Tensions and Synergies Between Tactical Urbanism and Social Sustainability

A Case Study of the Sunset Triangle Plaza

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INNEHÅLLSFÖRTECKNING

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PREFACE

This study was conducted as a degree project within the School of Architecture and the Built Environment at the Royal Institute of Technology (KTH). It concludes two years of studies at the Master’s programme Sustainable Urban Planning and Design.

I am immensely grateful to my supervisor, Helene Littke, for your consistent guidance and advising. For all the discussions we have had along the way and for cheering me on throughout the researching and writing process. This thesis would not have been completed without your help.

A massive thanks to my second supervisor, Tigran Haas, for your initial excitement and believing in my idea in the first place – and for helping me get to Los Angeles! Your great knowledge from many years of research within this field sparked my enthusiasm for public spaces and inspired me to write this thesis.

Thank you to Axel & Margaret Ax:son Johnson Stiftelse för allmännyttiga ändamål for financial support and giving me the opportunity to go to Los Angeles to conduct my case study.

Klara Bäckström
Stockholm, November 8th, 2018

Tensions and Synergies Between Tactical Urbanism and Social Sustainability: A Case Study of the Sunset Triangle Plaza

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ABS

RACT

For the past several years, the term social sustainability has gained a strong foothold within urban studies and has become a pervasive and trendy term that seems to be on everyone’s lips. Public space is widely acknowledged as an important urban feature, often in association with the social sustainability. As cities around the world are experiencing rapid population growth, creating meaningful and enjoyable public spaces is more important than ever.

The heightened interest in social sustainability, public spaces and placemaking (as a physical manifestation of social sustainability) has led to the emergence of several urban intervention movements, such as Tactical Urbanism. In 2012, for the first time in Los Angeles’ history, this tactic was used to transform a car trafficked street in Silver Lake into a pedestrian friendly public space: The Sunset Triangle Plaza. The aim of this thesis is to, by studying the use and function of the plaza after the conversion, highlight how a broad concept such as social sustainability can be understood from a relatively small-scale public space intervention.

The case study was conducted during the spring and summer of 2018, using a variety of data sources including interviews and observations of the plaza during February and March 2018. Two interviews were conducted with managers of the businesses directly adjacent to the plaza. Moreover, street surveys were conducted on two different occasions to ask the public about their use and opinions about the plaza. The results from the case study are presented to illustrate the real-life experience of the theories about social sustainability, public space and a discussion regarding “Whose Public Space?”, when applied at a local context. The findings were then further divided into three categories: usage (what type of activities did the installation enable?), users (for whom were they enabled?) and change (indicators of how the site has changed), reflecting the notions of Tactical Urbanism.

While certain changes have been merely “tactical”, others were more substantial; businesses flourished, traffic safety increased, the space has become a meeting place and therefore, it has now got an identity. Immediate change was evident in the process of the physical change when the plaza was constructed, but what has also followed is a continuous change. Even though the plaza with its painted dots may not look like much, a new space for engagement and interaction has been created, both physically and mentally. In addition, converting a street for the cars into a plaza dedicated to pedestrians is especially symbolic in a city like Los Angeles, where the automobile has been the predominant mean of transport for the last 60 years and instrumental in shaping the city’s layout. However, the case study also showed that it is one thing to launch a Tactical Urbanism initiative and another thing to maintain it and achieve long-term social changes.

The examined concepts and models to evaluate whether a public space can be considered successful are not always useful. The Sunset Triangle Plaza has certainly changed, but it has implied a continuous change – for better and for worse. Thus, this study also shows that it is evident that the idea of the “organically emerged” city can imply both opportunities and limitations.
1. INTRODUCTION

As cities around the world are experiencing rapid population growth, they are faced with numerous challenges, such as increased resource use and climate change, but also many social challenges in terms of inequity, segregation and social polarisation. Creating sustainable cities that are inclusive and fair for all its inhabitants is therefore more important than ever. For the past several years, the term social sustainability has gained a strong foothold within urban studies and has now become a pervasive and trendy term that seems to be on everyone’s lips. Research on sustainability has traditionally been limited to environmental and economic concerns but in recent years the social dimension has gained increased recognition as a fundamental component of sustainable development. Although this growing recognition has evoked more literature on the topic, Colantino (2011, p.18) argues that “our understanding of this concept is still fuzzy and limited by theoretical and methodological constraints, which stem from its context and disciplin ary-dependent definitions and measurements”. Because the term social sustainability is vague, it is difficult to decipher what it entails and how to apply it in practice. Planners tend to take advantage of its positive connotations but to which degree they actually engage in the social dimensions in a meaningful way or managing to create social change remains uncertain.

Public space is widely acknowledged as an important urban feature (often in association with social sustainability) since creating meaningful and enjoyable public spaces is vital for the social development in cities. The heightened interest in social sustainability, public spaces and placemaking, as a physical manifestation of social sustainability, has led to the emergence of several urban intervention movements. Tactical Urbanism has risen to the planning agenda during the past several years in an effort to both increase the liveability and the sense of community in cities, by “using short-term, low-cost, and scalable interventions and policies” (Lydon and Garcia, 2015, p.2). However, one topic of debate within the discourse concerns social equity and whether the implementations can create a more just and inclusive city.

In 2012, for the first time in Los Angeles’ history, the city transformed a car trafficked street in Silver Lake into a “pedestrian plaza”. It is now home to the bi-weekly farmers market, restaurants, cafes and a “neighbourhood market”, and is in close proximity to the numerous trendy restaurants and bars, cafes and boutique shops on Sunset Boulevard that runs along the southern edge of the plaza.

As an example of a contemporary public space project connected to ideals of community involvement, placemaking and Tactical Urbanism – this study wants to explore what happens to such a space after it has been converted. How is it being utilized today and what might it tell us about social sustainability?

By exploring the creation of the Sunset Triangle Plaza in Los Angeles, questions arise – how can a vague, global buzzword be linked to a hip street conversion?
2. DISPOSITION

The structure of the thesis is divided into five main parts. After a brief introduction and presentation of the aim and research questions follows the Methodology part, which presents the research design of the study. The Theoretical Framework constitutes the following section, which presents concepts such as social sustainability, public spaces, placemaking, Tactical urbanism and the different levels of publicness. Following the theory part is the Case Study in which the Sunset Triangle Plaza and the collected data is presented and further divided into three parts: use, usage and change. Thereafter, the thesis ends with a Discussion followed by a Conclusion.

As the theoretical framework was analysed in relation to the collected data, three themes emerged; usage, users and change, which constitutes the structure of the case study and the subsequent discussion.

3. AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of this study is to examine how a broad concept such as social sustainability can be understood from a small-scale Tactical Urbanism intervention. The overarching research question for this thesis is:

How Does Tactical Urbanism Influence Social Sustainability?

In order to answer this question, a case study of the Sunset Triangle Plaza was carried out to assess whether the conversion has created any long-term social change, by looking at how the plaza is used today and by whom. Therefore, the following sub-questions were posed:

(1) How does today’s use of the Sunset Triangle Plaza relate to theories of social sustainability and placemaking approaches?

(2) Can temporary interventions lead to long-term social change?
4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this part, the concept and “global buzzword” social sustainability is examined. Moreover, it explores the concept in relation to the terms public space and placemaking, and theories concerning “For Whom? public spaces are for, is debated.

4.1. Social Sustainability as a Global Buzzword

As cities around the world are experiencing rapid population growth, they are faced with numerous challenges, such as increased resource use and climate change, but also many social challenges in terms of inequity, segregation and social polarisation. Creating sustainable cities that are inclusive and fair for all its inhabitants is therefore more important than ever. For the past several years, the term social sustainability has gained a strong foothold within urban studies and has now become a global buzzword. Research on sustainability has traditionally been limited to environmental and economic concerns but in recent years the social dimension has gained increased recognition as a fundamental component of sustainable development (Colantonio, 2011). Although this growing recognition has evoked an emergence of more literature on the topic, Colantonio (2011, p.18) claims that our understanding of the social sustainability concept is “still fuzzy and limited by theoretical and methodological constraints, which stem from its context and disciplinary-dependent definitions and measurements”. According to Colantonio (2010) the concept has often been oversimplified and there have been few attempts to define it as an independent dimension of sustainable development. Thus, the relationships between the three sustainability pillars – environmental, economic and social – are still unclear and “no consensus seem to exist on what criteria and perspectives should be adopted in defining social sustainability” (ibid., p.80).

In a review on the operationalization of the term, Colantonio (2011) lists features from various sources in an effort to untangle social sustainability. The features range from broad concepts, which most of the authors agree are essential, such as; equity, democracy, and security; to less general and ill-defined features like inclusion, solidarity, participation, cultural and community diversity, social homogeneity, empowerment, pride and sense of place. To illustrate the difficulty in defining the term, Colantonio (2010) lists four examples of definitions of social sustainability (see Table 1).

Table 1. Examples of definitions of social sustainability (Colantonio, 2010, p. 80).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A strong definition of social sustainability must rest on the basic values of equity and democracy, the latter meant as the effective appropriation of all human rights – political, civil, economic, social and cultural – by all people</td>
<td>Sachs (1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...a quality of societies. It signifies the nature–society relationships, mediated by work, as well as relationships within the society. Social sustainability is given, if work within a society and the related institutional arrangements satisfy an extended set of human needs [and] are shaped in a way that nature and its reproductive capabilities are preserved over a long period of time and the normative claims of social justice, human dignity and participation are fulfilled</td>
<td>Liittig and Griessler (2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Sustainability] aims to determine the minimal social requirements for long-term development (sometimes called critical social capital) and to identify the challenges to the very functioning of society in the long run</td>
<td>Bielt (2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development (and/or growth) that is compatible with harmonious evolution of civil society, fostering an environment conducive to the compatible cohabitation of culturally and socially diverse groups while at the same time encouraging social integration, with improvements in the quality of life for all segments of the population</td>
<td>Polese and Stren (2000)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It becomes apparent that social sustainability can be interpreted and defined in many different ways; ranging from Sachs’ definition which focuses on basic values of equity and
democracy, to Polese and Stern’s more comprehensive definition which focuses on urban environments (e.g. housing, urban design and public spaces) and emphasises the cohabitation of culturally and socially diverse groups, social integration and quality of life for all segments of the population (Colantonio 2010, p. 80).

Chiu (2003) identifies three main approaches to the interpretation of social sustainability; the first one equates social sustainability to environmental sustainability (i.e. that social sustainability of an activity depends upon specific social relations, customs, structure and value, representing the social limits and constraints of development). The second interpretation refers to the social preconditions required to achieve environmental sustainability (social structure, values and norms can be changed in order to carry out human activities within the physical limits of the planet). Lastly, the third “people-oriented” interpretation, refers to improving the wellbeing of people and the equitable distribution of resources while reducing social exclusions and destructive conflict (Colantonio 2010, p. 80).

Colantonio (2010) recognizes that there has been a shift within the sustainability discourse, which is becoming less focused on the more traditional “hard themes” (such as basic needs, equity, livelihood and employment) while the “softer” and less measurable concepts (such as happiness, wellbeing, social capital, identity and sense of place) are becoming more central. This, in turn, has in recent years spurred a wider debate regarding the role that governments and policymakers should play in delivering these “soft objectives” (Colantonio 2010, p.81). While this mirrors the changing social needs of individuals and communities it also adds complexity to the interpretation and measurement of social sustainability. Due to different worldviews, study perspectives and discipline-specific criteria among social scientists, there is a certain disagreement concerning the main underlying themes and objectives of social sustainability (Colantonio 2010, p. 85).

4.2. Public Space as Arenas for Social Sustainability

Theories about public space and placemaking gained traction in the 1960’s and 70’s, when its original proponents Jane Jacobs, William H. Whyte and Jan Gehl introduced (at the time) ground-breaking ideas about the importance of public spaces and how cities should be designed for people. Jacobs is especially famous for her humanistic planning with emphasis the human scale and sociological concept such as “eyes on the street”. Her opposition to large scale and car focused planning processes and appraisal for lively, walkable neighbourhoods was expressed in her book The Life and Death of Great American Cities. William H. Whyte studied human behaviour in cities and defined the fundamentals for creating a vibrant social life in public places through his book The Social Life of Small Urban Places. Jan Gehl has also been praised for his work, which emphasises the importance the Life Between Buildings and focuses on people’s experience of everyday life in the public realm (Jacobs, 1961; Whyte, 1980; Gehl, 1987).

There are certainly no easy solutions to building inclusive, safe, healthy and well-functioning cities. However, a city’s public spaces are a fundamental component of successful cities as they can help build a sense of community, civic identity and culture, while also facilitating social capital, economic development and community revitalisation (Project for Public Spaces, 2012). Public spaces are widely acknowledged as important urban features and discussed as “crucial for practices of everyday life, democratic processes and social integration” (Littke 2016, p.167). Madanipour (1999, p. 879-880) states that our spatial behaviour is an integral part of our social existence, which is defined by, and also
defines, the spaces around us. He goes on to argue that cities have been created by human agreement and bear particular significance and meaning to people:

“The sheer physical presence of roads, schools, and houses does not render them meaningful. It is the collective intentionality, the capacity of humans to assign functions, to symbolize these objects beyond their basic presence that makes them part of the social reality. The significance of symbolism in the construction of social reality, however, shows how there can be more than one interpretation for the social facts.”

However, space finds different interpretations and becomes a multi-layered place as different groups assign different meanings to it, which reflects how places are socially constructed (ibid.).

Ultimately, the common perception of public space remains largely uncontested, according to Schmidt and Németh, (2010, p.454), and the provision of public space enjoys broad based popular support, often from groups and interests that may otherwise be at odds. As more and more studies show that public space is directly correlated with adjacent property values and improved public health levels, “more is better” is often argued.

4.3. Placemaking and Contemporary Movements of Public Space Provision

In recent years, the interest in public space provision has increased among urban activists and planners. According to Haas (2017, p. 6) great public spaces are not just well designed physical locations, they are places where communities come alive, bonds between people are strengthened and a sense of belonging is fostered. They are also locations that spark economic development and environmental sustainability. Thus, the future of our communities and cities depend on great public spaces and, more specifically, placemaking as a powerful approach to create and revitalize public spaces according to the community’s needs and desires.

“The art of creating great spaces has always been the fundamental task of urban design and great public spaces are the living room of the city – the place where people come together to enjoy the city and each other – have been in its core” (Haas, 2017, p.6).

Placemaking can be described as a physical manifestation of social sustainability and is, according to the organisation Project for Public Spaces (PPS), “the art and science of developing public spaces that attract people, build community by bringing people together, and create local identity”. PPS also claim that “placemaking has the power to transform our local communities and generate pride and a sense of belonging that translates into sustainability, economic development and increased quality of life” (Project for Public Spaces, 2018).

It is evident that community involvement and public participation are central components of urban planning, especially in terms of public spaces and placemaking in which the explicit goal is to create vibrant public spaces, increase liveability and strengthen relationships between people. Moreover, increasing social justice and catalyse economic development, as well as increasing civic engagement and advocating for the right to the city are also central to placemaking (Project for Public Spaces, 2018).
4.4. Tactical Urbanism

Tactical Urbanism has emerged as a prominent movement of placemaking in the last several years. The idea behind Tactical Urbanism is to, through the implementation of inexpensive and temporary changes to the built environment, catalyse long-term social change by making public spaces more pleasant. Much emphasis is put on creating a sense of community, involve citizens, shifting the focus from the “experts” to the “ordinary person”, immersing everyday life in the design instead of creating projects removed from it, emphasising unrecognized activates and a way to display different possible alternatives. In their book “Short Term Action for Long Term Change”, the mentors of Tactical Urbanism, Mike Lydon and Anthony Garcia, define Tactical Urbanism as “an approach to neighbourhood building and activation using short-term, low-cost, and scalable interventions and policies” (Lydon and Garcia, 2015, p.2). These types of implementations can, according to Németh (2014, p.148) “catalyse communities around common goals that serve local needs and not external interests and agendas”. Talen (2015, p.135) states that “the movement equates urbanism with the physical realm, asserting that small-scale intervention in material form [...] has the power to significantly impact the everyday lives of urban residents”.

Although temporary use has always been a part of urban development and design, it has now gained a new currency in the planning of cities, due to various reasons. For instance, according to Lydon and Garcia (2015, p.12), Tactical Urbanism is often used “as an expression of dis-obedience amongst citizens” or as a way of getting things done “without the burden of municipal regulation or extended timeline of public process”. Lydon and Garcia (2015, p.83) recognize that the layers of bureaucracy that urban development projects need to navigate through have become so thick that it’s too difficult and expensive to get things done. According to Talen (2015, p.135) the approach is “distinguished by being in direct opposition to top-down, capital-intensive, and bureaucratically sanctioned urban change”. However, Silva (2016, p.1044) recognizes that “the idea that Tactical Urbanism actions are typical bottom-up processes is becoming a topic for discussion. In some cases, they don’t seem to involve entire communities, but very specific groups”. Mould (2014) directs criticism towards Tactical Urbanism, arguing that while it has the potential to create better places, the process and the creation of these have been incorporated in neoliberal development strategies and is seen as ”quick fixes”. According to Mould (2014 p. 537), Tactical Urbanism “is a vernacular empty of tactics that is being used more as a political tool to engender neoliberal urban development than a means of empowering the socially, politically and economically excluded”. Mould (2014) also questions that the activist in a more “reactionary” Tactical Urbanism often becomes a question of entrepreneurship.

Tactical Urbanism approaches have been used more frequently in the last several years to reclaim streets and repurpose them as parks, pedestrian plazas or bike lanes. One of the most famous examples is the transformation of Broadway between Times Square and Herald Square in New York City. What started in 2008 as temporary street closures, some paint and inexpensive moveable chairs, has today become a permanent feature that includes custom designed benches and tables and activity zones for street performers (Hanson and Abdulsamad, 2018). As a result, an additional initiative called Green Light for Midtown started in 2009 in an effort to improve mobility and safety in the city (NYC Department of Transportation, 2018).
Another example of Tactical Urbanism interventions is “parklets” that originated in San Francisco in 2005 when a group of artists and activist paid for a metered parking space and turned it into a temporary public park. This initiative has subsequently lead to the emergence of “PARK(ing) Day”, an annual event where citizens, artists and activists all over the world collaborate to transform parking spaces into temporary public places. Its mission is to call attention to the need for more urban open space and to generate critical debate around how public space is created and allocated (PARK(ing) Day, 2018).

Because social sustainability is difficult to quantify and measure, it is also difficult to predict whether placemaking initiatives will be successful. However, because placemaking processes emphasise the use of participatory methods, the proponents of Tactical Urbanism claim that certain benefits are possible to anticipate. Social sustainability is not explicitly mentioned as a concept in “Short Term Action for Long Term Change” but it permeates the approach as it revolves around themes such as human wellbeing, inclusion and democracy. For instance, one of the main themes is to increase a sense of belonging.
through a greater sense of community, which, according to the authors, can be achieved through placemaking approaches such as Tactical Urbanism.

Figure 1. From Social Sustainability to Tactical Urbanism. Illustration by author.

4.5. The Different Levels of Publicness

Historically, urban public space has played a central role in the social life of cities. However, Manadipour (1999, p. 890) claims that they have lost their significance due to technological change, larger populations and specialization of activities, which in turn have led to a “fragmentation of functions and a despatialization of public sphere”. Furthermore, Manadipour (1999, p. 890) also recognises that the “treatment of space as a commodity, and stratification of society have led to sociospatial segregation and privatization of space”.

One of the simplest ways of classifying space is through defining them as either private or public. Public places are expected to be accessible to everyone. They are spaces where strangers and citizens alike can enter with no or few restrictions, as opposed to the complex system of codes, physical objects and social arrangements that signifies private places where permission or negotiation is required (Madanipour, 1999). According to Madanipour (1999, p. 880), where individuals can or cannot go in a city also determines some of the main patterns of spatial behaviour and social life in general.

Public spaces are important features of any vibrant and sustainable urban environment and according to Németh (2009, p.2463), the ones that provide opportunities for discussion and spontaneous encounters with people with different backgrounds and other viewpoints on the world are especially good. The best kind of public spaces are argued to be places for social interaction and active citizenship, in which “personal identities are constructed through unmediated human contact” and “social interactions and public activities of all members of the public occur”. However, Németh (2009, p.2463) also states that there are those who claim that this ideal of a “universally inclusive and unmediated space” cannot exist because publicly accessible space is not homogeneous, meaning that the level of “publicness” will be different from instance to instance. While creating new accessible public spaces “most scholars criticise privately owned public spaces for restricting social interaction, constraining individual liberties and excluding certain undesirable populations”. However, Németh (2009, p.2464) claims that we’re witnessing the rise of a different kind of space and with that a different conception of the public.

Different scholars have different opinions and definitions of what public space means. While Kohn (2004) defines public space as having three core dimensions; ownership, accessibility and intersubjectivity, Carmona (2010) expands this to include function and perception. Furthermore, Young (1990, 2000) defines her ideal of the unoppressive city, which highlights accessibility, inclusion and tolerance of difference as core dimensions. Madanipour (1999, 2003)
highlights *access* (access to place as well as the activities in it); *agency* (the physical dimension of control and decision making); and *interest* (the targeted beneficiaries of actions or decisions impacting on a place), while Németh and Schmidt (2007, 2010) highlight *ownership, management and use/users*. Based on these definitions, Varna and Toesdell (2010, p. 579) have identified five meta-dimensions of publicness: ownership, control, civility, physical configuration and animation. Each dimension ranges from *more public to less public*, as seen in Table 1/Table 2 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>More public</th>
<th>Less public</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Many social groups regard the place as a public space (i.e. more public for more publics).</td>
<td>MEANING Few social groups regard the place as a public space.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publicly-owned space with public function and public use</td>
<td>OWNERSHIP Privately owned space with private function and private use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free use</td>
<td>CONTROL Overt and oppressive control presence—human and electronic surveillance; highly visible security presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cared-for; well-kempt; managed in the public interest; management balancing needs of different social groups</td>
<td>CIVILITY Over- or under-managed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well connected and located within the movement system (on-the-beaten-track); strong visual connection to external public realm beyond space; without obvious entrances and thresholds.</td>
<td>PHYSICAL CONFIGURATION Poorly connected/located within the movement system (off-the-beaten-track); poor visual connection with external public realm; with explicit entrances and thresholds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wide range of supports for a wide range of potential uses and activities</td>
<td>ANIMATION Dead public space: narrow range of supports for a limited range of potential uses and activities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Schmidt and Németh (2010, p.455), proponents of privately owned or operated spaces, the efficiency of the private sector in distributing public goods outweigh any potentially negative social impacts. More (2005, p.15) also notes that proponents suggest that “competition promotes efficiency, innovation, and responsiveness to changing public preference”. However, some urban scholars argue that when security and private interest are prioritized over broader social concerns, it threatens the civil liberty and diversity in a public space, transforming it into a regulated site of consumption-based activity. Consequently, it no longer functions as a truly public forum, characterized by “(relatively) open access, unmediated deliberation, and shared participation” (Németh 2012, p.812).

The issue with the type of public spaces with the sole (or main) function to provide consumption-based activities is that it means that those who are purchasing goods or services are encouraged to spend time in these spaces, while those who do not (e.g. children or homeless people) are essentially discouraged. Essentially, Schmidt and Németh (2010, p.455) argue, “the economic exchange value of a space is prioritized over its use value”.

Table 2. Descriptors of “more” and “less” public for each dimension (Varna and Toesdell, 2010, p. 581)
The question of what level of publicness is desirable does not have one simple answer but depends on the context and on which viewpoint is applied. Németh (2012, p.813) concludes that:

- not all space can or should be public
- some form of control is often required or desired
- publicness is always subjective: whereas some might feel a space full of homeless persons is “truly public,” this sight might drive other users away.

4.6. Whose Public Space?

While the previous chapter refers to ownership as a legal process, this chapter focuses on the social process of ownership by addressing the question of “whose public space?”. A topic of debate within the placemaking discourse concerns social equity and whether such implementations can create a more just and inclusive city. Much attention has been given Lefebvre’s theory about the “Right to the City” and the concept has been commonly used within the urban studies field. According to the theory, all citizens are allowed to participate both in the use of and in the production of all urban space. It is argued that when citizens have control over the productions, they have control over the social and spatial relations. Thus, the social value of urban space is highly emphasized.

“Public space ideally promotes active citizenship by encouraging exchange and dialogue, where users deliberate opposing viewpoints and diverse parties find “renewed centrality [in] places of encounter and exchange” (Lefebvre 1968, p. 179).

Lefebvre argued that “space should not be merely thought of as a physical place, a neutral container or backdrop for action, but as an entity actively produced by society”. Many architects and urban studies activists and authors have since supported these notions, arguing that the urban environment shapes our behaviour, knowledge and disposition (Schmidt and Németh, 2010, p. 453). This has led to a growing interest in critically examining the role of power, race, gender, identity and representation in public space (Schmidt and Németh, 2010, p. 453).

Providing public spaces for people of all socio-economic backgrounds is essential to promote social inclusion, as these are the only places in cities where people from all social layers of society can meet and engage on the same level and with the same rights. By providing quality public spaces that combine uses and thus promote social mixture of a city’s inhabitants, this could potentially reduce economic and social segregation. Thus, protecting public spaces is a key prerequisite for the Right to the City as it fosters tolerance and dialogue (UCLG, 2016).

In many ways, Henri Lefebvre’s Right to the City seeps through placemaking approaches, for instance in terms of how it identifies people as key actors. Therefore, the concept can be seen as a guide for non-traditional placemaking approaches, ensuring that this question is a central concern when working with them. David Harvey, one of the main proponents of the ideas of the Right to the City, stated that “the freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights” (Harvey 2008, p.23). The theory of Right to the City also raises the question of “who’s right?”, which is also a common topic of debate within the placemaking discourse. Despite its claims of bottom-up and inclusive approaches, many critics argue
that it tends to fall short of these goals and the “who’s right?” aspect is instead often overlooked.

According to Madanipour (2010, p.1);

“public spaces mirror the complexities of urban societies: as historic social bonds between individuals have become weakened or transformed, and cities have increasingly become agglomerations of atomized individuals, public open spaces have also changed from being embedded in the social fabric of the city to being a part of more impersonal and fragmented urban environments”.

The question at issue thus becomes: can creating accessible public spaces through inclusive processes help overcome this fragmentation? And, moreover, do the existing and new public spaces of the city serve the public at large, or are they contested and exclusive? Whose public spaces are they? (ibid.)

4.7. Assessing Public Spaces

In 2015, UN Habitat initiated the “Global Public Space Toolkit” in an effort to provide an overview of indicators and tools for examining the quality of public spaces. According to the UN (2015, p.25-26), the different types of public spaces are streets (including avenues, boulevards, squares and plazas, pavements and passages as well as galleries and bicycle paths), public open spaces (such as parks, gardens, playgrounds, beaches riverbanks and waterfronts) and public urban facilities (which include libraries, civic/community centres, municipal markets and public sports facilities). The UN (2015, p. 14) also state that public spaces are the banner of urban civility, our urban commons, that they promote income, investment and wealth creation, enhance environmental sustainability and increase transport efficiency and urban safety. Meanwhile, they also promote equity and social inclusion, offer ideal opportunities to generate citizen involvement and that they are tools for gender and age-friendly cities. Public spaces and their functions are described as the essence of cities in that they, for instance, “host market and accessible commercial activities in fixed premises, public venues and other services in which the socio-economic dimension of the city is always expressed”, “offer precious opportunities for recreation, physical exercise and regeneration for all” and “are places of individual and collective memory, in which the identity of the people is mirrored and finds sustenance, growing in the knowledge that they are a community” (UN, 2015, p.117).

In contrast to UN’s broad definition of what a public space is, Setha Low (2018) defines public space through four categories, namely: play and recreation, social, cultural and economic relations, social justice and democratic practices and community and individual well-being. These categories further contain a number of aspects that can be used to assess how public spaces are used and how well they function. Low emphasises the importance of human connection and social interaction, social justice and creating spaces for all and ideally a public space should promote all the features listed below (see Figure 2).
UN’s definition focuses a lot on the functions of a public space and the activities taking place there, which is something Project for Public Spaces do as well, albeit on a different scale. The multiplicity can be related to “The Power of 10+”, a concept developed by PPS to evaluate and facilitate placemaking. According to the organisation, places thrive when users have a range of reasons (10+) to be there, for instance; a place to sit, playgrounds to enjoy, art to touch, music to hear, food to eat, history to experience, and people to meet. Ideally, the activities taking place in these spaces also reflect the culture and history of that place or the community. According to Project for Public Spaces, a great public space is largely about whether it offers a variety of activities rather than just having a single use dominating a particular place (The Power of 10+, 2018).

Project for Public Spaces have also created a tool called “The Place Game” through which a public space can be evaluated by considering a number of questions according to four different criteria: Accessibility & Linkages, Comfort and Image, Uses & Activities and Sociability (see Figure 3).
Despite the lack of consensus on how the different concepts should be defined, the connection between social sustainability and Tactical Urbanism is clear: placemaking is a physical manifestation of social sustainability and Tactical Urbanism is, in turn, one mode of placemaking. What remains unanswered, however, is how the latter affects the former in the grand scheme of things, namely: how does Tactical Urbanism influence social sustainability?
5. METHODOLOGY

5.1. Introduction

The study was conducted during the spring and summer of 2018, using a variety of data sources including interviews and systematic observations during February and March 2018. In this chapter, the qualitative approach and methods used are presented. To frame the methodological choices for this study, public space studies are discussed.

5.1.1. Qualitative Study

This is a descriptive and explorative study. Therefore, the main part consists of an empirical study in the form of a qualitative case study of the Sunset Triangle Plaza. The aim has been to study the use and function of the plaza after a Tactical Urbanism intervention to highlight how a broad concept such as social sustainability can be understood from a relatively small-scale public space intervention.

According to Gillham (2000), qualitative methods are essentially descriptive and inferential in character and have to be interpreted, as “facts” do not speak for themselves – someone has to speak for them. The method focuses on the kind of evidence that will enable and understanding of the meaning of what’s going on. Gillhem (2000, p.10) goes on to stating that “reality (and the truth) is not tidy” and thus all evidence is of some value for the researcher but it must be carefully appraised. Gillham (2000, p.11) also recognises six different characteristics in terms of what qualitative methods enables the researcher to do, for instance; “investigate situations where little is known about what is there or what is going on”, “explore complexities that are beyond the scope of more 'controlled' approaches” or to “get under the skin of a group or organization to find out what really happens”. However, there is also a philosophical base that needs to be considered when conducting qualitative studies, namely that “human behaviour, thoughts and feelings are partly determined by their context” and moreover that “how people behave, feel, think, can only be understood if you get to know their world and what they are trying to do in it” (Gillham, 2000, p.11).

In terms of observations, Gillham (2000, p.46) distinguishes two main kinds on opposite ends of the observation spectrum, yielding different kinds of data: participant (being involved – mainly descriptive, i.e. qualitative) or detached/structured (watching from outside in a carefully timed and specified way – counting and classifying what you see, i.e. quantitative). For this study, a detached approach was chosen.

5.1.2. Study of Public Space

Jan Gehl has been examining the question of how to design cities for people since the 1960's and the work done in his highly appraised book *Life Between Buildings* has influenced urbanists both in research and practice for more than half a century. In *How to Study Public Life*, Gehl and Birgitte Svarre (2013) provides a guide of different methods and tools for systemizing and registering direct observations of the interaction between public space and public life. The guide consist of tools such as counting (which provides numbers for making comparisons), mapping (plotting of activities, people, places for staying etc. to mark the number and type of activities and where they take place), tracing (drawings of peoples movements), tracking (following people either with or without their knowing it), looking for traces (traces of human activities such as litter or dirt patches can give the observer information about the city life), photographing (considered to be essential to document...
situations where urban life and form either interact or fail to interact after initiatives have been taken), keeping a diary (noting observations in order to register details and nuances about the interaction between public life and space) and finally test walks (which can give the observer a chance to notice problems and potentials for city life on a given route) (Gehl and Svarre, 2013, p. 24). The authors highlight the importance of making precise and comparable registrations, to be able to compare the results within a study. The importance of logging weather conditions and time of day, day of the week and month in order to conduct similar studies later is also emphasised (Gehl and Svarre, 2013, p. 23).

Furthermore, Gehl and Svarre (2013) distinguish between necessary and optional activities in public spaces. For instance, taking a stroll across a plaza is an “optional activity” while a walk to do errands is a “necessary activity”. According to the authors, necessary activities take place regardless of the quality of the physical environment while optional activities depend to a significant degree on what a place has to offer. When urban quality is poor, the number of optional activities is low and people limit the things they do to necessary activities. Essentially, this means that the better a place, the more optional activity occurs and the longer necessary activity lasts (Project for Public Spaces, 2008). Thus, observing the amount of optional activities taking place in a public space is a good way of assessing its urban quality. Based on Gehl’s methods, the study was organised as described below.

5.2. Case Study
Case study research allows for a deeper exploration and understanding of complex issues within a specific context and is considered a robust method when a holistic, in-depth investigation is required. The researcher can go beyond quantitative data and statistics and, by closely examining the situation, understand the behavioural conditions. According to Yin (1994, p.9), a case study “has a general advantage when a how or why question is being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control” and is relevant the more ones research questions seek to explain some present circumstances. While Yin (1994, p.13) defines case study research method as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context”, Rolf Johansson (2003, p.2.) refers to Robert Stake (1998) who stated that “case study is defined by interest in individual cases, not by the methods of inquiry used” and uses his definition of a case study as “defined by interest in individual cases”.

Johansson (2003, p. 8) also explains a number of important aspects of case study methodology that have been exhaustively discussed, for instance: How are findings validated? And, how are generalizations made from a single case? In “Case Studies in Planning”, Scott Campbell states that “the comparative advantage of case studies is their ability to handle messy, complex, contradictory social situations and communicate the results in a clear, persuasive narrative, which is a good definition of city planning as well” (Campbell, 2003, p. 17). However, similar to Johansson (2003), Campbell also states that “the heavy reliance on this method leads to on-going difficulties with analytical rigor, disciplinary legitimacy and cumulative generalization of knowledge” and recognises that there are two basic questions to ask of a case study: has one convincingly explained the functioning of the case itself, and can one generalize the results to other cases? (Campbell, 2003, p.1,15).

Yin (1994, p.9) recognises three types of arguments that critics of case studies frequently presents; the lack of rigour and “sloppy” investigation that allows for “equivocal evidence or biased views to influence the direction of the findings and conclusions”. The second argument is that case studies “provide very little basis for scientific generalisation since
they use a small number of subjects”. Finally, a third argument is that case studies are often labelled as being too long, difficult to conduct and producing a massive amount of documentation and that “the danger comes when the data are not managed and organised systematically”.

Evidently, generalisation is the principal issue of debate but there are different schools of thought on how to approach the issue. In this particular study, the method was used to distinguish trends and connect these to the overarching research questions. In this study, a case study has allowed a holistic perspective of the Sunset Triangle Plaza and has been an appropriate method as it demonstrates the complex and dynamic conditions at the site.

5.2.1. Triangulation

To increase validity of the results found in a study, triangulation is an important technique that facilitates this by applying a combination of research methods to study the same phenomenon (Gillham, 2000). In this study, observations were combined with field notes, mapping, interviews and a literature study in order to, as far as possible, overcome issues of subjectivity and bias.

5.2.2. Observations

The activities taking place at the Sunset Triangle Plaza, as well as people’s social behaviour in relation to the surrounding built environment, was studied through Gehl and Svarres’ methods by using the tools counting, mapping, looking for traces, photographing and keeping a diary. A non-participative observation method was chosen for recording basic data about the plaza and its characteristics, the surroundings and the activities of groups and individuals at the site.

Data was collected by taking notes and mapping activity during one-hour shifts once or twice a day during four weeks in February and March 2018. To get an understanding of how the plaza is used during the day, observations were scheduled at different times. On a few occasions, data was not collected due to bad weather conditions and on one occasion, the plaza was closed off due to filming of a tv production.

| Table 3. Calendar of when observations of the Sunset Triangle Plaza took place. |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
|                         | WEEK 1                    | WEEK 2                    | WEEK 3                    | WEEK 4                    |
| Monday                   | 13-14, 17:30-18:30        | Rain                      | 9-10                      | 16:30-17:30              |
| Tuesday                  | 8-9, 13-14                | 12-13, 21-22              | 19:30-20:30              | 13-15                     |
| Wednesday                | 13-15:30                  | 10-11, 18-19              | 13-15                     | Filming                  |
| Thursday                 | 17:30-18:30               | 16:30-17:30              | 11-12, 21:30-22:30       | 12-13:30                 |
| Friday                   | 15:30-16:30               | Rain                      | 13-14                     | 15-16:30                 |
| Saturday                 | 14-15                     | 12-13                     | 10-11                     | 9-10                      |
| Sunday                   | 13-14, 15:30-16:30        | 20-21                     | Rain                      | 9-10                      |
5.2.3. Interviews

Two interviews were conducted with managers of the directly adjacent businesses. Initiators of the plaza and of the People St Program were also desirable respondents but despite several attempts to reach them via email and telephone they were unsuccessful. However, additional sources such as interviews collected from YouTube and news blogs were used as a complement. Moreover, street surveys were conducted on two different occasions to ask the public about their use of the plaza and their opinions about it and Silver Lake in general. These short interviews were held with a total of five people; three of which were conducted during Farmer’s Market and the other two on a Monday and Tuesday evening respectively.

Respondents were not selected either actively or randomly. The street surveys were conducted with visitors of the plaza who agreed to be interviewed, all of which remain anonymous. The two managers listed below were chosen because they were likely to have an informed opinion about social interactions at the plaza, as they are running the businesses directly adjacent to it.

- Todd, manager of the restaurant Pine & Crane (2018-03-15)
- Clint, manager of the “neighbourhood market” Yummy (2018-03-16)

A qualitative method, such as interviews, is preferable in this case as it allows for a deeper analysis and exploration of an issue by attaining more developed and subjective answers. It allows the respondent to express opinions, feelings and concerns, i.e. information that cannot be acquired from quantitative methods and measurable data. Semi-structured interviews were held face to face with an interview guide as a support rather than a number of strictly outlined questions. The semi-structured approach allows the interview to head in different directions and generate a more natural dialogue. In addition, it lets the interviewer to ask follow-up questions when needed. This way, the answer to one question can evolve into an interesting subject of discussion, which is essential in an explorative study such as this one (Bryman, 2002).

5.2.4. Desk-based Study

Prior to the observations, research on different ways of studying public life was done in order to select a method suitable for this particular study. Secondary sources such as videos, blogs and news articles regarding Sunset Triangle Plaza were also collected and relevant literature on social sustainability, public spaces, placemaking, and conceptualisations of publicness was examined.

Due to the great interest in the conversion, several interviews with visitors, local business owners and other stakeholders involved in the project were held and have been uploaded on YouTube. Most of them were conducted by L.J. Williamson in 2014, just two years after the conversion, but the questions that were asked and the topics discussed are relevant for this study as they indicate how the plaza’s identity was created. The additional interviews used in this study were:

- Vivian, owner of Pine & Crane
- Julie, owner of Mornings Nights Café (which closed in 2016 and has since been rebuilt and recently reopened as “Roo”)
- Genelle LeVin, president of the Silver Lake Improvement Association
• Margot Ocañas, Pedestrian Coordinator at LA Department of Transportation and Frank Clementi, Architect and Designer of Sunset Triangle Plaza

5.3. The Issue of Subjectivity and Ethical Considerations

Despite the structured nature of this case study, it is important to recognise that much of the data collected is subjective and, to a certain degree, dependent on the observer’s point of view.

There are certain limitations and constraints in public life studies. In this study, due to lack of data prior to the observations, it was difficult to determine in what ways public life had changed as a result of the conversion. Moreover, since the interviews and surveys only capture data from people who in some way use the plaza, it is difficult to get a sense of how the plaza is received by those who use it infrequently or not at all.

In terms of ethical considerations, the interviewees were thoroughly informed about a number of things, such as: the aim of the study and what the data they provided would be used for, that they could choose to remain anonymous and that the material they provided would be treated with confidentiality. In addition, consent of recording the interviews was given by every respondent. Besides being fully informed about the practicalities, it was also important that they felt comfortable in the interview situation. According to Valentine (2005), this can be facilitated by different measures, such as starting off the conversations with questions that are easy to answer or to conduct the interviews on locations familiar for the interviewee to make them feel as comfortable as possible. Therefore, both interviews were held outside of their respective businesses.

On a final note, the term “rough sleepers” is used instead of “homeless” as it is impossible as an observer to determine whether someone has got a home or not, only on the basis of that person’s appearance.
6. CASE STUDY: SUNSET TRIANGLE PLAZA

A case study of the Sunset Triangle Plaza was conducted during February and March 2018 to examine community driven public space intervention in connection to aspects of social sustainability. In this chapter, the result of the study is presented.

6.1. Background

6.1.1. Los Angeles

Los Angeles is located on the Pacific coast of southern California and is the second most populous city in the United States with 4 million inhabitants in the city and over 10 million in the county. The population is ethnically diverse; with people from 140 different countries, California has officially reached the status of a “minority-majority state”, meaning that the combined population of minorities now exceeds the majority population.

Los Angeles’ city layout is composed of a series of widely dispersed settlements loosely connected to downtown, tied together by a vast network of freeways spread throughout the region (Britannica, 2018). Its low-density development and dependence on the automobile have been claimed to almost eliminate street life, walkability and public interaction in the city. According to Crawford (1995), “the city’s traditional public spaces support the argument that public space and public life in the city are either commodified, bankrupt, or non-existent”. In *Los Angeles – Architecture of Four Ecologies*, Banham (1971, p. 57) also recognises that the city’s low-density urban structure has “permitted more conspicuous adaptations to be made for motor transport than would be possible elsewhere without wrecking the city”. The author suggests that the city has no urban form at all in the commonly accepted sense, which is why “these parking-lots, freeways, drive-ins, and other facilities have not wrecked the city form is due chiefly to the fact that Los Angeles has no urban form at all in the commonly accepted sense”. Banham ultimately concludes that “there is a sense in which the beach is the only place in Los Angeles where all men are equal and on common ground” (ibid, p. 21).

The notion about Los Angeles’ lack of urban form and how it has hindered the creation of public spaces is also reoccurring in the discourse regarding the lack of green spaces in the city. According to Lize Mogel in *L.A. Forum* (2015) the geographic majority of the city is without access to private green space and thus, public green space is a necessity, although inadequate in Los Angeles. She further claims that “the presence of public green space is a measure of civic wealth, and of political solvency within a community” and more over that “land is a valuable resource in LA, and there is none left unclaimed. Any ‘natural’ environments, from landscaped traffic medians to large parks, are carefully constructed”. The lack of green space for the local public is undeniably another key issue in terms of public space provision in Los Angeles.

A debate over gentrification, displacement and the city’s vision for itself has in recent years exploded, chiefly due to the great shift that Los Angeles’s housing market has experienced in the last decade. From 2010 to 2015, the city’s population grew by 230 000 inhabitants but only 40 000 new homes were built and the average rent in LA is now over 2500 dollars per month (WNYC Studios, 2017-10-03). In the podcast *There Goes the Neighbourhood* (ibid.), a Los Angeles based real estate investor says:
"The market is hot, last five years we have been in a constant price increase and it doesn't appear to be a slow down in the short future here. A lot of people want to live in Los Angeles, both the demand is high and the supply is low and the prices keep going up."

One of the side effects of this increase in housing prices is that it forces a lot of people out of their homes. Partly due to this, Los Angeles’ homeless population increased with 20% from 2016 to 2017, to 34,000 people (WNYC Studios, 2017-10-03).

6.1.2. Silver Lake

Silver Lake is a residential and commercial neighbourhood in central Los Angeles, located northeast of downtown. Culturally, the area has a reputation for being the home to creative people; artists, musicians and writers, and is known for its hip restaurants and bars as well as its acceptance of an ideologically diverse and politically progressive population (Silver Lake NC, 2018). However, the general perception about what Silver Lake has become varies amongst its residents and visitors:

“One of the great things about Silver Lake is that it feels like the kind of place where you can make your own life. There just seems to be a fairly even playing ground for people who kind of take creative risks and stuff.”

“It kind of went downhill after the 50s and 60’s, a lot of LA was fairly gritty… and the it started to get gentrified again.”

“It still has this interesting mix of different kinds of people so it's sort of a really diverse place within a city that can otherwise be really segregated.”

“There’s a lot to do here and you can find just about anything.”

– Quotes from street surveys with visitors of the plaza, March 2018
The neighbourhoods in Los Angeles have a long tradition of being well defined, in regard to both area and socio-economic status. In his book *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* from 1971, Banham writes:

“The classic spread of residential foothills now runs, westward in geographical order but not sequence of development, from Silver Lake (built around the reservoir of that name), through Los Feliz (for want of a better name), Hollywood, West Hollywood, Beverly Hills, Bel Air, Brentwood and Pacific Palisades where the foothills fall into the Pacific […] [it] becomes stunningly apparent on any map that shows the distribution of average incomes; the financial and topographical contours correspond almost exactly: the higher the ground the higher the income.” (Banham 1971, p.79)

Today, Silver Lake is synonymous with soaring housing costs. According to the rental and real estate agency Zillow, the median rent price in Silver Lake is $3,925, while the Los Angeles average is $3,500. Silver Lake home values have gone up 15.9% over the past year and as of today, the median price of homes that sold is $1,235,900. This means that the median list price per square foot in Silver Lake is $746, compared to the Los Angeles average of $495 (Zillow, 2017-04-30).

The change from a “fringe” into a more “mainstream” and trendy neighbourhood has also made Silver Lake part of the “corridor of gentrification” that runs through Los Angeles’ east side. In the podcast *There Goes the Neighbourhood* (2017-09-28), reporter Anna Scott states:

“Certain LA neighbourhoods come up over and over again in conversations about gentrification. Highland Park, Echo Park, Silver Lake. Those are the places you find the $7 lattes and the expensive new condos. Those neighbourhoods all fit a kind of a LA gentrification paradigm.”

The increasing housing costs in Los Angeles is a relevant notion in this case study because it affects public space in that it indirectly controls who spends time there. These processes of gentrification in Silver Lake have transpired parallel to the plaza conversion and could be regarded as both a result of the change or, on the contrary; that the *Sunset Triangle Plaza* has impelled the gentrification process even further.
6.1.3. **Sunset Triangle Plaza**

It's a cloudy February afternoon at the Sunset Triangle Plaza in Silver Lake. Traffic is heavy on Sunset Boulevard and the restaurants lining the famous roadway are busy with lunch guests. The plaza is also quite busy. The man with the long beard is here today. He is sitting, as usual, on the stone wall between Yummy and United Bakery, selling incenses and CDs. Over at the park section of the plaza, a man who appears to be homeless is lying on a piece of cardboard that he has placed out on the little patch of grass. An older man with a walker is sitting a couple of meters away from him, by the “centrepiece” that looks like what was once a fountain. Across the plaza, the queue for the popular Taiwanese restaurant Pine & Crane snakes out of the front door and runs along its big glass windows, where at least eight people are standing, waiting to be let inside. Construction work is progressing in the shop to the left of Pine & Crane. What used to be a coffee shop called Mornings & Nights Café has been vacant for over a year and is now in mid-transformation into something new. This seems to happen every other week in Silver Lake. Dog walkers are crossing the plaza at regular intervals, cyclists are passing by and joggers are running across every now and again. Most people at the plaza are in their mid-twenties and the majority could be categorised what some people might label as ‘hipsters’; wearing either trendy clothes or active wear. Children are running around on the polka dotted street, chasing birds and greeting dogs. People are walking out from Pine & Crane with brown takeaway paper bags in their hands and others are sitting by the green tables outside of Yummy, having a salad or a wrap they’ve just bought form the “neighbourhood store”, scrolling on their phones. People don’t stay very long but there is a constant movement at the Sunset Triangle Plaza this Tuesday afternoon.

– Excerpt from field diary, February 20th, 2018.

The above excerpt paints a picture of today’s **Sunset Triangle Plaza**. Seven years ago, the description of the intersection of Sunset Boulevard and Griffith Park Boulevard would probably have sounded very different. By that time, the idea for the plaza had only begun to take shape.

As a response to community interest (and with the support from the mayor and the city council) the Los Angeles Department of Transportation launched the People St Program in 2014 with the intention to “expedite pilot projects quickly in places in the city that are in need of small-scale solutions” (Zimmerman 2015, p.34). On their website, it is stated that through this program, “communities can transform underused areas of L.A.’s largest public asset — our 7,500 miles of city streets — into active, vibrant, and accessible public space” and that “pedestrian centred activity is shown to foster a greater sense of community, and local businesses benefit as more pedestrians frequent neighbourhoods that accommodate them” (City of Los Angeles 2017). In accordance with the objectives set by Tactical Urbanism, the idea behind the People Street Program is to reclaim under-used street space in a quicker and cheaper way, by using simple materials, whilst involving local residents and businesses in both design and maintenance (RCH Studios, 2012).

According to the People Street Program (2018), these projects can “attract, expedite and foster future investment in infrastructure that better provides for people walking, bicycling an accessing transit, by physically and contextually demonstrating the benefits of capturing street space for public space”. This, in turn, make for more active, living streets and by expanding public space, while safety is increased for pedestrians, bicyclists and people.
using public transit due to calmed traffic. The organisation claims that the projects support economic vitality as increased levels of bicycling and walking implies more pedestrian-centric activities, which has shown can foster a greater sense of community and benefit local businesses. Potential community partners who are interested in starting a project can, through People Street’s webpage, fill in an online application and access a preapproved “Kit of Parts”, containing required configurations and materials from which to choose. These specifications are meant to simplify the process and avoid lengthy projects. The projects are permitted for a year with the option to renew and if the community support is strong enough, they can work together with the city and local officials to make them permanent (People Street Program, 2018). In many aspects, the program is considered to have been very successful and has even won the National Planning Achievement Award for a Best Practice in 2016 (American Planning Association 2016).

In 2012, the first People Street project was carried out; a car trafficked street in Silver Lake was closed off and reopened as a pedestrian plaza. The idea for the project began to develop already in 2006 when residents living in the area saw this trafficked street as a place that could be reclaimed for community use (Newton 2012). The Sunset Triangle Plaza began as a yearlong pilot project and was designed by Rio Clementi Hale Studios, the dots playing off of the abbreviation of Department of Transportation; DOT.

“When the county of Los Angeles approached me about this idea, I said let’s make this the first one in the city of Los Angeles and we did. I worked closely with the community, city departments and the county to make this the first Streets for People project in the city. It is now a gathering spot for the community, bicyclists and pedestrians.”

– Mitch O’Farrell, LA County Council (2013)

“The Sunset Triangle Plaza was a high-speed cut-through, so we thought this is a great traffic calming measure. I think the most important part is that I really has become magnet for ALL demographics within the neighbourhood. The piano came out, the basketball, there have been some people doing poetry, movie nights… […] And communities have been very enthusiastic to embrace it so, as a result, there is paint down on three other projects.”

– Margot Ocañas, Pedestrian Coordinator, LA Department of Transportation (Pivot, 2015)

“In Los Angeles, we’re not necessarily accustomed to closed off streets, so it had to be something that you could do as a pilot that other people could see that they could do themselves.”


The Sunset Triangle Plaza was completed on the 4th of March 2012 and is, like many similar Tactical Urbanism interventions, now a permanent feature in Silver Lake. It has outlived the early criticisms and concerns and has now become a central meeting place in the neighbourhood. The plaza is home to the bi-weekly farmer’s market, which predates the plaza every Tuesday and Saturday, summer movie nights arranged by neighbourhood groups every other Thursday, music performances, talent shows and other events and activities. Green and white moveable tables and chairs provide convenient seating to nearby restaurants and cafés (Zimmerman, 2015). The plaza is also in close proximity to numerous trendy restaurants and bars, cafés and boutique shops on Sunset Boulevard that runs along the southern edge of the plaza.
Location of Sunset Triangle Plaza. Source: Google Maps, 2018

Rendering of Sunset Triangle Plaza. Source: RCH Studios.
The intersection before the conversion into a pedestrian plaza. Source: Google Maps, 2011.
The Sunset Triangle Plaza in 2012, after the conversion. Source: RCH Studios, People St Program.
The Sunset Triangle Plaza in February 2018, seen from the south. Photos by author.
The northern part of the plaza, connecting to Griffith Park Boulevard. Photo by author.

The plaza seen from north, with the downtown skyline in the background. Photo by author.
Cyclists taking a break in the park section of the plaza. Photo by author.

The “centrepiece” in the park section of the plaza. Photo by author.
Child playing at the plaza. Photo by author.

How appealing is it to sit here, right next to the heavily trafficked Sunset Boulevard? Photo by author.
The People Street Program encourages activities such as dog walking, eating, talking and even listening to music, while smoking and sleeping is discouraged. Photo by author.
6.2. The *Sunset Triangle Plaza Today*

This chapter illustrates the real-life experience of the theories about social sustainability, public space and “whose public space?”, when applied to the *Sunset Triangle Plaza*. Descriptive accounts of the prominent uses and users of the plaza are presented, drawing mainly on observations of the *Sunset Triangle Plaza* conducted daily during four weeks in February and March 2018. Quotes from interviews are also presented to demonstrate how some of the theories discussed in chapter 5 were empirically identified. During an interactive process when analysing the theoretical framework in connection to the collected data, three themes emerged: *usage* (what type of activities did the installation enable?), *users* (for whom were they enabled?) and *change* (indicators of how the site has changed). These themes reflect the notions of Tactical Urbanism in that they examine the change of a place and making it more inclusive – for everyone.

6.2.1. Usage

In accordance with PPS’s focus on activities in public spaces, the first part of the description focuses on what happens at the *Sunset Triangle Plaza*. The most commonly registered activities are presented in Table 4 below.

*Table 4. The most common activities at the Sunset Triangle Plaza.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visiting the Farmer’s Market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strolling/Passing by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chatting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dog walking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking on the phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jogging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking a break from running or biking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food shopping at Yummy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having coffee at Roo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queuing (to Pine &amp; Crane)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having lunch (take away form P&amp;C, Yummy or other)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having dinner at Pine &amp; Crane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chilling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinking beer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Napping on the grass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunbathing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking a break from work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unloading of goods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selling (man with beard)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kids playing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skateboarding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing basketball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing cards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parking a car (along the plaza)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waiting for an Uber</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking photos in front of the mural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Begging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintenance work</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most common activity taking place at the plaza was “just being there”: people strolling across, sitting, waiting, watching or talking – both in person and on their phones. The majority of people crossing the plaza from Sunset Boulevard were heading towards *Yummy*, the food store, to the Taiwanese restaurant *Pine & Crane* or to *Roo*, the coffee shop next door. Most days at lunchtime, there were about 5-10 people queuing outside Pine & Crane. People walking their dogs, jogging or biking was also a common sight at the plaza.
The amount of people spending time at the plaza varied depending on both time of the day and day of the week. Lunchtime at the plaza was particularly busy, compared to mornings (before 10 pm) or late nights (after 8 pm). According to Gehl and Svarre (2013), necessary activities take place regardless of the quality of the physical environment while optional activities depend to a significant degree on what the places has to offer. When urban quality is poor, the number of optional activities is low, and people limit the things they do to necessary activities. Although many of the activities taking place at the Sunset Triangle Plaza are optional, the average time people spent there was typically in accordance with what Gehl and Svarre (2013) refer to as “short stays”, i.e. less than 5 minutes. Medium stays (5-10 minutes) or long stays (more than 10 minutes) were less common and occurred almost exclusively during the Farmer’s Market.

In regard to movement patterns, most people tended to keep to either the edges of the plaza (which is apparent in the map of shortcuts in Figure 4) or in the park section, unless an organised activity was taking place. For instance, during the Farmer’s market, people were criss-crossing the plaza; in-between market stands, through the park section and over Edgecliffe Drive, to a much greater extent than on a regular weekday.
Figure 4. Shortcuts. Illustration by author.
The conducted interviews revealed that organised activities such as the Farmer’s market and the Thursday movie screenings have had a significant impact on the local businesses at the plaza. Todd, the manager of Pine & Crane, regards the movie nights as particularly good for business:

“Pine & Crane likes to be actively involved in that, we donate a little bit of money towards the people who run it just so they get a little support. Because a lot of the people who kind of end up coming to these movie screenings, a lot of them choose to eat here as well. So it’s kind of like, it just works out for us to you know, give back as much as we can as well.”

Before Mornings Nights Café closed in 2016, its owner Julie pointed out that the movie nights were benefitting her business but also the community as a whole:

“[Movie nights] brings about 300-500 people, they all bring their kids, it’s a family event, they bring picnic baskets and we watch a movie. And it’s been great. And we have music nights sometimes. It’s just great to see everyone out. And it makes your business more visible. We do sponsor the movie nights so basically, people who haven’t even been to this neighbourhood start learning about us because it pulls people from different neighbourhoods.”

(Williamson, 2014)

Clint, manager of Yummy, agrees and is also appreciative of the Farmer’s market being held at the plaza right outside his shop:

“We’re also the local cash machine, especially at Farmer’s market […] That’s fine, that’s great, it increases awareness of what we are as well as gives us a little sale so it’s good.”

These organised activities are highly appreciated amongst both residents and visitors of Silver Lake and, according to Clint, they encourage a sense of community by engaging people in the area.

“I mean the Farmer’s market was probably only Saturday and then it does well enough and people enjoyed it enough that they did Tuesday also. Tuesday they have the bounce house so all the kids are out here, go in the bounce house. Um, what else… If anything it does kind of bring people out more because the events that they do out here sometimes between the Farmer’s market and the Thursday night movie… There may be another event scheduled or something where they’ll have a band play or something, like a talent show or something like that. And they do try to build community with stuff like that.”

Todd, manager of Pine & Crane, agrees, saying:

“I think having a Farmer’s market here twice a week, with local farmers and local eateries and things like that kind of allows the community to kind of reconnect and you know, be a little more apparent as well to the neighbourhood.”
This was also one of the reasons why Vivian, owner of Pine & Crane, saw the Sunset Triangle Plaza as a particularly good spot for her restaurant:

“When we were first looking for a spot, it was summer [...] They were doing movie nights, and it was cool to see the community coming together. It seemed like a community spot.”

The Farmer's Market at Sunset Triangle Plaza on Tuesdays and Saturdays. Photos by author.
Summer movie nights at Sunset Triangle Plaza. Source: SilverLakePictureShow, Instagram

Various organised events taking place at the Sunset Triangle Plaza. Left: Annual Silver Lake Talent and Variety Show. Source Silver Lake Chamber. Right: Biking Event: “The WOW ride explores new safe routes in LA at a social pace”. Source: SWAT.
People queuing to have lunch at Pine & Crane. Photo by author.

Main activities at the Sunset Triangle Plaza: strolling, talking, sitting and dog walking. Photo by author.
Dining at Pine & Crane. Photo by author.

Food shopping at Yummy. Photo by author.
Sunset Triangle Plaza at lunchtime and several bicycles parked in the bicycle stand. Photo by author.

Sunset Triangle Plaza at night and an empty bicycle stand. Photo by author.
6.2.2. Users

Based on the observations, most of the people at the Sunset Triangle Plaza are young, presumably between the ages of 25-35. Many of them fit into the “hipster” stereotype, which align with the general perception of the area as being trendy and progressive. Clint, the manager of Yummy, agrees with this image of the area, saying:

“There’s a lot of musicians, a lot of actors, lot of people in like music, film, television […] It’s totally trendy. [Silver Lake] Used to be like a fringe neighbourhood, much more mainstream now. Used to be a very much, like… kind of like a Latin neighbourhood but also a huge gay community and that’s why there’s like the leather shop down the street. Where the new pawnshop moved in across from El Pollo Loco, there’s a big sign that says “Circus of Books” and that was a big, like, gay porn shop. Um, but now it’s a weed store, haha!”

Todd, the manager of Pine & Crane has a similar perception of Silver Lake. He recognises that its shift in terms of both identity and demographics comes with both positives and negatives:

“I feel like Silver Lake for the most part has become like more of a fashion statement, you know what I mean? It’s definitely, for lack of a better word, pretty hipster. And that comes with its positives and its negatives. It’s positive that so many people from so many backgrounds want to create art and do, like, open restaurants here and things like that but it also comes with like, destroying a lot of the things that maybe made Silver Lake special 20 years ago. It’s tough, it’s definitely tough. It’s like a sensitive thing to talk about.”

He goes on by saying:

“There was more to this plaza when Mornings Nights was here. […] It had a lot more older people, who had been in the community for a lot longer. And now, I don’t know cause I don’t go around asking but, it seems like we have more and more of a younger crowd here, more and more of a transplant crowd here and less and less of the older Silver Lake crowd.”
Different “target groups” spending time at the Sunset Triangle Plaza: young, trendy ‘hipsters’ having coffee at Roo and families with children crossing the plaza. Photos by author.
Differences in how people from different social groups use the plaza could also be observed. The park section of the plaza was generally occupied by more marginalised groups such as drinkers or “rough sleepers”, especially in the evenings. During the day, the park was used, to a greater extent, by other groups as well. On those occasions, the different groups could be fairly close to one another and thus be able to observe each other but without necessarily interacting. However, during Farmer’s market, the park was mainly used by groups of people who typically did not spend time there. Hipsters bought lunch from the food stands or the restaurant and sat down on the grass, parents played with their children and dog walkers strolled through the park rather than walking around it. Meanwhile, the groups who were otherwise the more frequent users of the park section were practically absent. Thus, it could be argued that the plaza, and the park section in particular, promotes a certain “social mix” and although this is desirable, it is often romanticised. In reality, the situation during Farmer’s Market shows that groups more or less avoid each other when the space is required for other (organised) activities. Clint, manager of Yummy, says:

“The park becomes kind of a place where they CAN bring their kids but also like kind of like the homeless kind of hang out. So it’s a strange interesting mix, like it’s kind of at a point where it maybe is changing as like... maybe the homeless aren’t going to hang out there all the time but who knows, maybe everyone’s just going to hang out there together.”

The interviews confirmed that there is a so called “homeless situation” but the local business owners at the plaza don’t seem to be particularly bothered by it and it hasn’t caused many disputes. Todd, the manager of Pine & Crane said that:
The only real problems we have with the homeless community here, and it's not really a problem but it's more of a shared space issue. If there is a line for the coffee shops or the restaurants... if there are guests you know waiting to be served or whatever, sometimes, especially late at night, there will be a couple of individuals smoking weed here or they will just, maybe or may not disturb some of the guests and we just ask them to kind of move a little further away, just out of respect for like the communal space and usually they're just like "oh yeah sorry, sorry about that, we got it", you know, they are pretty respectful and kind of understand as well.

In terms of interaction with the “homeless community”, Todd has established a relationship with some of these individuals and has learned that there is a power balance between certain individuals within the “community”:

“I think there are a couple of leaders in the community here that, I don’t have any evidence to back it up, but I’m pretty sure these one or two people who kind of hang out here kind of seen as more the ‘managers’ or the ‘leaders’ of the space. One of them, he’s name is Eddie, we call him ‘Eddie Spaghetti’, the other guy, his name is Justin. I actually... I would consider them acquaintances at this point because, you know, they’ll kind of like, if anything goes wrong they kind of let us know and just say pay back and show them that we appreciate it, we usually almost always offer them food, if they order food in line I usually take care of them as well. So yeah, in terms of one-on-one interactions it’s mostly with Eddie and Justin.”

Clint, the manager of Yummy, agrees that the “homeless situation” hasn’t affected his business negatively and can only recall one incident where it’s been an issue:

“We have a restroom for customers and we would rather have the homeless come and use this restroom than use the side of the building, so, whoever comes in and ask to use the restroom... There was one guy who was either on something or not taking his medication, who tore up the restroom one day just in there like screaming and, like, whatever he was going through... And we’ve disinvited him to use the restroom because it was a disturbance for the customers as well as damage to the property for us.”

It is evident that the “homeless community” is neither a disturbance nor a threat to the surrounding businesses. However, in terms of inclusiveness, the “homeless community” does not take part in plans or the development of the plaza. Todd explains:

“I mean they are pretty respectful of the space and we like to keep it clean as well so it’s kind of, like, we all kind of work together but we don’t really have meetings with the homeless community as far as like, what needs to happen to the space. They’re kind of self-governing.”

He goes on by saying that:

“It’s homeless people on one end, which has a lot of negative social stigma attached to it, but it is like a community that once was here in a stronger sense but these days it’s been more on the lighter side.”
Clint has a similar perception of how the situation has changed in the last years and suggested that physical alterations in the park section of the plaza might be a reason for this:

“It seems like it used to be darker. And it seems more... I’m not sure exactly what happened but I feel like it was darker and more kind of closed off and it’s more open and bright now. They might have like changed some of the trees of something but... it seems more welcoming now than it did like five years ago”
Park section of the plaza with the “centrepiece” in the middle. Photos by author.
6.2.3. Change

“I think it’s been pretty static in terms of change to the plaza since it was installed. It’s been here, it’s just kind of this open space, you know, we get skateboarders, people kicking soccer balls, all kinds of stuff, but… It’s here and the girl scouts come and sell cookies here, people come out with like their petitions for other residents to sign and stuff like that. [It has stayed the same] since it opened, yes… And none of it has been bad, it’s mostly just a positive kind of changed that happened… So far, so good!”

– Clint, manager of Yummy, March 2018

Even though foot traffic has increased, and the plaza seems to be highly appreciated among people in the area, it has had its ups and downs in terms of maintenance and providing activities. When the plaza first opened it had a basketball hoop, a piano, a “free pile” where people would come by and donate clothes and books, a community board between Pine & Crane and Roo, a ping pong table and more furniture and parasols. However, somewhere along the line, the maintenance of it all fell behind due to both logistical matters, uncertainty of accountabilities and time constraints. Before Roo opened, the space had been empty for over a year since Mornings Nights Café moved out (which, according to Todd, was due to the rent increase¹). Mornings Nights Café used to oversee storing the basketball hoop, the ping pong table and the piano and when they moved out, the question of who should be responsible suddenly arose. Todd, the manager of Pine & Crane, explains:

“[…] and then that comes with like a new slew of logistical problems where it’s just like, “okay, who’s responsible for this, it’s broken, who’s going to repair this, who has the time to do this, who’s gonna keep the basketball, who’s gonna make sure that blah blah blah” […] We kind of fell behind on the maintenance of the thing and now it’s just completely broken and rather than figure out how to replace it, they’re just broken and eventually kind of disappeared. Which is kind of sad.”

He went on by saying that in order to maintain what was once the vision for the plaza – a vibrant meeting place that would create a sense of community by offering offered different kinds of activities such as basketball and ping pong – it needs a well-managed governing body that is in charge of sustaining this:

“When everyone is contributing and no one is really being held accountable it’s really easy for all parties to kind of fall off and then, again, with the vandalism that happens here, that basketball hoop got torn apart, the ping pong table eventually… No one respected it, it just broke… And the piano, I don’t even really know where the piano is. It used to be stored in the coffee shop and when the coffee shop closed, it was just gone. Was it stolen? I don’t know. It’s a shame, right? If the governing body that looks over this area was a little bit more well managed, who knows what we could achieve. But right now, it’s just kind of like a loosely formed community with volunteers from Silver Lake. If there was more public funding or safe funding for these kind of programs, oh man, we’d be behind that sort of thing in a

¹ However, no further information regarding the circumstances involving Mornings Nights Café’s closure could be found and it is therefore uncertain if there is, in fact, a direct correlation between its closure and the installation of the plaza.
second, you wouldn’t even have to ask us twice, we’d be all for it. But unfortunately, when you don’t manage these things and just kind of leave it out for it to kind of do its thing... Who has the time to buy a piano and maintain it now [...] The money part is not as much of a bottleneck as free time right now. It’s just one of those things where... Yeah, I can fantasize about like, a group of people who do super awesome, nice things for the community but... With the way things are outside of this community and what we’re trying to embody here, it’s difficult.”
Andrea DeGuzzman, owner of United Bread & Pastry told the Eastsider LA in 2017 that efforts to clean up the area began well before the plaza opened and that she notices the impact it had on her business right away:

“Businesses started to sprout. It’s been getting better and better.”

Todd, the manager of Pine & Crane, also said that:

“We are getting busier and busier and I think that the foot traffic and the popularity of this plaza in general has increased.”

Genelle LeVin, president of the Silver Lake Improvement Association had a similar perception of the effects that the plaza has had for the directly adjacent businesses:

“I have not heard anything negative. In fact, across the street is formerly El conquistador, a Mexican restaurant that had been there for 40 years. Well, a new developer came in, the owners were ready to retire anyway, and they changed their entrance from Sunset Boulevard to Edgecliff so that it would face the plaza and that business owner and another one adjacent to it are very supportive of the plaza and, in fact, they want to contribute to the improvements and the maintenance of the plaza.” (Williamson, 2014)
Julie, the owner of the now closed Mornings Nights Café, was also interviewed back in 2014 and confirmed Genelle’s above statement:

“Basically, bottom line, we’ve increased 20 percent, and we’re getting busier every year, actually every month because at this point this place has become a destination spot, so we’re just, getting busier and busier.” (Williamson, 2014)

She also noticed how the increased foot traffic made a big difference for her business due to increased visibility:

In all honesty, there’s less graffiti, there is less loitering because it is so visible. Before we were so hidden. I honestly do get people walking into my shop saying “I never knew you guys existed”. People would drive right on by. When you’re zooming off of a street you get used to your surroundings and I was never noticed, in all honesty. And with the plaza, people have been noticing my shop more (ibid.).

Genelle, too, states that she has noticed a big difference in terms of vandalism due to the increased visibility, saying:

“People contact me when there’s graffiti and it’s taken care of right away but it’s been nominal. There was a time when we’d get graffiti on the barriers, and Hollywood Beautification Team comes out and cleans that up right away. But I haven’t had any calls in months. Occasionally we’ll get little spots of graffiti in the area but I don’t think it’s as bad as other areas to be honest. […] I think the visibility, because the tables and chairs are out here most of the day, and people are around so… that makes a difference. Just that people are keeping their eyes open. And I think, it’s deterrent that people out here they are walking.” (Williamson, 2014)

Another aspect in terms of what kind of change the plaza has generated concerns traffic patterns and safety. According to Julie, the intersection used to be dangerous and accidents occurred on a weekly basis:

“This street was so dangerous, people would fly off of Sunset, the main street that we’re connected to, they would blow the stop sign at the end of the street. People were dodging cars basically.” (Williamson, 2014)

However, once the plaza was installed, this changed. Julie explains:

“It’s so much safer. There hasn’t been a one accident since the plaza came in at the end of the street where people used to blow the stop sign. On the other end of the street, bikers used to get hit all the time. It would literally be once every few months, I would see a biker on the floor and I’d have to go and call 911. But not one accident since the plaza has come in. So if that doesn’t say it all I don’t know what else to say, it’s just a safer street” (ibid.).
Visitors of the plaza, especially those with children, are very positive about the change. One of the interviewees from the street surveys conducted in March 2018 was particularly pleased with the change:

“I have an older son who at the time we had a stroller and to get from that corner [points to the junction at Sunset Boulevard/Edgecliffe Drive] to there [points to 99c store] was so difficult, because cars were coming at full speed off of Sunset and wouldn’t know that there were people possible crossing the street, especially as it got dark in the evening. It was very difficult. And because of all the changes they’ve made, it’s just become much safer, more I guess pedestrian friendly cause so many of the other stores and shops around here are places that we wanted to walk, resolving this traffic issue made even that much more welcoming.”

When Genelle was asked if she would recommend a similar project to other communities and in what way she thinks it is something positive, she said:

“There’s no question, I mean, there are several people here with their dogs, it’s a pet friendly community and people come and bring their (mostly) dogs and it’s a destination now. People come and meet. And it’s just been a real plus.” (Williamson, 2014)

The Tactical Urbanism approach aims to create change by using low-cost, small-scale actions in order to catalyse a long-term change. In the case study of the Sunset Triangle Plaza, change was evident in the process of the actual, physical change when the plaza was constructed, but what has also followed is a continuous change. While certain changes were merely “tactical”, like the basketball hoop and the piano that eventually “stopped happening”, others are have been substantial; businesses flourished, traffic safety increased, and the space has become an important meeting place for the community. The change into the Sunset Triangle Plaza has given the space an identity.
7. DISCUSSION

The discourse revolving social sustainability, public spaces and placemaking is complex to say the least, with numerous theories setting different kinds of requirements. By looking at some of these theories, this study attempts to untangle some of the concepts by applying them on a local scale in a physical setting; The *Sunset Triangle Plaza*, to answer whether new public spaces can be generators of social sustainability from three aspects: usage, users and change.

7.1 Use and Uses as Defining Factors of a Socially Sustainable Public Space

Daily observations of the *Sunset Triangle Plaza* were conducted to distinguish overarching patterns from the activities taking place there. The activities were then analysed by applying different perspectives drawn from the presented theories, in order to disclose whether the plaza has become a successful public space and how that relates to notions of social sustainability.

It is evident that different theories draw from various definitions of what a public space is or should be. Thus, whether a public space is considered “well-functioning” varies depending on which of these theories or perspectives is presupposed. While the United Nations’ toolkit assumes a rather vast definition focusing largely on functions, Low’s framework is more delimited, emphasising the importance of human connection and social interaction and social justice, whereas PPS’s model is even more defined as it mainly focuses on activities taking place in a public space. These frameworks claim to be useful tools in assessing public spaces. However, while they can be helpful in many ways and emphasise many important aspects, they are not always applicable as models to assess whether a public space is well-functioning. For instance, the *Sunset Triangle Plaza* can be considered a good public space in most aspects according to the UN’s definition but less so if Low’s framework is applied. While it can be established that the plaza is, in fact, a public space according to the UN definition, it cannot tell us anything about how it is used or how it is perceived. The plaza could also be considered a dynamic public space according to Project for Public Spaces’ “What Makes a Successful Place” scheme and it is also possible to list over ten reasons to spend time there. However, it is unclear what constitutes a “reason” according to PPS, which makes the framework rather vague. Moreover, these activities alone may not be enough to generate a well-functioning public space; they need to be looked at in a wider context and in correlation with socioeconomic aspects. The use of a space is obviously a central part of assessing public space because with no people there can be no public space. However, these identified models and framework have not been very useful as analytical tools to evaluate the use of the *Sunset Triangle Plaza*. Although they may all be more or less possible to apply to this case study, they don’t tell us very much in the end.

So, what does today’s utilization of the plaza say about social sustainability or Right to the City? Proponents of public spaces make great assumptions regarding their ability to generate social sustainability. However, although the *Sunset Triangle Plaza* can be considered a good public space as it aligns with many of the themes in the above-mentioned frameworks, whether the activities per se generate any long-term social change would need research that extends beyond evaluation of what they consist of. Thus, this study illustrates the need for additional frameworks and tools for the analysis of public space as generator for social sustainability.
7.2 Users

It is important to recognise that the installation or redevelopment of a public space may not necessarily benefit all potential users, but instead serve particular interest groups. It could even result in certain social groups being adversely affected or even removed from the space or appropriated different parts of a space depending on what kind of facilities, services and activates are offered and who can take part in or afford them. Polese and Stern emphasizes the importance of the cohabitation of culturally and socially diverse groups in public spaces, and social integration and quality of life for all segments of the population (Colantonio 2010, p. 80).

Although people of various social groups could be observed at the Sunset Triangle Plaza, there are underlying power relations between these groups. This is particularly noticeable in terms of the physical division, i.e. where different groups tend to stay at different times of the day. While “hipsters” are frequent visitors of Pine & Crane, Roo and Yummy and have a tendency to move alongside them and using the appertained tables and chairs, the “rough sleepers” generally occupy the park section of the plaza, especially on and around the “centrepiece”. However, the interviews also revealed that there seems to be fewer rough sleepers at the plaza nowadays and that this might have to do with the recent physical alterations that has been made to make the space less dark. Though the situation with rough sleepers may not meant much inconvenience for the surrounding businesses, certain types of behaviour or activities (such as drinking and loitering or even just “hanging out”) are sometimes regarded as inappropriate because of what they represent socially. For instance, the photo of the sign (page 32) indicates that the People St Program regard loitering, smoking and even sleeping as inappropriate activities at the plaza. It seems contradictive for a popular public space to discourage certain groups to spend time there by advising against activities and uses that don’t “fit the image” of an inviting public space. Furthermore, what makes a space inclusive is not only about the right to be in a public space, but also about being a part of the public and feel a sense of belonging. Thus, from a social sustainability perspective, inclusiveness is a central component but there is also a value in public visibility of marginalised groups because it creates an awareness of social issues.

The theory of Right to the City emphasises that “all citizens are allowed to participate both in the use of and in the production of all urban space” and raises the question of “Who’s Right?” Although placemaking and Tactical Urbanism stem from grassroots movements and claim to be bottom-up, inclusive approaches, many critics argue that it tends to fall short of these goals and the “Who’s Right?” aspect is instead often overlooked. According to Németh (2008, p.2463), the kind of public spaces that provide opportunities for discussion and spontaneous encounters with people with different backgrounds and other viewpoints on the world are especially good. Whether the Tactical Urbanism approach in this case has promoted inclusion and created a social mix is, however, debatable. Although the plaza allows for different social groups to meet, the two main groups observed at the plaza, i.e. hipsters and rough sleepers, generally don’t interact with each other. When rough sleepers occupy the park section, people from other social groups tend to avoid it but during the Farmer’s market, rough sleepers are absent while other social groups hang out there. Therefore, whether the plaza has contributed to a social mix in accordance with the objectives set by the Right to the City theory is debatable. To answer that, it first needs to be determined what is required for a place to be considered socially diverse: is it enough to be able to see each other and acknowledge each other’s presence or is some form of interaction necessary?
Even though a place is generally perceived as public, the “publicness” is, however, conditional as accessibility clearly depends on who you are; in terms of social status, age, gender, and on time of day as that regulates what kind of amenities or services are available. For instance, as services are usually limited late at night, it automatically excludes certain groups from staying at a place. Németh (2008, p.2463) argues that the ideal of a “universally inclusive and unmediated space” cannot exist because the level of “publicness” will be different from instance to instance. To which degree the Sunset Triangle Plaza could be considered “public” depends largely on which theory is applied. According to Varna and Tiersdell’s table on page 15, the plaza would be considered more public in terms of meaning (i.e. different social groups spend time there), ownership (public function and public use), control (free use) and physical configuration (well-connected and located within the movement system), but perhaps less public in terms of civility (well-cared for and balancing needs of different social groups) and animation (support for a wide range of potential uses).

The issue with public spaces that only (or mainly) provides consumption-based activities is that it means that those who are purchasing goods or services are welcomed in these spaces, while those who do not (e.g. children and rough sleepers) are discouraged. This way, Schmidt and Németh (2010, p.455) argues, “the economic exchange value of a space is prioritized over its use value”. Regarding the Sunset Triangle Plaza, many of the main activities are related the businesses surrounding the plaza, including Roo, Pine & Crane and Yummy. The street furniture is an important element of the plaza as it provides the opportunity for people to sit, linger, and interact with each other and their environment. However, even though there are no explicit rules in terms of signs or delamination, the tables and chairs seem to be perceived more private and meant for customers of the surrounding businesses. The park section, on the other hand, seems to be perceived more public which may be the reason this “physical division” occurs: the ones that can afford an over-priced latte or organic groceries can, by all means, sit down at the table, whereas the ones that cannot, are indirectly referred to the park section.

Different urban scholars have different ideas and opinions regarding what a public space is or should be and what level of publicness is desirable. Németh’s (2012, p. 813) conclusion that; “not all space can or should be public”; that “some form of control is often required or desired” and lastly, that “publicness is always subjective” is undeniably true in the case of the Sunset Triangle Plaza.

### 7.3 Creating Socially Sustainable Change

Tactical Urbanism promises a lot; increasing liveability and a sense of community, and making places more pleasant, vibrant, inviting and dynamic, and has, according to Talen (2015, p.153) “the power to significantly impact the everyday lives of urban residents”. The general attitude towards the plaza seemed more or less unanimously at the start and there were only good things to be said about it; businesses were blooming, traffic accidents went down from a weekly occurrence to virtually non-existent, Farmer’s markets and movie nights are highly appreciated and draws people from all over Silver Lake and Los Angeles and the plaza is so well-known it has now become a destination spot. However, some things have changed in the last few years. Even though the interviews revealed that the plaza is still appreciated, the basketball hoop, the ping-pong table and the community board are gone and before Rao opened its doors in March 2018, the space had been vacant for over a year. So, what does that say about Tactical Urbanism? Its tagline reads “short term action for a long-term change” but it becomes obvious that it is one thing to start an
initiative and provide fun activities, and another thing to maintain it. In the interview with Todd, it became apparent that even though a bottom-down approach is desirable in many ways, there are also difficulties in terms of logistics and maintenance issues attached to it. Who is responsible? Who has got the time to look after it? It is clear that bottom-up approaches and ideas about “common ownership” and “organically emerged” activities come with certain restraints, so much so that a more top-down approach is sometimes sought. Grassroots and community driven projects are often romanticised, but it is one thing to initiate projects and a whole other story to take responsibility for them and keep them “alive”. Silva (2016, p.1044) argued that Tactical Urbanism actions, in some cases, don’t seem to involve entire communities, but very specific groups. Thus, the idea that these actions will help create a vibrant public space where people from different social groups can participate in various, organically emerged activities is a nice thought, but it certainly has its limitations. Ultimately, someone must also be in charge of maintaining it because it doesn’t happen by itself.

Change can also mean a lot of different things. In the case study of the Sunset Triangle Plaza, “actual”, measurable change happened in terms of less vandalism and loitering, blooming businesses due to the increased foot traffic and less traffic accidents. However, according to Clint, manager of Yummy, it has been “more or less static in terms of change to the plaza since it was installed” but that one very clear, positive effect is that the plaza has created a space for everyday life and democracy:

“[…] It’s been here, it’s just kind of this open space, you know, we get skateboarders, people kicking soccer balls, all kinds of stuff, but… It’s here and the girl scouts come and sell cookies here, people come out with like their petitions for other residents to sign and stuff like that. [It has stayed the same] since it opened, yes… And none of it has been bad, it’s mostly just a positive kind of changed that happened... So far, so good!”

In terms of “psychological change”, the plaza has now become a place with an identity. It has become a destination spot with its own Yelp page. The change is also symbolic. In a city like Los Angeles, where the automobile and the highways are deeply rooted in its identity, taking a strip of road from the cars and giving it to pedestrians is an important step forward for the public spaces movement in the city.

Social sustainability is an ambiguous term and while some aspects of its core themes, such as democracy, equity and safety, are possible to measure, more extensive research is required to determine whether this has been achieved through the conversion. The case study of the Sunset Triangle Plaza illustrates that evaluating these broad concepts at a local scale opens up for many questions – and conclusions. Even though the “softer” objectives such as inclusion, sense of place, social integration and wellbeing are rather vague and less measurable, they can sometimes be easier to discern. There is a consensus among the local business owners that the plaza has only been a benefit to the area, and in many ways. Apart from the noticeable or measurable changes, most of the interviewees also mention that the community seem to get outside more now that they have this gathering spot where a lot of activities takes place, and that is brings people from other areas of Los Angeles as well.
8. CONCLUSION

The installation of the Sunset Triangle Plaza has indeed created a new public space with opportunities for meetings and interactions to take place, but has the conversion managed to create any long-term change? Can we say anything about whether it promotes democracy, inclusion or equity? And can the redevelopment of a public space create new social patterns in a neighbourhood?

Different social groups co-exist in this space but that doesn’t mean that social cohesion has been achieved. However, even though this enables people to observe difference, which in turn can (potentially) promote tolerance for social diversity, the kind of structural problems that social sustainability emphasises needs to be dealt with on many different levels. What we can say, however, is that the implementation highlights these issues.

Moreover, even though the conversion has meant a rather moderate physical change, it is also important to recognise the psychological change that has occurred as a result of the installation. So, even though it may be regarded as a merely cosmetic change with its painted dots and movable furniture it is not, as Madanipour (1999) argued, “the sheer physical presence” that renders public spaces meaningful, but how we as humans assigns functions to them that goes beyond that and makes them a part of social reality. Thus, although the physical change might not have been very drastic, the space has now got an identity and has become a powerful symbol of change. Already in the 1960’s and 70’s, Jane Jacobs, Jan Gehl and William H Whyte were proclaiming the importance of the social life in public spaces, “life between buildings”, human scale, walkability and building cities for people and not for cars. At the time, many cities were emerging and developing in a rapid pace, many of them designed for cars to facilitate driving because it was considered the progressive solution to transport problems. Today, over 50 years later, we are finally starting to take Jacob’s; Gehl’s and Whyte’s notions in consideration and measures taken to reduce our dependence on cars and fossil fuels are increasing. Los Angeles has long been identified with automobiles and freeways and notorious for being hostile to pedestrians. Thus, by reclaiming a snippet of street from cars and giving it to the people, for the first time in the city’s history, this conversion is especially symbolic and has spurred a debate about creating spaces for people instead of cars.

The discourse about public versus private is extensive and can therefore be debated on many different levels. While the physical aspect is more of a legal process, the psychological aspect concerns the social process, i.e. the question of Whose Public Space? For a real change to take place, there needs to be interplay between these levels. Grassroot movements and community partners are “fluid actors”, they represent groups that in some ways might be more including than bureaucratic governments but, at the same time, excluding because they take on the role to define what “community” means. The People St Program are, in this case, the “middle actor” but have not participated in this study, which might suggest that they are not as interested in taking responsibility anymore. Consequently, the responsibility falls on the local businesses and the users, whilst the city tries to do their part as well. Németh (2012, p. 813) concluded that “not all space can or should be public”, that “some form of control is often required or desired” and lastly, that “publicness is always subjective”. So what level of publicness is desirable in the case of the Sunset Triangle Plaza? Evidently, as Todd stated, some form of control is needed to uphold basic maintenance and logistical matters. So, perhaps the question at hand is rather about whether a private space is better than no space at all? Even though the theories of social sustainability consist of many ideas regarding what public spaces should be and what they should promote, the
two concepts do not always align with each other, but gives different answers to questions regarding control, as well as consumption and security. For instance, public spaces need consumption, an activity that can be excluding and controlling as private and public interest differ. Similarly, security and feeling safe is not the same thing, and differs between different groups of people.

Some of the issues addressed in this thesis can be related to gentrification. However, focus has primarily been on studying what happens at the plaza, rather than whether the socio-economic change that Silver Lake has gone through for the past decade has affected what happens there and how the plaza affects the area in terms of gentrification. What is, however, interesting to consider is what it takes to raise questions about public space, social justice, inclusiveness or safety in a neighbourhood. The fact that the project was initiated in a very trendy and, as of today, predominately white, upper middle-class neighbourhood is probably not a coincidence. Would the same kind of project have the same chance to be carried out, or even thought of, in a different, less affluent area in Los Angeles? It is also interesting to speculate on what the plaza will look like and how it will function in ten, or even twenty, years from now. In the case of the Sunset Triangle Plaza, it appears as if re-establishing some form control is required for the plaza to become as “vibrant” as it was in 2012. In the best-case scenario, the limitations that arise from uncertainties about who is responsible are recognised and efforts are made to facilitate maintenance through appointing a well-managed governing body, possibly in combination with a community centre or similar. In a worst-case scenario, these uncertainties are left undealt with and will continue to intensify which might ultimately lead to an abandoned public space.

This study has shown that the examined concepts and the models are not always useful; the space has changed but it is a continuous change – for better and for worse. It is evident that the idea of the “organically emerged” city can imply both opportunities and limitations.

8.1. Further Research

The initially stated overarching aim of this study was to examine how a broad concept such as social sustainability can be understood from a relatively small-scale Tactical Urbanism intervention. However, due to the limited time frame of this study, it has only managed to uncover one piece of the puzzle. What was found is that even though Tactical Urbanism makes claims of promoting (or even increasing) social sustainability, it is difficult to evaluate the projects based on this concept. There is a need for tools and frameworks for cross-scale analysis and sensitivity towards social structures and socioeconomic struggles.

An interesting field of further research is to examine the fluidity of the top-down/bottom-up aspect of Tactical Urbanism, in which the latter is often given emphasis. It would therefore have been valuable to delve into the more top-down oriented approach that was applied in the case of the Sunset Triangle Plaza and examine what the process and the methods used reveal about community engagement and control in this case. How has the top-down approach influenced the outcomes in terms of social change? And, in comparison, what has been the outcomes in another case, where a “truly” bottom-up approach has been used? Is Todd right; is some form of control needed for a project like this to create long term change? When is it desirable and when is it problematic?
Furthermore, gentrification is only touched upon in this study and it would be interesting to investigate the interplay between the plaza and the ongoing gentrification process in Silver Lake.

**On a Final Note…**

After four weeks of observing the plaza, I took a friend of mine to see “what all the fuss was about”. Once we got there, he took a quick look around and then, looking a bit puzzled, turned to me and said, “is this it?” And fair enough, because at first glance, this 11,000 square foot polka dotted plaza doesn’t look like much. Nevertheless, even though individual projects might not look very spectacular or can create long-term social change, the sum of all initiatives certainly can. There is an on-going force within the placemaking movement and although the *Sunset Triangle Plaza* might not express it, it serves as a cog in moving it forward. The plaza by itself may not help solve any social issues but one can still be positive about the space for what is has become today. It is safe to say that a new space for engagement and interaction has been created, both physically and mentally, after the conversion. Ten years ago, it was just the dull and dangerous intersection of Sunset Boulevard and Griffith Park Boulevard, today it is the *Sunset Triangle Plaza*, where activities and interactions can take place, albeit on a low-key scale.
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