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Encounters and Avoidances in Suburban Spaces

Experiencing Cultural and Social Diversity in a Multicultural City

By Tiina-Riitta Lappi & Pia Olsson

Negotiating Space for Encounters

If I tell first when I came to Finland, if I talk about the Myyrmäki area, it is my beloved area. I really love it. At the time when I came, I didn't know any foreigners, there were not that many in Myyrmäki. All my closest friends are Finnish, truly nice people (Female, September 27, 2017).

The description of Myyrmäki as a beloved area is a fragment from the beginning of an interview with a woman who came to the Finnish suburb of Myyrmäki for the first time 23 years ago. As the discussion proceeds she reflects a couple more times on her attachment for Myyrmäki and explains it very distinctly through the social relations which form the basis for her everyday life. These relations have given her support and provided her with a feeling of security whenever she has needed help or just a friend to talk to and spend time with. She herself has a background in the Mediterranean and she analyses the formation of her friendships on the axis of foreigner/Finnish. For her, the neighbourhood has become a good place to live through encounters with her "Finnish" friends.

The "cosmopolitan turn" in research has emphasized the way urban environments can be spaces for – if not positive then neutral – encounters between people from different kinds of backgrounds (Valentine 2008:324). Tolerance, conviviality and intercultural civility are emphasized as features of cosmopolitan spaces (see e.g. Gilroy 2004; Noble 2013; Valluvan 2016). In our article, we focus on Myyrmäki, located in the Helsinki metropolitan area, more specifically in the city of Vantaa. We ask how people with a migrant background experience suburban spaces in their daily

lives and how these experiences are affected by cultural encounters.

We have chosen Myyrmäki as one of our focus areas¹ as it represents a part of the city where cultural diversity is higher than the average in the city of Vantaa. All in all, in Vantaa, 16.6 per cent of the inhabitants have some other language than Finnish, Swedish or Sami as their mother tongue. This makes Vantaa the most diverse city in Finland. The most frequently spoken foreign languages are Estonian, Russian, Somali, Albanian and Arabic (Vantaan väestö 2016/2017 2017:15–16).

Compared with the suburban neighbourhood of Myyrmäki, the research dealing with the "cosmopolitan turn" has usually dealt with urban spaces with longer and more diverse histories.² In order to answer our research question, we deliberate about some concepts that have evolved within the cosmopolitan turn, namely cosmopolitan canopy and conviviality, by applying them in the context of a somewhat remote suburb in the larger metropolitan area. In other words, we are trying to see how such concepts concerning large-scale global trends, both "on the ground" and within humanistic theories, can help to explain the practices of cultural encounters in everyday life. Furthermore, we want to examine whether these concepts are applicable in a slightly different context (from what they were invented for) and how they can help in creating more involving meeting places. Then not only the empirical evidence but also ideas for such meeting places as well as knowledge of obstacles to their functioning would be of value. With such an approach we can strengthen the social impact of ethnological urban studies.

The underlying idea of our article is that urban space affects the ways urbanites experience their social environment also in relation to cultural differences. The American sociologist Elijah Anderson has introduced the concept of cosmopolitan canopy by which he refers to semi-public urban spaces encouraging people to adopt a positive attitude towards one another in a way that reflects civility and tolerance. This expressed civility is a key to a social control that further emphasizes the specific nature of the space. For Anderson, cosmopolitan canopies are “settings that offer a respite from the lingering tensions of urban life and an opportunity for diverse people to come together”. He states that “ethnic and racial identities are never ‘forgotten’”, but sometimes places where they do not define the encounters can be formed. Even though Anderson focuses on race and ethnicity in his study, he defines the canopy-like space as something that resonates with other kinds of differences as well, such as social differences (Anderson 2012:xiv, 10–11, 145; also Anderson 2004).

Especially the emergence of the concept of super-diversity in academic and policy discourses has foregrounded the idea that the previous ethnicity-based approach no longer provides an adequate analytical tool for understanding the complexity and dynamism of urban multiculturalism. Along with the turn to diversity, the focus has changed from entities to relations (Berg & Sigona 2013:348). Differences are negotiated daily in everyday urban spaces. Ash Amin has emphasized the role of “micropolitics of everyday social contact and encounter” but also the “inter-cultural” aspects of this negotiation. By

this he stresses the cultural dialogue to understand the processes as active ones, in contrast to understanding multiculturalism either as cultural differences preventing communication or as speculative cosmopolitanism (Amin 2002:959–967). To join the interculturality with the cosmopolitan canopy means to us that we look for the many, sometimes banal, ways of interacting in urban spaces.

The urban space we are discussing comprises the public or semi-public spaces in the suburb, i.e. spaces which are basically open to all city dwellers to access in their everyday lives. This means that we include in our research also privately owned spaces when their foremost purpose is to be open to the general public (Tani 2015:131). Sara Ahmed (2000:7–9) has defined the term encounter to “suggest a meeting, but a meeting which involves surprise and conflict”. She emphasizes that encounters are not only about the present but that they always also reopen previous encounters. In consequence, differences are not defined in a particular space or encounter but in a continuous historical relation, and this layered nature of encounters is something that becomes very noticeable also in the interviews done in Myyrmäki.

The cosmopolitan canopy can be categorized as one of the ideas linked to the “cosmopolitan turn” in which the urban potential for culturally hybrid environments has been emphasized. However, this view has also been criticized because the literature seldom analyses the actual processes where this kind of cosmopolitanism can be realized. The geographer Gill Valentine (2008:324–325) has argued that some of the research might even give

a romanticized picture of urban encounters where respect for others would automatically evolve from contacts with the “other”. We consider this criticism important while examining the fieldwork data produced within the project. The very first encounters with our interviewees have clearly shown that in our focus areas urban encounters can be very multisided and problematic.

Elijah Anderson, who in his work discusses “the colour line” that becomes visible also in the cosmopolitan canopies, has argued that “the gloss of the canopy provides cover, allowing some people to mask their true feelings. Some good comes from this, for prejudiced people are practicing tolerance, which may eventually take root.” So, at the same time as we are aware that we should not idealize the urban environment, we want to look at the ethnographic material³ produced within our project as a potential source for opening up the mechanisms behind cultural encounters in urban spaces.

We have previously discussed the difficulties that have arisen from applying the concept of “cosmopolitan canopy” in our project and especially in the places we have chosen as our research areas. When analysing our research sites in Vantaa in general we have realized that the cosmopolitan canopy there might be more of a state of mind than actually taking shape in relation to a specific space. This would also mean that the relationship between the planned city and the production of the cosmopolitan canopy might be difficult to establish. All in all, the canopy is not a static feature of a particular space but can be created anew or shattered by the people within the space (Lappi & Olsson 2018;

see also Ojanen 2018). We find it important, however, to look for clues to understand which factors create better opportunities for some spaces rather than others to become spaces for these kinds of cosmopolitan canopies. This approach will hopefully support the future urban planning and urban renewal processes as well. In order to be able to find such connections we will now turn to the closer reading of Myyrmäki central area – not arguing it to be a cosmopolitan canopy but looking for the factors that support it to become one or prevent it from becoming one.

Joined and Differentiated Spaces for Encounters

The focus of our study has been on public spaces and encounters between people of varying ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Since the Myyrmäki area was not very familiar to us in advance, the fieldwork started with observation aiming at identification of spatial practices which would reflect the social characteristics of the area. The most obvious place to start with the observation was the Myyrmanni shopping mall which is situated in the very centre and gathers shops, supermarkets, many coffee shops and restaurants under the same roof, making it a natural and easy meeting place for people in Myyrmäki. Such public services as the health care centre, social services and the library as well as the railway station are also located close to Myyrmanni. The impression after various visits to the Myyrmanni shopping centre is that the range of customers reflects the ethnic diversity of the population living in the Myyrmäki area. Actually, it may be that this is one factor that creates a feeling of hominess along with the

centre not being too large. Especially the restaurants and the coffee shops on the second floor encourage groups, from young schoolgirls to old men with different cultural backgrounds, to spend time with friends and acquaintances. Whether it is a multicultural space is another question and depends greatly on how it is defined.

A shopping mall is literally a place for shopping. However, in recent studies it has been analysed also as a place for other kinds of activities. It can actively be used for social encounters, as many of the studies about youth and their culture of hanging out show (see e.g. Tani 2015; Lampela & Tani 2015; see also Anderson 2011:31–71). Shopping malls can also be described as spaces where the attributes of “loose” and “tight” space⁴ become visible in different kinds of actions and where they sometimes also become subjects of negotiation (Tani 2015:142). In the context of “cosmopolitan canopy”, we have looked at the shopping malls as a space for cultural and social encounters that people experience just by coming there (see Anderson 2011). By this we mean that they do not need to actively and knowingly engage in some premeditated encounter in the surroundings but that the mall as a semi-public space⁵ in itself creates a specific space for potential encounters.

As later became clear, the shopping mall is not exclusively a place for positive experiences. However, during the interviews none of the interviewees brought up negative incidents or experiences concerning the cultural or ethnic encounters in the shopping centre.⁶ This could be seen as an allusion to an urban sociability where the sharing of space is claimed by

no one group but is shared by different groups. It is space for thrown-togetherness in which civility pervades at least momentarily. According to Anderson (2012:xvi, 15, 26): this is also a possibility to develop understanding with one another and to share ideas and practices. At the same time these experiences of encounters also create local knowledge. The Myyrmanni shopping centre might be even looked at as what Susanne Wessendorf (2014:393) calls the parochial realm characterized by more communal relations between users of that space than they would be in a clearly public space, where one meets mainly strangers. For the younger people especially, Myyrmanni may even be at times too familiar, not providing enough privacy or freedom from otherwise appreciated social networks:

Guess why we don't want to spend time in cafes and restaurants here? Suddenly your uncle is sitting next to you, so you have to leave. There aren't our people anymore [outside Myyrmäki] and you want to have your own time. I don't want to see my neighbours, my aunts, I want to have my own time, that's why we go out of Myyrmäki (Female, November 17, 2017).

Conviviality increasingly appears in the context of normative concerns with how to make spaces more positively interactive, or conversely how spaces might become more convivial through everyday practices and routines of people inhabiting them (Nowicka & Vertovec 2014:350). Positive encounters cannot be forced but it is possible to think about obstacles and barriers preventing people from varied and unexpected encounters, and work towards dealing with these hindrances. It is exactly these hindrances that Sophie Watson has focused her study on city publics

and urban encounters. Her main interest lies in exploring different aspects and forms of constraint operating in the public arena which limit the “coming together of strangers”, the “living with difference”, the “enchanted encounters”, the pleasures and displeasures of association and connection. She argues that “it is only when these constraints and limitations, and the fragile, interstitial and partial forms of connection across difference are understood that we can begin to think about how to support or construct the kinds of public spaces which may enhance these very connections” (Watson 2006:19).

In the canopy like space people can feel more relaxed and secure than in other places of the city. One of the basic premises for this to happen is that people visiting the space understand it to be open, or belong, as Anderson puts it, to all. There is no priority to the space for any one group (Anderson 2012:3, 5, 36). In any case, as Suzanne Hall (2017:1569) points out, the relationship between an individual and a public space is more about “being public” than being “in” the public space. The ways we experience the city – either through positive or negative encounters – give directions to our ways of being public.

Encounters in general have an effect on how people experience either insiderness or outsiderness and subjectivities are produced symbolically, discursively and materially through networks of power relations and practices articulated in space in complex and shifting ways. Urban encounters are woven across a multiplicity of spaces that are visible and invisible, performed, experienced and conducted through words and silences, glances and gazes, regard and disregard, acknowl-

edgements and hostilities, all of which are differently embodied (Watson 2006:20). Especially research on young people has emphasized the meaning of places where encounters with others are typical. Familiar places and memories connected to them can be seen as strengthening both young people’s friendships and their self-image. Even brief unwanted encounters in the public space create insecurity and sometimes an experience of outside-ness (Ponto 2017:85–86). These different kinds of experiences affecting the space relation are visible in the following extract, as the interviewee describes the change in her familiar neighbourhood:

This area, you know why it is nice, everyone is close to me. My best sisters live here, my Finnish sisters. Whenever I need them, they are there and they have supported us very much. They are the same as friends, but I call them sisters, we have a very deep connection. Every time I needed something, whatever happened to me, even at twelve o’clock at night, I call and they come. They are all Finnish. I trust this environment, but it’s not the same as before. When I came to Finland in 1995, if I was out at night, I wasn’t afraid of anything, but today I can’t feel trust (Female, September 27, 2017).

Having lived over twenty years in Finland the informant we quoted also at the beginning of the article had a long time perspective on how attitudes towards migrants, even in a very familiar and otherwise appreciated environment, along with the general atmosphere in society, have changed especially over the past ten years. Even though she has Finnish women as her best friends, she has used a lot of time and energy to help all migrants, especially women, as much as possible in order to enhance all kinds of cultural and social encounters in Myyrmäki. During the inter-

view, she stressed many times how important it is to get out of the home and take part in all kinds of activities to meet other people and exchange ideas with them, as she brings out also in this quotation. This is what could be interpreted in Anderson's words as "folk ethnography" or "people watching", which leads people to gradually learn about other people in the surroundings. Through this process they learn to read different kinds of signs and symbols from other people's appearances and behaviour and also to put these in perspective. This people watching happens all the time in our everyday routines in the city (Anderson 2012:125). However, the interviewee emphasized active doing in mixed groups and was perhaps a little disappointed as people were mostly active in their own social environment and mixing with others in an active way was more unusual.

I have invited many times, come, come little bit away from your daily routines, come and try to integrate with Finnish people, come to talk, come to change ideas, but they are not active. I have been really jealous, especially when the Somalis, if they want to organize something, it's the whole group, not just one. I say that not many foreign women are really active and I can say straight that when the Somalis came, they are very active (Female, September 27, 2017).

This leads to another related topic coming up in the research data, namely, that many activities as well as spaces used for these activities are quite separated, focused either mainly on migrants or on people in general in Myyrmäki, but not attended by migrants. In a similar vein, there are places and activities which are attended and organized by the migrants but not familiar or inviting to the majority population. For example, the mosque in Myyrmäki is an important meeting place, especially for the Muslim men, where migrants with a variety of backgrounds come together to pray but also to meet each other for discussions and coffee.

Women don't necessarily go to the mosque. But if there is an Eid festival, you can go if you want to. Different people go to the mosque, for example Moroccans, Algerians, Tunisians, Chechens, Albanians, Somalis, and yes, they have a very good connection. It is not just a mosque but at the same time also a cultural meeting place (Female, September 27, 2017).

One interviewee mentioned that in her opinion especially different kinds of activities preferably taking place in public space would bring people together and while doing something together it would be easier to start talking to someone and get to know people with culturally and socially varying backgrounds. In her words:

A place where Finnish people and migrants, all in the same place, not just migrants. If there are just migrants, problems may arise later on or someone wants to attack or wants to do something bad. But a place for both, that kind of place, there isn't such a place in Myyrmäki. When you don't know other people, strangers, you may be afraid of them, but if you know at least a little bit, they do not scare you anymore. This is very important (Female, November 2, 2017).

She also talked about how more attention should be paid to integration in housing based on her own experiences of feeling safer in her current neighbourhood where the majority of inhabitants are not migrants. She felt that having more non-migrants people living close by in a way protects her and her family from potential attacks and other possible hate-related incidents. In most interviews the question of how to become acquainted with majority people comes across somehow:

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Earlier [the Finns] they just asked, what do you want and didn't talk, but now [after many years in Finland] they are friends. They talk a lot and if there is a meeting in the housing cooperative, they elect migrants as members of the board. Now I have friends, earlier it was just work [for meeting Finnish people]. When you know a Finn in your spare time, they talk a lot. A neighbour of mine moved to Helsinki, we meet once in a while and we talk a lot, we go to the market place and have coffee. Things have changed but there isn't any meeting place in this area (Male, May 9, 2017).

When saying that there isn't any meeting place in Myyrmäki, the informant above means especially a place where everyone, regardless of their cultural or religious background, can meet for different activities or just to meet other people for a chat, for example. He mentions that things have changed since he first came to Finland, referring especially to shops etc. being open for longer hours and at weekends, which gives more freedom to arrange one's leisure time and daily life outside of work. In addition he brings up the wider variety of food supplies available for diversified demand, both in specialty shops and in local supermarkets. Despite these changes in society in general, having made urban lifestyles more internationally oriented and culturally diverse also "at home", the fact remains that it is still hard to find places and activities for social engagements crossing cultural boundaries.

Practices of Avoidances

Even though Myyrmanni was described by many as a comfortable place for doing their shopping or spending time otherwise, another, more tragic, aspect was also brought up by some informants who have lived in Myyrmäki for a longer time:

Q: Are there any unpleasant places [in Myyrmäki] where you don't want to go?

A: One thing are the bars, it's not safe there [close to where the bars are situated] and walking later in the evening, that might be scary. It's best to go in the daytime. I have felt uncomfortable and have not wanted to walk around that much after what happened in Turku, that man, I have become more scared. Another thing is when there was a bomb attack in Myyrmanni shopping centre. It was really frightening and I didn't want go even near that shopping centre. I was in Sweden when it happened, but the next day I came back and was afraid to go home, so I stayed with friends for the night. It was really bad. And now my best place is a coffee shop on the second floor [in Myyrmanni], where I spend time with my friends. Yes, we go there with friends quite a lot. But sometimes, when I go with my children, I wonder if something like that could happen again (Female, November 11, 2017).

For the interviewee, the shopping mall was ambiguous by nature. On the one hand it was a place for social encounters where she spent a lot of her time but on the other hand it aroused difficult memories and even fear that something bad might happen. She was not the only one talking about the bomb attack in Myyrmanni in 2002. A young man brought a bomb to Myyrmanni in his backpack and its explosion killed seven people and injured 59, which made it the most serious civilian incident to have happened in the metropolitan area since the Second World War. Some of the informants who have lived in Myyrmäki for a long time said that they still remember the incident quite often when spending time in Myyrmanni.

In recent years, however, it has become almost self-evident to suspect immediately a probable terrorist connection in any kinds of unexpected incidents

aimed at injuring innocent people. These incidents have had a clear effect on people with a migrant background, especially on those recognizable as Muslims, as is the case with many informants interviewed in the study. This is visible in the previous extract as the interviewee moves from the incident in Turku to the Myyrmanni bombing.⁷ In many conversations after what happened in Turku people brought up the change in the atmosphere towards migrants, which they felt was very unfair, as described by a young Somali woman:

I remember, I was working the next day [in customer service], people were looking at me like we were traitors. [Laughing.] Sorry, I'm not laughing because it's funny, but because I'm just so confused about how people think. People were looking at me like, that it was doing of your people, that I'm to blame for what happened. And I hear that it's my fault that these things are done, that one person is responsible for everything happening in the whole world. Like it was up to me to go and fix everything that's happening in the world, in Syria and everywhere, also in Somalia. I can't do anything about it, it's not my fault. Just because I'm dark, just because I wear a scarf, just because I look like a Muslim, then it's suddenly my fault, I'm to blame for what is going on in the world (Female, November 17, 2017).

This relates to the idea that minorities are often the visible expression of the processes inherent in globalization and while their growth is often seen as the cause of changing social and cultural patterns, they are simply the consequence of that change making them highly vulnerable to tensions and conflict (Cantle 2012:6). The quotation above shows how people with a migrant background may become subjects of ethnic or religious prejudices and hardened attitudes caused by something that happened somewhere else, without having

any way to defend themselves as individuals. It is quite often that these changes in attitudes towards migrants are experienced particularly while present with others in urban public spaces.

The fragment also shows how encounters are affected by very subtle actions, such as gazes. Sara Ahmed (2000:38–39) calls these kinds of encounters “eye-to-eye” or “skin-to-skin” encounters. Words are not used but the distrust is expressed through the body, with emotion. Although sometimes difficult to put into words, “facetime” with other people or fixing one another’s eyes can be used both to create conviviality and aggression, but can also reflect interest (Anderson 2012:60; Isotalo 2016:12–13; see also Ahmed 2000). Anderson (2012:113) uses the term “eye work” for those short moments when blacks and whites encounter each other, their eyes briefly meeting. This is a time when both parties assess the nature of their encounter. Here the meaning of an eye-to-eye encounter is clear, however: the recognition of a stranger (Ahmed 2000:25).

Some other examples of the more public open spaces in the centre of Myyrmäki were discussed by many informants and referred to as sites where it is good to spend time at least with some caution, especially in the evenings. Most of the interviewees were women, which has an effect on how urban spaces are used and experienced (see e.g. Beebejaun 2017). Even in the public spaces that are most cosmopolitan, tensions occur. For people coming from minorities, certain spaces can be confusing when not knowing what to expect from the potential encounters. These environments can be tolerant but still re-

mind them of their marginal position. These reminders can be sudden and surprising and tell about the social dynamics of inequality (Anderson 2012:41–44, 151, 154, 157). The spaces the interviewees from Myyrmäki discussed as spaces for everyday racism (Essed 1991:52) were, however, foreseeable for them.

The experiences of the interviewees are in line with the report published by the Finnish Ministry of Justice. This argues that harassment targeted at people with a migrant background is very common in public spaces. For example, in the group that responded to the inquiry, those speaking a foreign language, having foreign nationality or a migrant background, 44 per cent of them had experienced harassment 2–5 times within the last 12 months and 11 per cent experienced it a couple of times a month (Oikeusministeriö 2016:34–35). Everyday racism in the public spaces can have many forms. It can be experienced from looks, it can be in the form of verbal harassment or it can become visible in the situations of interaction as people's behaviour manifested in deeds, words, gestures, and other expressions (Isotalo 2016:7).

When describing Myyrmäki, the majority of the interviewees mentioned the railway station, which is located right in the centre of Myyrmäki. The station as such may not be that important, but what is brought up is the easy access to Helsinki and to the airport in the opposite direction as well. It was often stated that people mostly have access to what they need in Myyrmäki, which is one reason why it is a popular place to live. But if you need to go anywhere else, it is quite easy and this is something that in a way even defines the

character of Myyrmäki. While the train is appreciated for its convenience, it also came up as a site for concrete racist encounters which take place on the train, such as this one:

One time I was on the train with an African friend, we were sitting there and young Finnish people came to sit opposite us. They had had something to drink and even if it says on the train that drinking is forbidden, they had a bottle of wine. Then they spat straight at the face of that African. Many older Finnish people say, please, please, go away from here. There is a lot of racism these days (Female, September 27, 2017).

The train is a very limited space and often quite crowded, which means that people are physically close to each other, having hardly any chance to avoid these kinds of situations. That may be the reason why most actual racist incidents and confrontations people talked about have happened on the train, which can be looked upon as a kind of a “no mans land”. It is a very different environment from the familiar neighbourhood where one is likely to know people and places better in order to feel safe when potential conflicts can be avoided more easily.

Other sites mentioned as a potential place for unwanted encounters are the local bars and their surroundings, especially at later hours even if in the company of a Finnish person, as explained by this informant:

If you go to a bar together and your friend is Finnish, then there are different kinds of Finns, those who don't like migrants or they are racists or they are prejudiced against foreigners. And then they may come and tell you off and especially if it is a young person it may be difficult to resist saying something back and you can't keep on fighting all the time. Then it becomes a problem if you just can't let it go. This is a problem that affects many encounters, if you go there and someone comes to

tell you off, you just have to keep out of the way, it is the only option (Male, May 9, 2017).

The interview continued with this topic and especially with the question of how these “practices of silent avoidance” also prevent many potentially positive encounters from becoming realized. This is related to what troubles many public spaces, namely, that they are lacking in certain domestic qualities. That is, they fail to provide a sense of trust, comfort or amenity that might invite multiple publics to inhabit them (Koch & Latham 2013:9).

Suzanne Hall (2017:1568–1570) reminds us that city spaces can simultaneously be spaces for cross-cultural participation and growing inequality. The way we learn and experience the city affects the way we are “being public” in our everyday life. The different experiences define how and where we engage or resist the city. She suggests that we should have a more mobile conception of being public as it is through these movements from place to place and in-betweens that we keep learning the city. For people with a migrant background this learning the city, however, raises the risk of everyday racism. The interviewees also highlight how the relationship with the environment is not just built between the person experiencing the city and the specific urban spaces experienced but, as Hall argues, there are many other factors working as well. In the case of Myyrmäki, the meaning of both the personal history and the history of the place is visible when people narrate their place experiences.

Conclusions

Our earlier research engagements with urban dwellers’ reflections on urban spaces,

especially in the form of divergent place-based discourses with Finnish informants, have produced research data in which more weight has been actually ascribed to the material and aesthetic aspects of the built environment. In addition nature, even in the city, is something people bring up along with thinking about their personal life histories in relation to the sites of their habitation or the city at large (see e.g. Lappi 2004; 2007; 2013). There seem to be particular ways of observing urban environments and constructing narratives about them. However, when interviewing migrants living in Myyrmäki, their focus is clearly on the social environment instead of physical structures, aesthetics or functional aspects. Time and time again during the interviews one aim was to find out what the informants thought about Myyrmäki as a concrete physical place, but somehow the discussions always turned to social relations and practices.

Based on our study, we propose that this difference has something to do with the fact that for many migrants their relations with other people form the basis for stability and safety in their everyday lives, whether they have a strong social network in order to belong and feel accepted by others or they are aware of potential negative encounters. While it has proven to be quite difficult for many urban dwellers with a migrant background to integrate themselves socially in a larger society even in the close neighbourhood, it becomes quite obvious that in order to feel at home or find a place in the community one turns to where a network of trust and mutual support can be found. Not feeling accepted or safe in particular spaces or situations makes people avoid such places,

and potentially unwanted encounters easily lead to more separated spatial practices and social encounters.

Regan Koch and Alan Latham question the division of urban space into public and private and instead aim at better understanding of the publicness of a space by focusing on the relationship between the two. They argue that much of what happens in the public space is actually privately directed, when people go from one place to another, shop, eat, relax, meet friends etc. The public quality of such activities is connected to the ways in which they involve some kind of orientation towards others with whom one collectively inhabits the space. In public spaces, which work well, these relationships and practices are inclusive, convivial and democratic. In short, they are shared (Koch & Latham 2013:14).

According to Ash Amin, “every public space comes with its distinctive rules or orientation enshrined in principles and acts of public organization and order that, in signalling clear cartographies of permissibility and possibility, fix the terms of engagement between subjects in the public arena.” The chances of different social groups and their position in the social hierarchy are usually decided and directed by those having political and economic power along with the urban planners through the specifics of land use allocation, social and cultural policy, economic strategy, housing distribution, governance of public space, access to collective services, and symbolic projection of the city. Ash further argues that “the multiplicities of urban flow and excess are regulated by these silent fixes or urban order, allowing more breathing space to the stranger in

one site, but less in another” (Amin 2012: 65).

While doing fieldwork in Myyrmäki, the initial aim at the beginning was to find and observe places where people would gather together and “share the urban space”. After a number of interviews and observing spatial practices it became obvious that such places were actually hard to find, even if not totally non-existent at least for an outsider to detect. This led to the idea of introverted urban spaces, which may be quite common in suburban settings, such as Myyrmäki.

For the interviewees in Myyrmäki the public and semi-public spaces were divided into three kinds of spaces: (1) Spaces that could be identified as high risk spaces for everyday racism, such as spaces close to bars and closed spaces like public transportation; (2) spaces for casual intercultural encounters such as the shopping mall that could be argued to have at least some of the features connected to cosmopolitan canopies; and (3) differentiated spaces that were shared, safe and familiar spaces but which did not enhance multiple intercultural encounters. Not undermining the meaning of shopping centres as spaces for urban encounters, there are also limitations in them in the creation of a culturally diverse urban landscape. They are – at least in Myyrmäki – mainly spaces for consumption, which also limits the use of space. And in the end, it is a very limited space considering the Myyrmäki area in general.

While emphasizing the meaning of micropublics and microcultures of place Ash Amin (2002:967) wants to make visible the importance of everyday enactment for people’s identity and attitude for-

mation. This emphasis does not overlook the general influences but highlights the layered nature of the process. In the Myyrmäki interviews these micropublics seemed to be culturally differentiated. For Anderson (2012:29, 34), who in his ethnography focuses especially on Philadelphia, the city is formed by a “patchwork of racially distinct neighbourhoods” where “taking keen notice of strangers is the first line of defense”. In Myyrmäki, this kind of clearly defined distinction between neighbourhoods was not to be made. However, the social spaces sometimes reflected a patchwork rather than mixed, diverse urban spaces. The importance of these cultural patches is understandable, but to work against the high-risk spaces that limit people’s use of space we need more such spaces where casual, everyday encounters are possible. Deeper understanding of spatial as well as social aspects of place-making is crucial for the deconstruction of these cultural differentiations and divisions within urban space.

Following Amin’s thinking about spaces having distinctive rules calls for better understanding particularly of space-related experiences, not just spatial practices: listening to what people say instead of just looking at what they do. Especially the practices of avoidance are something that influences the uses of space, people’s behaviour in particular places as well as the formation of the entire social landscape in the suburb. All these “silent fixes”, to use Amin’s term (2012:65), affect how inclusive or exclusive public spaces are understood. Physical spaces can be fixed material constructions, but how they function as social and cultural spaces can be more easily reconstructed

and developed further based on ethnographic knowledge of spatial experiences. Based on our analysis, we argue that spatial equality should be created through possibilities to express more freely differences, social particularities, or cultural multiplicities in urban spaces. Furthermore, such diversity can be understood as a way to move towards more involving and accepting urban societies.

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Notes

- 1 This article is a part of a larger project called “Shared City”, which is funded by the Helsinki Metropolitan Region Urban Research Programme. In the project, we analyse the ways urban space is connected with interethnic encounters, focusing on six specific areas in Helsinki and Vantaa. In addition we aim at developing methods for integrating ethnographic knowledge into city planning.
- 2 At the same time as there is an ongoing process of Finnish cities becoming more and more hyperdiverse through immigration (about hyperdiversity, see Noble 2011), it is important not to over-emphasize this. Finnish culture has for long misleadingly been labelled as homogeneous (see e.g. Tervonen 2014), and this also affects to the ways people experience the changes within their environment.
- 3 The actual fieldwork in Myyrmäki was done by Tiina-Riitta Lappi and the direct impressions from the field are hers. The research

data in Myyrmäki was gathered between May and November in 2017 by observing spatial practices and different social activities in public places and pursuing 13 interviews (two group interviews with four informants in one and five in another) with people with migrant background currently living in Myyrmäki. In addition Tiina-Riitta visited a number of times two local associations offering services and a place to meet for migrants and had many informal discussions with both migrants and people working closely with them both in these associations and in municipal public services. Interviews were mainly done in Finnish, which meant that most informants had already lived in Finland for a longer time and that way they also had a temporal perspective on changes related to the topics discussed during the interviews.

- 4 The concepts of loose and tight space are from K. A. Franck and Q. Stevens (2007).
- 5 Sometimes to define a shopping mall as public or semi-public space can be ambiguous, as Sirpa Tani (2015) has shown in her article dealing with shopping malls as places for hanging out.
- 6 This was not particularly elicited or addressed in the interviews.
- 7 In Turku, a young man stabbed two people to death and injured eight in August 2017. At the time of writing, the man was on trial, charged for murders committed with terrorist intent.

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