Event Details

Title of Event
Toolkit for the Ethnographic Study of Space: Methods for culturally sensitive and inclusive public space

Organization Details
Organization: Public Space Research Group, The Graduate Center, City University of New York
Organization Country: United States of America

Summary
The Toolkit for the Ethnographic Study of Space (TESS) is an in-depth method for studying the everyday life of a particular public space. It is a qualitative method that helps to understand the meaning and context of urban space. Ethnography—a cultural description of a place—is a way to uncover the cultural rules, beliefs, feelings, and practices that make up public life. It complements quantitative survey and demographic methods by adding people’s experience of place. Most importantly, a TESS is a way to uncover the causes and dynamics of social exclusion, lack of diversity, and inequality in the use and access of a space to work toward creating a socially inclusive space for all community groups and members. TESS is an excellent way to begin evaluating a public space because it highlights what conflicts or opportunities may exist in a way that does not assume the researcher already knows what they might be. In other words, an ethnographic approach encourages us to learn what we did not already know, as well as confirm whether our ideas, plans, and goals are in fact correct. In addition to asking direct questions, the toolkit relies on a series of techniques that, when viewed together, create a rich portrait of a public space—a detailed picture of what is happening and why at a particular moment in time. Because multiple tools are used (mapping, photographing, observing, interviewing, and documenting the history of the space), the researcher or community member will produce different understandings of the space and ultimately bring them together to create an inclusive description. One strength of this methodology is that the researcher or community member can compare what they learn from each tool and search for an explanation when the findings differ. These differences often highlight the most important aspects of life in a public space. The use of the TESS enables trainees to answer evaluative questions about urban space that emphasize cultural, social, physical and life stage inclusion. The methods training includes: 1. Participant observation and field notes 2. Behavioral, movement, physical traces mapping 3. Informal interviewing 4. Oral histories of local residents and designers 5. Qualitative and thematic analysis 6. Matrices of users, activities and conflicts Core questions include: 1. Who has physical access (by walking, biking, public transit or private vehicle, by feeling safe and secure, and being able to enter without fees) to a public space or network of urban spaces? 2. How do people feel about their influence over the design, operations, and programming of a public space? 3. What makes people feel welcome or unwanted in an urban space? 4. Do people feel their experience and
cultural history is represented in a space? 5. How do people demonstrate their care for
the space and each other?

Other Organization name
Healthbridge; UN-Habitat