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Experimentation on public spaces: does it support urban (micro)mobility?

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This work addresses the following topic(s) from the Call for Contributions:
(Please check at least one box)

- Placemaking to integrate urban spaces and mobility
- Promoting sustainable mobility choices in metropolitan regions
- Governing responsible mobility innovations
- Shaping the transition towards mobility justice
- System analysis, design, and evaluation
- other: _____

Extended Abstract

Urban roads constitute a critical aspect of public space, and a noticeable trend has emerged to enhance their functionality. Accelerating the implementation of new interventions often involves experimentation (Elrahman, 2016), resulting in novel configurations and activities. In recent years, both citizens and public authorities have been shifting their focus towards human-scale measures (Lydon and Garcia, 2015; Silva, 2016; Sparks, 2019), particularly in local streets. It is known that traffic engineers have focused on the resolution of the mobility problems, with enhancement of road capacity to allow a higher flow of vehicles, while urban planners are more concerned about divergent land uses, equity and promotion of space, in a more qualitative perspective.

The conventional planning approach typically places architects, planners, and urban designers in a position of supremacy over other stakeholders within a given territory (Natrasony and Alexandrer, 2005), and this traditional process is widespread across various municipalities and public authorities globally, often referred to as a top-down approach, in which community involvement is somewhat indirect. Despite criticisms of the traditional planning process, it offers certain advantages for planners. The top-down approach provides public authorities with a sense of control and efficiency, reduces the time required for decision-making compared to a bottom-up approach, and simplifies resource allocation, making it more conducive to receiving investments (Dias *et al.*, 2022).

However, there are convincing arguments in favor of transitioning to a bottom-up approach, and aligns with community involvement. Concerns include the potential for the community to be unduly influenced by technical experts, the failure of classic approaches to address the specific needs of the community, and the potential issues that arise when attempting to replicate solutions across diverse contexts. Additionally, often the agenda is predefined without consulting the local community. A more inclusive and participatory approach to urban planning can address these concerns, engaging all stakeholders in the decision-making process and promoting solutions that better align with the unique requirements and aspirations of the local community (Voytenko *et al.*, 2016; Tsigdinos *et al.*, 2022).

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This shift towards a new approach acknowledges the value of community input and collaborative decision-making, ultimately leading to more sustainable and harmonious urban development. As a result of the combined perspectives and philosophies of use of public space and methods to intervene on the territory, there are emerging strategies to support new uses. The notion of experimentation has gained force and has been applied to different contexts. Urban roads represent the mixes in a city due to its complexity of activities and perspectives, and experimentation can bring together different stakeholders and their visions, which can be applied directly to the ground.

This paper aims to understand, from the perspective of specialists and technicians from divergent social and economic contexts, the main barriers, difficulties, advantages and benefits of applying experimentation techniques (i.e. tactical urbanism, pop-up urbanism, DIY urbanism) and its implications to urban mobility. Research questions were defined as:

- RQ1.** Can experimentation on public space serve as a spark for quicker changes on urban micromobility?
RQ2. What were the main barriers found during the process?

The methodological approach starts with a literature review of mobility planning and the use of experimentation on public spaces. Then, from the literature review, it was possible to identify key stakeholder groups: (1) urban planners and (2) mobility specialists. After that, guided/semi-structured interviews with the identified groups were conducted to get answers based on divergent perspectives. It was performed the transcriptions of the interviews for further analysis, and finally the relevant topics were identified for extra examination. It is expected that the results will present the way that experimentation is now applied, its benefits, major difficulties and how it can be inserted into the (formal) planning process, and achieve a more efficient implementation of interventions.

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