly, but with a *vibrant* plinth, the experience can be positive.

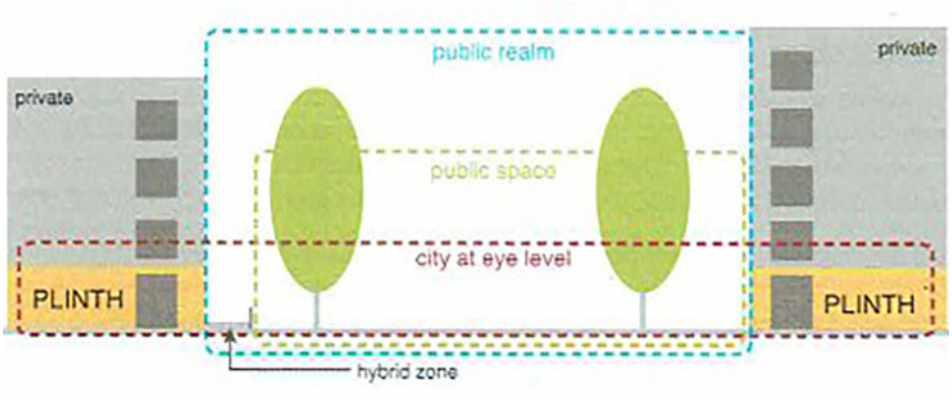


Figure 4: Plinths and public space.

The interaction between all road users, regardless of their mode of transport should be possible in a human space. Besides of interpersonal interaction, the surrounding, the texture and variation built or green is likewise important for the feeling of being in a social and human environment.

SLOWING DOWN, HARMONIZING SPEEDS

Slowing down car speeds, is a key issue to achieve human places, but with speed humps, fines for speeding, speed cameras and all those measures that need a form of maintaining, it is still not easy to reach the speeds we want.



Figure 5: Are signs the way to slow down car traffic in pedestrian zones?

In an experiment, done by Dirk Iede Terpstra (1998), car drivers were presented over 40 lay outs of the same road with different facades, high and low nearby or further away, green along the road or parked cars, a school, water etc. the speed they drove in the simulator was measured. The more texture in the facades the more it led to maintain lower speeds.



Figure 6: Norfolk (UK) Trees for speed calming.

This idea was also used in Norfolk (UK), with trees. The idea was to reduce speeds, by planting trees nearer to road when a village was approached. Also planting the trees with less distance between was a mean for car drivers to perceive speed and led to more or less conscious reducing the own speed, because the scenery of he landscape was passing faster. It's clear that the context of the road or street that influences the speeds. With this in mind it was possible to design places for people and make the conditions to change from the world of traffic to the world of people.

Shared Space as a human space for decision-making

One of the first projects for applying the ideas of Shared Space was at the Laweiplein square in the City of Drachten in the Netherlands. This is a sort of roundabout, but the design differs from standard design, lacking zebras and clear ways of priority. So, on first observation we saw cyclists, certainly also the young ones, school children, giving hand signs. Much more than in traditional regulated locations. This was a first indication that the environment did not rule



Figure 7: Gestures as communication

the behaviour in a strict way but made road users communicate with others. Students from the Groningen University did a study on this phenomenon and found out that in Shared Space locations, compared to regulated locations, there were more non-verbal signs (Vries Koopmans, 2013).

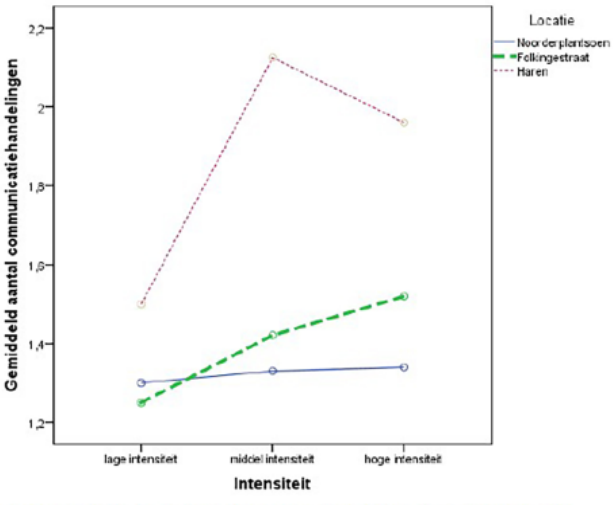


Figure 8: Signing by cyclists and number of gestures.

In Figure 7 the red-dotted line shows a higher average of communicative acts than in the two other places. We see the most acts in situations with an average traffic flow.

It looks as if the lack of signs from the system urges road users to communicate with each other instead of with the system This form of communication is not how we normally comprehend, because it's just one way communication. Shared space system stimulates and enables 2-way communication without additional infrastructure! The observation and the research was an indication that the late Hans Monderman (Shared space on the way to landscape, 2002) was right that it all deals with communication in traffic (Echo from the world, 2007).

Shared Space for every human being ?

Questions have come up, about vulnerable road users, like blind and visually-impaired people, who don't have the ability to communicate with vision. Making a street design in one level, without sidewalks and curbs, would give problems for blind people to orientate, but wheelchairs could move easier.

A study by Havik (2012), comparing three conventional locations with Shared Space places, revealed that there were no significant differences between locations when asked about the feeling of unsafety. In Shared Space we find most times people reporting that they felt unsafe, when "their" place was reconstructed into a Shared Space. But when asked more in-depth it was more a feeling of "insecurity", not knowing what to do, because there was no clear guidance. Older people reported this more than younger ones. After a certain amount of time, this feeling diminished and also avoiding those places became less frequent. In the study of Havik (2012), when blind and visually impaired people had to walk a pattern through the place, the result was that in one of the Shared Spaces, they got lost, problems with way-finding and orientation. A closer look at that place learned that the design, could be done better, with more points that could serve as orientation points. So a guidance for local designers was made, together with the Knowledge Institute for the Blind. And for the blind and visually-impaired road users, new developments are coming, developments that can help them move through Shared Space (Frank, 2019).

A better application is to use the system for navigation called " Galileo". This can guide blind and visually impaired people. It's much more precise than GPS, and that's important to find one's way in public space. It's not ready yet but it's a promise for future orientation for the blind and visually impaired (EU Agency for the Space Programme).

But apart from all this technology, there is also the social way. When blind or visually impaired people show their need, i.e. to cross the street or to find their way they most times have their red and white stick and/or a guide dog. They communicate their situation or need and they get help or ask for it.

Shared Space is for every road user and gives each one the same rights, not depending on the mode of transport or where they are in the public space. It needs a responsible and creative input from the designing engineers for the vulnerable road user. In the years that the Knowledge Centre Shared Space (Kenniscentrum. Shared Space) grew in experience, together with Royal Visio an expertise centre developed for visually impaired and blind-people-guidelines regarding these road users (Havik, 2014).

Shared Spaces can be built

Shared Space became accepted as urban design technology. After the concept became a viable option to use in urban design, no longer the ideas of Hans Monderman were the only source, although he brought these concepts with a lot of charisma. Still more research was required: figures, measurements, and experiments. Besides, the concept and realisation lacked a process in the beginning and an evaluation afterwards. This was added by the Knowledge Centre Shared Space: Functional ambiance as a method to assess the situation and to formulate the ambition (De Urbanisten). These parts are essential to realise a project that is for the users, the people around that space. These projects are no longer suspect as only coming from "the engineers and the politicians". A people's place is almost "owned" by the people, it's their square, village, centre or street.



At this junction in the village of Siegerswoude, The Netherlands, there were severe accidents, driving too fast and even a fatal one. Engineers suggested a roundabout. That's a technological solution, also an easy one, a copy of the many roundabouts everywhere. But the villagers wanted something better, something of their own and together with a group and help of the shared space workers, another design was made, a square in a rural surrounding. No straight roads anymore, a place a bit hidden with trees and bushes, so speeds go down and only on the square a road user can find it's way. It works, it's found much nicer and even some functions could be added. This place got an identity, the villagers named it "Ons dorpsplein" ("our village square").

Figure 9: Siegerswoude, NL, before and after reconstruction. (pictures Google Earth.)

With human intelligence it is possible for people to reach their own solutions for their own problems. These solutions will have support and less (or no) objections, because they are from bottom up and therefore also sustainable.

CONCLUSIONS

"Is there a definition for Shared Space?" A question many times heard.



In search of a definition of shared space:

Public space is all around us, a vital part of everyday urban life: the streets we pass through on the way to school or work, the places where children play, or where we encounter nature and wildlife; the local parks in which we enjoy sports, walk the dog and sit at lunchtime; or simply somewhere quiet to get away for a moment from the bustle of a busy daily life. In other words, public space is our open-air living room, our outdoor leisure centre.

Sir Stuart Lipton, CABE

Figure 10: A short(left) and a longer definition of Shared Space.

But a definition suggests that Shared Space is a standard solution, a concept to apply everywhere and always with the same look. This is not what it should be. So in the run of over 20 years it became clear that it's better to find the conditions for applying Shared Space:

1. A place is suitable for Shared Space when there are more functions than just moving from A to B.
2. The place or places should be part of a network with a higher hierarchy.
3. Speeds should be harmonized, with design measures.
4. Shared Space needs a design process that includes the community and their evaluation.
5. The design should reflect the history of the place.
6. The design characterises the identity of the place.
7. The place is accessible for everyone.

The conclusion is that the concept of Shared Space is still a concept, never ready and there are still more questions to answer and more questions will be raised and researched.

REFERENCES

- Sterke woonerfwijken: Voorkomen is beter dan herstructureren. Nicis-Platform31 (28 september 2011). Archived 1 april 2012. https://web.archive.org/web/20120401045303/http:/www.nicis.nl/Wat_doen_wij/Verspreiding/Docbank/Wonen/Wijken/Wijkenaanpak/Sterke_woonerfwijken_Voorkomen_is_beter_dan_herstructureren:232896.
- Haan, Pieter de, Sjoerd Nota, Karin Broer. 2022. *Shared Space. Een Innovatief Verkeersconcept Zonder Regels*. Noordboek
- Montgomery, C. Happy City. 2013. Transforming our lives through urban design. Penguin Random House UK.
- Bregman, R. 2019. De meeste mensen deugen. De Correspondent.
- YouTube, 2025. https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=shanghai+shared+space footage made by the author.
- Hans Karssenberg. 2016. The city at eye level. Eburon.
- Dirk Iede Terpstra. 1998. Vorm, Functie en Veiligheid, SWOV.
- Vries-Koopmans, K. de. 2013. *Communication and Traffic: Shared Space*, University of Groningen.
- Shared space on the way to landscape. January 2002. Proposal for Interreg IIIb NSR project .
- Echo from the world, powerpoint presentation (in pdf) about publications in 2007.
- Havik, E. 2012. *Wayfinding and Accessibility for visually impaired people.* Wöhring Printservice Zutphen.
- Swain, Frank. 2019. "These Colorful Stickers Are Helping Blind People Find Their Way Around." MIT Technology Review. June 6, 2019. https://www.visio.org/en-gb/professional/bevordering-deskundigheid/vision-2017/visio-presentations-at-vision-2017 or https://www.technologyreview.com/s/613632/these-colorful-stickers-are-helping-blind-people-find-their-way-around/.
- EU Agency for the Space Programme. https://www.gsa.europa.eu/personal-navigation-system-visually-disabled-people, Accessed April 12, 2025
- Kenniscentrum. Shared Space. www.kenniscentrumsharedspace.nl
- Havik, E. and Melis-Dankers J.M. 2014, *Toegankelijkheid van Shared Space gebieden voor blinde en slechtziende mensen,* Koninklijke Visio Huizen, The Netherlands
- De Urbanisten. Office for Urbanism and Landscape Architecture. http://www.urbanisten.nl/wp/?portfolio=functional-ambiance-2 Accessed April 14, 2025.

LIST OF FIGURES

- Fig. 1. Woonerf in Rijswijk 2016 (Mens en Straat)
- Fig. 2 Wellington NZ
- Fig. 3. A car with blinded windows is like a cocoon.
- Fig. 4. Plinths and public space.
- Fig. 5. Are signs the way to slow down car traffic in pedestrian zones?
- Fig. 6. Norfolk (UK) Trees for speed calming.
- Fig. 7.Gestures as communication
- Fig. 8. Signing by cyclists and number of gestures.
- Fig. 9. Siegerswoude, NL, before and after reconstruction. (pictures Google Earth.)
- Fig.10. A short(left) and a longer definition of Shared Space.